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MOTHERS ON AMERICAN TELEVISION:
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPRESENTATION AND ECONOMIC
OPPRESSION IN A NEOLIBERAL PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

by

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degree of
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Declaration

I, Kim Akass, declare that any material contained in this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted to any other University.

Abstract

This PhD by Publication focuses on the representation of motherhood on ‘quality’ American television and how that is intrinsically linked to women’s political and economic oppression in society. Although this study focuses on contemporary television series, it is grounded in a history of how motherhood has been theorized, its cultural positioning and how this informs the representations of maternity, motherhood and mothering in quality American television drama. Arguing that, in order to understand how patriarchy subjugates women, we need to expose the way patriarchal norms related to motherhood work as, while ‘we know that difference exists, ... we don’t understand it as constituted relationally’,¹ I propose that cultural attitudes expressed through televisual representations betray a deep-rooted misogyny that ties women to their reproductive potential thus impacting their positioning in society, their employment prospects and a lifetime’s wage prospects.

With so many meshes of ideological carriers at work, I conclude that it is urgent to bring them into consciousness and wield that knowledge politically.² My work brings what is invisible into discourse, what is unconscious into consciousness and teaches us much about the ingrained attitudes of a neoliberal western patriarchal society, how it views motherhood and the impact that has on women in society more broadly.

My original contribution to this field acknowledges ‘quality’ television’s soap opera roots, and, by analysing series from a feminist perspective, shows that much can be revealed about the patriarchal unconscious, how it views its mothers and how women are inevitably linked to their reproductive potential.

¹ Joan W. Scott, ‘Experience’, in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize The Poitical*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), p 25.

² Scott, ‘Experience’, p 26.

This PhD by Publication focuses on the representation of motherhood in a number of ‘quality’ American television series and how this is intrinsically linked to women’s political and economic oppression in society. Focusing on particular contemporary television series, principally those that offer a masculinised view of motherhood, this thesis is grounded in how motherhood has historically been theorized, how it has been culturally positioned and how this informs the representations of maternity, motherhood and mothering in some quality American television dramas. My research, which spans over twenty years, uncovers ‘the existence of repressive mechanisms’¹ and, through an analysis of the representation of mothers in these television series, brings into discourse how the positioning of mothers and motherhood within a neoliberal patriarchal society is visually evidenced. Agreeing with Joan W. Scott, I argue that in order to understand how patriarchy subjugates women, we need to expose the way patriarchal norms relating to motherhood work as, while ‘we know that difference exists, ... we don’t understand it as constituted relationally.’² My work here exposes the relationship between mothering and motherhood, how societal and economic oppression inevitably impacts televisual representation and goes some way towards uncovering the ‘historical processes’ of patriarchy’s positioning of motherhood.³ Mindful of the impact of Laura Mulvey who, in the mid-seventies, used psychoanalytic theory as a ‘political weapon’ to expose the workings of the ‘patriarchal unconscious,’⁴ I argue that an analysis of the representation of mothers in certain American television series can teach us much about the ingrained attitudes of a neoliberal western patriarchal society, how it views motherhood and the impact that has on women in society more broadly. Informing my argument is the proposition that cultural attitudes expressed through these televisual representations betray a deep-rooted misogyny that ties women to their reproductive potential thus impacting their positioning in society, their employment prospects and the subsequent impact on a lifetime’s income.

My claim is not that all quality American television series represent mothers in such a negative light, indeed there are many that celebrate motherhood but, in order to break into a cluttered televisual landscape, network, cable and streaming channels have often resorted to reductive representations of motherhood to attract an audience. As Amanda Lotz suggests, the post-network era has allowed for ‘the fragmentation of the television audience [which] allowed channels to target those eager for complex and sophisticated depictions of men’s contemporary struggles’⁵ with most of the series under consideration here being exemplary of this development. In addition, cable or streaming channels have been evermore inventive in their attempt to find an audience in the multi-channel TV marketplace which has lent itself to depictions of masculinity ‘that could generate cultural discussion’⁶. The series chosen as examples have generated a great deal of cultural discussion and this thesis interrogates examples of this, alongside the televisual representation of mothers and motherhood, as well as their social positioning in a patriarchal society.

Crucial to my reading of maternal representation on our television screens, and what it reveals about the inequality of women’s lives, is work that emerged from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the late 1960s, which focused on popular culture as central to society’s struggle over meaning. For scholars such as Stuart Hall, cultural hegemony was understood not necessarily as a direct stimulation of thought or action, but determined by the way: ‘The dominant class sets the limits – mental and structural – within which subordinate classes “live”’.⁷ Hegemony’s success, for Hall, is dependent upon how the subordinate class makes ‘sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them.’⁸ Marxist theories of class struggle, updated through the work of the Birmingham Centre and informed by Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, are particularly useful in unlocking how the small, but powerfully dominant, ruling class maintains power over the masses through a mesh of ideological carriers. In this schema, class is not the only signifier and it is impossible to privilege one

form of media over another or to contemplate one without considering its connection with other forms, like newspapers, magazines and films, as well as messages emanating from ‘schools, businesses, political organizations, religious groups, the military’ and how they and the mass media ‘all dovetail together ideologically.’⁹

My work represents a substantial original contribution to knowledge as a theorization of motherhood and its positioning within the ideological carriers – here television and its subsidiary media – of a neoliberal patriarchal society, taking its lead from early feminist interest in television, particularly feminist television scholars Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D’Acci and Lynn Spigel who proposed a call ‘to action growing out of the conviction that women’s oppression was very much related to mass media representations and that change was not only urgent, but possible.’¹⁰ The early cultural studies feminists looked at ‘how patriarchal ideology excluded, silenced and oppressed women’,¹¹ and their work highlighted the previously neglected and disparaged genre of soap opera as well as its construction of the female viewer by looking to the audience to interrogate the social contexts within which television was viewed not only as a ‘logical focus for studies on the relationship of viewers and televisual texts’¹² but also as a way of talking about how the viewing experience ‘gets determined by, but also determines, a gendered sense of self’.¹³

Working within the field of cultural studies, my thesis includes Marxist feminism as well as woman-centred psychoanalysis as a way of bringing into consciousness the repressions that patriarchy and the media are invested in keeping silent. Mindful of the fact that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic principles continue to hold sway, my work complicates and problematises many of the assumptions underpinning these early theories. In order to apply this methodology to quality American television I am indebted to feminist approaches to primetime soaps like *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-91) and *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-89). Particularly useful are Jane Feuer’s Marxist feminist analysis of primetime soaps and what they revealed about the ‘ideological complexity and contradictory politics of U.S.

television,¹⁴ and Christine Geraghty's work¹⁵ which argued that soap operas have become more masculinized by combining 'narratives of personal relationships with "plot lines which deal more regularly with the public sphere and emphasise the male grip on themes of business and work"'.¹⁶ The primetime soaps then form a bridge between the daytime soaps and the quality TV series under discussion, as they adopted 'serial narratives in traditional seasons, inflation of budgets and filmic production values' and were 'also predecessors of the current glut of must-see, "complex" (Mittel, 2015) or "quality television" (McCabe and Akass, 2007)'.¹⁷

My first foray into the subject of motherhood on American television in 2004 demonstrated the complexity of combining a political approach with an analysis of the representations of motherhood on television. I initially found it difficult to understand how the 'images of women' that characterised the work of the third wave of feminism could be combined with a more political second wave approach. This disjuncture can be seen in my 2004 work on *Sex and The City* and subsequent articles about motherhood in the media, both print and visual. It was only in the latter part of my research that I discovered the work of social philosopher and cultural theorist Nancy Fraser¹⁸ who, in 2015, argued that it is increasingly urgent for feminism to re-group and move forward as: 'No serious social movement, least of all feminism, can ignore the evisceration of democracy and the assault on social reproduction now being waged by finance capital'.¹⁹ Fraser argues that there are two distinct stages of feminism. The first, which encompassed both the first and second waves and fought for women's equality and made marginal progress towards political and economic parity for women and the second which, once women realised that they could do nothing other than "engender" the socialist imaginary', increasingly turned to a study of the representation of women in popular culture as a way of 'recognizing difference'.²⁰ For Fraser, the result has been a feminism defined by a lack of political will with an attention to identity politics that goes no further than describing women's place within a patriarchal

neoliberal world. By focusing on the way women are represented, Fraser argues that the feminist battle has become one with distorted images rather than with the male dominated industries that produced them and proposed that, ‘a feminist theory worth its salt must revive the ‘economic’ concerns of Act One – without, however, neglecting the ‘cultural’ insights of Act Two.’²¹ Since 2015 I have increasingly adopted this approach and, in my final book, have successfully fused my early methodologies into a theory that politically utilizes what I have learned from the representation of motherhood on certain quality American television series and how that relates to the way mothers are positioned in culture. My theorisation of motherhood takes into account what these televisual mothers reveal about the way motherhood is judged within a neoliberal patriarchal society.

My first article about motherhood was prompted by the revolutionary potential of Miranda Hobbes’ pregnancy and childbirth in HBO’s *Sex and The City* (1998-2004). This, my first foray into a decades long investigation of the link between televisual representation and women’s political positioning, was written before I had formulated a theory of how to write about mothers on television. Published in the journal *Se&F Online*²² in 2004, the article utilized Douglas, Susan J. and, Meredith W Michael’s book, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, for insight into American society and some of the debates that were raging in the print media at that time. With very little theoretical underpinning, and a very short word limit, I argued that the point is not whether *Sex and the City* is reality or fantasy, feminist or not, but that the series’ depiction of motherhood proffers an ambivalent version of motherhood and one in direct opposition to the stereotypes that existed in the media at that time. It should be noted that this was written in the midst of the American media’s mommy wars – a subject that I returned to in 2012.

During this time I was invited to edit a book series by I.B. Tauris. The ‘Reading Contemporary Television’ series (with Janet McCabe) saw us building a career on these academic books and offered me the opportunity to develop my thesis. *Reading Six Feet*

Under: TV to Die For was published in 2005 and my contribution to this volume, 'Mother Knows Best: Ruth and representations of mothering in *Six Feet Under*', was included, along with a joint introduction to the book.²³ In this article I began to look to psychoanalysis, particularly how the mother is reduced to the 'nurturing, breastfeeding pre-Oedipal mother who has meaning only in relation to her children'.²⁴ Arguing that the narrative positioning of Ruth complicates this and 'reveals an aspect of mothering that is routinely repressed and silenced'²⁵ within patriarchy, this series, I argued, offers us the opportunity to observe a grieving woman beset by the challenge of mothering her adult children. What happens to mothers at the heart of a family that, on the surface at least, no longer need her? Here I looked to the work of feminist theorists Melanie Klein, Karen Horney, Helene Cixous, Nancy Chodorow, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, to find a theory that would explain why motherhood is so 'repressed and silenced, invisible to society and reduced to a metaphor'.²⁶ The work of Michelle Boulous Walker was particularly useful to this chapter as she formulates an approach to motherhood beyond the pre-Oedipal nurturing mother and argues that, within a patriarchal society, a mother's 'sexuality simply does not exist beyond her reproductive potential'.²⁷ I concluded this chapter with E. Ann Kaplan's suggestion that: 'the Mother offers a possible way to break through patriarchal discourses since she has not been totally appropriated by dominant culture'²⁸ my work from this point focused on how to break through those discourses to understand what popular culture was saying about mothers and why.

The next chapter I wrote was included in *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*, again with a co-written introduction.²⁹ The women of Wisteria Lane lent themselves to analysis through a re-reading of Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, and this chapter, 'Still desperate after all these years: The post-feminist mystique and maternal dilemmas', allowed me to more fully investigate the way critics and journalists responded to a network series. This was an aspect of mothering on television that had

mostly been overlooked and, combined with the cultural studies approach that I was taking, offered a chance to investigate how the ‘meshes of ideological carriers’³⁰ worked together. Previous work on maternity on television³¹ had analysed the representation of mothers on UK television screens but no-one had yet considered it alongside the extra-textual commentary as a way of understanding how the positioning of mothers on television was reinforced by the critical commentators. My chapter directly addressed how working motherhood was discussed in the press as well as its representation in *Desperate Housewives*. What was revealed through this study was alarming. Despite the gender of the critical commentators, the over-riding consensus was that women were retreating into the home much like mothers of the 1950s. I wondered whether this was really true or an example of postfeminism’s ‘retreatism’ which, according to Diane Negra, is a master narrative that ‘operates as a powerful device for shepherding women out of the public sphere.’³²

This chapter is key to the development of my scholarship on motherhood. While Betty Friedan’s work was useful, it clearly needed to be updated and, looking behind the headlines, I realized that there was a much more sinister agenda here: one that revealed how American print journalism overwhelmingly supported the domestication of motherhood. More books were coming out of the US dealing with the issue of working mothers, for example, Joan Williams and Miriam Peskowitz’s work that discussed how working motherhood was made impossible in America as, without the right to maternity leave, mothers were (and still are) forced out of the workplace. America is notorious for its outdated workplace practices, a fact that had been hinted at by Miranda Hobbes in *Sex and the City* who was forced to reduce her working week to ‘50 hours max’ if she was to survive motherhood (‘Critical Condition’, 5:6). For both Williams and Peskowitz, once women become mothers, they are effectively removed from the workplace, replacing the ‘glass ceiling’ with the ‘maternal wall’ and find themselves in ‘mommy track jobs’ that result in a wage gap of 60 cents for every dollar that a man earns and a wage gap that is 10-15 percent

larger for mothers than childless women.³³ That this wage gap endures in a society that is predicated on equality and the American Dream is extraordinary and an insidious method of ensuring that mothers continue to be discriminated against in a workplace that ‘continues to be structured in ways that perpetuate the economic vulnerability of caregivers’ with a preference for ‘the ideal worker’ who ‘works at least forty hours a week year round’.³⁴ At this point the link between the way mothers are represented on television and how viewers form their opinions became explicit. It should not be surprising that the meshes of ideological carriers – network television and journalism – are united in their support for the patriarchal status quo with each reinforcing the others’ message. This would prove invaluable as I worked towards developing a feminist theory that took all of this into account, arguing that the idea of ‘opting-out’ of the workplace and the rhetoric of choice reported in the press, was just part of a neoliberal agenda that reduced all mothering possibilities to personal ‘choice’ rather than addressing workplace inequalities that continue to dog working mothers

The next chapter, for *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*,³⁵ took my research into another direction by reading one short scene – Al Swearengen’s fellatio by an unnamed prostitute – into the realm of feminist psychoanalysis. This chapter utilized the work of Karen Horney, a post-Freudian feminist, who refuted Freud’s formulation of the Oedipus Complex and theorized that one of the main causes of psychological problems in the male is due to his dread of woman ‘as a sexual being’.³⁶ Applying her theories to the character of Al Swearengen enabled me to develop an alternative way of understanding the series’ misogyny and the unconscious motivation that fuels the narrative. The breakthrough here was the knowledge that *Deadwood* was famously based on the real mining town of Deadwood and yet David Milch had altered Swearengen’s backstory which, in turn, exposed an unconscious bias on behalf of the male writers of this series. While it is impossible to know whether Swerengen did have a happy family life, it is clear that he did not suffer the abandonment

issues of the fictional Swearengen which led me to wonder why his origin story in *Deadwood* (revealed while receiving fellatio) was so clearly blamed on his mother.

This chapter was key in the development of my thesis as it offered an opportunity to go beyond the screen and into the motivations of television executives and creators. By making the fictional Al Swearengen a more sympathetic character, fuelled by his abandonment by a terrible mother, it is clear that he was given a rationale for his misogynistic treatment of the women working for him. Yet, the question remained, why do creators of TV series, in this case David Milch, feel the need to take revenge on mothers at all? Karen Horney's suggestion that 'men have never tired of fashioning expressions for the violent force by which man feels himself drawn to the woman, and side by side with his longing, the dread that through her he might die and be undone.' She adds: 'May this not be one of the principle roots of the whole masculine impulse to creative work – the never-ending conflict between the man's longing for the woman and his dread of her?'³⁷ Through this, Horney offered a way of theorizing the maternal on television, one that takes into account unconscious impulses, the devaluation of pregnancy and childbirth, as outlined by Horney, and the 'overemphasizing of male genitality'.³⁸

'The Gendered Politics of a Global Recession: a news media analysis' was published in the online journal, *Studies in the Maternal*³⁹ and saw my research turning to the way motherhood was discussed in print journalism during a global recession. At this time it was mothers that bore the brunt of the recession and yet US newspapers reported that men were losing their jobs disproportionately with American journalists reporting the recession as a 'he-cession' with men's wage-earning status threatened; accusations of them becoming 'an endangered species';⁴⁰ and news reports focusing on the impact of this which, they claimed, was leading to divorce and the breakdown of the family. What was particularly revealing was the difference between reporting in Britain and America, with the UK's recession purported to be causing women's unemployment as opposed to the reported experience in the US. My

research here utilized Susan Faludi's *The Backlash Against Feminism: The Undeclared War Against Women*⁴¹ in an effort to see whether American mothers were suffering from the same kind of treatment as had been meted out in the US press in the 1980s. Again, it was useful to compare past and present but, this time, it was not the historical veracity of a character but how the news reporting of two completely different decades was strikingly similar.

My research here focused mainly on the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic* and the *Huffington Post* with comparisons being drawn between those and the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*. This focus allowed me to explore the tense and contradictory relationship within these publications and the empirical sources that they used in order to 'spin' stories into backlash narratives that were then used to explain deepening inequalities and discrimination experienced by women. The results showed that, in the US, the recession was used to emphasize a perceived crisis in masculinity, whereas in the UK, the 'spin' was that women were returning to a 'natural' state of domesticity out of choice. Taking this deep dive into journalism and some of the facts and figures behind the stories was vital to my research as much of my work was increasingly focusing on the meta-commentary around quality American television series. This contextual research was essential to identify how the interconnection between mothering in society and newspaper reporting could be understood, especially as it was clear that most newspapers favoured the ideal of the nuclear family whether based in truth or not. What emerged was that mothers were not exercising 'choice' as much as sacrificing their wages (which, after all remain significantly less than men's) rather than paying for childcare (which, after all is prohibitively expensive). The fact that this was all reported in the midst of a recession meant that newspapers could spin the stories to suggest that women should retreat into the home leaving jobs for male workers.

Although my research up to this point had focused on the American print media and quality American television, the emergence of UK newspaper stories echoing those of the US drew my attention to the notion of trend reporting between countries. 'Motherhood and

the media under the Microscope: 'The backlash against feminism and the Mommy Wars' was published in Canadian online journal *Imaginations*.⁴² In this article I worked through a history of how notions of ideal motherhood were formed, how they have become embedded into a neoliberal society and how that positioning is reported in the press. While there are existing histories of motherhood and maternity, this article contextualizes these into a reading of journalistic reportage. Again, this was vital to my research on motherhood on American quality television as, like the previous article, it helped me to develop a much deeper understanding of trends in journalism. In addition, it allowed me to focus on the phenomenon known as 'the mommy wars' which had been instigated in the American press, echoed backlash reporting of the 1980s and fell under the auspices of postfeminist 'retreatism'. So far, I had discovered that the American and British press spun stories in different ways while sharing the same agenda and this article, by following the trajectory of the mommy wars, showed how the publication of the 2003 *New York Times* article, 'The Opt out Revolution',⁴³ instigated a flurry of US newspaper reports claiming that mothers were gladly returning into the home. Even though Belkin's article concluded that the real problem underlying women's 'choices' was not a preference for stay-at-home mothering but the lack of maternity leave and affordable childcare, this was glossed over in subsequent articles.

This research was particularly effective in demonstrating how trend reporting works internationally as, some seven years later in 2010, the British press started printing stories that were strikingly similar to the American ones. The *Observer*'s Lucy Cavendish went so far as to say: 'Working mothers can't stand stay-at-home mothers; older ones think their younger versions are too overindulgent. Those who choose not to have children are militant about those who end up having four or more.'⁴⁴ The article continues to repeat all of the claims from the American mommy wars, and is exacerbated by a slew of reports claiming that working mothers cause all kinds of problems for their children: low IQ and obesity being only two of them. The work of Miriam Peskowitz is particularly apposite here as she

argues that the mommy wars turned motherhood into an identity issue with a focus on postfeminist ‘choice’ that trivializes the real issues at stake and ‘far from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media’s Mommy Wars ... transforms parenting into a style war’.⁴⁵ I was convinced that my research could offer an alternative and innovative perspective on the way the media spins stories about motherhood, which pit woman against woman to suit a patriarchal agenda, rather than providing family friendly policies to support working mothers.

Armed with extensive knowledge about the way motherhood is subject to the vicissitudes of the print media’s agenda, I again turned to the representation of motherhood on quality American television to develop a theory that would politicize identity politics in keeping with Nancy Fraser’s 2015 call to arms. By this time US television was central to the streaming market which enabled me to investigate how the nuances in adaptations of source stories to an American market would reveal differing cultural attitudes towards mothering. ‘The show that refused to die: the rise and fall of AMC’s *The Killing*’ was published in the journal *Continuum* in 2015.⁴⁶ This was an ambitious article that drew together the various strands of my research up to this point by focusing on AMC’s incursion into the streaming landscape and how it used its drama series (as had HBO before it) to attract an upscale, affluent audience. Adapted from the original series, *Forbrydelsen* (DR, 2011-14), *The Killing* demonstrated the difficulties of adapting a Danish product to an American audience. Complicating this tale is the way that the series was cancelled by AMC, then Fox, before finally airing its last series on Netflix.

Despite the fact that *Forbrydelsen* had enjoyed international success, *The Killing* was not so lucky. My article argues that an analysis of the way motherhood is portrayed in both of these series reveals much about cultural attitudes towards mothers and mothering. In *Forbrydelsen*, Sarah Lund’s parenting style was always haphazard, regularly putting the needs of the case she was working above her teenage son which, in the Danish version, was never

judged. Of course, and as I argued, Denmark has one of the most generous parental leave systems in the EU with one year of parental leave (to be taken by either partner) and affordable childcare from 26 weeks to 6 years as the country recognizes that this is vital to women's full-time participation in the labour market. *Forbrydelsen's* adaptation to the American market saw Sarah Linden's 'bad' mothering continually judged by other characters and explained by her abandonment by her mother and growing up in foster homes – a backstory in *The Killing* absent from the original. As AMC's series progressed, it became apparent that it was not only Sarah Linden that was being positioned as a bad mother with many of the mothers in the narrative being punished for failing to live up to a 'natural' or 'ideal' maternal role. The final season on Netflix focused squarely on the results of 'bad' mothering culminating with the penultimate episode ('Truth Asunder', 4:5) containing a hazing ceremony where young cadets are forced to strip and masturbate over a photo of their mother and encouraged to 'come over the face of the woman who loved you enough to send you away'. The fact that critical commentators, much like those writing about *Deadwood*, did not mention this shocking scene in their reviews of the series is evidence of how deeply mired in the patriarchal agenda our media is; it was from here that I began work on a book that would expose the patriarchal unconscious by theorizing and politicizing this knowledge.

In order to truly make an original contribution to theory, in keeping with the agenda of feminist cultural studies and in order to counter the increased masculinization of television, my research has recently looked back to quality television's soap opera roots. Before Nancy Fraser's contribution to feminist theory, I had mainly looked at quality American television as an emerging canon and, through my work on the Reading Contemporary Television series, used feminist theory to focus on the 'images of women' contained in these series. What is different about my latest research on motherhood and quality American television is that, by looking at a much wider context – the 'meshes of

ideological carriers²⁴⁷ and how they ‘all dovetail together ideologically.’²⁴⁸ – my work has become more politically coherent. This moves beyond looking at the ‘distorted images’ of women in these series to discover why motherhood is represented the way it is and how that relates to women’s economic and political oppression in society. My overriding conviction, after looking to feminist psychoanalysis, is that mothers are demonised not only because of our own experiences of being mothered but also because of societal aversion to them working. What we can learn from a consideration of how televisual narratives, cultural attitudes and the print media ‘dovetail together ideologically’, reveals much about the patriarchal unconscious and why mothers continue to be so demonised.

While quality American TV series are often described as ‘high end’, ‘filmic’ or ‘complex TV’, at the heart of these series is their debt to the soap opera, one of television and radio’s oldest genres. Particularly useful is Tania Modleski’s work on the centrality of the mother to the genre; drawing on Laura Mulvey’s theories on male spectatorship in cinema,⁴⁹ Modleski suggests that even the illusion of power offered to the film spectator is not available to soap opera viewers. Unable to assume a singular active identification with the ‘main male protagonist’ of film, soaps ‘continually insist on the insignificance of the individual life’ and ‘present us with numerous limited egos’ that deny the spectator even the illusion of power imagined by the film spectator.⁵⁰ While ‘quality’ American television drama obviously caters to a different audience than the soaps under discussion, Modleski’s formulation of the spectator of soaps as ‘... a sort of ideal mother’⁵¹ is useful. The ensemble casting that is so characteristic of these series offers the spectator multiple identification points and also gives us insight into the motivations of each of the characters. Like the soap spectator, the quality TV viewer is forced to tolerate characters’ misdemeanours and has to extend their ‘sympathy to both the sinner and victim.’⁵² Being privy to such intimate knowledge of the characters’ lives allows us, however powerless, to understand the motivations behind their actions as they confront obstacles and work their

way towards, often unpredictable, outcomes. Like both the soap opera and primetime soap before it, the narrative of quality television is driven by an open-endedness that demands disruptions, inevitable suffering and consolidates the strength of family by portraying one, 'in constant turmoil and appealing to the spectator to be understanding and tolerant of the many evils which go on within that family.'⁵³

If the spectator as 'good' mother's 'primary function is to be sympathetic, to tolerate the foibles and errors of others' and to be forever forgiving, then what about the 'bad' mother? Modleski argues that the repressed anger inevitably felt by the spectator doomed to 'sit helplessly by as her children's lives disintegrate'⁵⁴ does have an outlet. Thrust centre stage as the creator of 'surplus suffering' in the narrative is the 'bad' mother who constantly tries to control her children's lives and becomes the person that we are allowed to hate 'unreservedly: the villainess, the negative image of the spectator's ideal self.'⁵⁵ Even while we are not allowed to condemn any of the characters within the narratives 'until all the evidence is in', the disruption provoked by the villainess evokes memories of the 'bad' mother who 'tries to interfere with her children's lives' and provides the spectator with an outlet for their anger.⁵⁶ Modleski warns us that dismissing this character is a big mistake: 'The extreme delight viewers apparently take in despising the villainess testifies to the enormous amount of energy involved in the spectator's repression and to her (albeit unconscious) resentment at being constituted as an egoless receptacle for the suffering of others.'⁵⁷ Could this be a clue as to why mothers, particularly older mothers, are so often vilified in quality American television?

Modleski's work is a useful starting point in a study of possible viewing positions of the audience but, as the 'ideal mother', the viewer is offered limited pleasure and it does not explain the popularity of soap operas. Ellen Seiter and Gabriele Kreutzner's work is helpful here as they argue that Modleski's theories can be challenged by the 'possibility for *conscious* resistance to the soap opera text' and should allow for viewers positioned outside of the

‘perfectly “successful” gender socialization entirely in keeping with a middle-class (and white) feminine ideal.’⁵⁸ When class, race and gender are taken into account, ethnographic research reveals that the viewership of soaps tells a very different story. Seiter and Kreutzner argue that: ‘Strongly held preferences for individual characters and dislikes for others prevented the ideal mother position as Modleski describes it from ever being fully taken up.’⁵⁹ Moreover, when it comes to the villainess, the women interviewed expressed a ‘fond admiration’ for her over the passive femininity of the ‘ideal’ mother and:

All of the women commented on their preference of strong villainesses; the younger respondents expressed their pleasure in and admiration for the powerful female characters who were also discussed in terms of transgressing the boundaries of a traditional pattern of resistance for women within patriarchy.⁶⁰

If the villainess is considered a role model to women in the audience why then do the mothers in quality American television series continue to get such short shrift? A possible answer is that the idea of women celebrating the power of the villainess and the threatened destruction of ‘the ideological nucleus of the text – the sacredness of the family’,⁶¹ is just too disruptive – especially for a culture that depends upon the willingness of women to bear children and raise the next generation. By analysing the representation of motherhood on our television screens with this in mind we are offered a privileged insight into the role the media plays in maintaining ‘the dominance of those ruling over [us].’⁶² Understanding how visual media, news journalism and society are inextricably intertwined is vital if we are to understand why women continue to be oppressed.

In order to test this theoretical positioning of the spectator of quality American television series, as well as how it relates to the way mothers are represented in them, I went back to one of HBO’s breakout shows, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) to see if an analysis of Tony Soprano’s (played by James Gandolfini) mother, Livia (Nancy Marchand) would reveal how viewers are inculcated into a hatred of the terrible mother and how the extra-textual

commentary is implicated in this positioning. *The Sopranos* has come to define HBO's move into the global television landscape and has become the series that most fully articulates HBO's brand equity on the global stage. Tony Soprano's relationship with his mother was central, a fact not lost on commentators who described the mother/son relationship as: 'the dark heart of *The Sopranos*. ... Livia Soprano is the most terrifying character on a show populated with ruthless, cold-blooded killers – a manipulative monster in the guise of a doddering old lady.'⁶³ That Livia Soprano was based on David Chase's own mother was endlessly remarked upon at the time and, while the death of Nancy Marchand cut short her role, Livia's spirit lived on through Tony's therapy sessions with Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), a relationship that structured the entire *Sopranos* narrative.

An interrogation of Freudian theory was illuminating here, particularly sociologist, Miriam M. Johnson's work on misogyny and motherhood, where she details how motherhood has been used by psychoanalysts to 'explain why men are motivated to denigrate and dominate women',⁶⁴ Johnson argues that: 'The devaluation of women (by both men and women) is not an inevitable reaction formation to women's prominence in early child care. It is a choice, helped along by the male dominance institutionalized in political and economic structures and supported in male peer groups.'⁶⁵ Understanding the positioning of motherhood within *The Sopranos* is particularly powerful when read alongside this statement as the impact of the gendering of public/private spaces is made clear: while Livia is held responsible for all of Tony's problems, his father remains blameless. Particularly apposite is the assertion by David Chase that his mother, while difficult, was also funny – something that Livia Soprano is never allowed to be – as he remarked 'for everyone who writes about *The Sopranos*, ... Tony Soprano's mother is [his] mother, [and] that there is a strong degree of identification.'⁶⁶ That the identification with Tony Soprano's experience of his mother is amplified by the reviews and academic writing about the series is important here; Livia Soprano is the recipient of the rage of viewers and commentators alike and, as the

‘bad mother’ is a prime example of how disconcerting the power of the villainess can be. It is worth looking back to Modleski’s work here, particularly her assertion that the reason viewers despise the villainess is because she ‘testifies to the enormous amount of energy involved in the spectator’s repression and to her (albeit unconscious) resentment at being constituted as an egoless receptacle for the suffering of others.’⁶⁷ The hatred of Livia Soprano both within the narrative and beyond is testament to how powerful identification is with the ‘bad’ mother is and how, as viewers and commentators, we are implicated in this process.

Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-19) was the subject of my next chapter. Rescuing HBO from a slump in subscribers and, responding to accusations of being ‘HB-Over’⁶⁸, the cable channel commissioned George R.R. Martin’s book series *A Game of Ice and Fire* hoping that this adaptation, with five books in the series, would save their ailing fortunes. There has been much written about *Game of Thrones*, particularly the treatment of women within both the book and television series. Again my interest was in the way motherhood was represented and particularly the way it was adapted to television. While I had spent some time looking at the background to the source novels, their historical veracity (a claim made by Martin) and whether mothering in the series was an accurate reflection of medieval mothering, this was a fruitless task. After all, the series is fiction. Far more profitable was a comparison between the novels and the television adaptation as, for Marta Eidsvåg, while motherhood ‘is an integral theme in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*’ the HBO adaptation fails its mothers, as they are ‘weaker, more traditionally motherly, less provocative and often less central to the narrative than the mother figure in Martin’s books.’⁶⁹ For Eidsvåg the result is ‘a mainstreaming of the mothers’ where their ‘motherhood ends up weakening rather than strengthening them.’⁷⁰ Eidsvåg’s work was crucial to my understanding of the representation of motherhood in *Game of Thrones* as this adaptation revealed an ‘idealisation’ of motherhood absent from the book. When read alongside the

insertion of scenes of nudity, rape and torture by HBO it was apparent that the lack of censorship enjoyed by the cable channel did not extend to a celebration of the mother's power which, I argued, reveals an antipathy to mothers on the part of the mainstream media as an ideological carrier.

Luce Irigaray's theorizations of motherhood was crucial to my thesis as, 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which is Not One*, lays out a theory of the way women are traded in a capitalist patriarchal society.⁷¹ Arguing that throughout history women have been defined by their potential as 'mother', Irigaray posits the theory that due to the phallogentric nature of a system in which women struggle to achieve subjectivity, our culture is 'based upon the exchange of women'.⁷² Key to my theoretical development was the assertion that:

The production of women, signs, and commodities are men's business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he 'pays' the father or the brother, not the mother ...) and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and 'products' are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone.⁷³

My conclusion, that women are only defined by their value to patriarchy, which is ultimately tied to their reproductive potential, can equally be applied to the mothers in the series as well as the way the process of adaptation to television diminished their power.

The next adaptation I turned to was Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which, like many series before it, was used by Hulu to break into the cluttered and competitive streaming market. In this chapter I argue that the series takes the narrative into even darker and more violent territory and, with only one source novel to adapt, reveals much about contemporary gender politics as well as those of the fictional world of Gilead. This chapter turned to the work of feminist theorist, Dorothy Dinnerstein, who argues that 'all of us are psychologically and socially disadvantaged by being brought up under asymmetrical

parenting roles'.⁷⁴ For Dinnerstein, it is not just that immutably assigned gender roles lead to women's oppression but that the omnipresence of the mother and her subsequent power over children of both genders causes women to always be 'regarded as dangerous and debased' which will continue 'as long as it is she, and she alone, who first introduces us as infants to the mixed blessing of being human'.⁷⁵

As I argue in Chapter 11 of the book⁷⁶ Dinnerstein's work has much in common with that of Adrienne Rich and Karen Horney and is a 'rigorous analysis of the conditions of motherhood as mutable and in dire need of improvement'.⁷⁷ Where Dinnerstein's work is more far-reaching and apposite to *The Handmaid's Tale* is in her warning that, as the world-building project is invariably male and patriarchal, it leads to an overvaluation of masculine qualities, much like the overvaluation of male genitality theorised by Karen Horney. But, in addition, Dinnerstein includes men's 'propensity toward brute "mastery" of external circumstances' and 'apocalyptically exploitative relationship to nature through rampant fetishization of technological enterprise'.⁷⁸ *The Handmaid's Tale* is set in a world where, because of environmental pollution and the transmission of sexual diseases, women are only valued for their fertility and ability to reproduce, which is not too far away from contemporary newspaper reports that warn: 'reproductive health in men and women' has declined 'dramatically at least over the past 40 years, [with] a major part of that decline ... linked to everyday exposure to chemicals in the environment that can affect our hormone system'.⁷⁹

At this point, I realised that the overriding similarities between the feminist psychoanalysts' work that I had used thus far all began to coalesce into a central theory. That, by ignoring the positioning of mothers in a neoliberal patriarchal society, we are in danger of entering a new 'Matrix of History' where 'wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men'.⁸⁰ It may be Gilead that is the centre of this narrative but the parallels that can be drawn

between *The Handmaid's Tale* and conditions that American women currently find themselves in are striking. Faced with a world where women are passed from household to household in order to reproduce is not too far-fetched and, even though the first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* had already been scripted and had begun filming at the time of the Presidential election in 2016, it is hard not to view it as an 'allegorical response to the dystopian moment that Americans' had stumbled into: 'After all, the country had just elected a president who, among other things, had bragged of his own acts of sexual assault and was doing his best to eliminate reproductive rights for women, both nationally and internationally.'⁸¹ It is also noteworthy that *The Handmaid's Tale* has become central to the way America talks about motherhood and reproduction in the twenty first century, particularly since the overturning of *Roe vs Wade* on 24 June 2022. Margaret Atwood's book was prescient on its first publication in 1985, twelve years after the US Supreme Court ruled that women should have the liberty to choose abortion, but the television series has since become symbolic of the erosion of women's reproductive rights in twenty first century America.⁸² Since rumours that the Supreme Court was about to overturn *Roe vs Wade*, memes began circulating featuring the scarlet clad handmaids as symbols of the loss of women's reproductive freedom. This fusion of politics, reproductive rights, popular culture and television is exemplary of how vital it is to understand the power of representation and its place within the meshes of ideological carriers that work alongside each other.

The penultimate series under discussion moves away from the psychoanalysis that has characterised the previous chapters and into the world of women working behind the scenes of television series. While my original contribution has been to highlight how these ideological carriers work together, I had not yet investigated the impact of how women behind-the-scenes (aside from Veena Sud – *The Killing* and Reed Morano and Ane Crabtree – *The Handmaid's Tale*) impacted on the representation of mothers on American quality television. At this stage in my research I had rather hoped that the level of unconscious

antagonism towards our mothers on American television would be alleviated by HBO's *Big Little Lies* (2017-), which was adapted from a novel by Liane Moriarty and produced by Nicole Kidman's and Reese Witherspoon's companies – Blossom Films and Hello Sunshine respectively. I expected to find that this series would offer a more nuanced and sympathetic interpretation of motherhood and that it would disprove the theory that women themselves 'suffer from the overbearing power of the mother' which leads them to distrust 'the mother in themselves'.⁸³ The introduction of director, Andrea Arnold, in season two also offered an alternative vision, one that should support claims that we truly are in an era of 'feminist TV'.⁸⁴

I initially looked to women's employment in the television industry. Even though I knew these figures did not take into account the employment of mothers or a racial profile, I thought that an overview of the number of women employed in the industry would be revealing. The gendered inequality behind the scenes is shocking. Martha Lauzen's 'Boxed-In' Report has tracked the employment of women in key behind-the-scenes roles for the past twenty years and the figures make for depressing reading. Despite the fact that streaming sites had initially positively impacted women's employment, there were still a high percentage of programmes employing no women at all. Even more disheartening is the fact that the initial spike in women's employment has begun to fall, with Lauzen's report telling us that there were still only thirty three percent of women in key roles on broadcast networks in 2021-22, a two percent decline since 2019-20. Moving beyond an analysis of 'images of women' and taking into account the lack of employment for women behind-the-scenes, my research shows that, far from being at a 'golden age of television for women',⁸⁵ the 'current glut of must-see, "complex" (Mittel, 2015) or "quality television" (McCabe and Akass, 2007) ... continue – perhaps to the extreme – the masculinisation of television'⁸⁶

The opening season of *Big Little Lies* immediately raised issues that harked back to America's mommy wars that had been written about so extensively with Reese

Witherspoon's character drawing battle lines between stay-at-home and working mothers. There were also criticisms about its racial casting and, by season two, more black actors were employed to alleviate the complaints. As I argued in the chapter, the big mistake was to make an adjustment to the story – instead of including an abusive father as motivation for Bonnie (Zoe Kravitz) to push Perry (Alexander Skarsgård) to his death at the end of season one – the abuser was her mother, a Black woman that embodied so many of the racial tropes that have inhabited our television screens from its earliest days. The addition of Perry's mother – Mary Louise Wright (Meryl Streep) – on a mission to find out what had happened to her son feeds into all the 'terrible mother' stereotypes that I have discussed so far. Even the working mother, Renata Klein (Laura Dern) is narratively punished as she turns into a bitter and angry woman, desperate to avoid poverty and angrily attacking anyone who gets in her way.

What is most surprising about this season is that Andrea Arnold, who is famous for her direction of independent films, had no control over the final edit of the series. As I argued in the chapter, there is a choppy, not-so-feminist, take on the second season, complete with the puzzling insertion of a parade of men that Celeste is supposed to have slept with (a motivation for Mary Louise to have Celeste declared an unfit mother) which may partly be explained by season one director, Jean-Marc Vallée, taking over the final edit. This supposition is partly borne out by HBO's president of programming, Casey Bloys, saying that, even though the series was indebted to Andrea Arnold, 'as anyone who works in TV knows, a director does not have final creative control'.⁸⁷ This may well be so, but it is hard to see how women can exercise any creative control with male executives and creators having the final say over their product. It seems that, even with three powerful women at the helm, the final vision we see onscreen supports a patriarchal agenda and this despite publicity around the second season promoting the idea that Witherspoon and Kidman had wanted an Andrea Arnold version of the show. For me this is evidence of the sad truth that,

even with a female auteur at the helm and two female producers, television series will never be a site of independent production for women, as it is subject to the same discursive context as all other series. With this in mind we should be wary of ‘amplified connotations of freedom and authorial control’⁸⁸ just because women are behind the scenes.

To conclude this analysis of motherhood on quality American television, I have argued that, as part of a mesh of ideological carriers, all media work together to demonise women who resist the idealised notion of mother in the home and has taken into account a variety of approaches to mothering in a neoliberal society. Before analysing how the various media are enmeshed in patriarchal ideology and how psychoanalysis could be used to understand the motivations behind this, I published the short online article about Miranda Hobbes’ pregnancy. I was impelled to re-visit *Sex and the City* and to re-work my analysis to understand why I had regarded Miranda’s pregnancy narrative as so revolutionary and what it could tell us about the positioning of motherhood in the twenty-first century. The last chapter for inclusion in my doctoral thesis completes the journey started twenty years ago. While I again utilized *The Mommy Myth*, I also gave the series a cultural context and brought the extra-textual commentaries to the fore. I include this chapter to demonstrate that, even while I have not revised my thinking on this series, I now understand why I considered Miranda’s journey revolutionary. By animating Adrienne Rich’s work on mothering as opposed to the patriarchal institution of motherhood, Miranda showed how difficult pregnancy, childbirth and life as a single working mother in America can be. Unfortunately this has not changed in the intervening years.

In conclusion, my work over the past twenty years, collected in this thesis, demonstrates a significant contribution to knowledge, and argues that motherhood on a selection of quality American television shows a cultural antipathy towards maternity and motherhood born out of women’s political and economic oppression. My thesis argues that viewers are inculcated into a demonisation of motherhood, reinforced through extra-textual

commentary. As evidenced by the recent overturning of *Roe vs Wade*, the neoliberal patriarchal agenda is contingent on women and reproduction and, in order to give this context, I have historicised motherhood as well as the way the print media has written about it. In order to understand the agendas behind reporting, I researched the way journalism writes about mothers, which revealed an overtly patriarchal agenda. So that I could understand this, I then looked to psychoanalysis to understand patriarchy's 'dread of woman' and, working through many woman-centered approaches to this, problematised Freudian and Lacanian theory. I applied this thinking to the television industry, offering a history of the development of the cable and streaming landscape and how the mothers in television series are textually maltreated in an effort to gain the biggest audience while supporting a patriarchal agenda. I have adapted feminist approaches to the soap opera in order to theorise a viewing position for the quality American television audience. I also looked behind-the-scenes, investigating the (principally) male creators and their impulse to seek revenge on mothers, particularly the older mother. I finally turned to a study of a female-produced and directed series arguing that, even with women behind the scenes, male executives are still in control of representation. Even while we can hope for a future for feminist television, we are not there yet.

This thesis argues that, with so many meshes of ideological carriers at work, it is urgent to bring them into consciousness and, by wielding that knowledge politically, put an end to the oppression of mothers in a neoliberal society. For Joan W. Scott: 'Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of transparent objects.'⁸⁹ Neoliberalism is notorious for its invisibility; my work brings what is invisible into discourse, what is unconscious into consciousness. Looking back over my work it is clear that, regardless of the celebratory nature of responses to 'quality' television and its resulting masculinisation, I have offered alternative perspectives that acknowledge how women are subjugated both within its narratives and beyond. My original contribution to this field

acknowledges ‘quality’ television’s soap opera roots and, by analysing series from a feminist perspective, shows that much can be revealed about the patriarchal unconscious, how it views its mothers and how women are inevitably linked to their reproductive potential. As the great Ruth Bader Ginsberg once said: ‘Women will have achieved true equality when men share with them the responsibility of bringing up the next generation.’⁹⁰ On the evidence of my work, mothers may well be left holding the baby for another century.

¹ Joan W. Scott, ‘Experience’, in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize The Political*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1992), p 25.

² *Ibid.*

³ Scott, ‘Experience’, p 26.

⁴ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989), p 14.

⁵ Amanda D Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2014), p 32.

⁶ Lotz, *Cable Guys*, p 29.

⁷ Stuart Hall, ‘Culture, the media, and the “ideological effect” [1977],’ in Stuart Hall and David Morley (eds.), *Essential Essays, Volume 1* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019), p 318.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ James Lull, *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach* (Columbia University Press, 1995), p 62.

¹⁰ Charlotte Brunson, Julie D’Acci and Lynn Spigel, ‘Introduction’ in Brunson, D’Acci and Spigel (eds.), *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p 5.

¹¹ Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, ‘Feminist Television Criticism: Notes and Queries’, *Critical Studies in Television*, 1:1, Spring 2006: 108. DOI: 10.7227/CST.1.1.15.

¹² McCabe and Akass, 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Jane Feuer, *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism* (London: bfi publishing/Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) p 2.

¹⁵ Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).

¹⁶ Christine Geraghty quoted by Elke Weissmann, ‘Provocation II: Not another article on the *Wire*: How hierarchies of gender undermine TV scholarship and lead to abuse’, *Critical Studies in Television*, 15:4, (2020), 403. DOI: 10.1177/1749602020959864.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London/New York: Verso, 2015).

¹⁹ Fraser, *Fortunes*, p 5.

²⁰ Fraser, *Fortunes*, p 4.

²¹ Fraser, *Fortunes*, p 5.

²² Kim Akass, ‘Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water: Miranda and the Myth of Maternal Instinct on *Sex and the City*, *Se&F Online*, 3:1, (Fall 2004).

²³ Kim Akass, ‘Mother Knows Best: Ruth and Representations of Mothering’ in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), *Reading Six Feet Under: TV To Die For* (I.B. Tauris: London, 2005).

²⁴ Akass, ‘Mother Knows Best’, p 111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Kaplan, E. Ann, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993; 2002) p 11.

²⁹ Kim Akass, 'Still desperate after all these years: The post-feminist mystique and maternal dilemmas' in *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*, Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006) pp 57-68.

³⁰ Hall, 'Culture, the media', p 318.

³¹ Rebecca Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television* (London: Anthem Global Media and Communication Studies, 2012).

³² Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants: Fantasizing the reclamation of self in postfeminism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009) p 5.

³³ Miriam Peskowitz, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good Mother?* (New York: Seal Press, 2005) p 67.

³⁴ Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Work and Family Conflict and What to Do About It* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p 2.

³⁵ Kim Akass, 'You Motherfucker: Al Swearengen's Oedipal Dilemma' in David Lavery (ed.) in *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, David Lavery (ed.), (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) pp 23-32.

³⁶ Horney, Karen, *Feminine Psychology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993) p 116.

³⁷ Horney, 'Feminine', pp 134- 5.

