More Than Mere Ornament: Re-evaluating Norman Pett’s *Jane*
Jane: The Popular Legend

• Remembered as a straightforward ‘cheesecake’ strip, with Jane thought of as an archetypal ‘dumb blonde’.

• Jane thought of as lacking control over herself and her situation- “a character whose clothes consistently fell off, in front of groups of men, for no apparent reason” (Levine 2015).

• The primary role of the series was to create an erotic spectacle for men.

• The primary role of the character was to be a male fantasy figure.

• Her fame is framed by, and understood in terms of, the war years of 1939-1945 and Jane’s popularity with allied servicemen.
“Jane represents a conservative ideal of womanhood. For all that she has a tendency to shed her clothes, Jane is not promiscuous: she remains, at all times, virtuous, chaste and loyal to her fiancé Georgie. A recurring theme is of Jane gamely fending off the amorous attentions of other suitors”.

James Chapman, *British Comics*
When we actually read *Jane*, however, we start to find that things are rather different.

One of the reasons that Bakhtin’s theories fit so well when looking at texts like this is their ability to accommodate the fluidity with which text, context and culture combine to create meaning.

“Texts continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation. . . . they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth.” (Bakhtin 1982).

*Jane* was creatively transformed many times during its decades-long *Mirror* career, and even during the war years, several distinct ‘eras’ can be identified.

*Jane*’s popular legend can be understood as a further creative transformation, albeit one that obfuscates and disguises the true nature of the series.
Jane versus Miss Lace:

Jane’s popular legend actually fits some other strips rather better than it does Jane itself.

First appearing in January 1943, and created exclusively for American service papers, Milton Caniff’s *Male Call* featured a sultry, dark-haired American woman who lived on the edge of an unnamed, and therefore universal, “everyman’s Army camp”

“Lace was clearly a sex object: as the principal character in the strip, she existed purely for the visual pleasure of the strip’s male readers.” (Harvey 2007).
During WW2, Jane was a continuity strip, whilst Male Call was a self-contained ‘gag-strip’. Narratively devoid of the potential to grow as a character, Lace did very little in the war other than interact with- and be defined by- the men around her.

Jane was a very different character. During the war, she was variously a military chauffeur and spy. She worked on the land, in a factory, in the NAAFI, the WAAFs, and the EFI. She led a diplomatic mission, was torpedoed, shot at, thrown from roofs and beaten. She was marooned on a desert island, parachuted into occupied Europe, engaged in military operations at home and abroad, and ended the war deep in the shattered ruins of Nazi Germany itself.
Unlike *Male Call*, and contrary to its popular legend, *Jane* was also a strip that was aimed at women as much as men.

When *Jane* first appeared in 1932, the *Daily Mirror* was “a paper with a definitely upper and middle class appeal... and only thirty percent of the readers were men” (PEP Press Report, quoted in Smith, 1975).

The London Press Exchange found in January 1947 that 80% of the *Mirror’s* female readers read *Jane*. This made it the most popular *Mirror* strip with women.

By 1952 the percentage had risen to 82%, with *Jane* again the most popular series with female *Mirror* readers (Cudlipp, 1953).
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Wartime Themes
Promotion of approved male/female conduct.
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Promotion of approved male/female conduct.

*Jane’s Love Story* (1938-9) established the principle of articulating nobility of character through male attitudes to war service and national defence.
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Promotion of approved male/female conduct.

“Supposing you are walking down the street and a lorry load of soldiers goes by. They wave at you, laugh and yell out ‘Hello, beautiful!’ What do you do? You do not turn a haughty head and show them a pair of indignantly raised shoulders. You laugh and wave back... As gaily as you know how”.

“You don’t have to make yourself look cheap or common... Every friendly gesture you make will be taken in the spirit it is offered. Our young men are a decent lot, you know.” (Daily Mirror 8 June 1940, p. 12)
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Promotion of approved male/female conduct.

Chapman inaccurately suggests that Jane shunned all men other than Georgie.

