Representation of female war-time bravery in Australia's *Wanda the War Girl*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses from a gendered perspective aspects of form and cultural record relating to *Wanda the War Girl* (1943 –1951), by artist Kath O'Brien – a Second World War strip for the (Sydney) *Sunday Telegraph* that was said to have been more popular with both adults and children than Superman. This was one of the first local comics to reflect a female point of view combined with some vernacular characteristics, and the series is   significant historically because World War Two was also the first occasion Australian servicewomen existed. The well- dressed adventuress and spy exemplified a new attitude towards women. Although she was a sexually provocative pin-up, *Wanda the War Girl* presented a form of female representation necessitated by the Second World War, that differed from earlier styles. The female character was powerful and productive: her bravery and attraction derived from her presence in male spheres. It is argued that by providing an interesting mosaic of 1940s attitudes, creator O'Brien's support for the war effort has become a valid cultural record of the period.

KEY WORDS: Wanda the War Girl, comics, Australia, representation, gender, cultural record

INTRODUCTION

During the Second World War, one of life's simple wartime pleasures was to read the lift-out comics sections in the Sunday newspapers. Cottesloe resident Ruth Marchant James recalls that she could not wait to consume *Wanda the War Girl*, an Australian comic strip first published in the *Sunday Telegraph* in 1943, and later collected into two comic books (2007). A school history textbook about the period claims that Wanda was the first wartime Australian female icon: servicemen painted her picture on their tanks and planes and she was said to be Australia's favourite pin-up (Ciddor 1998: 23). She escaped from espionage dangers involving German and Japanese armed forces, and her foolhardy exploits were often drawn from contemporary newspaper stories. After the war, her adventures morphed into detective-style escapades, and the glamorous, well-dressed heroine embarked upon dangerous exploits until the strip was abruptly terminated mid-adventure in 1951 (NLA 1984). Unfortunately the locally produced comic could not compete with American imports.

Wanda the War Girl appealed to adults and was said to be more popular with children than Superman (Ciddor 1998: 23). Not only was Wanda beautiful and feminine, but also she was a tough independent woman. Creator Kath O'Brien's intention was 'to give credit to Australian service girls for the marvelous job they are doing'. O'Brien recognized the changing social status and working lives of women. The overall effect was refreshingly different to the generally negative depiction of the sexualized woman in Australian war comics (Laurie 1999:121). O'Brien was influenced by *Black Fury*, an early wartime comic in the *Telegraph* (drawn by another woman, American Tarpe Mills), and by Norman Pett's extremely successful *Jane* who appeared in Britain's *Daily Mirror.*

According to John Ryan, O'Brien's illustrative style is one of the most original and individual styles to appear in Australian comics; in parts it is reminiscent of William Dobell (1979: 53). Eventually, the strips were collected into comic books published by Consolidated Press first as *The War Comic* and then as the first and the fourth in the *Supercomic Series* (1947-1950s) – the only original local products out of 66 US re-prints (NLA: MS 6514). After the war, O'Brien increasingly based her stories (written in conjunction with journalist C.W. Brien) on the novels of Ashton Woolfe, a self-promoting former employee of the French security services; she combined his (embellished) real life accounts with items from newspapers.

Wanda the War Girl was 'one of the first comics to reflect a female point of view [and was] reflective of its period' (Ryan 1979: 53). This article argues that *Wanda the War Girl* presented a fresh form of female representation that differs from others before and after the Second World War in form and in substance. *Wanda* extended the scope and range of female representation. However, Wanda was also a sexually provocative pin-up and the comic strip undoubtedly aided wartime propaganda.

CONTEXT

It is generally accepted that if there had not been a war there would never have been an Australian comic book industry (Gordon 1998:10) [i] This was mainly due to import licensing regulations and economic sanctions that restricted American imports during the Second World War, and by 1948 the industry had grown to such an extent that there were 38 local and imported (mainly British) comic titles available each week (Stone 1994:72; Ryan 1979:197). However, when import restrictions were lifted, American

products flooded the market again – to such an extent that in the post-War period 80 per cent of comics circulating originated in the United States (Lent 1999: 22). Despite the heavy competition – or maybe because of it – the popular characters produced in local comics have a social significance as part of the nation's cultural heritage.

Wanda the War Girl provided a more progressive representation of women, and as such it mirrored wartime representations and a new social trend for women to leave the home in order to serve the war effort. Australian women comic book artists such as O'Brien shared a 'strong commitment to giving a more balanced view of women in comics' (Unger cited in Shiell 1998: 79). This point is best assessed by touching upon female representation before Second World War.

In US comics history, the pre-Second World War period is referred to as 'The Early Industrial Age' (Lopes 2009). This primitive label is reflected in the content of other Australian visual archives of the period such as cartoons where female depictions are somewhat unenlightened. John Foster points to sexism by omission and provides examples where no women appear at all, even as protagonists or assistants (1990: 18). In *Bluey and Curley,* when women do appear, they are 'domestic tyrants who will not allow their male partners any pleasure or they are silly and frivolous' (Ungar 1998: 70). Popular strips aimed at the adult market such as *Bluey and Curley* and *Wally and the Major* were set in male-dominated worlds where female characters were often nameless, 'Mum' or 'Mrs Curley'. 'Mrs Bluey', and who never seemed to leave the house.[ii] Comics theorists McAllister, Sewell and Gordon point out that portrayals of life are not neutral or random (2001: 5), so it is not coincidental that when women were

featured working, it was usually in jobs offering little opportunity for adventure; most often women appeared as honey traps or as harridans   (Minell, 2003).

As Foster points out, ninety-five per cent of comics creators were male and it was always assumed (for the wartime period, although this changed during the post-war years) that 90 per cent of the readers were also male. The adventure genre dominated and bravery centred on missions to create 'peace and order out of the chaos produced by the forces of evil' (1999:145). Women's roles were as damsel in distress or helpmates for the male protagonist or victims. The consensus amongst comics historians is that in wartime comics women were usually civilian casualties, depicted as losing family members and /or being raped, pillaged, looted, or starved (Stromberg 2010: 50). Up to 1939 they were not usually service women, and World War Two was the first occasion that Australian women performed this new role. *Wanda the War Girl* reflected this change; as Joseph Witek suggests: 'Art has a psychological need to hear and render the truth' (1989: 114). This aspect of representation can also be seen in the United States comics industry where female characters assumed service roles as well as becoming costumed super heroes (Robbins 1996).

Of course, stereotyping of women as either harridan or honey trap was not unique to Australia. Comic depictions worldwide have traditionally been predominantly male but when this is combined with a tendency to over-simplify for cartoon purposes, the result historically (more generally in literature) seems to have been a categorization into virgin, mother, and crone (Stromberg 2010: 50). In comics, women's roles are further reduced to two categories: either maiden/vamp or mother/old hag. The former were depicted as

a busty, physically over-exaggerated object of desire – either someone to rescue or: 'merely a beautiful token to be at the side of the male main character' (Stromberg 2010:136). Conversely, the mother/hag was usually ugly and dominated her well-domesticated husband.

SOCIAL REALISM

Roger Sabin has noted that American superheroes became patriotic figures fighting for their country - 'unashamed morale-boosters' - so why not a woman to also fulfill this function (1996:146)? Unlike her American contemporary 'Miss Lace' in *Male Call*, Wanda did not just hang around the army bases like a 'perpetual maybe' (Stromberg 2010: 51) –a female who maybe sexually available. Wanda was a pro-active adventuress/spy for the war effort, with the result that her representation was less patronizing than that of previous female characters.

Witek acknowledges that there is a recent tendency to connect: 'the textual specificities of the comic form to the embeddedness (sic) of comics in social, cultural, and economic systems' (1999: 4). Certainly more masculine war comics published after the War tended to have high levels of factuality and were often based on true stories. However, this statement needs to be qualified: it is not possible to obtain a totally rounded picture of the War period from comics. The social history of Australia, as it relates to women, has its limitations for the gendered reasons stated above. The society that spawned comics in this period has since changed radically, thus according to Foster: 'no rounded view of the history is possible, however, simply because of the natures of both the medium and its readers' (1999:150-151); but he admits that comics provide 'pieces of

the mirror' that can be assembled (1990:22). Wanda's war-time bravery incorporates fragments of the social and political mirror to reflect the new attitude towards women.[iii] McAllister, Sewell and Gordon stressed that ideology is strongly connected to issues of social power. In this respect, Wanda often displays contradictory ideological dimensions (2001: 2-3). Yet despite limitations and contradictions, this particular strip still has a value as a social document because of its active acknowledgement of the important role of the active servicewoman.

PIN -UPS

It is true that Wanda was a voyeur's delight, for her clothes were constantly torn—the better to display her long shapely legs and impressive bosom. Nevertheless she was more modest than her English wartime equivalent Jane, who was more risqué. In terms of sexual symbolism, Wanda always retained an element of unspoken suggestion of sex. It is worth noting that *Wanda the War Girl* was drawn by a female artist, and while she competed with Moira Bertram's Jo (*Jo and her Magic Cape*), Tarpe Mills' strip entitled *Miss Fury*, and Dale Messick's strip *Brenda Starr*, it was Wanda who became the most widely displayed Australian pin-up. The comic character Jane was also a huge success as a pin-up (Saunders, 2004) and thus Wanda, like Jane, was a 'truly national phenomenon and was seen as boosting the moral of the men in military service' (Stromberg 2010: 50- 51). Jane supposedly sent the British troops onward five miles in just one day at the North African front when she finally shed *all* of her clothes in front of some British soldiers instead of only losing some of them accidentally, though regularly (Stromberg 2010: 50-51). In fact, scholars have acknowledged that the pin-up can

channel sexual energy by transforming it into military energy as a weapon (Kakoudaki 2004: 231). Both Wanda and Jane are the result of propaganda campaigns that encouraged men to idolize a different sort of woman - the attractive service woman (Westbrook 1990: 587). The need of governments to enlist women should not be underestimated: conflict was global and on an unprecedented scale. This made mobilization of entire populations for the war effort essential, so expansion of the role of women was inevitable. What was new in representational terms was that these 'new' women were sexy, powerful, brave, and productive.

There were three main taboo subjects during the 1940s and 1950s for Australian comics: sex, violence, and bad language. Kissing and passionate embraces in romance comics were permitted but 'there was seldom any physical contact between the genders' (Foster 1999:145). Casual sex was considered risky, to health and to national security. Indeed, in relation to female illustrative archives held by the National Archives of Australia, Minell comments:

> If they were not traitorous, disease-ridden 'femmes fatales', they were scattily-minded naïve young things who seemed to be more of a hindrance to the war effort than a help. It would be interesting to know how successful the foolhardy exploits of *Wanda the War Girl* were as an aid to female recruitment for the services! (2003: 22).

OTHER FEMALE CHARACTERS

Many of Wanda's competing female characters seemed to be less socially realistic. In January 1945 the *Daily Mirror* introduced another Australian cartoon strip by 16-year-old Moira Bertram, *Jo and her Magic Cape*: dark-haired Jo was beautiful and used her magic cape to help her boyfriend – an American pilot named Serge – to outwit the Japanese and gangsters. The magic cape was a common trope – a comic strip fictional device to speed up the narrative and herald action, but it lacked realism and detracted from Jo's natural bravery and credibility. The strip ran for a few months before moving into comic books. Another local artist Syd Miller (of 'Chesty Bond' fame) created a female character called *Sandra* for the *Melbourne Herald*. Although she also appeared in England and elsewhere, at that time (1945) he found a female character limiting for the type of stories he wanted to present, according to Ryan. Sandra was axed the following year, only to be replaced by the inimitable *Rod Craig*, an adventure strip that was adapted as a radio serial (1979: 54). Comic creators believed their male readership would not tolerate too many female characters as the women slowed down the action. Fewer women increased the likelihood that those who squeezed their way in would be destined for a traditional role of mother or wife, with potential for stereotyping since they were less likely to be embellished with a diversity of characteristics. Does this downward spiral indicate a potential for stereotyping? Martin Barker argues a form of mitigation against any such allegation by stating that the comic form has an equalizing effect. This, he argues should point theorists towards a slightly different line of enquiry. 'It makes no difference whether it is a stereotype of a plumber, a tax inspector, a policeman, a black person, a demented pig or a coward. For purposes of the strip, all

are equalized. Therefore they are not just 'stereotypes', they are much more; they are *types for the purposes of the formula of the stories.*' (1989:116).

Notwithstanding, there must be a relativist case to argue: types of women impact upon cultural understanding of a far larger proportion of a country's population than plumbers ever can. Clearly the issue of representation using the comics form is not an easy one: contemporary scholarship is particularly sensitive to the way that historically composed visual discourse on the 'Other' has emerged. WJT Mitchell, for instance, discusses how 'the relative position of visual and verbal representation is …..never simply a formal issue or a question to be settled by scientific semiotics' (Worcester & Heer eds. 2009:116). In comics and graphic art the danger of negative caricature is very real, and reductive iconography can have a dehumanising effect when it is presented visually in the form of deformed features (big bust, fat body, heavy wrinkles, et.al.). Character types need to be easily recognised - unique identity tends not be celebrated.

One problem from the standpoint of historical female representation is the lack of a range of formulas involving women, exacerbated by a propensity to copy American formats and types when the originals were not available – such was the case with local comic artist Dan Russell's 1942 creation of reporter *Wanda Dare* – an imitation of *Brenda Starr*. Seen in this limited context, *Wanda the War Girl* appears relatively progressive, especially in the light of other problems with the comics form and consideration of how they contribute to gendered considerations. The complex way in which words and pictures are combined can allow for a range of meaning, but comic strip space is constrained (Walker 1994: 9), and limitations of space may encourage the

creator to quickly resort to Barker's types for the formula of the story. The spatial limitations of the form need to be recognized for the effect they have on other aspects, such as the creation of a kind of visual shorthand in illustrative style, as well as a reliance on standard character types and formulaic plots. As McCloud argues, comics are uniquely placed to explore the space between reality and representation because the visuals operate mainly as iconic translations and this is reinforced by the narrative structure (1994: 24-25). Speed and conciseness of narrative is helped by the fact that comics can change the point of view easily (Carrier 2000: 55), and that can be both a strength and a weakness of the form.

READING WANDA THE WAR GIRL

Wanda is significant because she was a new 'type' of character; she is a tough adventuress who makes an active contribution to the war effort. In the *Sunday Telegraph* on 2 January 1944, Wanda – suitably attired in sexy jungle gear – is taking the lead by suggesting that her associate Jim and their helper take a store of Japanese rifles. Although she keeps watch while the two men do the business, she still runs fast and is always at the centre of action. She shoots a rifle and provides insightful narrative comments whilst all three are firing at the enemy. In February 1944 Wanda proves once more than she can always keep up with the men, and climb dangerous rock faces too, whilst simultaneously displaying her gorgeous legs. She insists on going ahead with Jim to do a 'recce'. Similarly, in the next episode she contributes to forward planning and strategic thinking. She makes useful suggestions on tactics as the team progress, by proposing that their captured Japanese prisoner could open the cave door: 'make him

do his Buddha opening act '. This works – 'open sesame' – to a hidden cave full of wretched prisoners, for whom Wanda shows feminine compassion: 'better release these poor old fellows now, hadn't we?' Then she places a bomb in the Japanese radio device (she's technical as well), and makes a run for it, with pistol in hand, but still looking shapely.

On 5 March 1944 we see the other Aussie troops respectfully accepting her as an equal: she shakes hands with them to say thanks, tells them to take care and says goodbye – the 'matey' thing to do. One of them replies: 'We'll be ok, Wanda. We've got to rejoin our cobbers'. Then, as Jim flies the captured plane away, Wanda operates the radio controls, sending a Morse code message: 'Jap radio station gone sky high. Reporting HQRS today. Flying Jap plane. Will signal approach. Wanda'. What amazing capability, control and technical expertise: good entertainment, but also positive encouragement for readers!

READING POST -WAR WANDA

Despite the improbabilities and inconsistencies from a gendered perspective, *Wanda the War Girl* and also *Wanda* post-war still provided a relative step forward for female representation. Published in April 1948, the post-war comics book 'Wanda in India' becomes too fanciful, however. Page one reveals that the Japanese are planning a take-over of India: this of course is in the wake of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By page four the exotic foreign clothes have become a bit theatrical. Admittedly the fictional kingdom of Dapur was supposed to be located on the Afghan/India border at a time when Pakistan was just being set up, but Wanda looks like an advert for Turkish delight,

or a belly dancer. Local women are similarly dressed half naked in bikini tops and see-through harem trousers! Dramatic stylization has its own equivalent literary short-hand that defines nationality. Thus Wanda, disguised as a servant boy (!), comes across a British agent, also in disguise and wearing a turban. Wanda tells him a Japanese air squadron is hidden in the hills, and he responds: 'Oh topping! We'll arrange for a bally surprise for the jolly old nips on their next visit, what!' The story ends with the local Prince swearing allegiance to the allied cause – danger over and mission accomplished. Wanda and her side-kick Jim move on to China to fight 'pro Jap agents'.

This time Wanda is back in her sexy short shorts, but somehow her progressive wartime style has given way to the American Cold War superhero image, as realism is sacrificed en route. She is rescued by Jim and a British secret service officer (called Lord Nicholas) after Chinese bandits, looking somewhat dated in coolly hats, have captured her whilst she was changing into native clothes. Always the best time to get Wanda! Although visual representation of the Chinese, for instance, looks dated, the story concerns of these post-War Wanda comic books very much reflect contemporary Cold War concerns – however irrational they may seem to today's readers.

This is especially true of the second Wanda comic book publication entitled 'Wanda Smashes the Black Market. At a time when there was rationing, shortages and hardship almost worldwide, the existence of a black market posed a major problem for post – war economic reconstruction as well as provoking feelings of injustice and anger amongst people who were at the receiving end of profiteering and coupon systems[iv]. This kind of content is also an example of how the comic strip and book, as an American form, was

customised for local cultural, moral and political purposes. As Possamai indicates, 'Within this new post WWII space local creators took an exotic art American form and, during a period of relative isolation from the industry, transformed it into something expressive of the identity of its Australian creators and readers.' Yet by the late 1950s, the honeymoon was over and the local industry declined in the face of economic competition from US imports, television and local censorship.(2003 (6):113) American comics were criticized by anti-comics campaigners as 'un-Australian in speech and style' (Lent, 1999:25) but as this was not accompanied by any form of cultural protection for comics, home grown comics disappeared in the 1950s.

CONCLUSION

Wanda the War Girl breaks the mold by overcoming the limitations in representation of women , but in the process her bravery borders on recklessness as a form of exaggeration. O'Brien used the format to stimulate of readers – who were clearly delighted by this new female image. Thus Wanda fulfilled a pin-up role that supported Australian troops in their war effort and her bravery is a product of exaggeration in pursuit of that aim. *Wanda the War Girl* was an iconic phenomenon that is part of Australia's heritage. Although this may well be Australian wartime valorization of female bravery for propagandistic purposes, the example provides a number of positives as well. Wanda bridged the gap between child and adult audience, demonstrating the flexibility and artistic potential of comics as a popular form. Wanda represented female liberation through conscription to the war-machine but it can be argued that in *Wanda the War Girl* women were treated as equals. At the time there was widespread support

for this female effort and the new role expanded the range of representation, making such female characters more reflective of the change in society. When O'Brien created Wanda, she not only created a new space for a woman, she also provided popular entertainment and a moral message that became hugely successful and served the needs of the time. Today's cultural needs are different, but *Wanda* provides an important cultural record of gendered values at a turning point in history for attitudes towards women and their contribution to society.

Acknowledgements

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[i] Throughout Europe and Latin America, and in Canada and Japan, comic books and comic strips are regarded as serious artistic and cultural productions. In the United States, however, comics has traditionally been considered a lowbrow medium (Varnum and Gibbons, 2001)

[ii] Later this began to change, especially in Australian drawn adventure strips that offered scope for female character development and participation. Sister Janet Grant (Royal Flying Doctor Service) was a key character in John Dixon's 'Air Hawk and the Flying Doctor' strip (1959-1986). I am grateful to one of the peer reviewers for this example.

[iii] For a historical analysis, see Higonnet et.al. (1987).

[iv] For the impact internationally, see Collingham (2011); Okita 1992; Steege (2007)