³⁸ Horney, 'Feminine', p 115.

³⁹ Kim Akass 'The Gendered Politics of a news media analysis', *Studies in the Maternal* 4(2), October 2012, doi: <https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.38>.

⁴⁰ Shannon Proudfoot, He-cession' hatching gender crisis; Job losses taking toll, researcher says. *Gazette*. Montreal. 7 June 2010, <http://www.canada.com/cession%2Brobbing%2Bjobs%2Bmanhood/3122654/story.html> (accessed 5 April 2012).

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⁴² Kim Akass, 'Motherhood and the media under the Microscope: The backlash against feminism and the Mommy Wars', *Imaginations*, 12 November, 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.mother.4-2.3>.

⁴³ Lisa Belkin, 'The Opt-Out Revolution', *New York Times Magazine*, 26 October 2003.

⁴⁴ Lucy Cavendish, 'Motherhood: stay-at-home or back-to-work? The battle continues', *Observer*, 28 March 2010. <https://tinyurl.com/2mfvtfew> (accessed 15 June 2022).

⁴⁵ Peskowitz, *The Truth*, p 6.

⁴⁶ Kim Akass, 'The show that refused to die: the rise and fall of AMC's *The Killing*', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 29:5, (2015), 743-754. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2015.1068724>

⁴⁷ Hall, 'Culture, the media', p 318.

⁴⁸ Lull, *Media, Communication*, p 62.

⁴⁹ Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', pp 14-28.

⁵⁰ Tania Modleski, 'The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas', *Film Quarterly*, Autumn, 1979, 33:1 (Autumn 1979), 14. DOI: 10.1525/fq.1979.33.1.04a0004.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Modleski, 'The Search', 15.

⁵³ Modleski, 'The Search', 14-15.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Modleski, 'The Search', 15.

⁵⁶ Modleski, 'The Search', 14.

⁵⁷ Modleski, 'The Search', 16.

⁵⁸ Ellen Seiter and Gabriele Kreutzner, "'Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naïve": Towards an ethnography of soap opera viewers' in Seiter, E., Borchers, H., Kreutzner, G., & Warth, E. (eds.), *Remote Control: Television, Audiences, and Cultural Power* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013), p 237.

⁵⁹ Seiter and Kreutzner, 'Don't treat us', p 238.

⁶⁰ Seiter and Kreutzner, 'Don't treat us', p 239.

⁶¹ Seiter and Kreutzner, 'Don't treat us', p 240.

⁶² Hall, 'Culture, the media', p 318.

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Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water: Miranda and the Myth of Maternal Instinct on *Sex and the City*

Kim Akass



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SEX AND THE CITY: Season 1, Episode 10

Out of all the *Sex and the City* women, high-powered lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon) is the most unlikely to become a mother. Turning up at Laney Berlin's (Dana Wheeler-Nicholson) baby shower with a gift packet of condoms, Miranda's attitude toward mothers and babies is playfully prophylactic ("The Baby Shower," episode 10). Sitting on the steps, away from the fecundity inside, Miranda

bemoans that the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* was very misunderstood: "I mean the woman builds her dream house and those brats come along and start eating it." Compare this to the finale of Miranda's story. Hunched over the tub, bathing her husband's sick mother, embracing family life in Brooklyn, and being told by her housekeeper Magda that *this* is love constitutes a hard ending for many viewers to accept. There is a feeling that, surely, the cynical Miranda would never compromise in these ways. And yet if we follow her story and look again at the last scenes of Miranda bathing her mother-in-law we can see that her narrative makes a plausible progression. By the end of season 6 the representation of Miranda has taught us the complexities of motherhood as a learned behavior rather than as one that is instinctual to all women.

Looking back at *Sex and the City* it seems that the series has deliberately worked against the myth of motherhood that, according to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, has been perpetrated by the media since the 1980s. In *The Mommy Myth* (2004), Douglas and Michaels argue that the media works to pit woman against woman and, more importantly, mother against mother. They contend that the new *momism* "seeks to contain and, where possible, eradicate, all the social changes brought on by feminism," adding, "It is backlash in its most refined, pernicious form because it insinuates itself into women's psyches just where we have been rendered most vulnerable: in our love for our kids" (23). To illustrate their thesis they give examples of two media stereotypes: the ideal / Madonna / nurturing mother and the bad working mother. The media uses both of these stock stereotypes of motherhood to judge mothers while at the same time giving them impossible standards by which to judge themselves (11-12). Douglas and Meredith propose that it is now time to "exhume what feminists really hoped to change about motherhood" and, further, "to go back to a time when many women felt

free to tell the truth about motherhood—e.g. that at times they felt ambivalent about it because it was so hard and yet so undervalued" (27).

Miranda's ambivalence toward motherhood is identified early on in season 4. Rather than follow the obvious narrative trajectory of Charlotte and Trey's attempt to have a child, the series gives us Miranda's surprise pregnancy ("Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," episode 59), which further deflates the fictional ending: a single woman with a lazy ovary knocked up by a man with a missing testicle. At brunch she is forced to tell her friends the news. Charlotte, who has devoted herself to being a wife to Trey and is desperate to conceive their baby, is devastated and leaves the restaurant abruptly. A conversation about abortion ensues. If you consider that it was only in the 1950s that Lucille Ball changed the fact that pregnancy could not be alluded to on U.S. television and in 1992 that Vice President Dan Quayle berated the sitcom character Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock (Nelson in Akass and McCabe 87), you can see how radical and groundbreaking this discussion is. Despite telling Carrie that she can barely find time in her busy life to schedule an abortion let alone have a baby, Miranda decides, at the last moment, to keep the baby. It may, after all, be her last chance and even the cynical Miranda cannot pass up the opportunity to experience motherhood, which according to Peggy Orenstein has "supplanted marriage as the source of romantic daydreams" for childless, unmarried women in their twenties and early to mid-thirties" (Douglas and Michaels 25). It is safe to say that Miranda's decision is based on more practical concerns than romantic daydreams; if she had working ovaries (and maybe a partner) the pregnancy would possibly have a completely different outcome.

It is not only that Miranda chooses to keep her baby (much to her friends' delight), but her swelling body, with its fatigue, uncontrollable flatulence, and out-of-control sex drive, that are constant sources of amusement to the viewer and bemusement to Miranda. As she so eloquently puts it, "I don't know why they call it 'morning sickness' when it's all fucking day long" ("Just Say Yes," episode 60). Told that she is expecting a boy, Miranda finds herself "faking her sonogram" ("Change of a Dress," episode 62); the romance of pregnancy turns out to be no less fictional, Miranda discovers, than prince charming and simultaneous orgasm. Telling Carrie that "everyone else is glowing about her pregnancy," Miranda wonders whether she ever will. Magda finds the sonogram photograph of the baby and tells Miranda that a boy is good luck, compelling Miranda to perform her now ritual fake joy. She pulls a muscle in her neck as a result. If this is not a good enough example of how mothers are taught to respond to their pregnancies (in the same way women are taught to respond to engagement proposals), it is reinforced by Carrie's reluctance to marry Aidan. Asking the question "are we just programmed?" to want marriage and babies, this episode confronts the viewer with the fiction of "maternal instinct." Carrie's question is partly answered by Miranda's rant two episodes later: "The fat ass, the farting, it's ridiculous! I am unfuckable and I have never been so horny in my entire life. That's why you're supposed to be married when you're pregnant—so somebody is obligated to have sex with you" ("Ring a Ding Ding," episode 64). In this line, Miranda translates maternal instinct into social mores. Her

nine-month-long abjection is eventually complete when, interrupting Carrie's last New York night with Big (Chris Noth), her waters break over Carrie's beautiful new Christian Louboutin shoes—the reality wave of motherhood washing over the fairy-tale glass slippers ("I Heart New York," episode 66).

In addition to exposing the realities of pregnancy, *Sex and the City* reworks existing representations of new motherhood apart from glowing Madonna-and-child imagery. Throughout season 5, Miranda struggles with the trauma of being a new mother surrounded by single childless women who seem patently unqualified to guide her through this particular maze. In "Anchors Away" (episode 67), Samantha (Kim Cattrall) bundles Miranda and baby Brady into a cab with indecent haste so that the child-free friends can go shopping. Carrie's spontaneous visit to Miranda finds her friend unable to breastfeed or concentrate on their conversation. The sight of Miranda's veiny milk-filled breasts fills Carrie with horror and, taking her leave abruptly, she kisses Miranda on the head and tells her, "Miranda, you're a mother, but it's OK, I won't tell anyone." This phrase, although offered with love, widens the newly formed gulf between the two friends, identifying Miranda's transformation from one of the girls to a mother. Considering how ambivalent all four women have been about marriage and motherhood, it is no reassurance to Miranda when Carrie tells her that nothing will affect their friendship and that she is still one of them.

"Critical Condition" (episode 72) exposes Miranda's exhaustion with Brady's constant crying, and, telling her friends that she has not slept for days, she rants: "If he was 35, this is when we would break up! This 13-pound meatloaf is pushing me over the edge. I feel disgusting." Her three friends are no help and, with Magda looking on disapprovingly, Miranda's story is a classic example of how isolating new motherhood can be. After a neighbor complains about Brady's crying, Miranda feels excluded from the community of mothers and clearly suffers from the thought of "being judged by the toughest critics out there: other mothers" (Douglas and Michaels 19). It is only the intervention of a neighbor that gives voice to the problem that has, so far, remained unspoken. Offering Miranda an oscillating chair for Brady, Kendall learns that Miranda has only childless friends and tells her, "Well then you're screwed. If they don't have kids, they don't have a clue." While such moments can seem to undermine the show's commitment to respecting single, child-free women's lives by depicting them as clueless, they also cut in the opposite direction, reminding us that child care is, like gender and romance, a matter of effective props rather than natural instinct. Obviously it is practical help with mothering that Miranda needs and the only way to tap into this discourse is through other mothers. Douglas and Meredith assert that "motherhood *is* a collective experience" (25), and, despite the media's emphasis on the individual achievements and failures of mothers, Kendall's words of reassurance—"Miranda, you're not a bad mother. You just didn't have the chair"—reveal the truth behind the fiction.

Miranda may have stopped Brady from crying and is gradually getting a handle on life again, but there remain two last bastions to be stormed by the single mother: sex and work. Neglecting to tell an old flame that she has

become a mother, Miranda explains, "I just didn't want it to change anything" ("Plus One Is the Loneliest Number," episode 71). Painfully aware of the constraints that motherhood puts on her single life, Miranda takes her date home and, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "mummy's coming," finally accepts her new role and the attendant responsibilities. After a female colleague formally complains about Miranda's lack of punctuality since giving birth to Brady, thereby exposing the myth of sisterhood in the workplace, Miranda eventually decides that she has to cut her working week to around 50 or 55 hours max *if* she is to survive parenthood ("Hop, Skip and a Week," episode 80). Miranda's narrative demonstrates not only ambivalence toward motherhood but also the difficulties of adjusting to this new life in a social context that continues to make mothering a contradiction with sex and work culture—a reality routinely ignored by the media.

The Uncomfortable Truth

However much *Sex and the City* explodes taboos about motherhood, the celebrity discourse surrounding the series constantly undermines this process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the magazine stories about the stars' real-life pregnancies and attitudes toward motherhood. Sarah Jessica Parker gave birth to her first child, James, in autumn 2002. Six months later Parker was back in shape. Promotional shots for the last series revealed no trace of her recent labors (*Hello!* 82). Compare this to Miranda's experience in seasons 5 and 6. According to the media Parker shares none of Miranda's problems: "She'll slip into motherhood as easy as she does her Manolo Blahniks" (Millea 338). If we read this against Miranda's story of lugging around a puking baby, the "blissfully wed" Parker story confirms the "have it all" discourse so neatly dismantled within the show.

It also adds rather interesting reading to what Michaels and Douglas call the "celebrity mom profile," which, in their analysis, snowballed in the 1980s and became a fixture in the 1990s. According to them the celebrity-mom profile "was probably the most influential media form to sell the new momism, and where its key features were refined, reinforced, and romanticized" (113). They add that the celebrity-mom profile has been an "absolutely crucial tool in the media construction of maternal guilt and insecurity, as well as the romanticizing of motherhood, in the 1980s and beyond" (113). Not only does it present mothers who have allegedly found a balance between working and caring for children, but there is an added pressure. If the celebrity mom is willing to give up her glittering showbiz career in order to nurture and mother her children, the suggestion is, why aren't we? Michael and Douglas argue that the celebrity-mom portraits resurrect many of the stereotypes that women had hoped were buried 30 years ago, including the notion that

Women are, by genetic composition, nurturing and maternal, love all children, and prefer motherhood to anything, especially work, so should be the main ones responsible for raising the kids (139).

They add that what is worse is that the celebrity-mom discourse exemplifies what motherhood has become in our intensified consumer culture: a

competition. One that pits mother against mother and leaves the notion of sisterhood in the dust.

The argument is not then whether *Sex and the City* is reality or fantasy, whether the endings are believable, forced, or tacked on. The depiction of motherhood may be real to some and fantasy to others. What is radical about *Sex and the City* is that it gives us an alternative version of motherhood to the stereotypes that exist in the media. It depicts motherhood in all its ambivalence. Which is why, when Magda tells Miranda that she is expressing love, it reveals an uncomfortable truth. One of the roles of adulthood is potentially caring for our own parents. Miranda has been on a long journey of rejecting motherhood, being ambivalent about taking on the role and then embracing it. She faked her sonogram, let a friend's baby fall off the sofa at her baby shower, and had difficulty coping with and bonding with Brady. She has never been someone for whom mothering comes naturally.

This is not where her story ends though; she has had to move out of Manhattan to Brooklyn for the sake of her family and now must take on the next stage of her life's journey, which includes caring for Steve's mother. Despite their difficult relationship, it is Miranda who recognizes Mary's illness and shares responsibility for looking after her mother-in-law, thereby accepting the traditional mantle of "nurturer," albeit temporarily. Rescuing Mary after she wanders off in a confused mental state, Miranda is forced to care for her mother-in-law as a mother would a child. Framed in the bathroom, their red hair superficially at least suggests a connectedness, and with Brady's bath toys reinforcing Mary's child-like state, the *mise-en-scène* suggests that Miranda has accepted the role that she fought against for so long. After three seasons of witnessing Miranda's difficulties with motherhood this is hard to accept and is arguably why viewers found Miranda's ending unbelievable.

It should be no surprise then that when Magda tells her, "What you did—that is love—you love," Miranda immediately tells Magda "Let's not tell Steve. It would only upset him." Keeping the truth of Mary's illness from Steve is not Miranda's only motivation here. Magda may feel vindicated by Miranda's apparent acceptance of the role of mother, but we know the truth as surely as Steve will. Over the course of the final three seasons Miranda has learned that there is more to being a mother than the idyllic and often sanitised versions offered to us in the media. She may perform the role of caretaker to Mary but this does not mean that she has embraced the whole romantic fiction of the "naturalness" of motherhood. Far from being contained in the role of mother and naturalised by it, Miranda's narrative shows us that it is possible to retain independence despite the constraints of caring. By portraying the difficulties along the way, Miranda's narrative has shown us that even the most intelligent and cynical woman can be completely unprepared for a role that the media romanticizes as a smooth fit (but like Manolo Blahniks, the role of mother can be more painful than sexy). Miranda's narrative ends here for good reason. While her struggle with a young baby may be good comedy, it is difficult to see how Miranda's new relationship with Mary could be such a rich source of humor. Steve and

Miranda may share their caring roles in the same way they share the parenting of their young son, but you can be sure there will not be many laughs along the way.