In fact, Jane’s actions promoted approved male conduct via a ‘reward system’. Men who were actively engaged in war-work, and who acted in a courteous and gentlemanly manner as they did so, would be rewarded with Jane’s attentions. Georgie fitted this bill, but so did many others:
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Promotion of approved male/female conduct.

Men who were war profiteers, secretly enemy agents, or generally lacking in gentlemanly conduct, would be rebuffed:

[Comic panels showing interactions between characters, illustrating the themes discussed.]
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Jane was neither defined by, nor subservient to, the men around her.

Contrary to vacuous fantasy figure of popular legend, Jane was confident, assertive and independent in her dealings with men (and life in general).
Beyond the Legend: Recurring Themes

Nudity used as an extension of the ‘reward system’

This aspect of the strips refute the popular notion that Jane was a doe-eyed innocent who was continually losing her clothing by accident- in fact, she sometimes chose to remove her clothing for men.
Within the diegesis, ‘unworthy men’ were not rewarded with Jane’s nudity- instead, they spied on her unnoticed. However, at the level of text/audience, Jane’s lack of clothing simultaneously facilitated the reward system by presenting Jane’s body for the benefit of the servicemen who were becoming an increasingly important part of Jane’s audience....
Differences between the wartime eras and Jane’s changing cultural role:

**Phoney War (1939-40)**
Continued the pre-war genre of lightweight comedy romance, albeit with a newly military setting.

**Defence of the Realm (1940-42)**
Became a rousing espionage-adventure, with Jane an MI5 agent. Reflecting the isolated and vulnerable position of the nation, all stories were set within Britain, with Jane battling ‘the enemy within’- fifth columnists and saboteurs. The overall feeling was of a vulnerable nation and an enemy close at hand.

**International Engagements (1942-44)**
Espionage adventure continued to be the main driver of narrative, but in keeping with Britain’s improving military situation the series became more international, with stories set in the Caribbean and Europe as well as the home front. Romance also re-established itself as a key secondary theme (notable story titles include *Jane’s Island Romance* and *Married by Proxy*).
The opening episode of the final International Engagements storyline, *Married by Proxy* (7/10/43), hinted for the first time at a major shift that had occurred in the series’ cultural positioning as the war progressed.
1942
1942 onwards
Jane also entered the wider iconography of the war through her adoption as unofficial mascot for a range of military vehicles (pictured is Avro Lancaster JB 138, aka ‘Just Jane’, who entered operational service in August 1943).
The shift to multiple methods of cultural dispersal created a parallel shift from monosemic to polysemic characterisation, allowing Jane to break free from authorial subordination to either Pett or the Daily Mirror.

Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony discusses how Dostoevsky’s characters are freed from subservience to an omnipotent creator, and are no longer simply “a vehicle for the author’s own ideological position” (Bakhtin 1984).

By the end of the war, Jane was exhibiting just such a polyphonic address, allowing the adoption of simultaneous and divergent cultural positions that were increasingly free from the authorial control of either Norman Pett or the Daily Mirror.
Final Wartime Era: Pin-Up Queen (1944-45)

Reflecting changes to *Jane* that had occurred within wider popular/war culture, the daily strip abruptly switched focus in 1944 in order to fall in line with Jane’s new fame as a glamour girl. Suddenly, within the diegesis Jane was famous as a ‘forces pin-up’, which creating humorous problems for her ongoing espionage duties.
By the second story of the Pin-Up Queen era (*Behind the Front*) she had abandoned espionage work, and her adventures became based around the stage (although thwarting Nazi plots was still the main theme).
By May 1945 all reference to Jane’s principal wartime role of espionage has been forgotten, and she even self-identified as a ‘pin-up girl’...
The daily strip had therefore ceased to be the primary driver of Jane’s cultural meaning, and had been forced to adapt to the wider cultural perceptions of Jane that had been formed through the character’s cross-media dispersal.

Ultimately, this new cultural perception of Jane as a ‘glamour girl’ would completely eclipse both the character’s origin and the nuance of her evolution up until that point, leading to a ‘typecasting’ from which Jane would never fully escape.
References:


