

SEX, GENDER, AND ROMANTIC INTIMACY IN SERVICEMEN'S LETTERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR*

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores sex and romance as under-examined aspects of wartime masculinities through a focus on letters from servicemen recipients of woollen 'comforts' to girls and women who knitted for them during the Second World War. It examines the tension between the cultural ideal of 'temperate heroism' that formed the hegemonic masculinity during the Second World War and evidence of predatory male sexuality and sexual violence, both in combat and on the home front. Servicemen's letters to anonymous knitters reveal many aspects of their emotional lives, including the widespread deployment of romance as a mechanism for maintaining morale. They also reveal that some men were able to manipulate their image as 'heroes' and make use of the comforts fund as a vehicle for engaging in sexually explicit correspondence and transgressive and deviant behaviours. A foregrounding of romance and sexuality suggests that we need to look again at arguments relating to the contiguity between military cultures and middle- and working-class civilian codes of respectable masculinity and male heterosexual expression. The article further engages with critiques in the history of masculinity of the neglect of working-class masculinities and the tendency to focus on cultural scripts about masculinity rather than what men actually did or felt.*

In February 1943, S. E. Ridge, an ordinary seaman aboard HMS *Ganges*, then docked at Ipswich, wrote to fifteen-year-old Doris Dockrill to thank her 'very much for your presents which I received from the Streatham Comfort Fund today. Sorry I can not write much to you, as I do not know weather [sic] you are a miss or a mrs which makes a lot of difference in letter writing as you must know.'¹ While many of the dozens of servicemen who wrote to Doris Dockrill between 1940 and 1945 sent a straightforward note of thanks, for

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¹ S. E. Ridge to Doris Dockrill, 8 Feb. 1943, Imperial War Museum (IWM), private papers of Miss D. Dockrill, documents 19147, 16/32/1.

many others, like Ridge, their focus slipped beyond gratitude to engage with Doris as a young woman. Some expressed a romantic interest, asking her age, if she was single, whether she would please send a photograph, even whether she would be available for a date next time they were in London. For some girls, letters from servicemen were less benign. In the same year, five seamen aboard the training ship HMS *Collingwood* were charged with sending obscene literature through His Majesty's post. According to fellow rating Dennis Maxted, the men had been writing to a girl in Glasgow and 'telling her all the things they were going to do with her and to her, sexually of course, and her father found 'em and reported 'em to the Commanding Officer'.² As with Doris Dockrill, the likely context for such correspondence was the comforts fund, a 'knitting party', organized in neighbourhoods, schools, and workplaces, usually comprised of women and girls who provided letters of support and woollen and other 'comforts' for men in the forces.

The Second World War saw the emergence of thousands of such 'knitting parties'.³ The practice of sending voluntary aid, including knitted 'comforts', to unknown servicemen had been pioneered by the newly formed Central British Red Cross Committee during the South African Wars, and in the early decades of the twentieth century co-existed alongside the more traditional practice of individual women and girls knitting for servicemen who were their own family members.⁴ After 1939, however, the Red Cross became one of a number of governmental and voluntary organizations which supplanted these ad hoc familial arrangements on a grand scale. Others included the Catholic Women's League, the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds, the Women's Institute, which organized whist drives to fund wool purchases for knitting parties, and the Women's Voluntary Services (WVS, later the WRVS), members of which distributed wool and collected and stored finished garments in their local comforts service depots, where they were sorted for distribution to service personnel both in Britain and abroad.⁵ Despite the social class and party-

² Dennis Maxted, IWM, Oral History 18200, recorder Conrad Wood, 1/2/1999, reel 1.

³ By April 1943, there were between 6,000 and 7,000 'knitting parties' across Britain. See Viscount Bennet, discussion in the House of Lords, 3 Aug. 1943: *Hansard*, vol. 128, Fifth Series, c. 958, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1943/aug/03/merchant-navy-comforts#column_958.

⁴ Rebecca Gill, 'Networks of concern, boundaries of compassion: British relief in the South African War', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 40 (2012), pp. 827–44, at p. 828.

⁵ James Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War: continuities of class* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 56–7; Ann Stamper, 'Country women in wartime – Women's Institutes, 1938–1945', www.thewi.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/11111/countrywomen-in-war-time-womens-institutes-1938-1945.pdf (unpublished paper, 2003), p. 13; Samantha Clements, 'Feminism, citizenship and social activity: the role and importance of local women's organisations, Nottingham 1918–1969' (D.Phil. thesis, Nottingham, 2008), pp. 174–5, 200, 204–6; Catriona Beaumont, *Housewives and citizens: domesticity and the women's movement in England* (Manchester, 2013), pp. 142–3.

political dimensions to such work,⁶ wartime knitting is most accurately understood as a ‘gender appropriate political expression’ which enabled women to support the war effort through the deployment of their domestic skills.⁷ At a time when so many women had moved into occupations that were previously designated men’s work, the knitting of ‘comforts’ also had a potentially reassuring function,⁸ placing women in the traditionally feminine role of men’s helpmeet, and with responsibility for maintaining familial and social networks.⁹ Indeed, popular representations of, and exhortations to engage in, wartime knitting which focused almost exclusively on women knitting for men, obscured not only the existence of men who knitted¹⁰ and servicewomen who did not receive knitted comforts despite doing similar jobs to men (for example, in the ARP (Air Raid Precaution)),¹¹ but also the initial development of such associational initiatives as a means to address levels of anxiety among women,¹² that is, for the comfort of women themselves. Women knitting for servicemen, as family members and as strangers, can be seen as one side of a ‘gift relationship’ which was structured in terms of wider gendered obligations, commitments, and anxieties.¹³ The recipients of such comforts, even when anonymous, were similarly obliged to be ‘worthy’ of such investment.

This article explores sex, gender, and romantic intimacy in letters sent by servicemen to women knitters who were strangers to them. While there is an extensive scholarship on servicemen’s wartime letters, the focus has largely been on correspondence between people who were already emotionally connected to each other. Great War historians have emphasized that letters between family

⁶ Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War*, p. 78; Andrew Thorpe, *Parties at war: political organization in Second World War Britain* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 155–6, 166–7, 195, 206, 225, 227–8, 283.

⁷ Susan Strawn, ‘American women and wartime handknitting, 1750–1950’, in Maureen Daly Gogging and Beth Fowkes Tobin, eds., *Women and the material culture of needlework and textiles, 1750–1950* (Aldershot, 2009), pp. 245–59, at p. 248. Strawn argues that in terms of the cultural history of women, knitting has received less attention than other textile crafts such as quilting, embroidery, and weaving, p. 245.

⁸ For patriotic femininity as reassurance, see Philomena Goodman, *Women, sexuality and war* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 15–25.

⁹ Anthropologists have pointed to the gendered social meanings of cloth and yarn. See Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and human experience* (Washington, DC, and London, 1988).

¹⁰ The evidence is disparate. See for example, images of male knitters on blogs such as <http://elinorflorence.com/blog/wartime-knitting> and www.atlasobscura.com/articles/when-knitting-was-a-patriotic-duty-wwi-homefront-wool-brigades.

¹¹ CSV Action Desk/BBC Radio Lincolnshire, ‘If you can knit – you can do your bit’, WW2 Peoples’ War – an archive of World War Two memories – written by the public, gathered by the BBC (Oct. 2005), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/26/a6041026.shtml>.

¹² Hinton, *Women, social leadership and the Second World War*, p. 62. For knitting and the development of community, see Lynn Abrams, ‘Knitting, autonomy and identity: the role of handknitting in the construction of women’s sense of self in an island community, Shetland, c. 1850–2000’, *Textile History*, 37 (2006), pp. 149–65.