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Mother knows best: Ruth and representations of mothering in *Six Feet Under*

Wendy Lesser of *The New York Times* dismisses *Six Feet Under*'s matriarch Ruth Fisher (now Sibley) as being a mere 'doormat for the show's producers to step on' (2001: 28). Comparing Ruth unfavourably to Tony Soprano's harridan of a mother, Livia (Nancy Marchand), from *The Sopranos*, Lesser maintains that Ruth is 'an infinitely less compelling' character whose biggest problem is that 'she embarrasses her kids'. Other critics are less than complimentary about Ruth, including Phil Rosenthal, who describes her as 'the increasingly cartoonish matriarch whose misguided search for direction in her life will become a running gag' (2002). Linda Stasi has no better opinion of her when she says 'Ruth is so wooden, she makes Mary Tyler Moore in *Ordinary People* look like an emoting machine', adding that 'she is a ready-to-explode mess in ankle socks and housedresses' (2001). But is this a fair assessment? Is it not true to say that there is more to Ruth than these critics give her credit for, and that she is far more complex than these initial responses would suggest? Surely to dismiss Ruth in this way is missing the point.

If the narrative of *Six Feet Under* can be defined as liminal, with each episode beginning with a death and ending with a burial, could it not be argued that Ruth's positioning within this narrative represents another kind of liminality: that of the middle-aged, post-menopausal mother with adult children? While orthodox

psychoanalytical theorists. Other than the mother in the symbolic (Freud 1905; Lacan 1977), feminists attempt to revise such thinking by bringing her into discourse (Klein 1930; Horney 1932; Cixous 1975; Chodorow 1978; Kristeva 1980; Irigaray 1981). Despite such attempts there is still a tendency to reduce the mother to her parental role, focusing on the nurturing, breastfeeding pre-Oedipal mother who has meaning only in relation to her children and nothing else. There is little attempt here to clarify what happens to the relationship once the child becomes independent and moves away. In this instance motherhood is repressed and silenced, invisible to society and reduced to a metaphor (Boulous Walker 1998: 135).

This chapter will examine the complex representation of the mother and the maternal in *Six Feet Under*, arguing that Ruth's narrative positioning reveals an aspect of mothering that is routinely repressed and silenced within patriarchy. If, as Robert Tobin asserts, Ruth is a good example of 'a generation of women who had spent their lives entirely under the thumb of patriarchy' (2002: 87), I will argue that Ruth's narrative finds her negotiating her way through uncharted territory while offering us an innovative subject position which allows the 'unrepresentable to emerge from the patriarchal restrictions of representation' (Boulous Walker 1998: 135).

Just Another Smother Mother?

Superficially at least, Ruth seems to conform to the type of mother traditionally found in melodramatic texts ('Pilot', 1:1). Framed in her kitchen she is surrounded by the men in her life; her son David who assumes the role of the patriarch by sitting at the table, criticising his mother and her husband at the end of the telephone. Flushed and busily preparing a Christmas Eve dinner, Ruth's conversation with Nathaniel is practical and yet critical as she fires off a list of chores for him to do. The tone of this conversation makes it easy to forget that Ruth is Nathaniel's wife and not his mother, as she talks to him like a recalcitrant child, one that must be cajoled, cared for and criticised to enable Ruth to maintain her role as the ideal nurturing mother. It is not long before this representation is rendered strange and our expectations shattered. Arguably, it is Nathaniel's rebellion against Ruth's critical mother's voice that causes his

untimely death. Not the long-drawn-out death caused by smoking, but a quick, final totalling of his life, brought about by a momentary lapse in concentration while lighting a crafty cigarette. Ruth's reaction to the news of Nathaniel's death is both violent and indicative of how this maternal representation is going to be much more complex than that of her melodramatic predecessors. Domestic devastation ensues and David is met with the sight of his mother collapsed on the kitchen floor, surrounded by the wreckage of her morning's labour and the words 'your father is dead and the pot roast is ruined'.

If patriarchal discourse works so hard to silence the mother, then Ruth's tone here exemplifies a double register breaking through that repression. Nurturing and yet critical, her questioning and rebuking is reminiscent of the role of the mother's voice in early childhood. On the way to the mortuary to identify Nathaniel's body Ruth asks her daughter: 'Are you having sex? Are you doing drugs?' (Pilot 1:1). That Claire is momentarily freaked by her mother's questioning is not only because she is high on drugs *and* considering having sex with Gabe but because Ruth picks this exact moment to question her daughter. Freud may assert that the formation of the superego 'retains the character of the father' (Freud 1995: 642) but here we can clearly see how the mother's voice functions in this formation. If the superego retains dominance over the ego 'in the form of conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt' (ibid.), it is the mother that gives voice to this authority as the primary caretaker of children. The death of Nathaniel relieves Ruth of this burden. As he appears to family members, Nathaniel articulates their guilty consciences and innermost fears; not only does this allow us access to their interior lives but it releases Ruth from the onerous role of giving voice to the 'law of the father'.

The binary nature of the family home and funeral home further complicates Ruth's positioning within the Fisher family. If the sex/gender divide in modern society is due to 'natural and biological' functions which assume that 'women's primary social location is domestic' (Chodorow 1978: 9), then Ruth's liminal status is reinforced by this uncanny fusion of work and home. Ruth may have been associated with the abject due to her role in the 'primal mapping of the body' where the child learns about its body through its mother's role in sphincter training (Kristeva 1982: 72) but the corpse is the ultimate in abjection as it is literally 'the place where

meaning collapses' (2). In the Fisher home, then, it is arguably Nathaniel and the men that are most associated with abjection, dealing daily with corpses and bodily fluids. As David tells Nate, 'Talk to me when you've had to stuff formaldehyde-soaked cotton wool up your father's ass so he doesn't leak' (Pilot 1:1). It is Nate's memory of his father inviting him to touch a corpse that causes him to flee the family business, not the shame associated with maternal authority and toilet training. This notion is reinforced by Nate and David's argument about the defecation of a corpse ('The Will', 1:2). Scolding her two sons for bickering, Ruth ignores the nature of their argument, and neither son shows any of the embarrassment or shame traditionally associated with the abject once the child enters into 'the order of the phallus' (Kristeva 1982: 74). Kristeva may argue that there is a split between the worlds of maternal and paternal authority, but this is arguably, not the case in the Fisher family home.

If the 'law of the father' and maternal authority in the Fisher household are confused, then the uncanny grouping around the dinner table reveals a further confusion. Planning a special family dinner, Ruth reveals that she is having a sexual relationship with her new employer and florist, Nikolai (Ed O'Ross), telling her children: 'We're all adults – we're all sexual beings – we should acknowledge that' ('In The Game', 2:1). Asserting her role as sexual woman with the right to speak about such matters finds Ruth's adult children sniggering and behaving like – well – children. Even if 'by 1986, the mother/sexual woman split was healed' (Kaplan 2002:183), there is no such healing for the middle-aged mother/sexual woman, as '[h]er sexuality simply does not exist beyond her reproductive potential' (Boulous Walker 1998: 136). Safely ensconced in the family home, their mother taking care of them and with their own sexual lives, the Fisher children reveal their reluctance to accord their mother the same privileges. The first time Claire meets Hiram (Ed Begley, Jr) she envisages her mother having energetic sex with him on the kitchen counter; later David imagines his mother reaching under the table and informing the assembled company that she 'can't get enough of [Hiram's] cock' ('Brotherhood', 1:7). While the Fishers can tolerate Ruth's eccentricities, it is her sexuality that causes them the most consternation and is a good example of how 'In patriarchal terms the feminine should be either woman or mother, never both' (Boulous Walker 1998: 136).

If Ruth's children are reluctant to accept their mother's sexuality it is, arguably, because they want to keep their family intact and unchanging. This dilemma is focused on the *mise en scène* of the kitchen, which, according to Alan Ball, 'is the heart of the home, the source of nourishment and sustenance, the congregating place, the hearth' (Magid 2002: 76). Despite the fact that the kitchen holds a central place in the lives of the Fisher family, and especially Ruth, Ball adds that 'it's not a completely warm and rosy place, because the Fishers live in the constant presence of death' (ibid.). Developing this point further, I would suggest that the kitchen is also symbolic of Ruth's inner journey as, locked in domestication, she gradually becomes lost in her attempt to find a place in the world. Although she is initially positioned as swathed in the warmth of her kitchen, busily preparing the Christmas dinner and anticipating her family reunion, she soon becomes trapped and the kitchen threatens to overwhelm her. 'The Room' (1:6) finds Ruth standing statue-like, gripping a saucepan, with her children bustling about her. 'The Invisible Woman' (2:5) sees Ruth dreaming of her bare house, stripped of furniture and devoid of life; the domestic space here is cold and unforgiving. Low camera angles, wide lenses and sinister lighting turn the hitherto cosy kitchen into an uncanny prison, emphasising the emptiness of Ruth's life.

The double register of Ruth's speech is further evidence that the domestic is a key part of her existence and makes strange her role as a mother. It is not simply that Ruth conflates two registers in her speech but that the clash of tones makes strange her efforts to connect with people. Looking at a nude Polaroid of her younger self, Ruth tells Nate the history of the photo (taken by Nathaniel before he went to Vietnam in 1965), saying: 'It's frightening how much we change. Are you staying for dinner, dear?' ('The Room', 1:6). Ruth does not merely sublimate her emotional state to practical issues but allows the inner conflict between domesticity and personal development its full expression. David finally admits to his mother that he is gay, and an emotional discussion ensues. Admitting that it was so much easier when they were small, as they 'used to tell her everything', Ruth composes herself to ask if he is staying for dinner. Through tears she adds the non sequitur 'We're having veal' ('A Private Life', 1:12). This equation of food with comfort is not restricted to her children. Hiram takes her out for dinner to tell her,

guilt-stricken, that he has met somebody else. Ruth takes the news calmly and tells him: 'Let's order dessert. That'll cheer you up' ('Knock, Knock', 1:13). Refusing the toast that Ruth has prepared for breakfast results in Claire being accused of having an eating disorder (1:1), and it is ultimately a solitary dinner in a cavernous kitchen that signals the end of domestic bliss for Ruth ('Back to the Garden', 2:7).

If you go down to the woods today...

If the Fisher family are happy to keep their mother in her domestic role, devoid of sexuality, it is Ruth who forces her children to grow up while exposing the fiction that it is the mother who keeps her children down with her in the Imaginary to fulfil her needs. Realising that her children do not need her any more is a shock for Ruth, but it also illustrates how the sexuality of the mother has to be expelled from the home ('Life's Too Short', 1:9). If it is the '*woman-mother*' that represents the greatest threat' to patriarchy and 'is exiled to the margins of society' (Boulous Walker 1998: 136), then Ruth here demonstrates the limits of this exile by telling Hiram that women should not go camping whilst menstruating as bears are attracted to the smell of blood. There is, obviously, a whole discourse here that Hiram is completely unaware of, which reveals the limitations behind the way 'Christianity balances its ambivalence toward woman, its contempt and idealisation in the figures of Mary and Eve' (ibid.). If Eve's 'aggressive sexuality' (ibid.) is to be contained in nature then it is only when she is not demonstrating her ability to reproduce that she is safe in doing so. Ruth's ecstatic midnight wandering reveals the rampant sexuality hidden beneath her prim, repressed façade. Hallucinating her dead husband, she tells him that she misses what they had, to which he replies, 'Well, go find it again.' The next morning Hiram tells a flushed Ruth that she had never before been so passionate with him. Ruth's laugh here is reminiscent of the 'Laugh of the Medusa' outlined by Hélène Cixous (1980), and while it is clearly a source of discomfort for Hiram it is also a warning of what lies hidden beneath Ruth's repressed exterior.

If Ruth's sexuality is initially positioned as akin to nature and outside the domestic environment, what of the other side of the

binary, the 'domesticated image of the Virgin Mary, the mother devoid of sexual desire' (Boulous Walker 1998: 136)? We first see this side of Ruth in the pilot episode the day after her hysterical confession of a long-standing affair at Nathaniel's funeral. Now composed, with hair loose, she asks Nate to stay for a few more days. Evoking the memory of the idealised mother of Nate's childhood, Ruth gets her own way. Waiting for the outcome of Nate's surgery ('The Last Time', 1:13), Ruth, hair flowing, is clearly situated as the ideal mother surrounded by her children, and is reminiscent of Michelangelo's 'Pieta', the iconic sculpture of maternal suffering. Discovering that she is grandmother to Nate's daughter Maya, ('I'll Take You', 2:12) gives Ruth a chance to relive a part of her life that she had so reluctantly left behind. Happily falling back into the role of nurturing mother, cradling her granddaughter, hair loose and tousled, Ruth is positioned as the Madonna, the ultimate icon of idealised maternity. This positioning may initially seem unproblematic and in keeping with the binary of Virgin Mary / Eve that I have argued is traditionally sanctioned by patriarchy, but Ruth's assertion that 'a woman's hair is the gateway to her sensuality' ('The Eye Inside', 3:3) retrospectively problematises this assumption and hints at Ruth's grasp of her positioning, along with her ability to manipulate it.

Speaking Fiercely From the 'I'

Ruth may be aware of how she is positioned but it is clearly not going to be an easy escape for her. Having tried many strategies to fill the void left by the death of Nathaniel, Ruth finds herself at a meeting of 'The Plan' ('Out, Out, Brief Candle', 2:2) and is clearly attracted to the idea that she can achieve self-fulfilment regardless of her own unhappy past. Moved by the graduation speeches, especially from a 41-year-old woman who speaks 'fiercely from the "I"', Ruth seizes her chance to achieve similar subjectivity, and later that day confronts Nate and David about the whereabouts of the \$93,000 she invested in the business. Seeing the new casket wall recently purchased by her sons, she indignantly demands to know how they paid for it and asks to see receipts and accounts. To the bemusement of her sons she tells them, 'I am speaking *fiercely* from the "I"', and fierce she is: body shaking, clenched fists and an angry expression on her face.

Unaccustomed to this kind of power she asks, 'Do you mind?' before leaving the room with a flourish.

'The Plan' (2:3) proves to be cathartic for Ruth, and her angry outburst at the seminar the following day sees her again speaking fiercely from the 'I'. Clearly exhilarated by her success, Ruth seizes on this discourse and spends the next episode forgiving old enemies and speaking to her family in building metaphors. It is not until she discusses Keith's niece, Taylor (Aysia Polk), with David that he is moved to tell her: 'Mom, I'm happy for you if this whole Plan thing of yours has enabled you to draft your own blueprint or patch up some of the cracks in your foundation but...just between you and me you're starting to sound like a crazy person and I think it's time you kept that shit to yourself and minded your own fucking business' ('Driving Mr Mossback', 2:4). While her children are tolerant of Ruth's eccentricities and accept her as an adult with the right to have her own life, here she goes too far; the combination of the mother's critical voice and the subjectivity accorded it by the Plan makes this a voice too powerful to be accepted by her family. The Plan may promise happiness but it does not offer an unproblematic solution to Ruth's dilemmas, and, further, it does not offer a solution to her repressed and silenced positioning within society and her family. As if to emphasise this, 'The Invisible Woman' shows Ruth, alone, contemplating old photos of her young family. It is a moment of pure despair as it becomes clear to Ruth that her role as a 'stay at home' mother has become redundant. Obviously, this is the downside to an occupation so lauded by society, and, with the repression of mothering in culture, is something that rarely finds representation. Left alone, Ruth faces the reality of her situation and loses hope of ever finding her subjectivity again.

The arrival of her granddaughter seems to offer Ruth an opportunity to relive the part of her life that she so obviously mourns. However comfortable Ruth may feel, Maya is not *her* child, and it is not long before the cracks begin to appear in her relationship with her new daughter-in-law, Lisa. Unaware of how mothering has changed in the past 30 years, Ruth feeds her granddaughter peanut butter ('Perfect Circles', 3:1). Lisa phones her and agitatedly informs her mother-in-law the error of her ways. Apologising, Ruth explains that peanut butter was never a problem when her children were young. This simple defence of her actions shows the intransigent

position occupied by Ruth. Having been a mother in the late sixties and seventies does not prepare her for being a grandmother now, and Ruth is clearly made redundant by her ignorance of the mothering skills expected in the twenty-first century. Dr Spock may have been good enough to dispense wisdom to mothers of Ruth's generation, but here Lisa reveals how the ideology of mothering has completely changed. In order to continue her role as childminder to Maya, Ruth will have to educate herself into what is expected from modern mothers and carers. This brutal fact shocks her into realising that, not only is she finding it impossible to re-insert herself into society, but also that she can no longer rely on the now outdated mothering skills that have carried her through her key role in life.

