Stephanie Bergmann
Professor Clingman
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A Queen Among Pawns: Gender and the Spy Genre in Transcription

In *Transcription*, Kate Atkinson revises the traditional spy genre along lines of gender and female agency. Her protagonist, Juliet, transcribes conversations of presumed enemies at the request of the male figures who employ her, Perry Gibbons and Godfrey Toby. As transcriber, she has access to information but no power over it, as she doesn't know what is done with this intelligence in the long run. Atkinson contradicts the spy genre by placing Juliet as the protagonist – Juliet, in Perry or Godfrey's perspectives, may only exist to serve them. But in making her the central rather than a peripheral character in this story, Atkinson reverses the typically male-dominated spy genre by creating a female protagonist who is a "queen, able to move in any direction" (242). Juliet is not just a "queen" because she's a spy and double agent, she's a queen because she is a *female* spy and double agent.

Juliet's role as a transcriber is gendered, illustrated by Perry's initial request: "I need a girl" (41). Not a woman, or a person, or an employee, but a girl. This term suggests that Perry wants someone who will act not only as a transcriber but as a secretary and maid as well. Furthermore, Perry treats her like a servant, requesting that she make him tea, claiming that while he knows it's not her job, "no one makes as good a pot of tea" as she does (60); and telling her to "whisk around with a duster, empty ashtrays and so on." Juliet also takes messages for Godfrey and "nips up next door [to] leave [them]...for him" (59). These instances are indicative of the fact that Perry and Godfrey see Juliet as useful not only because she transcribes conversations, but because she will make them tea and clean up after them and take messages for them. She likely fulfills these duties because she is either worried that she might be replaced or

because she knows there's no use arguing when the men see her as little more than a "girl" who is kept around only for her usefulness.

Even when Juliet is given some freedom to act as Iris Carter-Jenkins while spying on Mrs. Scaife, her role is still defined by subordinance to Perry and Godfrey. While Juliet is off pretending to be Iris, making strategic decisions such as sneaking into Mrs. Scaife's house to find the Red Book and making a daring "escape through an upstairs window," she's still seen as just a "girl." Perry observes, "Goodness, look what happens when you're let off the leash" (135-6). This implies that Juliet is leashed and deferential to Perry to begin with. While it's a passing comment, not something Juliet fires back at with a scathing retort (whether in thought or speech) as she tends to, here Perry reminds her that he has control of this metaphorical leash, and that at any moment he has the power to pull her out of the field and make her nothing more than his girl at the typewriter again.

Despite Juliet's subordinate position, she still has power in some ways. While she has no authority to do anything with the transcripts she writes, she *does* have the ability to choose what to write and how to fill in the unclear parts of the conversations she hears. Juliet decides what counts as "social chat and comment[s] on the weather" (49) and what is worth actually writing out. She can transcribe inaudible phrases as simply "(about six words)," to make an assumption about what was said, or to offer suggestions such as, "a small road or load(?)" (75). As she types, Juliet has power over the information she writes down, such as the ability to choose how to transcribe what she hears – and to decide who says what. After Dolly's murder, Juliet continues to write her into the transcripts to erase suspicion. Even though "it [is] all a counterfeit, of course. Dolly's words had actually been spoken by Betty" (299), Juliet alone has the ability to

give Betty's words to Dolly. Though small in the grand scheme of Godfrey and Perry's spy work, this power is indicative of Juliet's agency in both her job and her story.

When Juliet is "let off the leash," she quickly proves to be a successful spy. This may be due to her seemingly instinctive ease with duplicity, as her proficiency with lying makes her able to fool Mrs. Scaife into thinking she's Iris. Perry asks Juliet if she's "absolutely certain all this underhand stuff is [her] forte," to which she responds, "I absolutely am" (116). Lying seems to come easily to her, even before she takes on the role of Iris. We see this throughout the novel in Juliet's habit of saying the opposite of what she is thinking. For instance, when Perry asks her if she knows where a tearoom is located, Juliet has no obvious reason to lie, and yet – "No, she thought. 'Yes,' she said" (79). Similarly, Iris's fake fiancé Ian is described minimally: all Juliet is told that he exists and is in the navy. However, the more time Juliet spends with Mrs. Scaife, the more Ian grows "in stature every day. A rapid promotion to captain, a broader chest, a fuller head of hair. Charming manners, but underneath a heart of steel as he stood manfully on the bridge..." (99). This full description of a man who doesn't even exist illustrates how simple it is for Juliet to lie, to the point that she constructs the character of her fictitious fiancé without issue even when she isn't instructed to.

