

Wartime Knitting in Agatha Christie's *N or M?*

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ABSTRACT

Agatha Christie's *N or M?* (1941) has received scarce critical attention despite the increasing academic discussion about the British Queens of Golden Age crime fiction. This, as Phyllis Lassner or Gill Plain argue, is a major lapse in the criticism of the genre, because the war novels by Golden Age female writers can demonstrate both the experimentation of the narrative form and the genre's applicability to negotiate wartime concerns. *N or M?* focuses on the increasing paranoia about fifth columnists and the impact of WWII on everyday realities. To foreground the entanglement of the domestic and covert state operations through the counter-espionage mission of the Beresfords, Christie experiments with the fusion of spy fiction and the whodunit to subvert the traditional portrait of the spy by making Tuppence, a middle-aged housewife by now, but camouflaged as a knitting widow, the superior one. The novel also interrogates stereotypical assumptions about marginalized groups and negotiates new forms of patriotism by deconstructing propagandistic ideals of patriotic femininity. Therefore, this paper contends that Tuppence's knitting provides insights into the competing discourses about women and their agency while also underscoring their contribution to the meaning making of the banal and the insignificant, eventually flaunted in the heroic power of the color magenta. (RZS)

KEYWORDS: Golden Age crime fiction, Second World War, knitting, magenta, female agency



Introduction: Patriotic femininity and Christie's revision of the female spy

Agatha Christie's third Tommy and Tuppence novel, *N or M?* was published in 1941—the same year as Margery Allingham's *Traitor's Purse*. Both books depict wartime conflicts, the threat of Nazi Germany, fifth columnists,¹ the pervading spy fever, xenophobia, the crisis of national identity, and patriotism. While Allingham produced two other novels, *Black Plumes* (1940) and *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945), in which the detective spy needs to track down

the enemy within, *N or M?* is Christie's "only thriller dealing explicitly with the conflict" (Mills and Bernthal 1). Despite Allingham's solid position among the Queens of Golden Age crime fiction, and an increasing academic acclaim, she has never achieved the same popularity or critical recognition as Christie. Nevertheless, the Tommy and Tuppence series in Christie's oeuvre has also suffered from as much critical neglect as Allingham's war novels, and it has only been in the last few years that prominent female authors' crime novels of the Second World War have become the focus of academic discussion.² The increasing number of critical revisions has also targeted the writers' unrecognized contribution to the experimentation of the narrative forms of crime fiction and their applicability to negotiate wartime concerns. Phyllis Lassner is among the first critics whose gripping analysis of Allingham's and Helen MacInnes's detective spy novels foregrounds the literary value and critical potential residing in the hybridity of the form. According to Lassner, "[c]ombining complex weaves of narrative forms with political and cultural concerns, these novels provide new criteria that challenge any doubts about the legitimacy of these literary genres" (113–14). Lassner further argues that this hybrid form allows the protagonists to assume the dual role of the spy and detective when there is a strong demand for "multiple forms of intelligence gathering to unmask the disguised enemy" (114), which further reinforces the need for creativity and inventiveness in times of crisis, such as the Nazi threat during Second World War. Christie's *N or M?* also offers a fertile ground to explore this intricate relation between the narrative form, wartime anxieties and her protagonists' investigative agency in a counter-espionage mission in the early phase—the spring of 1940—of the Second World War. The novel is also an attempt to discuss the everyday experience of the crisis on the home front by focusing on women's contribution to the war effort with an emphasis on their domestic duties, which, traditionally regarded as passive or insignificant, "was thus reinterpreted as their patriotic duty to the home front" (Morgan and Evans 58). Given that the book prioritizes the middle-aged Tuppence Beresford's involvement and investigative strategies—camouflaged as a knitting widow—Christie's narrative form successfully interweaves large-scale political and cultural concerns with the banal and the insignificant, which calls for a revision of women's domestic knowledge and engagement in the war. While Judy Suh, Merja Makinen, and Gill Plain have published valuable insights about patriotism, femininity, motherhood, and war propaganda in *N or M?*, no

analysis has been dedicated to the entanglement of knitting and its (militaristic) metaphors, which the book offers for reconsideration.

Given its counter-espionage plot, *N or M?* calls for interpretation in the context of the spy novel, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and its formal origins “lay hazily within an amalgamation of the imperial adventure tale and the detective novel” (Bloom 1). Clive Bloom points out that while both of these genres were a response to social pressure in the second half of the nineteenth century, “[t]he spy thriller . . . (in its fully-developed form) was, more than both its predecessors, *the* genre tied to *international* political and social tensions. Indeed, more than any other form the spy thriller responded to a need to represent *covert* activity by state organisations” (1, emphasis in original). Allingham’s and Christie’s detective spy novels written during the 1940s borrow elements from both genres, but most importantly, they experiment with the fusion of “guilt within the context of a home or family” (Hepburn 25), adopted from detective fiction, and “guilt within the context of statecraft and diplomacy” (Hepburn 26), taken from espionage fiction. Lassner claims that although the war novels of Allingham and MacInnes are “deeply concerned with disturbances in the domestic social order, [they] underscore the terror of total conquest, ranging from suspicions of collaboration and betrayal to the destruction of British culture and identity” (114). These hybrid texts then, as Lassner suggests, are important milestones in women’s crime writing during the war and “invite literary historical analysis that links the cultural ideologies of Britain’s war against Nazism to the literary value of detective and spy fiction” (113). Her claim is also intriguing because Golden Age detective fiction, or the classic whodunit, which Christie and Allingham are categorically associated with, has often been accused of escapism due to its nostalgic tendency to create an artificial world, immune to its social reality. This critical hostility, however, loses sight of the complexity of the term itself: Gill Plain argues that it is through these wartime narratives that a revision of the genre’s escapist element is indispensable, especially because the violation of society brought about by “the crime of murder can be seen as analogous to the more comprehensive transgression of war” (*Women’s Fiction* 17). Despite the somber tone and the anxieties around a possible Nazi invasion, these texts provide “a fantasy of wartime survival” (17) through the intervention of the “courage and intelligence of the individual detective” (17). These novels, Plain asserts, offer a “fantasy of control and agency” (17), but more importantly, they contribute to the “process of