'The Eye Inside'

It is Bettina (Kathy Bates) who temporarily rescues Ruth from this untenable position – a straight-talking, irreverently mischievous woman who embodies the transgressive possibilities of the unruly woman. Kathleen Rowe suggests that the unruly woman's power comes not from the fact that she signifies castration but rather that she threatens patriarchal belief systems. 'What most threatens that set of beliefs is not (or is not *only*) the vagina, but the female mouth and its dangerous emanations – laughter and speech' (1995: 43). Ruth is appalled when Bettina steals a scarf on their shopping trip ('The Eye Inside', 3:3). Confidently confiding in Ruth that 'fortunately women our age are invisible, so we can really get away with murder', it is clear that Bettina is aware of the fact that in society's eyes both she and Ruth not only are invisible but occupy a liminal space. The shopping trip proves instructive, as the banter between the two women shows us a side of Ruth that has been hidden up until now. Shoplifting a lipstick, Ruth begins to embrace her liminal status, while tentatively, with Bettina's guidance, she begins to uncover the woman that has been submerged under her all-encompassing role as mother.

'Nobody Sleeps' (3:4) sees the complete transformation of Ruth under the tutelage of Bettina. If motherhood is to be the focus this week, then Lisa's problematic path towards her 'nurturing mother' role is contrasted with Ruth's trajectory out of it. Waking in his

marital bed, Nate attempts to rouse Lisa. To his horror it is Ruth purring sexually at his side, and not his wife. Of course, the classic Freudian interpretation of such a dream is of the son's Oedipal desire for the mother – and we soon discover that Nate's nightmare is becoming a reality when Ruth and Lisa are framed together in the kitchen, looking uncannily alike. It would seem that Nate's dream is not simply about his desire for his own mother but shows a tentative understanding of just how his Oedipal journey has led him to repeat his father's life. The sins of the father are not only revisited on Nate, however, as it becomes clear how this repetition impacts upon women. Being cared for by Lisa and befriended by Bettina, Ruth is shown a way out of the rigidity of her roles. From the 'Pilot' episode onwards Ruth has struggled with split subjectivity – mother to her family and sexual woman to her lover and hairdresser, Hiram. While she has, in some ways, managed to merge these subjectivities, the introduction of Bettina's unruliness and Lisa's nurturing unleashes a merging of all her past selves and underlines Rowe's assertion that the unruly woman's 'rebellion against her proper place not only inverts the hierarchical relation between the sexes but unsettles one of the most fundamental of social distinctions – that between male and female' (1995: 43). Laughingly revealing uncomfortable truths about herself and her sons, Ruth crosses a line and forces them to reveal *their* repression. Not only does she cross the line of family secrets laid bare but she also tipsily crosses the line between funeral and family home and death and life. Languishing on the set of the following day's funeral, Bettina and Ruth enact their own deaths, and later, accompanied by a now awake Maya and a merry Lisa, dance to the words 'I'm an ordinary girl. Burning down the house. Wait till the party's over.' It should be clear enough that Ruth's Medusan laugh in 'Life's Too Short' (1:9) has come full circle, found its joyful expression and signals the death of the old Ruth.

* * *

It is clear that Ruth still has many mistakes to make despite her liberation by Bettina. Her friend's departure in 'The Trap' (3:5) leaves Ruth alone again. Impulsively hugging Bettina on the stairs the women observe Arthur Martin, the new apprentice who will provide Ruth with an alternative focus for her newly unleashed self. It should be no surprise that Ruth becomes a voyeur over the course of season

three; after all, she has attained a new symbolic status and 'her desire sets things in motion' (Kaplan 1993: 204). Stalking Arthur, she actively pursues her desire, kissing him unexpectedly on the lips and then doing it again despite his protestations ('Tears, Bones and Desire', 3:8). Regardless of his six previous marriages, Ruth impulsively proposes to George Sibley out of loneliness, and shows us that Ruth may have completed a journey but, in many ways, she is still repeating old patterns ('Twilight', 3:12). Marriage may not be made in heaven but it does fulfil Ruth in many ways; and it is one way of ensuring adult company and a fulfilled sexuality. Lisa's death at the end of season three also returns Ruth to a mothering role, albeit that of surrogate mother to the now motherless Maya. The patriarchal family may be reconfigured but it again promises to test the limits of Ruth's liminal positioning.

Kaplan suggested as long ago as 1983 that 'the Mother offers a possible way to break through patriarchal discourses since she has not been totally appropriated by dominant culture' (1993: 11). It is clear that the death of the patriarch in *Six Feet Under* allows representations of mothering, and especially the middle-aged mother, to become, for better or worse, reconfigured. Emerging from the death of her husband, Ruth's journey towards a new symbolic role clearly problematises many assumptions about the maternal role along the way. Ruth's narrative may not be particularly revolutionary (after all, she does marry a man who receives faeces in the post ('In Case of Rapture', 4:2) rather than enduring a life of loneliness'), but the fact that Ruth has a narrative at all is due to the fact that *Six Feet Under* lifts the lid on repression and exposes numerous liminal spaces for us to see. It seems to me that steeping each narrative in the omnipresent threat of death allows traditionally taboo and dangerous areas safe expression. Ruth's narrative may not tell us if mother knows best, but it does give us a rare and honest glimpse into her world.

four



Still desperate after all these years: The post-feminist mystique and maternal dilemmas

Kim Akass

In the past sixty years we have come full circle and the American housewife is once again trapped in a squirrel cage. If the cage is now a modern plate-glass-and-broadloom ranch house or a convenient modern apartment, the situation is no less painful than when her grandmother sat over an embroidery hoop in her gilt-and-plush parlour and muttered angrily about women's rights.

Betty Friedan 1992: 25

'Happy to be Desperate' claims the headline of the news review section of *The Sunday Times* (2005: 4). A large photo shows the female stars of ABC's *Desperate Housewives* hemmed in by a white picket fence sporting the caption '*Desperate Housewives* caught the madness but also the strange satisfaction of domestic life for women'. The irony of this is not lost on India Knight, the article's author, as she argues that the series 'does not seem like a piece of twee fantasy to me, or like satire, but like a high-kicking piece of bang-on social realism. Well, apart from the murders, obviously' (ibid). Why does she make this claim? Could it be Lynette Scavo's desperation to be a good mother, which 'brilliantly depict[s] competitive parenting'? Or maybe it is her empathy with Susan Mayer's terror at 'the idea of being left alone

and unloved, and her relief when that possibility starts to recede'? Or is it Gabrielle Solis's 'archetypal bored housewife drowning in money and gasping for air, too desperate to behave decently and too frightened of financial loss to call it a day'? (Apparently resembling at least five women known by the writer.) Surely it is not Bree Van de Kamp's 'old-school housewife extraordinaire, with her stay-put hair and her twinset and pearls' that makes *Desperate Housewives* smack of reality? Ponderings aside, for Knight, the fact that the 'middle-aged married women in *Desperate Housewives* should have become heroines to their viewers' is not surprising. Especially when you consider her claim that the popularity of *Desperate Housewives* is proof that 'women, more than ever, still want nothing more than the old-fashioned dream of stay-at-home domestic contentment'. Despite the fact that domestic contentment could not be further from what is represented in *Desperate Housewives*, Knight is undeterred in her final analysis: 'We're all either Desperate Housewives, or yearning to be one. It's time to wield that rolling pin with pride.'

Fighting talk indeed. But can this really be true – especially in this post-feminist, postmodern, post-9/11 era? Surely women know better than to yearn to be a housewife, especially one living in the 'astonishingly true to life' Wisteria Lane (ibid). It is not as if the series makes any attempt to hide the grim reality of this role. Indeed, the first few minutes of ABC's *Desperate Housewives* exposes just how desperate life as a housewife can get. Mary Alice Young makes breakfast, cleans and tidies her house before calmly shooting herself in the head (1:1). Our only clue to this seemingly random act is the subsequent discovery of a note saying: 'I know what you did. It makes me sick. I'm going to tell.' Thus a narrative conundrum for the first season of *Desperate Housewives* is set: what would make an apparently happy housewife commit suicide in the middle of a sunny suburban utopia? Gathering at the wake her friends ask the same question, after all, according to Gabrielle 'she was healthy, had a great home, a nice family'. But, as Lynette

points out, her life was their life. Ending in suicide, is it one that twenty-first-century women really yearn for? And, if it is, the question that has to be asked is: why would any sane woman swap a life of independence for one of quiet desperation like those lived on Wisteria Lane?

THE POST-FEMINIST MYSTIQUE

There can be few commentators that missed the connection between Betty Friedan's 1963 seminal text *The Feminine Mystique* (1992) and *Desperate Housewives*. It is hard to tell if the following is Mary Alice's voiceover or Friedan's observations written over forty-years ago:

Millions of women lived their lives in the image of those pretty pictures of the American suburban housewife, kissing their husbands good-bye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor. They baked their own bread, sewed their own and their children's clothes, kept their new washing machines and dryers running all day. ... They gloried in their role as women. (1992: 16)

It is helpful to remember that the image that Friedan is referring to here is the 'mystique of feminine fulfilment [which] became the cherished and self-perpetuating core of contemporary American culture' (ibid) in the 15 years after the Second World War. According to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, while this may have been the privileged ideology of the time, it is undermined by the fact that 'by 1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation's previous history' (2004: 34). There is obviously a discrepancy here between the representation of the happy housewife and her reality. To push the point further, Miriam Peskowitz reports that in 1948 'nearly

one-third of all women in America worked' (2005: 67), although it was not until 1976 that 'women's participation in the workforce inched near 50 percent' (68). Be that as it may, it is difficult to see how the prevailing ideology of domesticity as a goal has any currency with women when the facts of their lives seem to tell a different story.

Or do they? It may be that the facts and figures do not reflect what is at stake here. Joan Williams, a professor of the Gender, Work and Family programme at American University Law School, suggests that despite the 'true story' told by the number crunching 'the ideology and the practice of domesticity retain their hold. A recent survey found that fully two-thirds of Americans believe it would be best for women to stay home and care for family and children' (2000: 2). Interestingly there is nothing here to determine which gender (or class or ethnicity) thought this was the best way forward. And yet there seems to be at least some evidence for Knight's claim that women still yearn for that 'old-fashioned dream of stay-at-home domestic contentment' (2005: 4). And why not? Despite Friedan's call to arms in 1963 for women to live their lives in pursuit of more than 'feminine fulfilment' (1992: 24) it seems that once children come along women are more than happy to climb off the corporate ladder and settle for a life of motherhood and domesticity. And it would make sense if Williams is to be believed when she argues that the 'shift of women into the workforce has undermined neither domesticity's linkage of women with caregiving nor its association of men with breadwinning' (2000: 27).

So what is going on? Surely the twenty-first-century post-feminist woman has more to look forward to than Friedan's women whose chief ambition was 'marriage and children' and included those 'in their forties and fifties who once had other dreams [but] gave them up and threw themselves joyously into life as housewives', or those who 'quit high school and college to marry, or marked time in some job in which they had no real

interest until they married' (1992: 24). We have moved on since then haven't we? Not according to Douglas and Michaels who assert that 'what the feminine mystique exposed was that all women...were supposed to inhabit one and only one seamless subject position: that of the selfless, never complaining, always happy wife and mother who cheerfully eradicated whatever other identities she might have had and instead put her husband, her children, and the cleanliness of her house first' (2004: 34). What is most disconcerting about their thesis is that this is not a subject position that was left behind in the 1960s but one that has risen 'pheonixlike, and burrowed its way once again into the media and into the hearts and minds of millions of mothers' (ibid).

THE RHETORIC OF CHOICE

The much repeated source story for *Desperate Housewives* tells of Marc Cherry's conversation with his mother about Andrea Yates' murder conviction for drowning all five of her children. Responding to his mother's assertion that 'we've all been there' he says: 'if a perfectly sane, rational woman could have the life she wanted, being a wife and mother...and still have moments of insanity' then anyone could (September 2004). He claims that things are pretty much the same now as they were in the 1950s when his mother was at home, the only difference being that the post-feminist woman 'can decide for family over work but must accept responsibility for the outcome. Now it's "I've chosen it, I'm in control. Oh, I can't blame anyone for my own unhappiness, what do I do?"' (ibid).

According to Joan Williams and Miriam Peskowitz it is this idea of choice that is so completely disingenuous when describing women's attempt to combine motherhood and the workplace. As Peskowitz points out we 'talk about the glass ceiling and the mommy track so regularly that these phrases seem passé,

yesterday's news' (2005: 67) and yet they still hold much currency in twenty-first-century American life. She says:

Scratch the surface and there's the glass ceiling. Peer into the company accounts and there's the persistent gender wage gap. Look at who's taking family leave, or why our public life seems so devoid of fortysomething women, and why it's still mostly men running for office or men running the TV news, and it's pretty clear that we aren't as postfeminist as we'd like to be. (66)

Even more worrying for Peskowitz is the fact that the 'gap between men's and women's earnings is 10 to 15 percent larger for mothers than for women without children; in fact the wage gap between mothers and nonmothers is larger than that between men and women' (67). As she puts it 'the gains for women in the past decades have not meant a similar gain for mothers...childraising remains mothers' work, and in many families it's the mother's salary that is balanced against daycare costs' (66–67). Hardly surprising when the shocking truth is revealed 'that mothers who work full time earn only sixty cents for every dollar earned by full-time fathers' (2000: 2).

If this is the case, why does this wage gap persist, especially in our post-feminist society? Surely one of the most important feminist gains was that of equality in the workplace – and surely the days of a distinction between 'women's' and 'men's' work are long over? According to Joan Williams the gendered wage gap exists because the workplace 'continues to be structured in ways that perpetuate the economic vulnerability of caregivers' with a preference for the 'ideal worker' who 'works at least forty hours a week year round' with an expectation to work overtime at any given moment (2). The result is that even when mothers do manage to work full time they get forced onto the 'mommy-track' as they can only rarely work the amount of hours expected of them. She adds: 'a rarely recognized but extraordinarily important fact is that jobs requiring extensive overtime exclude *virtually all mothers* (93 percent)' (2). She reluctantly comes to the conclusion

that:

Domesticity's organisation of market and family work leaves women with two alternatives. They can perform as ideal workers without the flow of family work and other privileges male ideal workers enjoy. That is not equality. Or they can take dead-end mommy-track jobs or 'women's work.' That is not equality either. A system that allows only these two alternatives is one that discriminates against women. (39)

If this is the case, and the evidence certainly supports this view, then where does the rhetoric of choice come from? According to Peskowitz the slight downturn in the amount of working mothers with infants since 1998 (when the figure stood at 58 per cent) to a steady 55 per cent has been accompanied by a series of newspaper and magazine articles that have claimed 'a new traditionalism, a resurgence of old-fashioned motherly feeling' (68). She claims that before October 2003, 'well-educated mothers who left fancy professional jobs were merely quitting', but since an article in the *New York Times Magazine* suggested that 'these women were "opting-out" ... the phrase really caught on. ... and "opting-out" quickly became part of the national vocabulary to describe mothers who left full-time jobs' (87). Unfortunately, for Peskowitz at least, one of the main problems with the phrase 'opting out' is that 'it forecloses any discussion about what "choice" means and about what kinds of options women have ... "Opting out" assumes that women have options' (99). Williams expands on this point and suggests that it is 'not surprising that women facing the constraints handed down by domesticity speak of having made a "choice"' (2000: 37), especially in the twenty-first century when choice (however problematically) is embedded right into the very heart of American feminist ideology:

As much as it has been a phrase of feminist politics, choice itself is a fantasy, one that emerges from a classic American belief that we are independent, free, and autonomous; that we

have choices and choose our options freely; and that as a result, we ourselves are solely responsible for the results. (Peskowitz 2005: 99)

For Williams 'choice and discrimination are not mutually exclusive. Choice concerns the everyday process of making decisions within constraints' (2000: 37). The constraints that the workplace clearly places upon mothers are such that, when faced with working long hours, putting a large portion of their salary towards childcare costs and being too exhausted to enjoy their family, they will often surrender to domesticity. This does not mean that they have made a free choice, or one based on a need to spend 24 hours a day with their children, but rather a choice based on the ideal worker system versus domesticity. It is clear that any decision to 'opt-out' is more often than not made within the constraints of a system that 'pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving' (39) and furthermore it is one framed in a rhetoric that only partially describes the choices facing working mothers who 'don't get to choose the structures of the work-place... This workplace predicament is not our choice. Let's be clear about that' (Peskowitz 2005: 98). For both Williams and Peskowitz this predicament affects all women and, rather than thinking about it as a personal decision, a 'choice' to 'opt-out', it is more helpful to see it for what it is – a 'maternal wall' – a phrase that 'helps us see what we all face individually as something broader and more generally shared among women' (Peskowitz 2005: 67).