Although Juliet's duplicity may stem from an innate capability to lie, arguably it is due to her gender that she possesses this ability to deceive in the first place. When she and Perry go for a walk, for instance, he asks if she enjoyed herself. Juliet answers, "Yes, it was very nice. Thank you," but thinks, "To be honest, not one jot" (73). This may result from a need to make everyone else comfortable, even if she isn't, which is common for women – the feeling that you must lie in order to appease others rather than argue and cause a fuss. "I practice to deceive" (147), thinks Juliet when she considers how she must hide Oliver Alleyne's visit from Perry, but she doesn't

seem to need to practice at all. For her, lies have become second nature. Juliet's gender and ability to lie don't function separately in the story; it is both of these traits working together that make her a good spy.

Juliet does, however, challenge her own status as a "queen." In 1950, when confronted by Fisher, she reconsiders thinking of herself as a queen rather than a pawn: "How foolish to think such a thing was possible, when the Mertons and Fishers of this murky world were in charge of the board" (315). This isn't a matter of Juliet being subordinate because she's just a "girl" or because she's a woman, but because there are larger forces at play in the form of people like Merton and Fisher. Even if she doesn't think it in the moment, Juliet is still able to be a "queen;" her ability to move in any direction has not been taken away. Her status as queen is depicted when she manages to make her escape to "somewhere where no one could own her" (321), despite feeling like she has been cornered by Fisher.

In making Juliet a "queen," Atkinson shifts *Transcription* away from the traditional parameters of spy fiction. Many of the female characters in other spy novels have little voice or agency (for instance, Phuong in *The Quiet American*, Tatiana in *From Russia With Love*), but Atkinson subverts that by making Juliet the protagonist and giving us as readers access to her thoughts and lies firsthand. There is also a break from the typical romance storyline spy novel characters, in which female characters exist solely to love and serve the male protagonist. These romances are often sexy and passionate, like that of Tatiana and James Bond's. However, though Juliet pines for romance – "Could [Perry] not see that she was ripe for the plucking?" (146) – when she finally gets it, it's not the way she imagined. Because Perry is gay, even when they are engaged, their romance is characterized by a lack of desire: "All she received was a dry kiss on her cheek...and that was how they slept, modestly side by side, as chaste as effigies on an icy

tomb. She was not to be plowed, but left fallow and parched" (152). Unlike the provocative affair that Bond and Tatiana have, Juliet and Perry's engagement is empty of that lust and of love.

Both the absence of a passionate love along with Juliet being situated as the central character indicate Atkinson's revision of the spy fiction genre. Although Juliet is recruited as Perry's "girl," she differs tremendously from other women in spy literature: she is not sacrificed for a man, she has a voice and the ability to use it to spin lies, and her story itself isn't hinged entirely on romance. Juliet is a queen, able to move in any direction *because* of her gender, and Atkinson's placement of a woman at the forefront of a spy novel is an impactful revision to the traditional spy genre.

An excellent essay, Stephanie, well-structured and argued, and extremely well-written throughout. You have it in a nutshell at the beginning: "Juliet is not a 'queen' because she's a spy and double agent, she's a queen because she is a *female* spy and double agent." Through the rest of the discussion you develop that insight paragraph by paragraph. Perhaps a word on how Juliet even deceives us as readers (no doubt at Atkinson's behest) might be in order: the revelation that she has been a communist double agent. You are quite right to link the issue of gender and genre, and to show how the latter is rewritten here. Fine work!

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Stephen Clingman.