¹³ See Marcel Mauss, *The gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies* (London, 1966; orig. edn 1950). See Gill, ‘Networks of concern’, pp. 828, 832.

members were a crucial means by which men gained emotional sustenance and remained in touch with home and with 'the identities they had left behind on enlistment'.¹⁴ In his study in the history of emotions, Michael Roper has used Kleinian psychoanalysis to examine the place of the domestic and the familial in the emotional resilience of young unmarried soldiers at the Front, as expressed in their letters to their mothers.¹⁵ In correspondence forged via many of the comforts funds, however, men were not in role as sons, husbands, or boyfriends. The constraints that came into play when writing to a known addressee – not to make a mother too anxious, for example – did not apply. As Roper has argued, '[t]he person being imagined and addressed brought some states to mind, suppressed others and left others unthought'.¹⁶ The letters that men wrote to unknown women and girls were to imagined recipients, making it all the more interesting that so many chose to write in a romantic register, to the potential girlfriends of their imaginations, and possibly from the selves of their imaginations also. As Margaretta Jolly has claimed, intimate letters provide a space in which to explore and assert 'new selves and desires'.¹⁷

In composing romantic letters to girls and women who knitted, men were drawing on tropes in the wider culture. As Claire Langhamer has recently argued, the Second World War represented an 'emotional watershed' in the mid-twentieth century as understandings of love and marriage moved away from a focus on material circumstance, epitomized by the careful economic and emotional planning of the engagement, to prioritize the thrill of romance and sexual and emotional connection.¹⁸ During the war, established courtship patterns were disrupted, as young people moved 'outside the orbit of parents and community', working away from home in the services or in war work and frequenting new venues such as pubs and dances held specifically for servicemen.¹⁹ The scope for meeting potential romantic partners was one of

¹⁴ Jessica Meyer, *Men of war: masculinity and the First World War in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 2, 44–5; Martha Hanna, 'War letters: communication between front and home front', 1914–1918-online.net (2014), 1–22, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/pdf/1914-1918-Online-war_letters_communication_between_front_and_home_front-2014-10-08.pdf. See also Jenny Hartley, 'Letters are everything: mothers and letters in the Second World War', in Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot, 1999); Christa Hämmerle, "'You let a weeping woman call you home?'" Private correspondences during the First World War in Austria and Germany', in Earle, ed., *Epistolary selves*; Cornelia Osborne, 'Love letters from front and home: a private space for intimacy in the Second World War?', in Elizabeth Harvey, Johannes Hürter, Maiken Umbach, and Andreas Wirsching, eds., *Private life and privacy in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge, 2019, forthcoming).

¹⁵ Michael Roper, *The secret battle: emotional survival in the Great War* (Manchester and New York, NY, 2009).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Margaretta Jolly, *In love and struggle: letters in contemporary feminism* (New York, NY, 2008), pp. 6–8, 25.

¹⁸ Claire Langhamer, *The English in love: the intimate story of an emotional revolution* (Oxford, 2013), p. 9 and *passim*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117, 166–7.

the thrills of wartime. The emotional intensity wrought by wartime uncertainties and anxieties was further bolstered by the popularity of torch songs (sentimental songs typically about unrequited or lost love) and the Hollywood emphasis on heartache and excitement. Screen images of American men as lovers preceded the arrival of US servicemen in Britain;²⁰ airmen in the modernized RAF also acquired an erotic allure.²¹ While romantic letters to knitters of comforts were not love letters²² – they were not written to an established partner – they nonetheless carried ‘the weight of the reader’,²³ and were performative, attempting to enact an often romantic intimacy between writer and recipient.²⁴

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of reading letters not just for their content, as sources of information, but as a cultural practice shaped by social context and involving ‘scribal cultures’ and ‘codes, rituals, grammar and rhetoric’.²⁵ A key feature of scribal cultures in the armed services is that letters were often shared; in some cases, as suggested by the actions of the sailors in the opening paragraph, replies were jointly authored. In addition to a function as sites of individual fantasy – revealing a serviceman’s hopes for the future or, as in the case of British POWs in Europe, enabling a proximity to normality that made the present more bearable²⁶ – they also had group significance. The contents of the sailor’s ‘ditty box’, where letters were kept, was an ambiguous space, apparently private and individual, but also patently for public display and discussion, contributing to a deliberate performance of masculinity for other men on the lower deck.²⁷

In the article that follows, letters from servicemen to unknown women who were providers of ‘comforts’ are used to explore two themes. First, I bring together two seemingly contradictory discussions of wartime masculinities. On the one hand, is the growing scholarship which builds on Sonya Rose’s

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

²¹ Martin Francis, *The flyer: British culture and the Royal Air Force, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2008).

²² For love letters, see Martin Lyons, ‘Love letters and writing practices: on écritures intimes in the nineteenth century’, *Journal of Family History*, 24 (1999), pp. 232–9; Eva L. Wyss, ‘From the bridal letter: changes in text type from the nineteenth century to the internet era’, *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*, 9 (2008), pp. 225–54.

²³ Janet Altman, *Epistolarity: approaches to a form* (Columbus, OH, 1982), pp. 87–116.

²⁴ Christa Hämmerle, ‘“Waiting longingly...” love letters in WW1 – a plea for a broader genre concept’, www.history-of-emotions.mpg.de/en/texte/waiting-longingly-love-letters-in-world-war-i-a-plea-for-a-broader-genre-concept, pp. 2–3.

²⁵ Martin Lyons, ‘New directions in the history of written culture’, *Culture and History*, 1 (2012), <http://cultureandhistory.revistas.csic.es/index.php/cultureandhistory/article/view/8/71>.

²⁶ Clare Makepeace, ‘Living beyond the barbed wire: the familial ties of British prisoners of war held in Europe during the Second World War’, *Historical Research*, 86 (2013), pp. 158–77, 177.

²⁷ For gender as a ritualized social performance linked to the public assertion of a gendered ‘sense of self’, see Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (London, 2006; orig. edn 1990). Thanks to Chris Hopkins for an illuminating conversation on the functions of the ditty box.

pioneering exploration of representations of the 'temperate heroism' of the military man in the Second World War as the apogée of desirable masculinity. 'Temperate heroism' was a cultural ideal which drew together the simple bravery of the combat soldier and the understated qualities of the ordinary 'little man' of interwar constructions of Englishness: kindly, homely, good tempered, a family man, emotionally reticent, with a sense of fair play and decency, courageous 'when necessary'.²⁸ A reaction to the mass slaughter of the Great War and part of a retreat from exalted 'heroic' notions of manliness and martial masculinity, 'temperate heroism' was further defined against the perceived hyper-masculinity of the Nazis and the effeminacy of conscientious objectors. This was a 'hegemonic masculinity': while 'not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense [as] only a minority of men might enact it...it was certainly normative. It embodied the current most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it.'²⁹ The ideal of the 'temperate hero' remains central to recent studies which have examined various wartime hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in greater depth, adding nuance to our understanding of military masculinities and extending the focus of research to include civilian men.³⁰

And yet, representations of 'temperate heroism' collide most brutally with evidence of the normativity of predatory male sexuality and even sexual abuse of women in wartime, both in combat and on the home front. Looking across the twentieth century, Dagmar Herzog argues that sexual violence was 'standard operating procedure' in wartime, serving different functions in different contexts: as entertainment, as a bribe to induce men to fight, a male

²⁸ Sonya O. Rose, *Which peoples' war? National identity and citizenship in Britain 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 151–96. For soldiers and masculinity, see Graham Dawson, *Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities* (London and New York, NY, 1994). For interwar constructions of gender, see Alison Light, *Forever England: literature, femininity and conservatism between the wars* (London, 1991).

²⁹ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept', *Gender and Society*, 19 (2005), pp. 829–59, at p. 832. See also John Tosh, 'Hegemonic masculinity and the history of gender', in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagerman, and John Tosh, eds., *Masculinities in politics and war* (Manchester, 2004), p. 47.

