

'The Ultimate Version of Who You are Now': Performing the Gentleman Spy

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'If you're prepared to adapt and learn, you can transform', superspy Harry Hart (Colin Firth) declares to his working-class protégé Eggsey Unwin (Taron Egerton) in *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2015).¹ The transformation Harry advocates is a jettisoning of Eggsey's working-class outlook, clothing, and mannerisms in order to become a gentleman spy. Through focusing on the figure of the gentleman spy and his performance of masculinity in *Kingsman* and the graphic novel on which it is based, Mark Millar and Dave Gibbons's *The Secret Service* (2012), we unpack two aspects of adaptation. Firstly, we examine the ways in which the gentleman spy trope is transposed from the graphic novel to the screen, answering the call from adaptation scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Thomas Leitch, and Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan to broaden the adaptation discussion by moving beyond what Leitch terms the 'literature on screen' paradigm (64). It is important to consider 'material from print journalism, franchise characters, television series, comic books, video games, and toys' (Leitch 64) in order to 'challeng[e] the comforts of disciplinary integrity' (Cartmell and Whelehan 4). Furthermore, we contend that while the staples of the spy narrative remain constant in both texts, the graphic novel satirises elements of the genre while the film oscillates between homage and pastiche.

Drawing on Leitch, Cartmell, and Whelehan's work on adaptation as a genre, we also examine how the graphic novel and Matthew Vaughn's film adapt the genre of the British spy narrative, and how this adaptation throws masculine performativity into sharp relief. Through verbal and visual allusions, both the graphic novel and the film evoke fictional spies, in particular James Bond, who stands as the archetype from which Harry (and his graphic novel equivalent Jack London) and Eggsey (or Gary as he is typically called in the graphic novel) are derived. Hutcheon writes that 'adaptation as adaptation involves, for its knowing audience, an interpretive doubling, a conceptual flipping back and forth between the work we know and the work we are experiencing' (139). But while the graphic novel exhibits what Leitch regards as one of the features of the adaptation genre—'a tradition of self-mocking distance from the source text' ('Adaptation, the Genre' 115)—the film is more of a homage to the figure of the gentleman spy, except in its utilisation of problematic female characters whose liminal gender performances destabilize the genre's heteronormative paradigm. These differences in

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tone are particularly fascinating given that Millar was so involved in the process of adapting his graphic novel to film.

Wesley Wark argues that the spy novel offers a ‘typology of alternating modes ... in which the thrill of the adventurous romance vies for command with the politically charged narrative of societal danger’ (9). This oscillation between what Alan Burton terms the ‘romantic’ and ‘realistic’ modes is particularly evident in British spy narratives, with the gentleman spy inhabiting the ‘romantic’ mode and making the occasional incursion into ‘realistic’ terrain (24). It is these modes that Millar and Vaughn—both themselves British and both self-consciously making their contribution to a constantly evolving form—deliberately evoke. A sense of the development of the genre since its origins in the late nineteenth century is thus necessary to understand how the graphic novel and film replicate and subvert key tropes, particularly to do with masculinity. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were dominated by the figure of the gentleman spy, typically an amateur ‘cast unexpectedly into danger and rising magnificently to the challenge’ (Burton 5). These gentlemen, such as Erskine Childers’ Charles Carruthers and Arthur Davies, and John Buchan’s Richard Hannay, ‘render[ed] British espionage acceptable to the reader’ through their reassurance that ‘English supremacy remains securely based on the broad shoulders of those entitled to rule’ (Stafford 18). A shift to a ‘despairing moral tone’ and a focus on an ‘anti-hero’ protagonist engaged in ‘routine, dull, and ineffective’ espionage occurred from the late 1920s, epitomised by W. Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden; or The British Agent* (1928) and Eric Ambler’s *Epitaph for a Spy* (1938), although Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) provides an early forerunner of this type (Burton 6).

John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg credit Ian Fleming with ‘revitaliz[ing] ... the secret agent romance’ with the creation of James Bond in 1953 (143). Combining glamour with professionalism, Bond also injected a ‘liberated, *Playboy*-style sexuality without constraint’ into the genre, which proved ‘immensely influential’ (Burton 8). Post-Bond, many British spy narratives have sought to capitalise on Fleming’s success through either imitation (such as *The Avengers*) or parody (such as *Austin Powers*). In contrast, the more realist strand of British spy fiction built on the counter-tradition established by Somerset Maugham, featuring grammar school educated heroes (such as Len Deighton’s nameless spy) as well as ‘genuinely working-class protagonists such as James Mitchell’s David Callan and Brian Freemantle’s Charlie Muffin’ (Burton 11). Indeed, John le Carré, whose George Smiley is perhaps the most famous of the disillusioned, morally compromised realist spy protagonists, described Bond as a ‘candy-floss image of a macho man, an Etonian, who really seemed not to have a moral doubt in his head’ (Masters 243).

Both *The Secret Service* and *Kingsman* follow in and contribute to the tradition of the romantic spy mode, and are preoccupied with the figure of the gentleman spy. Of course, while there are nods to early prototypes, such as Hannay, and the film visually references *The Avengers*’ John Steed, it is Bond and his particular brand of masculinity, combining gentlemanly conventions with physical and sexual prowess, an appetite for violence, and a chameleon-like adaptability, that forms the primary touchstone. Praseeda Gopinath’s and Andrew Spicer’s analyses of English masculine representation provide an invaluable context for understanding Millar’s and Vaughn’s recycling

and adapting of Bond's enduring cultural image. Spicer suggests that Bond, in combining 'debonair Englishness with a classless internationalism', is the epitome of 'heroic masculinity' (187). Crucial to Bond's masculine type is the fusion of traditional aspects of the gentleman (service, style, confidence, sophistication) with the physical prowess and potent sexuality of the adventurer and spy.