ATTEMPTING TO SCALE THAT 'MATERNAL WALL'

If the workplace predicament is one that affects all women with children then Lynette's choice to opt-out and be a stay-at-home mom should be indicative of how that decision is made. In flashback we see how her joy at discovering she is pregnant is

quickly marred by her husband Tom's suggestion that she should quit her job as: 'kids do better with stay-at-home moms' adding 'it would be so much less stressful' (1: 1). So much for a choice, especially when the real stress of Lynette's life is now attempting to care for a baby and three unruly pre-school boys while her husband is free to work the extended hours of an ideal worker. Her spontaneous punch to his jaw when he attempts to have unprotected sex with her and risk another pregnancy shows just how disenchanted Lynette is with her role. And as if that is not enough, during a fraught shopping expedition she lies to an ex-work colleague who asks her: 'don't you just love being a mom?' Mary Alice's voiceover reveals that 'for those who asked it, only one answer was acceptable' and Lynette's answer confirms that she has much to share with Friedan's women who found it impossible to talk about the real desperation of their lives (1:1).

It is not until the beginning of season two that *Desperate Housewives* directly addresses the problem of what happens when mothers attempt to return to work. Again Lynette's 'choice' is pre-empted by Tom's resignation from his job. She may have interfered with his promotional prospects in an attempt to prevent him working even longer hours but is taken aback at his insistence that it is now her turn to get a job and his to be a stay-at-home father (1: 23). Despite her protestations, Tom makes it clear whose choice it is when he tells her 'I already made the decision. You're going back to work.'

Lynette's foray into the working world begins, somewhat uncomfortably, when confronted with another face of the maternal wall. Nina Fletcher (Joely Fisher) represents the harsh voice of power feminism, one that is well aware of the sacrifices that have to be made in order to succeed in a 'man's' world. Looking aghast at Lynette's confession that she has four children, Nina tells her 'I knew I could never do both jobs justice. That's why I chose not to have a family. I didn't want to be one of those kinds of women. You know, sloughing things off onto co-workers

because of a paediatrician appointment or a dance recital' (2: 1). Nina clearly speaks for women who 'have been working long enough to know the possibilities of advancement, the struggles women face to achieve, and the subtle discriminations that persist' (Peskowitz 2005: 94). Using the rhetoric of choice to describe her decision *not* to have a family proves Williams' point that the twenty-first-century workplace allows only two options for women if they want to succeed within it. Nina may talk of choosing a career over family but is this really a choice? In Peskowitz's opinion 'we should not confuse a bunch of decisions we make with real "choice" that we don't have as women or mothers' (2005: 107).

If Nina's attitude suggests that the odds are stacked against Lynette's successful integration into ideal worker status, then the following day will push the Scavo family's role reversal to the limit. It may be that the maternal wall prevents women from full access to the workplace but it is soon clear that the other side of the coin is 'domesticity's peculiar structuring of market work and family work [which] hurts not only women but also men...' (Williams 2000: 3). It may have been Tom's choice to take a break from work but by day two he is confronted with the stark reality of life as a stay-at-home father. Williams confirms something that many working women already know, despite 'our self-image of gender equality, American women still do 80 percent of the child care and two-thirds of the housework' (2) and, according to one study, 'an average American father spends twelve minutes a day in solo child care' (3). If these figures are to be believed, then it is hardly surprising that Tom is flat on his back after only 24 hours of domesticity and childcare, and it is obvious that it is not only Lynette who will have to prove her worth. After all, being an ideal worker depends upon a primary caregiver providing 'immunity from family work' (20). Lynette may tell Nina that her children 'won't get in the way of the job because my husband's staying home with them from now on', but this very much

depends on Tom's ability to prove himself a reliable caregiver. Untrained for the job, he is soon to find out that, in Lynette's words, 'being a mom is like being an E.R. doctor – there are no days off' (2: 1).

AND IN THE REAL WORLD...

Ellen Goodman writes in the *Washington Globe* that she knows that she should not like *Desperate Housewives*, as it is 'either post-feminist or pre-feminist. It's too racy or too retro. It's either an example of the backlash or a product of the cultural collapse' but, despite all of this, it had her from 'hello' (2004: A19). Unlike India Knight's take on the subject, it is not women's longing to be housewives that makes the show so compelling but Lynette's depiction of 'the power of the updated and eternal myth of momhood' (ibid). What is refreshing about Goodman's article is that it pulls no punches when talking about the reality of working mothers' lives and, unlike Knight's homage to the fantasy of domesticity, recognises that the present tide of new American mothers are facing a fairly unique workplace problem. Echoing Peskowitz's observations that the current trend of new mothers are 'part of an explosion into parenting by a certain class of women and men in their thirties and forties' (2005: 69), she says that these are the mothers that 'worked hard and had children later' adding that the 'postpartum choices they face include 60-hour jobs or none' (ibid). What these women find, according to prominent sex discrimination attorney Judith Vladek, is that building a career first and having children later makes no difference to their prospects. She says:

Women should be told the truth. Having a baby is used as an excuse not to give women opportunities. The assumption is that they have made a choice, that having children ends their commitment to their career...putting off motherhood doesn't

help. (quoted in 2000: 69)

Barbara P. Billauer, President of the Women's Trial Board, confirms this in her testimony to the ABA's Commission on Women:

Every single woman that I have spoken to without exception, partner or associate, has experienced rampant hostility and prejudice upon her return [from maternity leave]. There is a sentiment that pregnancy and motherhood has softened her, that she is not going to work as hard. (ibid)

In the face of such damning evidence it is no surprise that the women of *Desperate Housewives* evoke Friedan's housewives – with one basic difference – as Goodman reminds us 'Lynette's entire cohort grew up with the message that women can choose what they want' (2004: A19). This may be so but it should be clear that this rhetoric of choice is brought into play when describing a no-win situation. Choose motherhood or a career. Have-it-all or nothing, love it or leave it – in the face of this Hobson's choice most women are stymied. Asking if we have come 'full circle to a post-feminist mystique' Goodman wonders if American women 'have been so busy fighting the mommy wars that we've forgotten that shared pressure' (ibid). Maybe the rhetoric of choice has lulled mothers into a false sense of security and led to a resurgence of Friedan's problem that has no name. The difference being that the women that are now suffering were born into a post-feminist world that gives them education, careers and the illusion of equality; only to have that illusion shattered when they attempt to combine motherhood and work. The ladies of Wisteria Lane may be desperate but is it any surprise when we find that equality no longer extends to them?

You Motherfucker: Al Swearengen's Oedipal Dilemma
 Kim Akass

Of one thing we can be sure, Al Swearengen is a bit of a bastard. Towards the end of season one of *Deadwood* we are treated to a rare moment of self-disclosure during Swearengen's drunken soliloquy to a whore ("Jewel's Boot is Made for Walking," 1. 11). Much has upset Al over the course of this day but the catalyst for this particular outburst is his discovery that Trixie, his number one whore and confidante, has visited Sol Star for an illicit fuck 'on the house'. Swearengen's revenge is to summon Star to the Gem and, forcing Trixie to witness the transaction, he orders the bewildered man to pay him \$5 for the pleasure of sex with his favorite whore. Humiliating Trixie publicly is not enough retribution for Swearengen, however, and he sends her packing saying: 'tonight you sleep with your own.' Picking an unnamed whore and in the privacy of his bedroom his full rage erupts as he demands anonymous, disconnected sex, bluntly expressed to the wretched woman:

I was fuckin her and now I'm going to fuck you if you don't piss me off or open your yap at the wrong fuckin' time. The only time you're supposed to open your yap is so I can put my fuckin' prick in it. Otherwise you shut the fuck up.

As the owner of the Little Gem and all the whores in it, Al is clearly somebody that can take his pick of women without sentimentality and yet his naked contempt for the woman in his bed remains shocking. Angry at her vocal affirmation of him Swearengen tells the unfortunate prostitute: 'shut the fuck up. You suck my dick and shut the fuck up.'

In many ways Swearengen's emotive response to Trixie's infidelity seems like an overreaction. She may have dented his sense of sexual prowess and knocked his masculinity, but he has had to weather worst storms than this: he has a price on his head throughout most of season one; his saloon has had to survive competition in the form of rival Cy Tolliver's up-market Bella Union; and he is only just managing to maintain a shaky

hold over his business dealings in Deadwood. The Reverend Smith's gradual descent into madness and the re-emergence of the warrant on Swearengen's head may have upset him further but it is surely Trixie's illicit fuck that has led Al to this particular emotional juncture. An unnerving moment in the narrative, it is, as I shall argue, the emotional catharsis of this scene that not only reveals much about this paradoxical character but also exposes a type of misogyny peculiar to twenty first century representational forms.

'My cherry's interfering with my work.'

Karen Horney's investigation into male sexuality suggests that one of the causes of psychological problems in the male originates in his dread of woman 'as a sexual being' (Horney 1993: 116). Building upon Sigmund Freud's formulation of the castration complex, Horney argues that because 'the male has to entrust his genitals to the female body, that he presents her with his semen and interprets this as a surrender of vital strength to the woman, similar to his experiencing the subsiding of erection after intercourse as evidence of having been weakened by the woman' (116-117). Swearengen's extreme reaction to Trixie's infidelity is arguably because her visit to Star has implied a sexual desire not satisfied by the outwardly virile and sexually confident Swearengen. Already made vulnerable by his attachment to Trixie, Al's masculinity certainly seems to have been affected by a 'dread of not being able to satisfy the woman' (126) as well as a more general sense of betrayal. He may have a cocksure demeanor and power in the town but his reaction to Trixie's 'house call' exposes a vulnerability, one that bares itself in anger projected onto the unnamed woman and in his very physical and sexual silencing of her.

Horney's work has long been overlooked but here it seems to offer a persuasive account of the troubling misogyny at work in *Deadwood*. Convinced that Freud's 'controversial postulate of the Oedipus complex' is a stage of development 'that every child has to go through' (125) she suggests that much of man's insecurity stems from an earlier age

when he 'felt himself to be a man, but was afraid his masculinity would be ridiculed.' Adding 'traces of this insecurity will remain more frequently than we are inclined to admit, frequently hidden behind an overemphasis on masculinity as a value in and of itself.' (127) It may be that Trixie's illicit orgasm has opened a chink in Swearengen's emotional armor and reveals much about the fragility of his masculinity. Horney's thesis offers us insight into the trauma experienced by Swearengen as his sense of masculinity collapses so totally in the face of Trixie's infidelity.

It's like doing one thing and meaning a mother.

This peek at Swearengen's unconscious and his character's motivation is nothing compared to the revelations that follow. He may tell the prostitute 'don't be sorry, don't look fuckin' back because, believe me, no-one gives a fuck.' But this is exactly what he does over the course of the next few minutes. Launching into the sorry tale of his early life and setting the pace of the blowjob to match the narrative thrust of his story, Swearengen reveals the source of his misery – that his mother sold him to 'Mrs. fat-ass fucking Anderson' - the same woman that now supplies Al with women for the Little Gem. That this is the root cause of his rampant misogyny is evidenced by Swearengen's rising vitriol and heightened sexual arousal as his story unfolds. It may be the 'seven dollars and sixty-odd fucking cents' that she left him with 'on her way to sucking cock in Georgia' that fuels his outrage but the fantasy he weaves around his mother's life exposes a torment at the heart of Swearengen's sense of masculinity. Postulating that she probably became 'a mayor or some other type of success story unless by some fucking chance she wound up as a ditch for fucking come' Swearengen uses this maternal fantasy to achieve his own orgasm. Telling the woman in his lap 'Now. Fucking. Go. Faster ...' he ejaculates, seemingly adding his own ejaculatory fluid to the 'ditch' that is his mother.

If Horney is to be believed, men's problems are indeed the result of their early relationship with the mother since it is she that is 'usually entrusted with the care of the infant.' She

continues 'it seems to be very difficult to fully free oneself from these early experiences' (126). Swearengen's orgasmic rendering of this last memory of his mother – the return of the repressed - perfectly illustrates Horney's hypothesis and serves as a prime example of the direct link between the sins of the mother revisited in the son. By abandoning him to the care of 'Mrs. fat-ass fucking Anderson' Swearengen's mother has not only committed one of our society's greatest maternal crimes (short of infanticide) but also left her son to negotiate his own upbringing under the protection of an indifferent caretaker and ruthless businesswoman, one that supplies children to brothels. If it is true that 'at puberty a boy's task is obviously not merely to free himself from his incestuous attachment to his mother, but more generally, to master his dread of the whole female sex' (140-141) then Swearengen's path to mature masculinity was clearly fraught with difficulty. And it does not take much to equate this drunken, humorless, ejaculating man with the specter of an abused childhood.

So far, so damaged. This brief, and some might say myopic, analysis of Swearengen's blowjob argues that he is certainly much more of a 'motherfucker' than a 'cocksucker.' But is this not a pointless exercise? Surely this is a good time to remind ourselves that Al Swearengen is the fictionalization of a real character that resided in Deadwood in 1876.

Frontier life – fact or fiction?

Al Swearengen (sometimes spelled Swearingen or Swerengen) reportedly did 'move to Deadwood in the summer of 1876' and was 'one of the earliest non-mining men in the area' ('Legends of America' March 2005). History tells us that he was the owner of the Gem Variety Theater, which provided entertainment for the men of the community in the form of boxing prize fights, comedians, dancers and singers. Of course this was just a front for the serious business of selling women for sex and the saloon 'soon gained a reputation for its debasement of the women who were pressed into service there' (March 2005). Swearengen and his staff were notorious for brutality and 'The Gem had a

reputation for the most vile entertainment featuring the debasement of women in a generally violent and wide open town' (Fall 2005). Swearengen's callous attitude to women is well documented and creator David Milch has obviously carefully considered the background of his character despite the infamously untrustworthy nature of the frontier's history. What then prompted Milch (other than narrative efficacy), to divert from Al Swearengen's 'real' story into yet another tale woven from poetic and dramatic license? What do we make of Swearengen's maternal abandonment issues when it is revealed that he was one of twin brothers and, 'the oldest of eight children, raised by parents Daniel and Keziah Swerengen until they were adults in Iowa' (March 2005)? In the light of a relatively stable upbringing it appears that the dramatic license taken here may tell us more about the demands of the western genre and our own cultural preoccupations than my initial investigation into this character's sexual peccadilloes would suggest.