³⁰ Linsey Robb and Juliette Pattinson, eds., *Men, masculinities and male culture in the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 2017); Corinna Peniston-Bird and Emma Vickers, eds., *Gender and the Second World War: lessons of war* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 40–52; Juliette Pattinson, Arthur McIvor, and Linsey Robb, *Men in reserve: British civilian masculinities in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2017); Linsey Robb, *Men at work: the working man in British culture, 1939–1945* (Basingstoke, 2015); Emma Newlands, *Civilians into soldiers: war, the body and British army recruits, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 2014); Ana Carden-Coyne, ed., *Gender and conflict since 1914* (Basingstoke, 2012); Emma Vickers, *Queen and country: same-sex desire in the British armed forces, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 2013); Lucy Noakes, "'Serve to save": gender, citizenship and civil defence in Britain, 1937–1941', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47 (2012), pp. 734–53; Julie Anderson, *War, disability and rehabilitation in Britain* (Manchester, 2011); Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting home defence: men, women and the home guard in the Second World War* (Manchester, 2007); Francis, *The flyer*.

bonding activity, and to enforce women's compliance in camps.³¹ Even though it was the Germans who, as during the Great War,³² were represented as rapists, there is evidence of atrocities committed by Allied servicemen, including the Americans in France, the British and French in Italy, and the Soviets everywhere.³³ As Joanna Bourke argues, using Bakhtin's words, sexual violence was an 'authorized transgression' which officers expected of their men and for which they would cover up.³⁴ Such practices extended beyond the immediate theatres of war. British servicewomen on the receiving end of predatory behaviour were forced to develop strategies to manage unwanted sexual attention, in some cases resorting to carrying hatpins to fend men off or, as with the censors in the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service), for example, sharing knowledge gleaned from men's letters to would-be girlfriends.³⁵ Newspaper reports reveal the fear that members of the armed forces were responsible for an increased number of sexual assaults on civilian women.³⁶ Sexual assaults by civilian men also increased during the black out.³⁷ We know of these incidents despite the silencing of evidence by sexual and moral norms, including notions of

³¹ Dagmar Herzog, ed., *Brutality and desire: war and sexuality in Europe's twentieth century* (Basingstoke, 2011; orig. edn 2009), pp. 4–5. See also Joanna Bourke, *Rape: a history since 1860 to the present* (London, 2007), pp. 357–86, especially pp. 363, 366, 376–8; Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili, eds., *Rape in wartime* (Basingstoke, 2012); Joshua Goldstein, *War and gender* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 362–71, 365; Regina Mulhauser, 'Reframing sexual violence as a weapon and strategy of war: the case of German Wehrmacht during the war and genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941–1944', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 26 (2017), pp. 366–401; Elissa Mailänder, 'Making sense of a rape photograph: sexual violence as social performance on the Eastern Front, 1939–1944', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 26 (2017), pp. 489–520. See also Cynthia Cockburn, 'Why are you doing this to me? Identity, power and sexual violence in war', in Anna G. Jonasdottir, Valerie Bryson, and Kathleen B. Jones, eds., *Sexuality, gender and power: intersectional and transnational perspectives* (New York, NY, 2011), pp. 189–204.

³² Nicoletta F. Gullace, 'Sexual violence and family honor: British propaganda and international law during the First World War', *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), pp. 714–47.

³³ See for example Bourke, *Rape: a history*, pp. 368–9; Mary Louise Roberts, *What soldiers do: sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago, IL, and London, 2013); Andrea Pető, 'Memory and the narrative of rape in Budapest and Vienna', in R. Bessell and D. Schumann, eds., *Life after death: approaches to a cultural and social history of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003).

³⁴ Bourke, *Rape: a history*, pp. 357–86, especially pp. 376–8, 366.

³⁵ Penny Summerfield and Nicole Crockett, "'You weren't taught that with the welding": lessons in sexuality in the Second World War', *Women's History Review*, 1 (2011), pp. 435–54; Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives: discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998), pp. 137–8, 145–8, 272–3; Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the cage: women's experiences in two world wars* (London, 1987), pp. 205–10; Goodman, *Women, sexuality and war*, pp. 93–4; Jo Stanley, naval historian, personal discussion (2016).

³⁶ Bourke, *Rape: a history*, p. 363. See also returned soldiers' reputation for rape and sexual assault after the First World War: Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: politics and trauma in Britain, 1918–1931* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 35–9.

³⁷ Marc Wiggam, 'The black-out in Britain and Germany, 1939–1945' (D.Phil. thesis, Exeter, 2011), <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10036/3246/WiggamM.pdf?sequence=2>, pp. 141–59.

honour which saw death as preferable to rape,³⁸ and the neglect of sexual violence by historians.³⁹

This article asks in what ways the ideal of 'temperate masculinity' is complicated, compromised, problematized, by matters of sex. What happens to the notion of the 'temperate hero' when experiences of predatory sexuality and power in wartime are brought to the fore? Indeed, plentiful evidence suggests that sexual restraint was part of positive representations of both middle- and working-class masculinities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ Sexual restraint might be reasonably assumed, therefore, to be one of the characteristics and qualities of the homely yet brave 'temperate hero'. But the same emphasis on heroism allowed for other, less temperate, activities. Is there more to say, for example, about the airmen in Martin Francis's study who saw the 'pursuit of love' as both 'a welcome release from the alternating boredom and terror of war' and 'a fitting reward for those who had undertaken the obligations of military service'?⁴¹ When does the 'release' of romance tip over into practices which are altogether more entitled and potentially predatory; the expectation of a 'reward'?

Secondly, the article addresses current critiques in the history of masculinity of the neglect of working-class masculinities⁴² and the tendency to focus on cultural scripts/discourses *about* masculinity rather than what men actually did or felt.⁴³ In focusing on the behaviours and identities of servicemen as demonstrated by the act of sending romantic letters to knitters, this article contributes

³⁸ See interview with Dorothy Williams, in Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting home defence*, pp. 264–5. For an illuminating discussion of shame, see Katherine R. Jolluck, 'The nation's pain and women's shame: Polish women and wartime violence', in Nancy M. Wingfield and Maria Bucur, eds., *Gender and war in twentieth-century Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, IN, 2006), pp. 193–219.

³⁹ Annette F. Tim, 'The challenges of including sexual violence and transgressive love in historical writing in World War II and the Holocaust', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 26 (2017), pp. 351–65.

⁴⁰ This has been discussed by historians in terms of men not making excessive sexual demands on women during marriage (and thereby subjecting them to too many pregnancies). See John Tosh, *A man's place: masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT, and London, 1999), pp. 46, 155–6; Elizabeth Roberts, *A woman's place: an oral history of working-class women, 1890–1940* (Oxford, 1984), p. 84. Kate Fisher has argued that such restraint even extended to husbands taking responsibility for contraception and being 'considerate' of female sexual pleasure. Kate Fisher, *Birth control, sex and marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2006). For 'restraint' and 'self-control' as key elements in the construction of modern, bourgeois ideals of masculinity more generally, see George L. Mosse, *The image of man: the creation of modern masculinity* (Oxford, 1996).

⁴¹ Francis, *The flyer*, p. 63.

⁴² John Tosh, 'The history of masculinity: an outdated concept?', in John Arnold and Sean Brady, eds., *What is masculinity? Historical dynamics from antiquity to the contemporary world* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 17–34, at p. 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31; Michael Roper, 'Slipping out of view: subjectivity and emotion in gender history', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), pp. 57–72; Karen Harvey and Alexandra Shepard, 'What have historians done with masculinity? Reflections on five centuries of British history, circa 1500 to 1950', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 274–80, at p. 276.

to a growing body of research that moves beyond discourse and representation to ‘reconnect with that earlier curiosity about experience and subjectivity’ while also holding onto the valuable recognition that ‘experience is always mediated through cultural understandings’.⁴⁴

This article draws on three collections of letters from servicemen to women and girls who knitted for them as part of their patriotic duty to explore the dynamics of the wider culture which included, at one extreme, understandings of predatory sexual behaviour as ‘normative’, and, at the other, the use of comforts funds to make contact with potential romantic partners. First, the letters to Doris Dockrill, teenage tobacco factory worker and champion knitter from Wandsworth, South London, reveal the motivating emotions for men’s letter writing, including a desire for romance. A second Imperial War Museum collection, from Sam Gibbs, a North Sea fisherman aboard a trawler requisitioned as a minesweeper, explores a more performative approach to romance. For Gibbs, a happily married father of five, romantic letters formed an explicit mechanism for maintaining morale during the war. This section explores how Gibbs’s performativity both consolidated feminine and masculine identities through romantic epistolary acts while also creating space for a new representation of himself as a working-class writer. Finally, a third case-study demonstrates that such performativity could be put to less noble ends. Focusing on the letters from a stoker in the Royal Navy to an East Midlands schoolgirl, this section explores an instance of men making use of their anonymity and mobility to engage in a sexually explicit, even abusive, correspondence with a young knitter. Letters from servicemen recipients to unknown girls and women are thus a rich source for exploring issues of sexuality, romance, and masculinity, both temperate and intemperate, during the Second World War.

I

The vast majority of letters from servicemen to female members of comforts funds are single, straightforward, and brief expressions of gratitude. Some men provide a little detail about the context which made the comforts so welcome, many emphasizing their far-flungness and their discomfort, isolation, and boredom. For example, C. Hitchison of the Merchant Navy told Mrs Sansome of the Sutton Coldfield Comforts Fund that he had received clothes after his ship was sunk and he had swum in the cold sea for one and a half hours.⁴⁵ Many men also cite the fact of being remembered and cared for as of primary importance to them. Private A. Wheeler of the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) wrote to Mrs Steggal of the Streatham Comforts Fund

⁴⁴ Tosh, ‘The history of masculinity’, p. 31. Studies which focus on lived experience include Summerfield and Peniston-Bird, *Contesting home defence*, and Francis, *The flyer*. For lived experience and the working class, see Pattinson, McIvor, and Robb, *Men in reserve*.

⁴⁵ C. Hitchison to Mrs Sansome, n.d., IWM, private papers of Mrs F. M. Sansome, box 06/53/18/8/434.

to express his gratitude for the gloves he had received. It was 'bitterly cold' where he was and '[i]t is very nice to know that the people back in England are thinking of us and looking after us so well'.⁴⁶ Recipients are sometimes nostalgic, prompted to remember aspects of their civilian lives by letters which are also material artefacts⁴⁷ and, as such, physical tokens of belonging.⁴⁸ On receiving a parcel from the Streatham Fund, Peter O'Dwyer, aboard HMS *Nairana*, reminisced about nights at the Locarno: 'right now I give anything for a walk along the high road and a stroll round Tooting Bec on my next leave'.⁴⁹ As Jenny Hartley writes, 'The letter guarantees and authenticates – or seems to – sincerity and intimacy. In wartime the status of the individual is fragile and vulnerable: sent among strangers, regimented, uniformed and facing danger and perhaps death. In these circumstances, the "warm" genre is particularly welcome.'⁵⁰

While men clearly felt lonely and isolated, it was more than human contact and a sense of care that many wanted. They saw in these letters an opportunity for forging romantic relationships. Doris Dockrill, a teenage girl and skilled knitter from Wandsworth, South London, who knitted as a member of Streatham Comforts Fund, received many such letters in response to the scrap of paper she enclosed with her comforts which contained her name and address and a brief 'good luck' message.⁵¹ Dozens of servicemen replied; Dockrill's papers contain letters from men located across the United Kingdom and beyond, for example, in the Middle East, Gibraltar, and Sierra Leone.

In terms of asking for a date, very few were as upfront as R. W. Warrame, a sixteen-year-old boy in the Home Guard, who wrote to thank Doris for his skull cap: 'PS Could you possibly make a date for the pictures one night. I am 16 years old. Will be glad to hear from you, Ron.'⁵² Other correspondents began by couching their offer in terms of taking Doris out as a 'thank you' for her knitted comforts. By the second or third letter, many men asked for a photograph. Albert Duffin repeatedly asked Doris for 'a snap-shot of yourself', prefacing this in his second letter with his 'feeling we will be quite good friends I do hope so.'⁵³ Eric Bowring on SS *Ingman* also wanted a photo and tried to woo Doris with a promise of a gift: 'I don't suppose you would say no to a pair of

⁴⁶ Pte A. Wheeler, BEF, to Mrs Steggal, n.d., IWM, WW2 Letters Re Woollen Comforts, misc 23/ item 405.

⁴⁷ David Barton and Nigel Hall, *Letter writing as social practice* (Amsterdam, 1998).

⁴⁸ Michael Roper, 'Nostalgia as an emotional experience in the Great War', *Historical Journal*, 54 (2011), pp. 421–51.

⁴⁹ Peter O'Dwyer to Doris Dockrill, 26 Dec. 1943.

⁵⁰ Hartley, 'Letters are everything', p. 185.

⁵¹ Found in a letter from R. W. Warrame to Doris Dockrill, n.d. See *Woman's Own*, 10 Feb. 1940, p. 18: 'Don't forget to put your name and address in with your parcel when dispatching it – the boys like to know whom they've got to thank!'

⁵² R. W. Warrame to Doris Dockrill, n.d.

⁵³ A. E. Duffin to Doris Dockrill, Aug. 1941.

stockings.’ He might be able to get leave if she wanted to meet up, he told her, and asked if she was engaged or had a steady boyfriend.⁵⁴ Some letters soon read like dating profiles. Seaman Peter Hunt told Doris Dockrill that he wanted to give her ‘an idea of my character’, proceeding to tell her that ‘I do not dance very much [and] I do not go in for drinking, but unfortunately I smoke very heavily.’ He was, he said, ‘very fond of swing music although I can take some of the classics as well, my favourite film stars are Errol Flynn and Anne Sheridan, Ingrid Bergman. Glen Miller is my favourite dance Band.’ He enjoyed pointing out compatibilities: ‘Incidentally Doris Dear I see we both agree on Bing Crosby, although my favourite record is of him singing Sunday Monday or Always.’ He was keen to meet up on his next seventy-two-hour leave: ‘Doris if you should have a spare photograph of yourself I should be very pleased to have one. You might be surprised to hear that I am approximately 6 ft tall, so I do hope you are not too small, although I shall not worry about that...Yours, Peter xxx.’⁵⁵ (Hunt was later exposed as a cad: he cancelled the date due to his long-term girlfriend arriving in the city.⁵⁶ Doris’s choice to end the correspondence at this point suggests that she did not share the relaxed view of infidelity that is evident in other sources.⁵⁷)

As Michael Roper argues, letters reveal a great deal of emotion, even unconsciously, in their structure and syntax.⁵⁸ Private Jack Shoesmith, at Albany Barracks on the Isle of Wight, who asked Doris Dockrill for a photograph in his first letter, stating that he would ‘like to see what sweet young lady made and sent such a handy present’, used the phrase ‘by the way’ to lead into his central question: ‘By the way, have you any social ties such as being engaged etc. please write and let me know.’⁵⁹ Doris received another ‘by the way’ from Pete Hunt, mentioned above, who first wrote to her after receiving the ‘most appreciated article’ of a balaclava. ‘By the way Doris’, he continued, ‘I shall be very pleased to write to you now and again if you wish? It might help if you were to know my age, well Doris I shall be 20 yrs old on the 28th Nov.’⁶⁰ These two by-the-ways are suggestive of an after-thought, a casual addition, but are actually central to the author’s message.

Some men’s hopes and desires were also revealed in their hesitation about pursuing a correspondence until they were certain of Doris’s age and marital status. A soldier in the RASC (Royal Army Service Corps) writing from Saudi Arabia told Doris that: ‘I can always do with another penfriend, I am not

⁵⁴ Eric Bowring to Doris Dockrill, 6 Aug. 1943.