‘making sense’ of war” by “uncover[ing] the fear and confusion that lay beneath these strategies for survival” (18).

Nonetheless, Stephen Knight dismisses the Tommy and Tuppence series, labeling them “simplistic and jingoistic mystery adventures” (93), whose potential is ruined “by the obviousness of the plotting and characterisation and the political naivety of the ideas” (93). Knight’s hasty judgment, especially pertaining to *N or M?*, apparently fails to take into consideration the narrative form’s capacity to reflect on and make sense of the large-scale crisis threatening the whole of Europe. His unappreciative approach might stem from a strong focus on the hopeful tone justified by the Beresfords’ success in their counter-espionage mission, yet it disregards the impact of the crisis on the meaning-making process in the domestic sphere, one of the main concerns of the book. Makinen points out that critics “have rightly called the novel patriotic propaganda” (“Taking on Hitler” 68), but it is not at all “jingoistic” (93) as Knight calls it, as instead of painting Nazism “as black as night” (68), it offers a more nuanced interpretation of the term itself. Undoubtedly, *N or M?* heavily reflects on the hatred of Hitler and Nazi Germany, xenophobia, racism, the pervading spy fever, and the increasing misogyny, but by presenting various perspectives on these matters, it also challenges the legitimacy of the dominant discourses while, as Makinen argues, it “interrogates the term patriotism in a number of ways” (68).

Indeed, Christie’s innovative narrative technique widens the scope and thematic preoccupation of conventional spy fiction not only to undermine orthodox ideas about patriotism and women’s agency, but also to subvert its generic elements by making Tuppence, already a middle-aged housewife and a knitter, the “superior spy” (Suh 141) of the two, and her husband, Tommy, “a dim-witted sidekick” (Makinen, *Investigating Femininity* 32). While Tommy could qualify as the British gentleman, “the incorruptible and upright British agent . . . a ‘symbol of stability’ in a changing world” (Trotter 31–32), typical of early British spy novels, his position is not only weakened by his wife being the brainier, but also by the fact that he spends almost half of the narrative in the captivity of N, one of the Nazi spies. According to Bruce Merry, female spies in generic spy fiction are opposed to the gentlemanly male ideal, since “they must be young and attractive” (127) or—if they are the hero’s girlfriend—they can easily get into trouble and need the hero’s intervention to escape (180). Tuppence as an unemployed middle-aged wife and mother is delineated as the absolute antithesis of the generic female spy. Yet, it is exactly this subverted portrait

of the type that allows for a critical observation of propaganda's impact on women's role on the home front, intricately connected to the increasing misogyny, the anxiety surrounding motherhood and images of patriotic femininity. Phil Goodman uses the term "patriotic femininity" in her article about women's and men's morale to describe the contradictory images that women were exposed to during the war. Her major claim about patriotic femininity includes that, while the war disrupted traditional notions of femininity, as women were required to make their contribution to Britain's war efforts, their role and place were still heavily influenced by pre-war stereotypes connected to their looks and domestic duties. Following up on this claim, Jennifer Purcell asserts that along with the idealization of these opposing and almost unattainable images of what woman should be like—doing masculine work while taking care of her family and staying attractive—propaganda also raises the status of housewifery: "Wartime messages were just as insistent that housewives had an integral part to play in the war. *Good Housekeeping*, for example, reminded housewives of the gravity of their own participation in the war-effort, 'The smallest scrap YOU rescue may mean the turning point of the war'" (154). A significant part of women's contribution on the home front targeted charity work with much emphasis on knitting for the army, which, as Richard Rutt points out, "was more highly organized than it had been during the First World War" (149). Rutt also remarks that "[i]n the second war the British government was much concerned about morale at home. Rationing was successfully managed, not least for clothing. A system of coupons for cloth and clothing included knitting wool" (149). Knitting was the signifier of feminine morale and patriotism was meant to be raised to the level of paid employment so that women did not so much regard themselves as "citizen housewives" but rather "domestic soldiers" (Purcell 154). Nevertheless, as Purcell observes, among the records of Mass-Observation (M-O),³ housewives' experience of unpaid domestic work did not generally reflect pride or satisfaction, and many did not consider their efforts "vital war work. Indeed, guilt at not participating in some paid occupation underlined many of the responses" (157).

Viewed against this backdrop, Christie's *N or M?* effectively negotiates the ambiguities surrounding the domestic sphere by foregrounding the couple's despair at their own situation, but the novel concerns itself more with the aging housewife's futile efforts to do something meaningful. Tuppence, who appears as a devoted knitter in the opening scene, hints at and immediately questions various meanings of

knitting, which deconstructs stereotypical ideas about women's (useless) domestic activities on the one hand, and destabilizes masculine hegemony along with the narrative form, on the other. Tuppence's ambition to participate in the counter-espionage mission—which only accounts for a man's, in fact, her husband's, intervention—and go undercover as a certain Mrs. Blenkinsop in a boarding house on the southern coast, both maintains and undermines the respectable image of the decent middle-class housewife. Or, as Plain argues, it asserts “both her loyalty and disloyalty to the patriarchy” (*Twentieth-Century* 49). Building on Plain's argument, Suh contends that Tuppence “capitalizes on her ability to perform, and more importantly, her ability to read the culture's contradictory representation of women in wartime” (153). Knitting as a performative act of femininity but also a tool for spying and investigating signals Tuppence's inventiveness to connect the war and the home, and illustrates how the domestic, the ordinary, and the banal can signify their very opposite to validate their contribution to the war effort. Nevertheless, the women's presence and performance were all the more unappreciated due to the growing anxiety over their talk, which became the target of the Allied propaganda that “spoke directly about and to servicemen's fear of their women's betrayal. Posters enjoining silence as a protection against spies implied that women's talk would kill fighting men. . . . English cartoons and posters pictured women as irresponsible in their garrulity or sinister in their silence” (Gubar 240). Christie's detective spy fiction exaggerates these fears to the point of ridicule by not only enhancing stereotypes about women in general, but also by arguing explicitly that categorical thinking about groups conventionally associated with potential danger or weakness—foreigners, the Irish, elderly ladies, or mothers—can be fatal in a large-scale crisis. The fact, however, that Tuppence fulfills the mission without threatening male competence or territories could undermine the novel's potential to seriously revise woman's place and role.⁴ Thus, instead of offering a radical feminist agenda, *N or M?* provides insights into the competing discourses about women and their agency, while also underscoring their contribution to the meaning-making process and coping strategies in the domestic sphere during the threat of a Nazi invasion in the Second World War. After all, what emerges is an alternative narrative of the war achieved through the subversion of generic strategies of spy fiction as well as images of patriotic femininity to contain the story of the female other.

Knitting something *magenta*

The opening scene of *N or M?* exposes the act of knitting and its figurative interpretations to explore the intricate connection between the war and women on the home front. This scene epitomizes the subversion of patriotic femininity by the (aging) woman's knitting, which turns this fairly innocent, passive, and insignificant occupation into an active, visible, and meaningful action.

The story starts in the spring of 1940 when Britain is facing the Blitz after the German invasion of France and Belgium. Tommy and Tuppence, both middle-aged, feel frustrated about having to spend their days unemployed in their London flat despite their several attempts to contribute to the war effort. The opening scene is fairly depressing and foregrounds the importance of mental health and some occupation for the aging population on the home front: sitting in the living-room, Tuppence is knitting a Balaclava helmet⁵ in khaki wool, when Tommy enters the room with "a resolute smile" (1). Just by giving him "a quick glance," she realizes that Tommy has failed again in his search for a job, so she "then busied herself by knitting at a furious rate" (1). In their mid-forties with two adult children working for the British army, they feel as if their great adventures and many successful missions in their youth had never happened: "It's bad enough having a war,' said Tuppence, 'but not being allowed to do anything in it just puts the lid on.' . . . Tuppence gave a snort of rage, tossed her glossy dark head, and sent her ball of khaki wool spinning from her lap. . . 'Us! You and me! Despised, unwanted Mr. and Mrs. Beresford'" (3–4). Ruminating a little about things past and their present disappointment, Tommy remarks that women at least can knit, or do up parcels, and other charity work but "it is worse for a man" (4). Tuppence immediately reproaches him, clearly stating that a woman at her age, still ambitious and energetic, cannot be content with that: "I can do all that twenty years from now" (5). Here, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Grant, who offers Tommy a job in intelligence services to go undercover as a certain Mr. Meadows, an ex-military widower, to track down two Nazi spies, N and M, in a boarding house, ironically called Sans Souci—meaning "no worries"—in Leahampton. Mr. Grant is determined to exclude Tuppence from the mission and makes up a cover-story about Tommy's new job; yet, being smarter than her husband, she finds out about the plan and also leaves for Leahampton. Upon her arrival at the boarding house, Tuppence starts her role-playing as Mrs. Blenkinsop, a decent widow with three sons from two different husbands, and an enthusiastic

knitter. When Tommy arrives, he finds Tuppence there, eagerly knitting a Balaclava helmet.

The scene at the end of the first chapter is crucial in the development of the plot, while it also indicates semantic shifts in women's knitting. Plotwise, it points towards the forthcoming actions and the unfolding of the events guided by the rhythm of Tuppence's spy-knitting. Semantically, it refers backwards, to the opening scene, where Tuppence is knitting the same helmet. Soon after Grant leaves, Tommy, feeling guilty about the whole project, especially having to go alone this time, returns to the thread of their earlier conversation to relieve his remorse:

"After all," said Tommy feebly, "you can knit, you know."

"Knit?" said Tuppence. "*Knit?*" Seizing her Balaclava helmet she flung it on the ground. "I hate khaki wool," said Tuppence, "*and* Navy wool *and* Air Force blue, I should like to knit something *magenta*!"

"It has a fine military sound," said Tommy. "Almost a suggestion of Blitzkrieg." (14, emphasis in original)

This exchange between the two illustrates the tension between the myths about women and their real experience of the domestic in the war. According to Rutt, knitting in the First World War was "a war activity for the lonely and worried women, and at the same time an expression of love All ages of women in Britain were knitting for dear life in something like a national addiction" (139–40). Although knitting was less obsessive and more focused on morale in the Second World War, Tuppence's sudden emotional reaction demonstrated through flinging her knitting on the ground seems to be a rejection of taking on the role of the sad, lonely, but devoted woman. Kathy Rees highlights that knitting in literature invariably functioned as a barometer of female emotions: "the act of letting the knitting fall into the lap conveyed shock and horror, the needless unwinding of worsted betrayed indignation, and the jerking of stitches imparted scorn and disdain" (n.p.). Tuppence's emphasis on the second "knit" justifies a mixture of feelings from annoyance to shock, all of which are finally sublimated in the symbolism of the color *magenta*.

This symbolism can be brought into relief by considering the conventional colors of wartime knitting. Rutt points out that "[k]nitting for the armed forces in the Second World War could be done in three colours, for 'Air Force blue' had been added to navy blue and army khaki" (149). Tuppence's hatred of these colors might be taken as a refusal of the

dreariness of the world with the prescribed and uninspiring color scheme to choose from, the type of ordinary heroism as an ideal of the British common man in a time of crisis. Plain explains that J. B. Priestley's *Postscripts*, broadcast throughout 1940 and 1941, "depicted a conflict in which heroism was the province of the 'ordinary British folk.' He spoke of the everyday and commonplace, the comfortable and the familiar; seemingly mundane topics but their very ordinariness was the key to success" (Priestley qtd. in Plain, *Women's Fiction* 7). Related to this widespread ideology during the war, David Morgan and Mary Evans add that "[t]he idea of heroism was no longer limited to the singular courageous act; it became a generalised quality of all those who endured the deprivations and dangers of both combat and the home front". As a result, the traits associated with heroism and courage "had become de-militarised and, to a certain extent, de-mythologised" (16). Considering the wartime ideal embodied by the unchanged image of the "little man" (Plain, *Women's Fiction* 5), the simplicity and the anti-heroism of everyday practices, Tuppence's Spartan cry to knit something *magenta* calls for further interpretation, especially because the appellation of the color *magenta* is deeply connected to bloody fights as well as heroic triumphs. The fusion of something seemingly innocent and ordinary with something heroic changes terms of reference and qualifies as a radical form of storytelling with an emphasis on everyday reality and the destabilization of the symbolic order. It is not at all accidental that Tommy immediately associates the name of the color with a "fine military sound" and "Blitzkrieg" (14), or total annihilation. He seems to suggest a parallel between the present threat of Nazi invasion and the Battle of Magenta, in Northern Italy, where in 1859 the Austrians were defeated by the French and Sardinians in the Franco-Piedmontese War (see Wright 359). Despite the fact that Tuppence's statement is an implicit sign of her knowledge of and potential involvement in Tommy's secret mission, her avoidance of reflecting on her husband's remarks leaves the chain of signification open. Commenting on the collapse of the signifying process and the quest for meaning in narratives of crisis, Plain concludes that "constituted through language, the subject is placed in a critical situation through that language's inability to contain or express the experience of a war . . . This disruption challenges the strategies through which the subject makes sense of the world . . . and the ever present gap between signifier and signified is uncomfortably revealed" (*Women's Fiction* 19). Tuppence's enigmatic words destabilize the ordinary operation of intelligence activity to save the nation

in favor of offering alternative readings of the woman's scenario for survival by knitting in *magenta*.

Readings of the color *magenta* in *N or M*?

Decoding the meanings of *magenta* tangible in the novel requires an exploration of not only the semantic shifts in the dye's name itself, but also an insight into the cultural history tightly related to it. Apart from the Battle of Magenta, there are at least three more intriguing facts about the production of the new color relevant to this analysis.

Magenta emerged as a new color in the mid-nineteenth century, whose name, as Laura Wright points out, had undergone several semantic shifts in the 1850s—from *fuchsine* through *mauve* to *rosein*—before it started to be marketed as *magenta* in reference to the eponymous battle (359) and “introduced in 1860 in the newly-invented chemical dye industry” (341). She also asserts that “[d]ictionaries suggest that the name *magenta* was given either in reference to the soldiers' bright red uniforms or in reference to the bloodshed in battle; however, neither were coloured magenta, and the fact that *solferino* was also used as a dye-name suggests that the choice was merely a topical reference” (360–61). Tommy's natural reaction to the military sound of the color could foreshadow the success of their mission, as well as a total destruction of Nazi Germany with Hitler on top, whose Austrian origin may be implied through the association of the color and the defeated Austrian army in 1859.

Furthermore, Tuppence's wish to knit something *magenta* suggests a new form of patriotism, one that can connect rather than separate the people in her country. Wright explains that the history of the birth of the new hue goes back to Sir William Henry Perkin, who “invented aniline dye in 1856 and changed the appearance of Victorian fabric” (356). When Perkin was fifteen, he started to attend the lectures of August Wilhelm von Hofmann, the most acclaimed German chemist in the nineteenth century, and at the age of seventeen, he was appointed Hofmann's assistant (356). Their exchange of ideas and collaboration introduced ground-breaking scientific innovations into British industry and culture. Drawing upon this historical fact, the novel also plays with the possibility of such a co-operation between the English and the Germans through the friendship between Tuppence and Carl von Deinim, whose professional expertise of chemistry may not be a mere accident in the book. Tuppence's fondness of and sympathy towards Carl, a German refugee working in a chemical research laboratory, demonstrates a humane approach to individuals who

are systematically rejected based on the preconceptions about the group they represent.⁶ During one of their conversations, Tuppence expresses her views on this matter:

I hate the Germans myself. . . . But when I think of individual Germans, mothers sitting anxiously waiting for news of their sons, and boys leaving home to fight . . . and some of the nice kindly German people I know, I feel quite different. I know then they are just human beings and that we're all feeling alike. That's the real thing. The other is just the war mask that you put on. (98)

Nevertheless, her appreciation of the young man also stems from the fact that Carl is working for the British and his expertise, thus, will serve higher goals: "But in the meantime, you're doing useful work—or so I've heard. Useful not only to England but to humanity. You're working on decontamination problems, aren't you?" (97). From this perspective, patriotism has a more practical side for Tuppence, one that goes beyond exclusivity or propagandistic standards in favor of inclusivity and individual merits for the interest of her own nation, and thus, even if highly idealistic, the higher good of mankind. In this regard, Tuppence and Carl are secret sharers, as both suffer from discrimination and are excluded from power: Tuppence's skills go unrecognized for being a middle-aged woman and those of Carl for being a German and a refugee.

Tuppence's inquiry about Carl's "decontamination experiments" (48), referring to the immunization of certain gases, draws attention to the poisonous effects of the new color, which carry far-reaching implications in the novel. Wright's discussion of the history of the color *magenta* also reflects on the havoc that Perkin's aniline magenta dye caused after its introduction in 1860. She says that "his original formulation had to be abandoned as it contained mercury which poisoned his workers" (361). Despite these concerns, "aniline magenta dye was tremendously successful, particularly for underwear. However, it was becoming known by the late nineteenth century that aniline dyes were not entirely harmless" (361). Many people wearing items of aniline magenta developed symptoms of arsenic poisoning, but in the mid-1860s "a wallpaper with a thick green pattern of foliage had [also] become very popular which, when heated up in hot weather or if rubbed, discharged particles of arsenic, affecting the lips, eyelids and throat of anyone inhaling." Yet, Wright goes on to explain that nothing was done despite the "publication of letters of protest" because it

was in the dye-companies' interests to keep producing aniline dyes (361). Poisonous gases as war weapons were a real threat and left a deeply shocking memory of the First World War—Nazi extermination by gas was not yet in force at the time of the book's publication. Yet Tuppence's attention is more drawn to locating and identifying the invisible poison as a component of the color *magenta*, a metaphorical reference to the fear of fifth columnists, who—similarly to the invisible poison eating away the body—emerge as parasites destroying the nation. This idea is illustrated by a dialogue between Tommy and Mr. Grant:

“But there are those for whom we’ve neither respect nor liking—and those are the traitors within our own ranks—the men who are willing to betray their country and accept office and promotion from the foreigner who has conquered it.”

Tommy said with feeling: “My God, I’m with you, sir.” . . . “And there really are these—these swine?”

“Everywhere. As I told you.” (48)

The Beresfords are desperate to track down the secret enemy and eradicate the spread of poisonous Nazi ideology in their country, but the emphasis on the enemy's invisibility allows Tuppence more efficient maneuvers through her spy-knitting. Being invisible herself as a knitting widow, she can easily familiarize herself with the other, fairly uninteresting residents in Sans Souci. At the same time, the color *magenta* signifies both a serious danger that she exposes herself to and a test of her own capacity to discern the “invisible ink” (Christie 235) behind the color.

Apart from the concerns of visibility and invisibility, the narrator's hints at the identity of one of the spies, whose “usually red face” (160) turns purple as a sign of anger, highlight the need for precise definition of colors and shades. Wright explains that *magenta* is not red: “*OED* is clear that *magenta* denotes a pink-mauve hue but also registers the red component in its nomenclature: ‘A purple-pink aniline dye, fuchsin; the colour of this dye. Originally more fully Magenta red’” (361). Based on this definition, *magenta* cannot fully be identified as one particular color, but rather as an amalgamation of rosy tints from red to purple. The color denotes corporeal signs in the novel and the ability to recognize the purplish complexion of the face means the success of the Beresfords' mission. Yet, the emphasis on the reddish hue of the face is ironic at the same time and can function as a red herring, given that two male characters, Commander Haydock and Mr.

Grant, both have red faces, but Major Bletchley's face also turns red as a sign of excitement or shock. Therefore, the recognition of the *magenta* hue is necessary, as the one whose facial complexion indicates negative emotions by turning purple proves to be the Nazi spy, N. With reference to the previous note about the invisible, poisonous nature of the dye, the real challenge for Tuppence is to hunt down M, N's partner, whose strategies to hide her real identity resemble those of Tuppence. Unlike the identification of *magenta* red, a strong and passionate color, its secret and mortal component requires more complex and intuitive feminine skills, those that can be explored through Tuppence's knitting.

Making sense of the lady detective's wartime knitting

The figure of the knitting woman in literature was not a new phenomenon by the time Christie started to write her detective stories, but the lady detective as a knitter became a popular trope in the interwar era thanks to the increasing success of classic whodunits.⁷ Christie's Miss Marple and Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver are probably the best known knitting ladies, for whom this handicraft is a strategic exercise "to camouflage their surveillance of criminals" (Rees n.p.). Furthermore, as Berkem Sağlam argues, the act of knitting also contributes to these spinster detectives' role-playing to assume the image of the helpless and unthreatening woman: "In the Miss Marple books, more often than not, knitting serves as a motif that constructs character, and helps to establish Miss Marple as a quite harmless, soft, and genial person" (319). Nevertheless, Sağlam also points out that the word "spinster" is derived from the act of spinning, referring to needlework as a common activity performed by "women above a certain age who have never been married" (320). Beyond this explicit link between the activity of spinning and gender, she also draws attention to the figurative meaning of "the acts of spinning and weaving, [which] have been linked in language to the creative act of writing and storytelling, as is clearly suggested in the expressions 'spinning a tale,' 'weaving magic,' and 'telling a yarn'" (320).

While both elderly spinster detectives are shrewd and cunning, their quiet pose and passive form of inquiry through knitting is an anachronistic image of the woman in the interwar era, when the descendant of the fin-de-siècle New Woman, who despises Victorian morals, becomes more and more common. Rees contends, however, that the portrait of the knitting detective, as a less threatening figure for male authority, is a feature of the conservative inclinations of the genre in general (n.p.). Yet, it would be a

mistake to rush to such conclusions based on this single example. Makinen's thorough analysis of Christie's female characters in her *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006) would suggest otherwise, but in terms of the established power structures, it is true that Miss Marple's knitting to investigate can be seen as a moderate step for the recognition of women's skills and expertise in criminal investigations. Unlike the Miss Marple stories of the interwar era, Tuppence's spy-knitting in *N or M?* reaches beyond the mere investigation of a single murder case due to the novel's engagement with the increasing paranoia and anxiety over fifth columnists in Britain. She applies knitting too, as a strategy to dissolve suspicion, but more importantly to highlight the dangers of the critical blindness to the politically conditioned ideological concepts about foreigners, motherhood, or aging women during the war. Her knitting also demonstrates new forms of patriotism by undermining the propagandistic function of patriotic femininity to tell the woman's story expressed not in uniform colors but in the vibrating hues of *magenta*.

In *N or M?*, the true nature of the war is not portrayed through sheer violence or death, but it is to be interpreted through more sophisticated signs, the meaning of which subvert and haunt everyday reality as floating signifiers. Victoria Stewart argues that "[d]etective fiction might have traditionally served as a means of encompassing or controlling the apparently uncontrollable—violence, death—but in wartime, this function becomes both more urgent and more difficult" (93). Therefore, making sense of banal rituals in the novel might be the key to success, and this presumes the applicability of the power of observation, which at the same time is easily supported by a pretentious physical occupation, such as knitting. Soon after getting to Sans Souci, Tuppence quickly gets acquainted with the female residents by simply pretending to be an inexperienced knitter, one who has never really done any knitting "before this dreadful war" (Christie 36). This establishes the pattern of role-playing, typical of Christie's crime novels, to shed light on the terrifying trait epitomized by the ordinary. According to Susan Rowland, "Christie's fascination with masks and social types embodies an aesthetic of 'the menace behind ordinariness' of traditional social structures, not at all dissipated by the neat endings" (168). Not long after her arrival, Tuppence asks for the guidance of Miss Minton, an excellent knitter, because "she could only do simple things like Balaclava helmets but even now she was afraid she had gone wrong somewhere" (35) and "Mrs. Blenkinsop was so stupid, she wasn't really very good at knitting, not following the patterns, that was to say" (35).

The guests' identity at Sans Souci is investigated through their acts, words, and movements to the degree of paranoia. This is a typical scenario after an eruption of crisis, which, as Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow explain, is characterized by "a radical departure from the status quo and a violation of general assumptions and expectations," which considerably "limit[s] the ability to anticipate and predict" (n.p.). In order to find clues, everyday rituals such as knitting, a morning walk, street encounters, or an invitation must be observed with a heightened interest. Christopher Yiannitsaros says that in the Miss Marple novels, the elderly sleuth is not *a* panoptic force but *the* panoptic force: "She plays the role of surveillance agent and her ruthlessly dissecting gaze is internalized by her neighbors, affecting their conduct" (83, emphasis in the original). Tuppence has no such luck, as all the other guests are observing one another to find out their secrets. For example, Mrs. O'Rourke, an Irish woman with an intimidating smile, who usually sits by the window, claims to be "terribly interested in all [her] fellow creatures, that's why [she] sit[s] in this chair as often as [she] can. You see who goes in and who goes out and who's on the veranda and what goes on in the garden" (56). Bloom points out that detective fiction shares the attitude to secrecy with the spy thriller, but while "the original owner of the secret (the criminal) must remain in hiding" in the former, "the central question in spy writing is the ownership of the secret and this involves a struggle for power played out at the level of thrills" (3). While Miss Marple's panoptic force is vital in justice-making, in *N or M?* it proves to be ineffective. When one evening the cast sits down to have dinner, the conversation turns to "the absorbing subject of spies. . . . It was a very normal conversation of the kind that may be heard almost every day, nevertheless, Tuppence watched keenly the faces and demeanour of the people as they talked, striving to catch some tell-tale expression or word. But there was nothing" (58). The more they observe each other, the more everyone hides their true identity.

The success of the Beresfords' mission is highly dependent on Tuppence's ability to maintain the image of Mrs. Blenkinsop, a pathetic, knitting widow, which not only moves the plot forward towards the resolution, but also unravels the ultimate mystery figuratively identified with the invisible poison—that is, with the female double agent—infecting the nation's body through the corruption of motherhood. Consequently, Tuppence has to be alert not to step out of her role while interacting with the others. Following Miss Minton's advice on knitting, she completely forgets about her role-playing and gets in the center of attention due to Mrs.

O'Rourke's sharp eyes: "You're getting along fine with that helmet, Mrs. Blenkinsop," said Mrs. O'Rourke, suddenly turning her attention to Tuppence. 'You've been racing along. I thought Miss Minton said that you were an inexperienced knitter.' Tuppence flushed faintly" (57). The incident, which might have ruined "an easy approach to intimacy and good relations" and could have blown her cover of "an indifferent knitter asking for guidance" (91), reminds her to be vigilant at all times. The knitting scenes, though appearing insignificant, must be paid more attention to, especially the skills that knitting might signify: speed, pattern, concentration, creativity, routine, and perseverance. All of these determine the process of investigation, the struggle for finding out the secret and the rhythm of the plot: first Tuppence knits slowly, a clumsy, indifferent knitter in the observation phase, then speeds up to engage in lively conversations for a faster exchange of information, then strikes a medium course, "not so clumsy as she had been at first—but not so rapid as she could be" (91). Being an excellent knitter, she exactly knows how to follow the patterns, where she needs to go back and pick up the stitches, when to slow down or speed up. Yet, Christie plays with the meaning of the word "pattern" and demonstrates how traditional meanings collapse during the war. Probably, the most worrying disruption surrounds the trope of motherhood, or as Plain argues, the ability to recognize the "authentic mother" (*Twentieth-Century* 46) in order to preserve the stability of the nation. Plain uses the word "authenticity" as a synonym for "fixity, stability and by extension, loyalty." Tuppence, who is "herself an authentic mother" (46), confronts with her own weakness of reading the contradictory signs of motherhood along established standards. All of the characters are misled by Mrs. Sprot, whose identity is never questioned: she is unconditionally accepted as a mother and Betty as her child. They are both protected and supported by the other guests, who like to occupy themselves with the little girl, especially Tuppence, who reads her nursery rhymes. Understanding that a crisis heightens the desire to maintain everyday routines, the mother and child's presence comes to signify a cozy domestic atmosphere, underlying the total lack of suspicion and the real threat behind the invisibility of motherhood. Mrs. Sprot, who turns out to be M, is an English woman acting as a mother to the toddler Betty, whom she kidnapped from her real mother, a Polish woman called Vanda Polonska. In fact, as Suh points out, Tuppence's role-playing as a widow demonstrates her "ability to read and anticipate cultural gender logic and perform normative femininity, [which] is the same logic enacted by M in her espionage as Mrs. Sprot" (153). Not until she is

threatened by being shot by a lunatic woman, Anna, who lost her son in the previous war, does Tuppence realize the distorted pattern of motherhood that Mrs. Sprot performs to engage in the Nazi creed. Anna's obsession with her lost son reminds Tuppence of Vanda Polonska's face and her determination to get the child back and leads her to the recognition of the authentic, "unrelenting" mother (Christie 224). Mrs. Sprot, the false mother and Nazi spy, turns out to be the most monstrous double agent, the invisible poison, threatening the innocent body of the nation.

The dénouement of the plot heavily relies on Tuppence's intuition to finally "knit" and bring to light the toxic threads foreshadowed by the indiscernible and lethal component of the color *magenta*. The missing link is closely related to the corruption of nursery rhymes. Alison Light argues that

Many of Christie's titles remind us of both the terrors and the magic of the nursery: *Hickory Dickory Dock*, *Five Little Pigs*, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, *Crooked House*, *A Pocketful of Rye* . . . —all use the suspense that lies in the nursery rhyme, and remind us of how the mounting excitement of their repetition depends on that unsteady boundary between the homely and the malevolent. (81)

Betty, who "had taken a great fancy to Tuppence" (Christie 90), is really fond of a tattered picture-book with nursery rhymes in it and enjoys Tuppence reading them to her, especially *Goosey, Goosey, Gander*. However, when Betty asks her to read her a story for the second time, she refuses to touch the shabby book Tuppence takes from the cupboard and tells her that it is bad, nasty, and dirty: "She seized the book from Tuppence and replaced it in the line, then tugged out an identical book from the other end of the shelf, announcing with a beaming smile: 'K-k-klean ni-t i ce Jackorner!'" (Christie 111). At first, she does not regard the child's obsession with the shabby book as anything particular, but still "the words of the nursery rhyme seemed to mock at her" (91) until she is trapped by N, Commander Haydock. It is more out of impulse or intuition than rational thinking that Tuppence responds to Haydock's threatening words about a new Europe, with the title of the nursery rhyme: "Tuppence looked at him and searched her mind for a telling phrase. She was only able to find one that was both childish and rude. *Goosey, goosey gander!* said Tuppence . . . The effect was so magical that she was quite taken aback. Haydock jumped to his feet, his face went dark purple with rage, and in a second all likeness to a hearty British sailor had vanished" (223). In the resolution, Tuppence finds

out about the significance of Betty's tattered picture-book from Mr. Grant: "that book contains written in invisible ink a full list of all prominent personages who are pledged to assist an invasion of this country" (235). Thus, Tuppence has not only identified the invisible poison embodied by Mrs. Sprot, but has also succeeded in knitting a decontaminated shade of *magenta* to prevent the destruction of her nation's body.

Conclusion

N or M? brings the female experience to the fore by blending the narrative form of detective and spy fiction to question propagandistic images of feminine ideals in the Second World War. The analysis has explored how Christie's hybrid narrative form allows the re-evaluation of women's agency and performance in the war effort through depicting their rather mundane, even invisible domestic activities, like knitting. Tuppence's role-playing as a knitting widow in the counter-espionage mission deconstructs the traditional image of the female spy and, knitting, applied as a tool for surveillance and investigation, completely undermines orthodox ideas about patriotic femininity. Tuppence's spy-knitting does not only show the real danger contained in the domestic but also interrogates the legitimacy of hegemonic discourse directed at marginalized groups as well as the efficiency of patriotism built on those discourses. The floating signifiers of Tuppence's desire to knit something *magenta* finally find their signifieds in the identity and poisonous collaboration of the two Nazi spies, but beyond these concrete references, they also highlight the efficiency of women's contribution to the war effort and, more idealistically, the rescue of mankind. Even if the book could not but advertise wishful thinking at the time of its publication, it still offers an engaging scenario for survival through its experimentation with spy fiction's capacity to merge with the classic whodunit and critically revise contemporary political, cultural, and gender ideologies to contain the female other.

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Notes

1. Harris Mylonas and Scott Radnitz give the following definition of the term: “We understand ‘fifth columns’ as domestic actors who work to undermine the national interest, in cooperation with external rivals of the state.” They also point out that “[t]he first documented use of the term ‘fifth column’ is uncertain, but most sources suggest that it was originally coined in the context of the Spanish Civil War by William P. Carney in a 1936 article published in the *New York Times*. He used the term in English as the translation of the Spanish *quinta columna*, used to describe the Nationalist supporters that were sent ahead to Madrid to assist, from within, the four columns of troops led by Nationalist rebel general Emilio Mola Vidal against the loyalist Republicans” (3–4). With reference to the Second World War, Judy Suh argues that the term “‘Fifth Column’ . . . took on a greater significance when Norway fell to Germany in 1940.” (141) Referring to Peter Fleming, she also remarks that “[a]ccounts of ‘preconditioned traitors’ who aided the Nazis there were ‘easy to believe and impossible to disprove,’ and thus fueled the conspiratorial imagination” (Fleming qtd. in Suh 141).

2. See Rebecca Mills and Jamie C. Bernthal’s *Agatha Christie Goes to War* (2020), or Phyllis Lassner’s *Espionage and Exile: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film* (2016).

3. A social research group that began in 1937 (Purcell 155).

4. While loosely related to female authors of Golden Age detective fiction at first sight, it is intriguing to consider the female protagonist, Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Anne Radcliffe, whose “transgressive reading experiences,” as Angelika Reichmann argues, lead her to see through “the schemes of patriarchal reason,” yet “without openly transgressing the rules of patriarchal order” (191). Despite the fact that Tuppence’s agency is far from being suppressed, she is very much aware of the constraints of the status quo, which makes her operate according to the same cultural logic as the one the fictional heroines of the previous centuries resorted to.

5. Richard Rutt explains that the Crimean War of 1854–1856 “was the first war in which [British] people knitted at home for their armies overseas. The amount of knitting done during the war has been exaggerated” (134). He also points out that the three words, balaclava helmet, cardigan and raglan, usually associated with knitting, all have their origins in this war. He explains that “[s]ince the 1880s ‘balaclava helmet’ has meant a knitted helmet covering the head, ears, and neck, with an opening for the face.” He further argues that while the garment itself had been known before—it was patented by James Martin of Walworth as ‘The Protector’ in 1848—the name Balaclava first appeared in print only in 1881, seventeen years after the battle of Balaclava on 25 October 1864, but “[h]ow the name came to be applied is unknown” (135). Building on this historical fact, one can argue that the name Balaclava helmet itself originates in the intricate connection between knitting and the war.

6. Tuppence admits that the other residents find it really hard to accept that she likes a German so much: “How very unfortunate that the person I like best in this place should be a German. It makes everything cock-eyed!” (Christie 98).

7. Knitting women also appeared in Victorian literature, the most famous of whom is probably Madame Defarge, the menacing female figure in Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), who “famously knitted shrouds encrypted with the names of

aristocrats doomed to the guillotine, and who pointed her knitting-needle ‘as if it were the finger of Fate’” (Rees n.p.).

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