For Gopinath, Bond is a crucial 'threshold figure' (144). He may have briefly attended Eton, but he is *not* a gentleman of leisure. Rather, he is a professional man with a job to do and a lack of scruples about *how* he gets the job done; efficiency and success are crucial, not honour and chivalry. Yet Bond is such a useful government tool precisely because he can *perform* the gentleman. He 'embodies two seemingly antithetical styles of masculinity ... pass[ing] with ease between a hierarchical imperialist world of gentlemanly entitlement and a classless, meritocratic world of professional expertise' (146). He is a chameleon figure who decides 'which stylization he will adopt according to his professional situation' (Gopinath 146). Like Bond, Jack London in *The Secret Service* is a professional who has been trained to perform the role of the gentleman spy. Unlike Bond, who is embedded in a world of class privilege, Jack has to divest himself of his working-class roots in order to achieve his personal and professional aspirations for a 'better' life. In contrast, the equivalent character in *Kingsman*, Harry Hart, is only ever presented as the consummate gentleman, with the film displaying a reactionary nostalgia for Childers's and Buchan's world of chivalry, honour, and the gentlemanly code epitomized by Harry's code name: Galahad.

We will first consider *The Secret Service* and *Kingsman* as adaptations of the British spy narrative, particularly of the gentleman spy James Bond. While Bond is the touchstone in the graphic novel, the film broadens the adaptation of this figure to reference other iconic mid-twentieth-century British gentleman spies, such as John Steed and George Smiley, and more recent incarnations of the man of action (similar to, but distinct from the gentleman spy), in particular Jack Bauer and Jason Bourne. Both texts pay homage to and recycle a key staple of the Bond narrative: the spy-hero who saves the world from a megalomaniac villain through a combination of violence, gadgets, sexual charisma, and adaptability. In doing so, *The Secret Service* and *Kingsman* reject the gritty Bond of the twenty-first century in favour of a lost golden age of gadgetry and debonair charm. When attention turns to issues of masculinity, the relationship between *Kingsman* as an adaptation of *The Secret Service* (as well as the wider relationship between the *Kingsman* narratives and Bond) becomes more complex. *The Secret Service* questions both the rewards of violence and the gentlemanly code embedded in the Bond formula. This interrogation of a particular brand of masculinity is not present in the film, which endorses the gentleman spy as the ultimate hero, and choreographs violence to a stylized pitch which virtually removes it from any real-world consequences. *Kingsman* does, however, rework the Bond formula in a distinctive way, expanding the roles of women from the 'victim-bimbo' dichotomy present in the graphic novel, while also challenging the patriarchal underpinnings of the gentleman spy.

The Secret Service and *Kingsman* are both aware of their indebtedness to and appropriation of spy genre conventions, particularly those popularized in Bond films. Millar reveals that the genesis of his story lies in director Terence Young's battle 'to turn [Sean] Connery, this rough Edinburgh guy into a gentleman' by taking him to 'his tailor, to

favourite restaurants, and basically [teaching] him how to eat, talk, and dress like a gentleman spy' (De Mesa). This inspired Millar to create a narrative which focuses on the 'making' of a spy, and which accommodates the 'death of the mentor' story arc without destabilising the grand narrative of the ultimately invincible superspy. The core thriller plot of exposing and defeating a villain who proposes mass murder as an environmental necessity is likewise rooted in the Bond canon, appearing in narratives such as the novel *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1963) and the film *Moonraker* (1979). Millar and Gibbons make the Bond parallel explicit when one of the celebrities Gary rescues declares that he 'used to play James Bond'. Blurring the lines between reality and fiction, the actor (who visually resembles Pierce Brosnan) claims that his film experience has given him a real-world competency around weapons. When asked if he knows how to fire a gun, he replies: 'I've been doing this shit since before you were born' (135). The allusion to Brosnan signals a crucial point about the intersection of both graphic novel and film with the Bond canon. Both texts demonstrate a nostalgia for the pre-Daniel Craig Bond era—they long for an age when Bond was more (or less) than a dark and tenacious anti-hero doing a serious job.

Kingsman articulates this longing in an exchange between Harry and the villain, Richmond Valentine (Samuel L. Jackson). When Valentine asks Harry if he likes spy movies, Harry replies: 'Nowadays they're a little serious for my taste. But the old ones—marvellous. Give me a far-fetched theatrical plot any day'. This is precisely what *Kingsman* does, harking back to the improbable fun and action in Bond films such as *Goldfinger* (1964) and *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), in which, as Harry remarks, the 'gentleman spy' battles the 'colourful megalomaniac' in order to save the world. Harry is the epitome of the gentleman spy, and Valentine is a villain of the old order. Rich, lisping, weak-stomached, and with a penchant for baseball caps and sports attire, his grandiose plan to save the world by destroying its inhabitants articulates an oxymoronic environmental logic.

On a cultural level, Valentine is problematic. He is not British, not white, and not a gentleman, and thus conforms to what Umberto Eco terms Fleming's formula of the villain as ethnic other (40). As the only African American (or American at all) to play a significant role in the film, the showdown between hero and villain can be read as a perpetuation of reductive colonial stereotypes that cast the gentleman in the role of literally white knight and the man of colour as the source of contagion who will end civilisation (mirroring Bond's battle against the Chinese-German Dr. No or the Haitian-French Mr Big). *Kingsman's* saving grace is its self-awareness of this pastiche. Not only does Valentine initiate the conversation about the spy versus megalomaniac, but he also taunts Harry after the church massacre, suggesting that there will be no chance of escape while the 'villain boasts of his convoluted plot'. He then follows through, shooting Harry in the head after declaring, 'this ain't that kind of movie'. Similarly, Valentine uses his dying breath to request a 'really bad pun,' a request the film first refuses through Eggsy's reprisal of Valentine's earlier 'This ain't that kind of movie,' and then later honours through the Swedish princess inviting Eggsy in 'through the arse hole'. Although the line is tasteless, it is best understood as part of the pastiche that Vaughn builds. Many Bond films end with a spoken sexual pun, and by offering his own version of this innuendo, Vaughn situates his narrative within a body of prior spy

narratives—intertexts he unabashedly evokes and celebrates. For Vaughn, ‘it was a kind of play on the Bond thing, *Spy Who Loved Me* and *Moonraker*, but the gag is this time the woman is asking for it, not the man’ (Brown).