⁵⁵ Peter R. Hunt to Doris Dockrill, Nov. 1944.

⁵⁶ Peter R. Hunt to Doris Dockrill, 10 Dec. 1944.

⁵⁷ See Langhamer, *The English in love*, p. 198; and her discussion of an audience response to *Brief encounter* in idem., ‘Adultery in postwar England’, *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), pp. 86–115, at p. 86.

⁵⁸ Roper, *The secret battle*, pp. 63–8.

⁵⁹ Jack Shoesmith to Doris Dockrill, 1 June 1942.

⁶⁰ Peter R. Hunt to Doris Dockrill, 28 Oct. 1944.

married so that need never worry you. But there I go and I don't even know how old you are.'⁶¹ Peter O'Dwyer was pulled up short by a similar realization: 'PS It has just occurred to me that you might have become engaged since you made the comforts or perhaps you are an elderly woman if so disregard my letter and accept my deepest thanks for what you sent you may be assured they are appreciated.'⁶² Dockrill's correspondents were generally less anxious about her age. The persistent Ron Cotter told Doris he was thirty-one years old and guessed she was twenty-four to twenty-five. Once he learned how young she was – this correspondence took place in 1943, the year Doris turned sixteen – he wrote: 'I still don't think that matters, we can still be more than friends, what do you say about it, let me know in your letter when you write.'⁶³ Eric Bowring was 'surprised to find you were only sixteen. I expected you to be a little older. Nevertheless, I expect you are much older in experience and ideas...You say you look older than sixteen so there is not many years between. We can always be friends anyhow. You can see for yourself when we meet, that is if you agree to. I shall be very disappointed if you don't.'⁶⁴

These letters reveal that men's emotional lives were conducted not only in the context of established bonds but in relation to anonymous 'comforters' via the possibility of romance. Men appear to have expressed different emotions to strangers. The airmen studied by Martin Francis could not confide their fears to other men, but did so to women, as nurses and lovers as well as wives.⁶⁵ Joan Wyndham wrote of her airman lovers shaking with fear and crying in her arms the night before they were due on 'ops'.⁶⁶ As Christa Hämmerle has argued in relation to the First World War, such letters from men at the Front are not only about the maintenance of civilian identities and bonds; they are a 'performative act', expressing love and other associated emotions like care, trust, desire, jealousy, and hope, attempting to enact a connection with the recipient of the letter.⁶⁷ In this sense, they are comparable to nineteenth-century engagement correspondence in terms of making use of an opportunity to explore desire and develop a relationship outside of family and community involvement.⁶⁸

II

In his first letter to Maidenhead Comforts Fund member Mollie Baker, Bill Stewart, skipper of the requisitioned trawler, now minesweeper, HMT *John*

⁶¹ Name unclear, RASC MEF to Doris Dockrill, 31 May 1944.

⁶² Peter O'Dwyer to Doris Dockrill, 26 Dec. 1943.

⁶³ Ron Cotter to Doris Dockrill, n.d., 17 Mar. 1943.

⁶⁴ Eric Bowring to Doris Dockrill, 10 Aug. 1943.

⁶⁵ Francis, *The flyer*.

⁶⁶ Joan Wyndham, *Love lessons: a wartime diary* (London, 1985), and *Love is blue: a wartime diary* (London, 1986).

⁶⁷ Hämmerle, "Waiting longingly...", pp. 2–3.

⁶⁸ Wyss, 'From the bridal letter', pp. 246–7.

Stephen, thanked her for the comforts, sought to direct her group's future efforts ('sock's seem to be the chief worry of men') and gave her advance warning of 'the boys' on his ship. One of his seamen, he wrote, 'writes the most passionate letter's to every dame who gives him encouragement so any of your party that want's to make there hubby look small just say the word and I'll get Sammy on the job'.⁶⁹

'Sammy' was Sam Gibbs, a married father of five and a North Sea fisherman from Grimsby, north Lincolnshire, on 'hostilities-only' service aboard a mine-sweeper. Gibbs lived up to Stewart's warnings, nurturing intimacy from the start of his correspondence with his warmth and appreciation. 'I hope your husband wont mind me writing like this', he wrote after Mrs Baker's first letter addressed directly to him, 'but I don't seem able to write a informal letter to you.' (He means formal here.) He continued: 'and now that you wrote to me, well I can't express what I feel towards you...Au Revoir and May God keep you and your family safe and well, I'm always Your Pall, Sam.' In another early letter, Gibbs wrote: 'I hope the others are as nice as your letter says you are. Give them all my love, the lads and myself will allways be thankfull for a few woollens and books.'⁷⁰ Before long, he switched the address in his letters from 'Mrs Baker' to 'Mollie': 'I hope you'll excuse me calling you by your christian name but if were going to be pals, that's how it will have to be.' Mollie was clearly a chatty and personal letter writer in turn. Gibbs's letters reveal that she shared information about her family, including her husband, who was in the Horse Guard. Their correspondence was very much about comfort and care. They exchanged photographs of their children and Mollie sent Sam's family Christmas gifts and a box of apples.⁷¹ Gibbs told her that he thought of her during the raids and offered reassurance: 'keep the chin up, were a long way from being licked and all the lads are ready for anything'.⁷²

Gibbs's and Stewart's letters to Mollie Baker reflect other cultural scripts of wartime, specifically the recognition of the valuable role women were playing in the war effort; that ultimately, everyone was in it together. Gibbs positioned women alongside the men: 'Dear Mollie and the Knitting squad', he wrote throughout 1940. At the end of the war, clearly in response to a self-deprecating comment of Mollie's own, Stewart insisted: 'Don't kid yourself "Molly", the B. knitters done there bit just the same as my gang, this war was won by

⁶⁹ Bill Stewart to Mollie Baker, 27 Aug. 1940, IWM, private papers of Mrs M. Baker, documents 570, 88/42/1. I am aware that these apostrophes are incorrect, but I have not used [sic] to denote the many grammatical errors and spelling mistakes in Stewart's and Gibbs's writing as to do would result in their writing being peppered with my corrections and would, I believe, disrupt their flow. I have made a bracketed intervention only where the meaning is unclear.

⁷⁰ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 8 Sept. 1940.

⁷¹ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 13 Dec. 1940.

⁷² Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 18 Oct. 1940.

“moral”, just people having faith that every little help’s.⁷³ The trawlermen acknowledged the Maidenhead women’s lack of experience in making some garments and were directive and encouraging regarding their knitting practice.⁷⁴ They all want socks, Gibbs told Mollie, suggesting she work to a size 9. He later asked for a sweater, which when it arrived was perfect except that the arms were too long. The helmets fell over their faces; could they have woollen hats instead? He shared with Mollie a cheaper way to make mittens and said that as they wore short wellingtons in the navy, the boot stockings didn’t need to be quite so long; she could save a third of her wool.⁷⁵ He was also perfectly at home with some gentle ribbing at some sea-boot stockings he didn’t consider quite fit for purpose: ‘I had to smile when I saw the stocking without heels but one cannot look a gift horse in the mouth.’⁷⁶ As Gibbs suggests here, the personalized efforts of women knitters – the intimacy and nurture, the attempt to counter the standardization and lack of comfort associated with regulation clothing – were more important than the quality or utility of all of the knitted items.⁷⁷ Indeed, some of the men had experience of knitting. Bill Stewart, for example, told Mollie that he had taught his own daughter to knit and was the happy recipient of ‘a scarf that was an admiration of the fishing fleet only I had to wait until dark before I could wear it, it used to dazzle everybody’s eyes’.⁷⁸ There is a profound sense of teamwork at play here: ‘You keep the needles going and we’ll do our best to keep you in food by keeping the seas clear for the Gallant merchant men.’⁷⁹

As is maybe suggested by the use of the word ‘gallant’ above, and again in keeping with wider cultural scripts of wartime, Gibbs saw romance as having a morale-boosting function and as a key means of maintaining all of their spirits. As well as being ‘the squad of knitting ladies’, Mollie and her group were ‘our Girl friends in the knitting squad’.⁸⁰ Gibbs particularly enjoyed writing love letters. In line with Bill Stewart’s mock warning of August 1940,

⁷³ Bill Stewart to Mollie Baker, 25 Apr. 1945. The term ‘B knitters’ is both a play on ‘Knitting B’ and a reference to Stewart’s playful use of the phrase the ‘Blessed Knitters’.

⁷⁴ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 24 Oct. 1940.

⁷⁵ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 13 Dec. 1940.

⁷⁶ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 8 Sept. 1940.

⁷⁷ On the issue of utility: Strawn discusses a nurse returning to the US after the First World War with reports of soldiers’ complaints of blisters caused by hand-knitted goods which were put to an alternative use of rubbing down horses. Strawn, ‘American women and wartime hand-knitting’, p. 252. Sailors in the Second World War would sometimes give their knitted comforts (in exchange for extra rum rations) to men who then unravelled them and sent the wool home for their wives to knit up for the family. Personal correspondence with George Harris, whose father-in-law was a petty officer on a corvette, 13 Nov. 2018.

⁷⁸ Bill Stewart to Mollie Baker, 27 Aug. 1940. See also J. Plumstead to Doris Dockrill: ‘Personally, when much younger, I could do a bit of plain, but when it came to more complicated stuff like purl – well I was at a loss. How the Dickens you manage to get round corners without breaking needles is beyond me.’ 22 June, no year.

⁷⁹ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, Oct. 1940.

⁸⁰ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 29 Oct. 1941, 4 Jan. 1941.

he was soon offering to write specifically romantic letters. 'Well hows the gang going', he asked Mollie on 24 October 1940. 'I hope there all OK give them my love, how old is your youngest member, if she's single drop me her address I'll write her a letter that'll make her think she's engaged to be married.'⁸¹ Around this time, Gibbs told Mollie about an ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) girl called Joan with whom he had been in correspondence for some months. They had not met – she was based in Nottingham – but they had exchanged photographs ('she looks a peach'). He elaborated on this relationship the following year, telling Mollie that Joan had been moved near to Newcastle and they were planning an afternoon and evening out together. 'This girl friend hasn't got a boy and she is over 20', he wrote.

I always write to her as a sweetheart, just to let her feel someone thinks a bit about her. I wrote her some lovely love letters but she knows I'm married and that doesn't worry her she has more sence than take any serious so we're just 2 good war pals.⁸²

Gibbs was not looking for a lover: 'I've a good sweetheart waiting at home', he told Mollie. 'We have been sweethearts now 23 years. We started courting while we were at school and I never had no other girl.' For Sam, the performance of romance, including flirtation in letters and the occasional date, whether with a married mother of two or a young, single woman, was part of keeping up spirits during the war. His tone was flirtatious but chaste, confessional and personal rather than sexual. 'Give my regards to all our Girl friends', he wrote, 'also your husband, and my love to the kiddies. CHINS UP.'

Gibbs's letters reinforce the performative aspects of gender in complex ways. The act of writing love letters consolidates feminine and masculine identities. At the same time, Gibbs borrows from the discourse of romantic love to perform an identity not traditionally seen as masculine and which is unexpected for a man of his occupation and social class: as a writer.⁸³ 'Don't forget I've a good pen so share those letters', he wrote in a PS in October 1940: 'I can write any kind of letter from Love to blackmail Love letters are my speciality ask Bill he'll tell you.'⁸⁴ Indeed, Gibbs's range included two pieces of life-writing describing

⁸¹ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 24 Oct. 1940.

⁸² Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 25 Feb. 1941.

⁸³ A number of the men were unconfident letter writers. See for example Jack Storey, 25 Oct. 1940, and James Bore, 1 Nov. 1941, both to Mollie Baker. British men were in all probability less well acquainted with the art of letter writing than their continental European brothers. British children were not introduced to letter writing until their final year of the elementary curriculum; not all would have stayed in school that long. David Vincent, *Literacy and popular culture: England, 1750–1914* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 51, 89; Hanna, 1914–1918-online.net, p. 4. For the emphasis on honest, heartfelt letter writing in French elementary education, see Martha Hanna, 'A republic of letters: the epistolary tradition in France during World War One', *American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), pp. 1338–61.

⁸⁴ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, Oct. 1940.

the life of a North Sea fisherman.⁸⁵ Bill Stewart, his skipper, expressed awe at these letters:

Sam has just told me that he wrote a nine page letter to you and he reckons if you read it to the 13 knitters there will be no knitting that day. I reckon Sam is a bit of a Fifth columnist because he is stopping production at the knitting B. but what a gift to be able to sit down and write a nine page letter.

With a nod to his own deficiencies as a writer (though it could be argued while also revealing his decidedly literary ear), Stewart continued:

My wife reckon's it's a shame to waste a stamp on the letters I send her but one cannot tell about his undying love all the time and if I write and tell her about my kidney's she sends back a Pithy letter about drinking. The hardest letter a man can write is to his wife...A Prophet gets no honour in his own home.⁸⁶

For Gibbs, the act of writing to a class of woman with whom he was unlikely to have been in contact during peacetime – made possible by the efficiency of the wartime postal service and the existence of the comforts fund scheme – opened up a new world of self-representation. Indeed, quoting Hsu-Ming Teo, the authors of love letters 'write because they are in love; but perhaps they also love because they write'.⁸⁷ Sam told Mollie that he could write more than he could ever talk if he met her; although he could adapt himself to any company, he was 'on the shy side'.⁸⁸ But 'I love writing to someone who can appreciate a letter', he wrote in December 1940, and two months later: 'I think letter writing is my favourite sport.'⁸⁹

Janet Altman has written about the 'epistolary pact': that the knowledge that the writer is calling for a response is central to a correspondence; that *relationship* is integral to an exchange of letters.⁹⁰ It is this pact that in part gives letters what Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley call their qualities of 'letterness'. They have shifted the focus in epistolary studies from questions usually associated with life-writing and autobiography – about representativeness, individuals and social context, collective memory etc. – to sincerity, arguing that 'the truth of the writing is in the relationship rather than in its subject'.⁹¹ The correspondence between Mollie and Sam is replete with sincerity. But what happens when the relationship itself is an untruth? When one writer lacks sincerity or isn't who he says he is? Or indeed when the writer isn't actually one man but is in cahoots with another and seeking to deceive and manipulate the recipient?

⁸⁵ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 18 Oct. 1940, 19 Dec. 1940.

⁸⁶ Bill Stewart to Mollie Baker, 12 Dec. 1940.

⁸⁷ Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Love writes: gender and romantic love in Australian love letters, 1860–1960', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20 (2005), pp. 343–61.

⁸⁸ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 12 Feb. 1941.

⁸⁹ Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, 25 Feb. 1941.

⁹⁰ Altman, *Epistolarity*, p. 89.

⁹¹ Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, 'Letters as / not a genre', *Life Writing*, 2 (2005), pp. 91–118, at p. 93.

III

Sam Gibbs's letters to Mollie Baker were written in the context of a working life aboard a trawler in which his letter-writing ability was celebrated and enjoyed, including by his skipper. A different collection of men in another environment could produce a very different dynamic. In this section, I will argue that the wartime combination of anonymity, mobility, hyper-masculinity, and patriotic femininity⁹² also gave scope for deception and exploitation. The focus is a collection of letters from Jim Gilbert,⁹³ a stoker on board HMS *Elgin*, to Norah Hodgkinson who, at the outset of their correspondence, was a working-class scholarship girl in the English East Midlands. Jim had made contact with Norah in 1941 via a pair of socks she had knitted for the Royal Navy Comforts Fund; like Doris Dockrill, she had included her name and address inside the parcel. The complication to their correspondence is that, a few months in, Jim arranged for Norah to meet his brother, Danny, who was in nearby Loughborough on an RAF training course. Norah fell in love with Danny and, over the next two years, they corresponded regularly, he visited her family home, and they discussed marriage. Anger, jealousy, and sibling rivalry, overlain with navy/RAF rivalry, are all present in Jim's letters. What Norah did not know, however, was that Danny was already married. In this case, what started as a 'thank you' note for knitted comforts turned into a series of love letters that then become part of a process that we would now refer to as sexual grooming: Jim was feeding Norah false information about his brother in order to persuade her to 'give in' to his sexual advances. As Jim's letters reveal, he was very aware of the high premium placed on girls' reputation, as well as the importance to Norah of her 'respectability'.

Jim's letters to Norah follow a similar, if condensed, pattern to that described in the discussion of letters to Doris Dockrill, above: alongside gratitude and his references to his location on a minesweeper in the cold North Sea, he squeezes into his first two letters questions about Norah's hobbies, school life, and plans for the future, requests for a photograph, and a check on whether she has a boyfriend.⁹⁴ Over subsequent weeks, the dating profile comes to the fore: Jim came from a working-class family in the south of England similar to Norah's own, was

⁹² There is more work to be done on the subject of patriotic femininity, especially the emphasis on women boosting morale through their sex appeal, and the relationship of this to the emphasis on modesty and sexual ignorance, the valorization of romance and vulnerability to predatory masculinity. See my unpublished paper, "'Dear Norah, why did you take my letter the wrong way, it was not intended to hurt or corrupt...': danger, desire and patriotic femininity in Britain during WW2'. For patriotic femininity, see Goodman, *Women, sexuality and war*; Pat Kirkham, 'Keeping up home front morale: "beauty and duty" in wartime Britain', in Jacqueline M. Atkins, ed., *Wearing propaganda: textiles on the home front in Japan, Britain, and the United States, 1931-1945* (New Haven, CT, and London, 2005), pp. 205-27; Rose, *Which peoples' war?*

⁹³ Due to some ethical considerations, I have anonymized Jim and Danny Gilbert.

⁹⁴ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 26 Feb. 1941. Letters in my possession.

the only one of his siblings not to go to the local grammar school, had joined the navy in 1937, and had seen tours of duty in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Middle East, and his interests and hobbies included cricket, boxing, and football, sentimental tunes and comic operas, novels by Rider Haggard and Warwick Deeping, and Hollywood films and actresses.⁹⁵

As with letters to Doris Dockrill, it was Jim who stepped up the intimacy between himself and Norah. His letters soon become more flirtatious than any written to Doris and they are less explicitly performative than those from Sam Gibbs to Mollie Baker, although as with Sam and Bill, they are redolent with working-class humour and contain some risqué newspaper cartoons. The first gentle flirtation came a month into their correspondence: 'I try to picture you, Blonde about 5 ft 6', Jim wrote at the end of his letter, and when Norah put him right, he apologized: 'I'm sorry about the blonde and brunette affair, but being candid, the brunette is preferred.'⁹⁶ Jim's letters mix ordinary chat with flirtatious conversation and included a gift of a purple silk naval-crested handkerchief, photographs of himself and his brothers and many compliments. 'Gee! I think you are very attractive and pretty', he wrote on receipt of a photograph. 'I thought of you 5.30pm Good Friday when your favourite song came through on the ship's wireless, Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.'⁹⁷

Correspondence with girls was an important part of mess culture across the services. As Emma Newlands argues, 'describing "moments of passion" and reading love letters to one another' operated as a means of sexual release for men, while stories of sexual prowess were 'prized masculine trait[s]' and important for bonding; for the creation of what Ben Wadham has termed the fratriarchy.⁹⁸ Even though Jim appeared to distance himself from common representations of sailors – telling Norah that he always went on shore leave alone, for example – he nonetheless wanted to be one of the boys. Asking for a photograph to keep rather than just exchange, he explained that 'my writing box looks a bit bare without a girl's photo'.⁹⁹ Later the same month, he requested 'a lock of your hair, it is a common thing in our ship and I would like to be in fashion'.¹⁰⁰ While we have no way of knowing how Jim experienced life on board the ship, the nature of the male bonding, or his relationships in the stokers' mess, his focus on sex and romance is in keeping with other accounts. Despite the domestication of sailors during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they were transformed in popular representations from 'Casanova Jack' into ideal working men, patriotic defenders of the nation,

⁹⁵ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 26 Feb. 1941, 5 Mar. 1941, 14 Mar. 1941.

⁹⁶ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 24 Mar. 1941, 5 Apr. 1941.

⁹⁷ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 12 Apr. 1941.

⁹⁸ Newlands, *Civilians into soldiers*, p. 136; Ben Wadham, 'Brotherhood', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28 (2013), pp. 212–35.

⁹⁹ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 12 Apr. 1941.

¹⁰⁰ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 17 Apr. 1941.

and dutiful husbands and fathers,¹⁰¹ oral history interviewees reveal the prominence of sex in individual lives, in terms of both the navy's initial appeal and men's early experiences of service.¹⁰² The men also reveal a range of private responses which were sometimes quietly at odds with the hyper-masculinity which characterized lower deck life. Bill Batters, for example, pushed into a sexual initiation with a young prostitute in Argostoli, Kefalonia, in 1937, reported feeling privately ashamed of the encounter, but did not let on to the shipmates who greeted him 'like a young lion'.¹⁰³ This underscores the power of dominant masculinities. While men sometimes felt differently from what was suggested by their behaviour, as Corinna Peniston-Bird has argued, they 'did not have a choice whether to conform or reject hegemonic masculinity: they positioned themselves in relation to it'.¹⁰⁴ Despite any plurality of masculinities, most men would be complicit with dominant forms in order to achieve the 'patriarchal dividend'.¹⁰⁵

The first hint of anything untoward in Jim's letters to Norah came in April 1941, with a request for what he later called 'school girl snaps'. 'Have you a photo of yourself in school uniform', he asked, 'or are you shy?'¹⁰⁶ This request was accompanied by a suggestion that Norah should keep his letters secret, locked away from her mother's eyes. After Danny arrived on the scene, and as a tag-team quality developed in the brothers' contact with Norah, Jim slipped into prurience. 'I am glad you wangled the time and place to make love to Danny', he wrote in June 1942:

I expect you know all the answers, especially if you are great pals with your married sister. Passionate kisses are marvellous when both involved respond to each other's. Please tell me how and where you and Danny were alone because the way he wrote to me seemed that all his time with you was always in company with your family. In his first letter, after his visit to your home he told me he plucked up courage and kissed you on the station platform, and he was worrying if he had offended you...Was Danny the first to make real love to you if so what effect did it have on you? Do you mind me asking you intimate questions? I wish you would ask me some only I don't want to offend my best friend but if you start first it will make it hundred

¹⁰¹ Mary A. Conley, *From Jack Tar to Union Jack: representing naval manhood in the British Empire, 1870–1918* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 3, 194–5; Joanne Begiato, 'Tears and the manly sailor in England, c. 1760–1860', *Journal for Maritime Research*, 17 (2015), pp. 117–33.

¹⁰² Christopher McKee, *Sober men and true: sailor lives in the Royal Navy, 1900–1945* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), pp. 33, 165–89.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁴ Corinna Peniston-Bird, 'Classifying the body in the Second World War: British men in and out of uniform', *Body and Society*, 9 (2003), pp. 31–48, at p. 45.

¹⁰⁵ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁰⁶ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 12 Apr. 1941. On 17 June, he wrote: 'I would like to see you in your school outfit, I understand (shy). I wonder if you would send some school snaps...Yours more than imagination.'

times easier for me. When I look at your photo, to just kiss your hair I would be thrilled. I could ask you lots, but may I?¹⁰⁷

Norah clearly complained: 'Dear Norah, Why did you take my letter the wrong way, it was not intended to hurt or corrupt', Jim wrote in his next letter and on another occasion scrawled the words 'PLEASE DON'T CONDEMN' across the top of the opening page.¹⁰⁸

With these letters, Jim is far removed from the hopeful requests in letters to Doris Dockrill or the friendly flirtations of Sam Gibbs. Such integrity projection and sexualized games are characteristics of grooming, and Jim's subsequent letters reveal a combination of these and other strategies, including bribery, gifts, deception, manipulation, and threats.¹⁰⁹ He accused Norah of being an 'ice-berg' who would 'condemn' his brother if he asked for a 'so-far'; 'I would gamble my life that no boy has even been allowed to put his hand up your knickers', he wrote. He asked her to send 'school photos in your next [letter] and let me keep one when about 12 to 14 years' and requested a souvenir, a 'curl' from her pubic hair, as proof of 'how great our friendship is'. He vouched for his brother's sincerity, telling her he could 'play a big part in your love affair with Danny', and offered advice: 'Here is a little tip even if it's breaking a mother's advice or a promise to her. If one desires a mere feel grant it providing it's the one you love then he does not have to seek it elsewhere. I am cruel aren't I.' Norah continued with the correspondence because Jim was her only route to Danny after his disappearance from her life between October 1943 and March 1945. Jim was well aware of this dependence: 'Would you marry Danny if you had the chance', Jim asked. 'I could help you with that.'¹¹⁰

While we cannot know whether Jim's early requests for schoolgirl photos, or, indeed, his later request for a 'souvenir', were part of mess-room banter, he and Danny's wartime environments appear to be factors in bringing particular behaviours to the fore. In a letter written in 1947, when Danny had been demobbed and was a father of two, and Jim still had two years left of his twelve-year contract, Jim wrote to Norah to apologize for the way he and his brother had behaved. 'Many times during and after the war we have talked about you and the terrible and most ungrateful way we treated you and we both apologise and wish you all

¹⁰⁷ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 28 June 1942.

¹⁰⁸ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 7 July 1942, 25 Jan. 1945. For Norah's response to Jim Gilbert's letters, see Alison Twells, "'Went into raptures": reading emotion in the ordinary wartime diary, 1941–1946', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2015), 143–60.

¹⁰⁹ Discussions with Gertie Whitfield, former Personal, Social and Health Education adviser, Derbyshire County Council, 2018. See also Samantha Craven, 'Deconstructing perspectives of sexual grooming: implications for theory and practice' (D.Phil. thesis, Coventry, 2009); Helen Whittle, Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis, Antony Beech, and Guy Collings, 'A review of young people's vulnerabilities to online grooming', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 18 (2013), pp. 62–70.

¹¹⁰ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, various letters, 1941–5.

the happiness in the world.’¹¹¹ Although in subsequent letters Jim reverted to sexually explicit material – launching into his ‘wide experience with girls all over the world’, for example, asserting that he thinks he’d have ‘gained a yes’ if he’d been in Danny’s shoes, telling her that men go elsewhere if they don’t get what they want – the apology is interesting. The shape of the correspondence suggests that it may well have been Danny, newly reintegrated into a civilian life peopled by women and non-combatants, who was now ashamed of his wartime escapades. As Joanna Bourke has argued in relation to sexual violence, the dominant wartime justification for rape – that ‘you can’t stimulate and let loose the animal in man and then expect to be able to cage it up again at a moment’s notice’ – disappeared in peacetime as the emphasis shifted to a focus on individual pathology.¹¹² While the brothers’ treatment of Norah was understood in post-war Britain as an individual wrong-doing, during wartime it was enabled by some of the same factors that facilitated a range of atrocities.¹¹³ These factors included anonymity and the homosocial environment of an airbase or a ship, where normative masculinity required a particular performance of interactions with women, including stories of sexual prowess, photographs on ditty boxes, and bonding over letters to girls, such as the letter to the Glaswegian girl in the introduction.¹¹⁴ It is possible that Jim, who had signed up in the pre-war navy in 1937, was exposed over a longer period to attitudes that were potentially less temperate than those of men like his brother, or Gibbs and Stewart, who were ‘hostilities-only’ servicemen hoping their service would be a temporary disruption in their working lives. Evidence concerning sex and romance suggests that Martin Francis’s argument that there existed a ‘striking contiguity between martial and civilian cultures in the twentieth century’ requires further exploration.¹¹⁵

IV

This article explores sex and romance as under-examined aspects of wartime masculinities through a focus on letters from servicemen recipients of ‘comforts’ to girls and women who knitted for the war effort. Servicemen’s letters to anonymous knitters reveal many aspects of their emotional lives: their

¹¹¹ Jim Gilbert to Norah Hodgkinson, 20 Oct. 1947.

¹¹² Joanna Bourke, ‘Unwanted intimacy: violent sexual transfers in British and American societies, 1870s to 1970s’, *European Journal of English Studies*, 9 (2006), pp. 287–99, at pp. 288, 294.

¹¹³ Bourke, *Rape: a history*.

¹¹⁴ Mailänder, ‘Making sense of a rape photograph’. Feminist discussions of the sexual scripts leading to predatory male sexuality go back to the 1970s. See Stevi Jackson, ‘The social context of rape: sexual scripts and motivation’, *Women’s Studies International Quarterly*, 1 (1978), pp. 27–39.

¹¹⁵ Francis, *The flyer*, p. 85. See also John Tosh: ‘What we most lack is analyses of experience of combat and its impact on peacetime masculine conduct...’: Tosh, ‘The history of masculinity’, p. 24.

isolation, loneliness, bodily discomfort, desires for distraction, fears of being forgotten. They also reveal a desire to engage with women, not as degendered wartime workers, but as potential lovers, girlfriends, and wives; and a belief that romantic connection would assuage difficult emotions and make their present circumstances more bearable. This is evident in many of the letters sent to Doris Dockrill and also in Jim Gilbert's early letters to Norah Hodgkinson. Sam Gibbs, while more chaste, saw romance as an appropriate vehicle for intimacy in his correspondence with Mollie Baker (and, as he reports, his friendship with Joan, the ATS girl). The concept of 'temperate heroism' provides a framework for understanding what was essentially a 'gift relationship': women produced knitted comforts and letters in support of men's endeavours to fulfil their heroic role, while the letters of gratitude which form the men's 'return' expressed romantic intimacy, vulnerability, and the need for love, thus confirming women's successful performance of their patriotic duty.

A focus on sex and romance in servicemen's letters reveals diverse desires, however, some playful, some romantic, others ambiguous, and some plainly exploitative. Jim Gilbert's letters are particularly interesting in this respect, revealing how servicemen were able to manipulate their image as 'heroes' to perform transgressive and even deviant behaviours. Gilbert's letters support evidence that there was much 'intemperate' sexual activity in wartime, both in theatres of war and on the home front, ranging from promiscuity, the belief that sex was a reward for bravery and heroism in the face of wartime dangers and the normativity of sexual violence. The contrast between Gilbert's letters and those of Gibbs raise further questions about the context in which different masculinities were shaped and upheld, in and across military and civilian cultures. For Gibbs, working with some of the same crew and operating out of the north-east of England, his home territory, there was considerable continuity with his pre-war life as a trawlerman. His correspondence with Mollie Baker was flirtatious and playful but transparent, and was shared with his skipper aboard the *John Stephen*. In contrast, Jim Gilbert's letters were not only sexually explicit but were deceitful, designed to persuade a young woman to engage in sexual activity. Both his wartime letters and his post-war letter of apology reveal this course of action to be a conscious choice on the part of himself and his brother to exploit their 'heroic' status in the wider culture. A foregrounding of predatory sexuality therefore suggests that we should look again at arguments relating to the contiguity or otherwise between military cultures in the Second World War and middle- and working-class civilian codes of respectable masculinity and male heterosexual expression. Letters from servicemen recipients of 'comforts' to anonymous girls and women are thus a rich source for exploring issues of sex, romance, and masculinity during the Second World War.