These allusions operate as a collective intertext, signalling that the plot of both graphic novel and film will feature battles and explosions, and an eventual triumph of hero over villain. Both Jack London (whose name links him to the city which is his home and to the early twentieth-century author of adventure classics such as *The Call of the Wild* (1903)), and Harry Hart (whose code name is Galahad, the purest of the Knights of the Round Table) are unambiguously identified as heroic through a series of linguistic and visual markers that connect them to Bond. Jack, for example, works for ‘Her Majesty’s Government’ as a ‘secret agent’ specialising in ‘overseas threats’. Somewhat heavy-handedly, he also repeats the famous Bond catchphrase about having a ‘license to kill’ (30). His car—a bulletproof, grey Turner GT fitted with wings, rocket launchers and the capacity to ‘handle an Afghan war-zone’ (43)—is an overt allusion to Bond’s Aston Martin, which typically featured gadgets such as rockets, spike-producing tires, and a passenger ejector seat.

In *Skyfall* (2012), Q (Ben Whishaw), reincarnated as a science nerd, scoffs at Bond’s chagrin when he is issued with only a gun and a radio: ‘What were you expecting, 007? An exploding pen? We don’t really do that sort of thing anymore’. This ‘brave new world’ is not only a disappointment to Daniel Craig’s Bond, as Millar, Gibbons, and Vaughn all betray a nostalgia for the gadget-rich world of the Bonds of the Connery, Moore, and Brosnan eras. The spy training base in *The Secret Service*, for example, manufactures ‘all the goodies you might have seen in the movies’ (43). Training officer Rupert Greaves’s comment firmly locates the graphic novel in a fantasy world of technological wizardry, in which cars can fly and jet packs, dart-firing watches, and boot pistols help the spies to defeat the villains. Likewise, in the showdown between Gary and Arnold’s henchman Gazelle, Gazelle easily evades the gadgets he is accustomed to (being a former operative) but is ultimately defeated by a new invention, the ‘laser pen-knife’ (140).

As private citizens in a privately funded organisation, the *Kingsman* spies have an even greater supply of gadgets at their disposal. Harry and Eggsy’s arsenal emerges straight from Q’s laboratory in the Desmond Llewelyn era (1963–1999): a poison-loaded pen, a lighter that doubles as a hand grenade, a signet ring capable of delivering a lethal electric volt. More specifically, the poisoned blade in the shoe parallels Rosa Klebb’s (Lotte Lenya) deadly shoe blade in *From Russia With Love* (1963). And Gazelle’s lethal steel legs evoke other Bond villains with metal body parts, namely the deadly metal teeth of Jaws (Richard Kiel) from *The Spy Who Loved Me*, and the clawed right arm of Tee Hee (Julius Harris) in *Live and Let Die* (1973).

Bond is not the only spy evoked in the film. Arthur (Michael Caine) asks Eggsy why he has named his dog JB, assuming the initials are either a tribute to James Bond or to the American spy assassin Jason Bourne. Neither guess is correct, with Eggsy admitting that his inspiration is yet another spy hero with identical initials: Jack Bauer, the protagonist of the American action-thriller television series *24*. An additional intertext is evoked by Harry’s impeccable suit and thick-rimmed glasses, which visually reference John Steed from *The Avengers*. Even Harry’s signature weaponized umbrella links him to the third season of *The Avengers*, while his home is a

visual homage to Steed's flat in Season Five of the series. Harry's first name possibly parallels Harry Palmer, the name given to Len Deighton's nameless spy in the film versions of the novels, a connection that is underscored by the casting of Michael Caine—who played Palmer in the films—as Arthur. These echoes serve two purposes. Firstly, they charm and reward devoted watchers and readers of the genre by providing moments of nostalgic recognition. They also foreground Vaughn's pastiche; he replicates and adapts not to challenge, or even to update, but to prove that he knows, and can use with flair, the core ingredients of the spy canon. Such artistic confidence comes as no surprise, given his previous experience directing *X-Men: First Class* (2011), another comic-book-to-film adaptation. With this and with *Kingsman*, Vaughn internalises Julie Sanders's argument that 'texts feed off each other and create other texts', evoking 'pleasure' through the 'tension' created by the interplay of the 'familiar and the new' (14).

The Secret Service and *Kingsman* adapt the staples of the spy narrative in identical ways, firmly locating their narratives in a bygone age of unabashed, over-the-top fun and romance. In so doing, they offer a contrast to the more serious, gritty spy thrillers of the twenty-first century, epitomized by Craig's Bond and Matt Damon's Jason Bourne. Reviewers and scholars writing about the recent Bond films have praised the updating of the genre for a new age in which feminism, terrorist threats, government oversight, fiscal responsibility, and cyber developments have made the suave, misogynist spy obsolete (Dodds, Smith). Millar, Gibbons, and Vaughn demonstrate that there is still an appetite for the escapist pleasure of less realist plots and characters, with the film performing so well that a sequel is set for release in late 2017. In an interview, Vaughn declared that both he and Millar 'missed all the spy movies we loved as kids'. Lamenting that spy films 'have become very serious', their aim was to 'subvert ... the spy movie genre as we know it' by taking what they 'love about that genre but put a spin on it and make it a bit crazier' (Terrero).

Both the graphic novel and film are similar in this regard, but when attention turns to the film's adaptation of the graphic novel's other core plot—the transformation of a young working class hoodlum into a gentleman spy—several key differences between the tone of the works become apparent. The graphic novel adapts the figure of the gentleman spy with the 'self-mocking distance' that Leitch identifies as a distinguishing feature of adaptation as a genre (115). He writes that

watching or reading an adaptation as an adaptation invites audience members to test their assumptions, not only about familiar texts but about the ideas of themselves, others and the world these texts project against the new ideas fostered by the adaptation and the new reading strategies it encourages (116).

Millar and Gibbons's text engages in this testing of assumptions, evoking the standard narrative tropes of the gentleman spy to satirize and interrogate key aspects of the genre. In contrast, Vaughn's film alternates between pastiche and homage. It foregrounds its relationship to preceding British spy narratives, and celebrates its own recycling of core spy tropes, but does not sufficiently distance itself from its wider source material to interrogate the gentlemanly code it perpetuates, except in relation to its female characters, as will be discussed later.

In the graphic novel, after Gary Unwin is shown around the spy-base at which he is to be trained, Uncle Jack asks him: ‘Do you want to be a *gentleman*, Gary? A dashing, urbane, *ladies man*? The *ultimate version* of who you are *now*?’ (Millar and Gibbons 44, emphasis in original). Implicit in Jack’s question is the assumption that masculinity can be learned through training, and that this training involves opposing the feminine, adhering to upper-class norms, and endorsing and literalising a dichotomy between an ‘ultimate’ masculine ideal and its subjugated other. The imitative and contrived nature of Gary’s training introduces a hermeneutical problem wherein readers must interpret Gary’s evolution from hoodlum to gentleman spy as either a natural transition or a deliberate construction. While at first glance both interpretations seem valid, closer examination suggests a disparity between the graphic novel’s satirical subversion of gentleman spy conventions, and its characters, whose actions and ideologies are directed towards normalising hegemonic masculine ideals. This is further problematized in the film, which presents the gentleman as the masculine ideal and desired norm.

Part of this normalisation involves promoting masculinity as innate and authentic. As Judith Butler suggests, this authenticity is established through dramatization and reproduction, with masculinity constantly reiterating hegemonic gender norms in order to defend its ‘claim on naturalness and originality’ (125). Gopinath builds on this, arguing that the ‘vectors of class, race, and sexuality intersect with masculinity to delineate the particular gender norm that is aligned with the nation’ (5).

This performative tension, which the spy thriller genre often includes but never completely acknowledges, provides an ideal platform on which to consider the nexus between violence and masculinity in *The Secret Service* and *Kingsman*. Across both texts, violence is used to construct and maintain a hegemonic gender model that posits upper-class masculinity as the ultimate goal, and marginalization or feminisation as a threat. Here, violence is performative, carried out within conventional limits in order to establish a boundary between ‘good’ (functional, upper-class) and ‘bad’ (wanton, lower-class) violence. *The Secret Service*’s satire aims to blur this boundary and detach violence from its conventional rewards, while *Kingsman* self-reflexively highlights gentleman-spy plot conventions to examine the way in which violence, however theatrical, is contextualized and sanctioned by upper-class patriarchal discourse.

The Secret Service also invests in an upper-class British tradition, but connects this tradition to narrative moments which undercut masculine violence and the rewards it earns. Although the spy genre is certainly not the only one that posits masculine violence as rewarding (or necessary, as the case may be), it is distinctive in its suggestion that violence is foundational to the construction of gentleman spies—and that the gentleman spy image, swathed in hegemonic upper-class codes and conventions, is itself a reward for the expulsion (explicit or implicit) of the lower-class or the feminine. Bond is a prime example, for, as Brian Baker suggests, Bond is a ‘socially acceptable and fantasy representation of the hegemonic soldier-subject’ (34) whose embodiment of ‘ideological fantasies (of power, security or domination)’ (35) tells of the Eurocentric reader rewards that can be gained from Fleming’s narratives. Accompanying Bond’s cultural impact, however, is the legitimation and rewarding of masculine violence: Bond protects Queen and country neither by pure machismo nor destruction alone, but by contextualized and codified acts of violence that construct his masculine image while simultaneously

appeasing social anxieties towards ominous conflicts and threats such as the Cold War, homosexuality, or the exotic obscurity of the non-European 'other'. Bond's endorsement of imperialist ideologies and masculine ideals makes the rewards he earns doubly satisfying—his masculinity is both 'a comforting fantasy of covert Great Power status' (Baker 34) and a hegemonic paragon, an amalgamation of patriotism, violence, and unwavering gender normativity.

This combination of violence and success is subverted by *The Secret Service's* opening panels. A secret agent, having rescued Mark Hamill (who, in a delightful transtextual connection was cast as a kidnapped scientist in the film) from nondescript captors, escapes through a snowy forest via snowmobile with a group of henchmen trailing behind him. As vehicles explode and bodies fly through the air, the panels begin to mirror Timothy Dalton's escape in *The Living Daylights* (1987) or Pierce Brosnan's in *The World Is Not Enough* (1999). The snowmobile launches off a cliff as the secret agent assures Mark Hamill, 'the parachute can hold both of us' (Millar and Gibbons 8). But instead of the Union Jack parachute unfolding like Roger Moore's in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, it deploys too late, and both Mark Hamill and the secret agent die at the bottom of the cliff. Here, the graphic novel disconnects violence from its intended reward. There has been bloodshed, but the mission has failed, and the parachute—a symbol of national pride—lies deflated in the snow. Although the Union Jack parachute eventually unfolds in all its glory at the end of the graphic novel, it is now a challenged symbol; it no longer signifies impenetrable and flawless masculine violence, but rather a tenuous gambit in which violence might succeed, or equally fail.

To be rewarding, masculine violence must be morally permissible as well as effective. *The Secret Service* not only detaches violence from conventional narrative resolutions, but also blurs the boundary between 'good' and 'bad' violence in order to further delegitimize the spy genre's claim that normative masculine violence is defined by inviolable boundaries. Across most spy fictions, 'good' violence is a force wielded by the upper class, facilitated by gadgets and iconic weaponry. It saves the world, defeats evil, fosters a sense of catharsis, reinforces the law, and perpetuates sociocultural, institutional, or gendered ideals. 'Bad' violence, on the other hand, is carried out by street thugs, foreigners, and faceless henchmen. It targets the innocent, and is destructive, wanton, and artless. It is the broken bottle, the knife behind the back, the nuclear bomb; the antithesis of Bond's gleaming pistol. This distinction is fundamentally a process of 'othering' whereby aberrant masculine performances are repudiated and normative performances are reinforced: accordingly, gentleman spies do not harm women, children, or the innocent. Aware of this, *The Secret Service* consistently places Gary in situations which require the use of unconventional violence in order to achieve a conventional result, which is no less than the construction of Gary's masculine identity.

For example, when Gary discovers that Dean has abused his mother, he finds him at the local pub and physically assaults him. Billy and the rest of Dean's friends confront Gary and prepare to attack him, but are immobilized by a 'neural disruptor' (101) Gary pulls from his suit jacket. Gary then proceeds to beat them all with a pool cue, and then, as a coup de grace, shatters a giant bottle of coins over Billy's head. Here, readers are faced with a problematic scene that presents an apparently clear boundary between good and bad masculine violence, only to blur this boundary by establishing Gary as

a vigilante who inflicts physical retribution upon passive targets. And while Gary's violence appears to earn him various rewards (good triumphs over evil, and he is one step closer to becoming a 'real' man), these rewards are undercut by the paradoxical intent of the violence itself. Gary tells Billy, 'You think [respect] comes with having guns and stuff, but ... respect's got to be earned'. Then, after smashing Billy's head with the bottle, Gary asks him, 'You respect me now, big Billy?' (103) Gary has not *earned* respect so much as he has taken it by *force*, and thus the only things that separate him from Dean and Billy are a suit, a gadget, and a license to kill—signifiers that are no more than a veneer over gratuitous violence.

The effect of this veneer can be seen when Gary and his partner Hugo are sent on their first assassination mission. While Hugo describes the act of shooting in dispassionate, mechanical language—'two in the chest and one in the off switch'—Gary refers to the mission as 'human target practice' and reminds Hugo that the people they have been ordered to kill have 'mums and dads and all that' (60). Later, however, when Gary arrests a South American drug lord, he shows a noticeable lack of moral reservation by killing half a dozen guards. Unlike the assassination mission's gritty alleyway shootout, the violence performed here is far more stylized and conventional: Gary approaches wearing sunglasses and holding an automatic rifle in each hand, and tells the drug lord, 'enough of this shit ... I've got a plane to catch' (85, ellipsis in original). It is in offering these two conflicting representations of masculine violence that *The Secret Service* performs its most subversive work. Rather than showing conventional displays of 'good' or 'bad' violence, the graphic novel displays violent masculine performances that are either cloaked in codes and clichés, or stripped of convention and damaging to the construction of hegemonic masculine identity. David Brion Davis tells of the 'sheer marketability of imagined violence' (29)—violence that offers suspense, surprise, and contrast to its viewers. *The Secret Service* certainly includes these elements, but regards fantastical violence as a distraction, a series of smoke and mirrors around an increasingly tenuous masculine image.

The film *Kingsman*, however, underscores gentleman spy conventions as part of its homage to the genre, and its violence is deliberately removed from the real world of consequence and trauma. Through a careful blend of choreography, sound track, and special effects, the violence is highly stylized and has a detached, grotesquely comedic quality. For example, when Merlin (Mark Strong) succeeds in activating the control chips that Valentine has implanted in his minions, the resulting head explosions provoke laughter rather than anguish, drawing artistic inspiration from the hypnotic bird's-eye-view kaleidoscope shots of Busby Berkeley 'Dance Until Dawn' and exploding in a rainbow of psychedelic colours in precise time to Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance* (1901). The music, so familiar to audiences of the annual Last Night of the Proms, works to further reassure the audience that these are the 'bad guys', people of privilege and power who sold out their fellow citizens to preserve their own lives and futures. In contrast, Merlin and Eggsy, the British gentleman spies who put duty and service before self, will, in the words of 'Land of Hope and Glory', act as 'Mother[s]' (or protectors) 'of the free' to restore civilisation (Elgar and Benson, Finale).

The last battle between Eggsy and Gazelle (Sofia Boutella) also presents violence as adrenaline-pumping entertainment. To the soundtrack of the 1982 disco hit 'Give

It Up' by KC and the Sunshine Band, ballet meets martial arts in the highly-stylized encounter between the hero and the villain's henchman. This battle, as with the exploding heads sequence, conforms to the 'good' violence model: it is purposeful violence intended to save the world, as opposed to the wanton violence Valentine wishes to inflict upon humanity. Moreover, Gazelle's prosthetic blades make her not a disadvantaged victim but a powerful equal, allowing for a fair fight between her and Eggsy. And when she is ultimately defeated, it is not by gratuitous violence but by a tiny cut from a poisoned blade.

This convention of 'good' violence is problematized, however, in the three-and-a-half-minute church massacre sequence. This offended some viewers and critics, who felt that the scene crossed a line between acceptable and pornographic violence (Robey; Brynes; Dargis). However, the film carefully manipulates the sympathies of the audience by making the target of Harry's violence a congregation of racist, homophobic, sanctimonious churchgoers potentially modelled on the hate group based at Westboro Baptist Church. While their beliefs do not make them deserving of Valentine's sadistic experiment, their rhetoric of hate certainly makes Harry's victory over them palatable. In a narrative that positions the mature gentleman spy in a homosocial world and portrays him as curiously sexless, violence also stands as a substitute for sexual power, affirming Harry's capacity for physical dominance and, by proxy, his virility.

Harry's violence connects to another taboo 'pleasure' evident in audience appetite for action films and action games: violence removed from moral restraint. Millar expressed envy that he had not created this scene in the graphic novel, commenting:

Guys like James Bond are so highly trained you never really get them to cut loose in movies and show what they can really do ... to actually see them go nuts and not hold back was just fascinating. It was like James Bond trying to survive in *The Walking Dead* (Guerrasio).

The violence takes place to the soundtrack of 'Free Bird' (1973) by Lynryd Skynyrd. In the song, the narrator expresses a desire to be free of domestication, but what viewers witness in the film is Harry freed from rational thought and moral restraint. He is the pure id of the spy hero, trained to such a pitch of professionalism and violence that he can out-fight the entire congregation, personally killing at least forty members with a combination of spy tools: (hand gun, cigarette lighter bomb); appropriated weapons (axe, knife); and improvised weapons (candelabra, thurible, Bible). Once again, stylization keeps the violence at an emotional remove, at least until the end. Harry's debonair appearance and skill promote a flawless masculine image, but his hyper-violent actions are still coded as immoral and thus disturb the ostensibly serene surface of gentleman spy success.

The guilt and unease catalysed by Harry's rampage forms an incisive interrogation of masculine violence, wherein Vaughn forces viewers to consider whether screen violence has anesthetized them to such an extent that now, when witnessing such scenes, they experience gleeful pleasure rather than disgust. Instead of clinging to an unseen, unacknowledged body count (a pattern used in many spy films to maintain an acceptable gentleman image), Vaughn brings the body count up close and personal. Harry's adversaries do not die off screen but at his hands, brutally and terribly, causing him an unbearable burden of guilt. Like *The Secret Service's* subversion of the Union Jack

parachute, Harry's murderous actions cast doubt on the gentleman spy and his legitimacy as an autonomous moral agent. As Harry himself admits, 'I had no control. I killed all those people. I wanted to'.

The word *control* is vital here, for in all the previous scenes in which Harry unleashes violence, he is completely in control. This is particularly apparent in the scene where he teaches the thugs who torment Eggsy a lesson. Locking the pub door in synchrony to declaring 'Manners maketh man', he proceeds to demolish the thugs with a combination of skill, gadgetry, and opportunism. Harry's first act, hooking the beer tankard with his umbrella handle, is a visual symbol for the whole sequence: a taming of working-class thuggery through elegant, precise, and purposeful gentlemanly violence. The rewards are tangible: the villains are chastised, and Eggsy is protected from harm. In re-enacting this scene at the end of the film, down to a reprise of Harry's three-piece suit, words, and deft umbrella work, Eggsy signals that he has completely transitioned from hoodlum to spy.

It is in this interplay between working-class origins and gentlemanly spy training that the tonal difference between the graphic novel and film becomes apparent and the links to the Bond oeuvre are challenged. Bond may be a 'modern, to some extent classless, hero', but he is also 'indelibly associated in the popular imagination with a particular image of Britishness—the suave gentleman hero' (Chapman 133, 130). In the graphic novel, the figure of the gentleman spy is simultaneously glamourized and critiqued. Certainly, Gary wants to go to spy school and learn to be 'everything [he] ever dreamed of', to 'shoot properly ... fly planes ... do stunts in any kind of car and bring a woman to orgasm every time' (Millar and Gibbons 44). Fundamentally he wants to be his uncle Jack, who is the 'ultimate version' of masculinity: the gentleman. Yet, while the graphic novel presents Jack as a model of Bond-like heroism, it also challenges the cost of his trajectory from council estate to Her Majesty's secret service. Jack has jettisoned his past, and his aptitude for violence permits him entry into a world of Savile Row suits, fine wines, and service for the greater good. But in so doing, he has failed to protect and care for those closest to him: his sister and nephews. His selfishness and snobbery is challenged by Gary who, despite being a hoodlum, works hard to protect his mother and brother. This inherent decency is what makes him a good spy: he is loyal, self-sacrificing, and protective of the weak. It is also what makes him a different kind of man to his uncle. His first act upon graduating from spy school is to buy his mother a house, rescuing her from an abusive relationship and providing her with a bank account that will allow her to be financially independent. Jack helps him, declaring that 'This is something I should have done a long time ago' (106).

It is not that the graphic novel paints a flattering picture of the working class. Dean and his crew are presented to the reader through Jack's eyes and are depicted as abusive, thuggish, racist, dope-smoking, reality-television watching petty criminals who '[exist] in a cultural vacuum', 'dress like ... clown[s] and limit [their] vocabulary to eight sexual expletives' (59, 34). Jack's reductive view of the working-class is indicative that he has absorbed the values and mind-set of the upper-class, privileged gentleman to such an extent that he now 'others' the class to which he once belonged. While Millar and Gibbons associate Dean and his crew with a negative brand of masculinity, they simultaneously expose the class system in Britain as elitist and unjust through Jack's

gradual realisation that it is the system that creates a tragic cycle of hopelessness and violence. Jack's final letter to Gary castigates the media for perpetuating an image of the working-classes as 'feckless and work-shy' (151). The problem lies with a system that seeks to keep the working class in its place and constantly 'others' that class as lazy and undeserving in order to justify the retention of power by the privileged few. Jack exposes the flaw in this paradigm when he articulates a Thatcherite message of self-responsibility: 'all we need is a little opportunity and someone who believes in us' (151). Both he and Gary are living demonstrations of the graphic novel's acceptance of this maxim—given an opportunity, they transform themselves by learning to perform as gentlemen. This ability to move between worlds highlights that class barriers are arbitrary and porous, and that being a gentleman spy is not an accident of birth but a matter of adaptability and training.

In the graphic novel, the masculine ideal is a combination of Jack and Gary: a successful performance of the gentleman spy coupled with a respect for one's origins and a determination to improve the lot of loved ones. On the surface, *Kingsman* makes a similar point, expressing a limited critique of the upper-class snobbery that would prevent Eggsy from becoming a spy because of his working-class origins. Arthur's discomfort with Eggsy is ridiculed by Harry, who terms his boss a 'snob' and urges him to accept that the world is 'changing'. Harry's quip that 'aristocrats develop weak chins' because of inbreeding is eventually endorsed by the behaviour of Charlie (Edward Holcroft), a Kingsman recruit with impeccable upper-class credentials who is revealed to be a self-serving coward. The revelation that Arthur is a Valentine convert momentarily underscores this point, until his dying curse betrays his own working-class origins (another tongue-in-cheek nod to actor Michael Caine's portrayal of the cockney spy Harry Palmer).

Yet while the film presents Arthur and Charlie as unattractive and ultimately villainous, this does not represent an eschewal of the gentlemanly ideal. Indeed, Arthur and Charlie's behaviour exposes them as unsuccessful gentleman, unworthy of the Kingsman name. The true gentleman, epitomized by both Harry and by the Kingsman code, combines character with the spy skill set. Harry argues that 'Being a gentleman has nothing to do with the circumstances of one's birth. Being a gentleman is learned'. He proceeds to give lessons in martini making, the etiquette of sitting or standing when visiting a friend or colleague, the need to avoid publicity, the acquisition of a bespoke suit, and the choice of 'Oxfords not brogues' as the ideal footwear. This suggests that being a gentleman is entirely performative, but it also insists that this type of masculinity is the apotheosis of being a man. Tellingly, Harry associates the gentleman with '[t]rue nobility ... being superior to your former self', a curiously anachronistic idea that harks back to a Victorian ideal that scholars argue declined with the waning of the British Empire (Spicer 3–8; Gopinath 23–4).

By describing the suit as 'a modern gentleman's armour' and the Kingsman agents as 'the new knights', the film taps into a historically distant but potent symbol of Englishness: Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. This cleverly circumvents many of the problematic aspects of being an English gentleman in a post-colonial world, for Arthur and his Knights are embattled patriots rather than imperial invaders. It is this chivalric knightly ideal that Eggsy must aspire to—indeed, after Harry's death,

he must become the new Galahad. This trajectory is wholly endorsed by Vaughn, who casts Harry/Eggsy/Galahad as the saviours not only of Britain and the world but of a vanishing way of life, a world of class privilege, benign patronage, ‘disinterested service’, ‘altruism’, and honour that represents the ultimate masculine ideal (Gopinath 30).

The film partly overcomes one of the problems of this elitist paradigm by casting Harry, the ultimate gentleman, as the Kingsman who works to cultivate working-class talent, first in his protégé (Eggsy’s father) and then in Eggsy. Unlike the graphic novel, however, Harry himself has no working-class roots. He is coded as upper class by: his accent (received pronunciation); clothing (three piece suits and an understated beige cardigan for home wear); Mews flat (discreetly decorated with pictures of dogs and mounted butterflies, crystal decanters, and an abundance of silverware); and his ethic of self-effacing service (epitomized by the banal newspaper headlines that decorate his office as a reminder that he has been a successfully invisible agent). Yes, Harry opens the door of privilege to Eggsy, and, yes, Eggsy walks through this door. But, apart from retaining his accent and his duty of care to his mother and sister, Eggsy then proceeds to undergo the *Pygmalion* transformation the film references: casting aside working-class habits, behaviours, and modes of dress to become the socially ‘superior’ gentleman spy.

This problematic reinforcement of class hierarchies, which is accompanied by a parallel idealisation of whiteness, also carries equally problematic gender associations. The Kingsman organisation was established when England’s monarch was a man (George V), but although the current Arthur, Lancelot, and Galahad inhabit a nation ruled by a Queen, there is no shift in nomenclature to acknowledge they are ‘Queensmen’. And while Elizabeth II is visually acknowledged by the coronation portrait that hangs in the hall outside the Kingsman boardroom, that very location is telling—it is outside the boardroom’s walls, which are adorned with paintings of former Kingsman, all men and all dressed in either military uniform or the gentleman’s suit. The word *Kingsman* excludes women, a stance which is later challenged through Roxy (Sophie Cookson), but which in the opening boardroom scene is reinforced by the presence of holographic images of all the current Kingsman: all male, all suited, all wearing glasses, all clean shaven and with short hair. In essence, all clones of Harry.

The ‘young, attractive,’ sexy and ‘disposable’ Bond girl figure might also be seen as a clone, if not a trope (Neuendorf et al. 758), with iterations appearing across various narratives such as the Jason Bourne and Jack Reacher series, and of course *The Secret Service*. As Robert A. Caplen argues, ‘Bond girls’ continue to be defined by a ‘male-oriented view of female sexuality’ (194) despite appearing smart, autonomous, or sexually liberated. These and other female characters are always present but never fully assimilated into what is a predominantly masculine genre because their femininity forms part of the ‘visual guarantee of the maleness of the Secret Service’ (Black 107). While *Kingsman* reinforces the class hierarchies that *The Secret Service* disrupts, the inverse is true of the texts’ treatment of female characters: the film broadens and interrogates the limited roles afforded women in both the graphic novel and the wider spy tradition that Millar and Gibbons’s text recycles.

The problem with the graphic novel’s female characters, however, lies not in their noticeable lack of agency but rather in how they, as subjects, are meant to be interpreted: do they operate as satirical instruments whose clichéd performances mock the

spy genre's outdated perception of feminine sexuality, or are they simply victims of an enduring misogynist ideology that has yet to be shaken from the genre's narrative framework?

Doctor Arnold's girlfriend Ambrosia, for example, is a useful source of information, but this information can apparently only be gained through seduction, and thus she exists as a sexual target in the eyes of her 'gentleman' predators. Gary describes her as 'tasty' (Millar and Gibbons 111), and this obvious reference to her name recalls a tradition of amusingly named Bond girls (such as Pussy Galore, Honey Ryder, or Kissy Suzuki). That Jack refers to Ambrosia as 'the beautiful *girl* in the bright blue mini-dress' (111, emphasis added) validates her Bond girl status as well as J.J. MacIntosh's point that 'women in spy fiction are almost always referred to as *girls*' (172, original emphasis). Jack continues explaining to Gary that 'wives and girlfriends are always the key', and that as far as interactions with women are concerned, 'seduction training comes in handy' (Millar and Gibbons 111). Ambrosia, then, is both objectified and patronisingly elevated to a 'key' character: she is useful not just to the novel's course of events, but to Jack's and Gary's masculine performance. Unlike *Kingsman*'s Harry Hart and Eggsy, who are never overtly sexualized or placed in positions of sexual dominance (save for Eggsy's crude sexual encounter at the end of the film), Gary and Jack rely on compliant women to cement their roles as men and as secret agents. And while Ambrosia's compliance seemingly evolves into a found sense of agency—she points a rifle at Arnold and tells him, 'I'm not going to stand back and let you kill all these people' (139)—even this performance serves to reinforce masculine ideals. Here, she is not an empowered woman so much as she is a masculinized subject, one that must adhere to hegemonic masculine norms and ideals if it is to be seen as strong, independent, or influential.

The paradigm of the masculinized woman poses a serious problem, as it promotes the assumption that 'feminine' or 'authentic' women are passive, emotional, openly sexual beings, while 'masculine' women exhibit resilience, physical ability, perceptiveness, or independence—in other words, the traits of a man. While *The Secret Service* appears only tangentially concerned with this gender bias, *Kingsman* invests much of its subversive energy into displaying problematic female characters who, although visually feminine, remain caught in a mire of masculine signifiers. Take, for instance, the character of Gazelle, who in *Kingsman* has been adapted from a brawny ex-Secret Service agent to a femme fatale with razor-sharp blades for legs. Unlike the 'Bond girl villain' discussed by Tony W. Garland, Gazelle is never sexually linked to the spy hero—another subversion of the Bond tradition. More importantly, the film adaptation adjusts Gazelle's gender performance, positioning it at the nexus of masculine and feminine convention. Less militant than her graphic novel counterpart, she is often depicted as an assistant rather than a soldier, bringing Richmond Valentine his food, organising his security, and covering bodies with blankets before he walks into a room (he cannot stand the sight of blood). Clothing visually reinforces both her secretarial role and her femininity: her 'business' attire, which consists of a black skirt and a black top with a white collar and sleeves, evokes the image of a housemaid; her only other outfit being her form-fitting Ascot floral dress and matching black feather fascinator. While these accoutrements aim to convince viewers of Gazelle's femininity, they are contradicted by her

conventionally masculine actions. She cuts a Kingsman agent in half, murders two guards by cutting off their limbs and stabbing one through the head, and later, as she sits in Valentine's private jet (dressed elegantly in floral daywear) she props up her bladed prosthetic leg and begins sharpening it as if preparing for battle. Gazelle is thus presented not as a powerful woman, but as a liminal figure who looks like a woman but acts like a man, and whose violence is coded as masculine while simultaneously appearing balletic and feminized. This is perhaps why, before she attacks Princess Tilde's guards, she unzips her skirt and throws it to the side—she divests herself of feminine aesthetics in order to properly emulate a masculine act.

Similarly, if not more problematically, Roxy's performance of violence (or lack thereof) belies her femininity as well as her role as a Kingsman agent. Although she completes the Kingsman programme and is thus more legitimately a secret agent than Eggsy, she is relegated to a nonviolent mechanical task while Eggsy fights Valentine's henchmen. And while this might be read as a consequence of her femininity, it is precisely her femininity that is downplayed at every turn: she takes on the codename 'Lancelot', the name of a fabled male knight; her hair, unlike Gazelle's is always tied back; and her clothing is tailored to match the gentlemanly style of the other Kingsman agents. She is the inverse of Gazelle insofar as she is visually masculine but functionally feminine, and is able to access gentleman spy accessories but not the violence they necessitate (the closest she comes to firing a gun is when she shoots a blank round at her dog as part of a training exercise). Visually convincing but devoid of substance, she is an imitation of the gentleman spy; this imitative performance lends weight to *Kingsman's* critique of spy fiction tropes, for as soon as *being* a Kingsman is reduced to having a gun and a set of clothes, the entire matrix of hegemonic codes and conventions on which gentleman spy masculinity depends is rendered contrived and unnecessary.

The Secret Service and *Kingsman* foreground the complexities of adaptation as they both evoke the tradition of the gentleman spy, in particular the James Bond canon. Yet *The Secret Service* also works in dialogue with and opposition to the Bond formula: it recycles the tropes of the gentleman spy, but by detaching violence from its rewards, challenging the snobbery and elitism of the class system, and killing off the mentor spy, it also subverts many of the core components of the genre. *Kingsman* offers a further level of complexity in its adaptation of both Millar and Gibbons's graphic novel and the wider canon of the British spy narrative. In adapting the narrative arc of the transformed working-class hoodlum, it abandons the critique of class hierarchy embedded in *The Secret Service* and celebrates the figure of the gentleman spy as guardian of the nation and apotheosis of masculinity. In this way, both texts are paradoxical inasmuch as they are in love with the myths they purport to critique: by offering the urban hoodlum and the aspiring female hero a path to becoming a 'gentleman spy', they present a fantasy, an 'ultimate version' of self that is simultaneously subversive and reactionary.

NOTE

¹ For ease of identification, the graphic novel is referred to as *The Secret Service* (although it was republished as *The Secret Service: Kingsman* following the film release) while the film title has been truncated to *Kingsman*.

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