Moreover, what are we to make of the fictionalization of Swearengen's domestic circumstances? Historian of American nineteenth century sexual politics, G.J. Barker-Benfield is useful here suggesting that pioneer couples 'have not captured American myth' anything like the lone hunter with 'the promise of total mobility because he was free of women' (2000: 8). It may not actually matter to the development of the narrative that in reality Swearengen was married three times, arriving in Deadwood with his first wife, Nettie, who soon left him and later divorced him citing spousal abuse. His violence towards Trixie in 'The Pilot' for killing a punter in self-defense quickly and effortlessly establishes Swearengen's attitude to women, dispensing with the need for a huge back-story and instigating a narrative arc that culminates in his drunken blowjob. What is most interesting about this particular revelation is that it adds another, more contemporary, layer to the legend of the lone frontiersman that Barker-Benfield suggests 'was largely a creation of the eastern imagination' (8) – possibly not unlike that of the East Coast based HBO. The excision of Nettie from the narrative removes any threat of a civilizing force traditionally symbolized by the frontier wife. It also serves to bolster the already well-

established myth of the 'cold, implacable pioneer' (6) that still haunts our post-modern imaginations.

Returning to the woman in Swearengen's bed is informative in the light of this reasoning. Especially when we consider that the real Swearengen recruited his women from the east and, being a peddler of dreams, promised to make them performers at his theater. Once the women had arrived courtesy of a one-way ticket paid for by him, they found themselves stranded 'with little choice other than to work for the notorious Swearengen or be thrown into the street. Some of these desperate women took their own lives rather than being forced into a position of virtual slavery' (2003-2005). Compare this to Milch's fictional Swearengen whose whores

are bought at the same orphanage where he was raised, including a cripple who has absolutely no use to him at any pragmatic level. He is constantly presenting himself as a pure pragmatist, yet to insist on getting your whores at one particular orphanage is at once an impulse to take revenge on women, and also to rescue women (salon.com 2005).

Unsurprisingly it seems that the real Swearengen shared none of our Al's irrational impulses to rescue women but this particular twist to the tale is as revealing as Swearengen's blowjob confession. The contradictory emotional pull that Milch invests in his character is obviously itself a pragmatic decision and there is a certain neatness to the cause and effect nature of taking revenge on women while also rescuing them. But the question remains: why does he need to take revenge on them at all? Karen Horney may again shed some light here. Arguing that men 'have never tired of fashioning expressions for the violent force by which man feels himself drawn to the woman, and side by side with his longing, the dread that through her he might die and be undone' (1993: 134). She adds, '[may] not this be one of the principal roots of the whole masculine impulse to creative work – the never-ending conflict between the man's longing for the woman and his dread of her?' (135). Maybe this is a question that could be leveled at the writers of

Deadwood. Especially in the light of Swearengen's real back-story that reveals no particular motivation for his brutality towards women, just the result of a 'cold' and 'pitiless' attitude towards the push westwards with 'the demands of this struggle [affecting] the attitude of the American male toward his wife and family' (2000: 5).

If *Deadwood's* representation of Swearengen owes more to post-Freudian and post-Feminist thinking than a nineteenth century sensibility, what do we make of our twenty-first century Swearengen's misogyny? As a media literate audience we are smart enough to know that, among other things, visual fiction often demands the compression of many characters into one, a series of events into a single action-packed day, and the suspension of disbelief in order to allow the drama to work. It should not matter to us that the real Swearengen was, by all accounts, more of a brutal misogynist than the one portrayed in *Deadwood*. As the central character of the series it is vital that viewers find him engaging enough to care about and yet realistic and compelling enough to watch week after week. In fact, is it not remarkable (blowjob aside) that compared to other portrayals of masculinity in *Deadwood*, Swearengen is positively agreeable? Cy Tolliver is a good example. Beating Flora and Miles Anderson to near-death in public in order to 'make an example of them' proves his implacable attitude towards women and children (or teenagers). He shows no remorse for forcing *his* favorite whore, Joanie Stubbs, to shoot Flora to 'put her out of her misery' after he has shot her brother ("Suffer Little Children," 1. 8) and evokes Alexis de Tocqueville's description of the frontier man as someone who is 'a cold and insensible being' (2000: 6). And, to this extent, Tolliver better embodies the nineteenth century American frontier male as 'hard, closed off from the feelings regarded ... as "natural to the heart" (7) than Swearengen.

If Tolliver is a more reliable representation of nineteenth century masculinity (interestingly there is no real Cy Tolliver to compare him to) then it is not surprising that Swearengen is a more sympathetic and complex character than his ancestor. After all, if a contemporary

audience is to identify with and have sympathy for a man capable of appalling acts of brutality and rampant misogyny then we must be given sufficient motivation. With an eye to post-feminism, and in order to wreak his revenge on women, what better justification can he be given than a mother that abandoned him to a terrible fate? After all, if Horney is to be believed the dread of woman is so powerful that 'the grotesque nature of the anxiety, as we meet with it in the symbolism of dreams and literary productions, points unmistakably to the period of early infantile fantasy' (1993: 141). Not Swearingen's early infantile fantasy of course, especially now that we know the 'true story' behind his characterization, but the projection of this dread onto a fictional character.

The Dread of Woman

Returning to Swearingen's blowjob scene should be instructive in light of the above. The grotesque nature of the dread of woman (or the anxiety surrounding it) seems to be so threatening to the creators of *Deadwood* as to insinuate itself onto Swearingen's drunken climax. Horney may reassure us that, despite man's attitude to motherhood being a 'large and complicated chapter. ... [even] the misogynist is obviously willing to respect woman as a mother and to venerate her motherliness under certain conditions' (114). But there is little evidence of this within *Deadwood*, and particularly in this scene, as the absence of respect is replaced by degradation and humiliation. In fact, by applying a modern day cause and effect sensibility to the character of Swearingen – as an alibi for his terrible misogyny – an even more sinister dread of woman emerges, one that is evidenced by the sexualizing of the mother to achieve climax and one that obviously haunts the creators of *Deadwood*. This terrible dread is usually only alluded to and, further, is one that the male has 'many strategic reasons for keeping ... quiet.' (136).

Horney argues that for men the real dread of woman is not due to the castrating mother, or the castrated mother as theorized by Freud, but the 'dread of his own inadequacy, of being rejected and derided' because as a boy his 'penis is too small for his mother's

genital' (142). Thankfully she assures us that this is all an unconscious process, but nevertheless argues that as 'it is the mother from whom we receive not only our earliest experience of warmth, care, and tenderness, but also our earliest prohibitions' (126) the resulting power over her son means that he is hit 'in a second sensitive spot – his sense of genital inadequacy, which has presumably accompanied his libidinal desires from the beginning' (142). The result of this is, for Horney at least, 'of vital importance' as the boy's frustration 'by his mother must arouse a twofold fury in him: first through the thrusting back of his libido upon itself, and secondly, through the wounding of his masculine self-regard.' She thus concludes 'the impulses take on a sadistic tinge' (143). If Swearengen's blowjob is a purely fictional twenty-first century fantasy then what are we to make of the sadistic tinge contained within?

Barker-Benfield's investigation into the history of sexual politics may prove illuminating here as he suggests that in the nineteenth century 'there was a uniquely extreme distinction between sexual roles in America' (2000: 20). His thesis argues that 'white American men's experience of the increasingly democratic society was one of unrelenting pressure, and that their sexual beliefs and their treatment of women were shaped very largely by that pressure' (liv), Citing 'westward expansion, the economic pattern of boom and bust, the separation of the sexes associated with industrialization, and increasing democracy' (xiv), Barker-Benfield is concerned with how nineteenth century values are reflected in gender roles, especially the evidence that 'male attitude[s] ... demanded not only that two styles of life, male and female, be separate, but that women should remain subordinate, and in the home' (20-21). His overriding concern is that 'the pressure these circumstances generated led American men to view their own sexuality and women in a particular and negative way' (xiv). And he suggests that we are still suffering the damaging effects of this formulation in American society today.

This irony is not lost on him as he describes the political climate emerging from the turmoil of the sixties with the 'leading edge of reaction ... the Christian Right, with views on sex and on the position of women by no means remote from those described in *Horrors*' (xxxvi). It should be noted that he was writing at the time of Bill Clinton's impeachment following his sexual shenanigans with a White House intern and not George W Bush's dodgy rise to prominence. And yet, there is a certain echo of contemporary anxieties contained in his statement that of all the repercussions the most 'salient has been the opposition to women's right to abortion' (Ibid). With the current battle raging over women's reproductive rights and the election of John Roberts, as the country's most powerful judge being 'the first major test of abortion rights for the Supreme Court in the guise of *Ayotte v. Planned Parenthood of Northern New England*' (Lerner 2005). And with the possibility of the *Roe v. Wade* ruling being rattled, if not overturned entirely, there is not much to choose between the ideologies being discussed here. It also reveals the pertinence of reclaiming nineteenth century sexual mores in the twenty first century.

It is not too surprising that *Deadwood*, screened as it is on HBO, the underbelly of the networks and purveyor of the darker side of life, enters into a dialogue with the sex wars raging in America at this present time. Surely, and in this age of self-help and therapeutic confession as seen on TV, the creators of the series are enlightened enough to realize the impact of a scene like this? And, surely something as powerful as Swearengen's maternal fantasy while climaxing into a whore's mouth should not disappear into the ether without so much as a by-or-leave? Given the length of the sequence, and the sheer audaciousness of it, it is surprising that the scene is overlooked on online reviews, commentaries and even on the HBO website episode guide. Is it possible that the nature of this trauma and the dread it invokes is so terrible that the existence of it has to be totally repressed?

Horney again sheds more light on an ever-present resentment towards women that finds its inception in the child's early years. It is worth reminding ourselves that Horney was writing this some seventy years ago, but I would ask the question, has anything really changed when we hear that men's 'resentment expresses itself, also in our times, in ... distrustful defensive maneuvers against the threat of women's invasion of their domains; hence their tendency to devalue pregnancy and childbirth and to overemphasize male genitality' (1993: 115). That Swearengen's blowjob does all this within the space of minutes leads me to echo Karen Horney's words of some seventy years ago:

Is it not really remarkable (we ask ourselves in amazement), when one considers the overwhelming mass of [this] transparent material, that so little recognition and attention are paid to the fact of men's secret dread of woman? (136).

Thanks to *Deadwood* and Swearengen's drunken blowjob I can assure Karen Horney that she need worry no longer. It may have been remarkable 'that women themselves have so long been able to overlook it' (ibid) but with such a clear example of the blaming of the mother for the sins of the son, for the overt sexualization of that relationship and for expressing such utter contempt for the poor woman performing fellatio on him I thank the misogyny and brutality of Al Swearengen. This scene may leave us with a nasty taste in our mouths but at least Swearengen redeems himself by telling the whore 'OK, go ahead and spit it out. You don't need to swallow.' What a gent, what a relief, and long may he reign at the heart of *Deadwood*.

Kim Akass

The Gendered Politics of a Global Recession: A News Media Analysis

With an eye on the global recession and as recent austerity measures really begin to bite, the UK's leading campaigner for gender equality, The Fawcett Society, has argued that it is women that stand to suffer the most with 'some £5.8 billion of the £8 billion of cuts planned [being] taken from women's pockets' (Diversitylink 2011). The latest report from the Office of National Statistics spells out the miserable truth: cuts to local services in England and Wales have resulted in women's jobs accounting for some '66.4% of the total drop in employment in councils (85.710 female job losses out of 129.051 total council jobs)' (Office of National Statistics, in Fawcett Society 2011b). In fact the Fawcett Society is so convinced that the potential for equal employment and pay between genders is reaching a crisis point that in November 2011 the organisation stepped up its usual low key campaigning and, 'in its first "call to arms" in nearly a century-and-a-half of activism', arranged a day of action (Davies 2011). In a week where it was claimed that women's unemployment had hit a new high of 1.09 million, the Fawcett Society urged women to don rubber gloves, 50s dress and headscarves and take to the streets in an attempt to draw attention to the way the Government's austerity measures are eroding equal employment rights and turning back time on women's rights. At that time Anna Bird, The Fawcett Society's Acting Chief Executive warned that, as a society, we had reached a watershed in which 'the impact of austerity has brought us to a tipping point where, while we have got used to steady progress towards greater equality, we're now seeing a risk of slipping backwards' (quoted in Davies 2011).

On the other side of the Atlantic, the economic downturn has been widely reported to have turned a differently gendered course and, according to the media, has 'taken a disproportionate toll on male employment' (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). In June 2010, a 'Statistics Canada' report was published stating that 'male-dominated industries such as construction, manufacturing and transport [have been] hit hardest' with 'more than four in five jobs lost in the previous six months [...] held by men' (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). Dubbed the 'he-cession' by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, North American and Canadian newspapers soon began running stories about the latest gender crisis, claiming that traditional notions of working class masculinity, most notably men's ability to support a family, their 'breadwinner'

status, were ‘under siege’ with men now becoming ‘an endangered species’ (Proudfoot 2010, p.C5). Combined with other social changes, such as ‘de-industrialization’ and ‘the loss of manufacturing jobs’, this latest assault on masculinity has, according to Assistant Professor Christopher J Greig, created ‘anxieties around what it means to be a man at this particular moment’ and has not only ‘intensified [...] concerns as men [...] lost their role as the breadwinner’ (in Proudfoot 2010, p.C5) but has led to North American newspapers being full of ‘an anti-feminist backlash’ where ‘men pine for a return to “the good old days” when men were men – and when women, presumably, knew their place’ (in Walter 2010).

On the face of it at least, the consequences of the downturn in Britain and America seem contradictory. Whereas British newspaper reports claim that, ‘Cuts to public services are pushing the fight for gender equality into reverse’ (Asthana 2010) with ‘the coalition [...] happy to restore an outdated “male breadwinner, dependent female carer” model of family life’ (Asthana 2010), American news reports have focused firmly on how the impact of male unemployment is leading to divorce and the breakdown of the family (Nauert 2011). While the British press talks about women willingly returning to their ‘traditional’ roles in the home, US newspapers report on how the upsurge in female employment is having a negative impact upon the ‘conventional’ family. Can it really be true that the recent recession and resulting austerity measures are having such a diverse and radical effect on American and British families? Are American men truly suffering massive job losses while British women are seeing their employment opportunities eroded? Or is this latest round of reporting just another attempt to coerce families into a ‘traditional’, idealised and heteronormative configuration at the expense of women’s equality within the workplace?ⁱ Taking my lead from Natasha Zaretsky’s account of how the American family has historically been aligned with fears of national decline, I shall argue that the white, middleclass family more than ever stands at the epicentre of perceived threats, not only to the very capitalist system that defines it, but also to one that underlies social, legal, political and economic systems worldwide—Patriarchy.

If, as Assistant Professor Christopher J Greig has argued, changes resulting from de-industrialisation and mass unemployment have left 21st century men ‘expressing a longing for a return to old-style values’ (in Walter 2010) and triggered another round of backlash against feminism, then it will be instructive to consider Susan Faludi’s examination of backlash reporting contained in both the British and American media of the 1980s. If her assertion that the 1980s recession saw women’s equality become so threatening that ‘its slightest shadow threaten[ed] to erase male identity’ (Faludi 1992, p.87) then it will be useful to compare this

against the present economic background which is uncannily similar to the: ‘decade in which factory closures put blue-collar men out of work by the million’ⁱⁱⁱ (Faludi 1992, p.87). My critical analysis of the way British and American newspapers report on the gendered impact of austerity, focuses on what Faludi terms ‘trend journalism’, a style of writing which ‘professes to offer “news” of changing mores, yet prescribes more than it observes’ (Faludi 1992, p.103). According to Faludi, trend journalism ‘attains authority not through actual reporting but through the power of repetition. Said enough times, anything can be made to seem true’ (Faludi 1992, p.104).

My reading of the US print media mainly focuses on *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic* and *The Huffington Post*; much of the British analysis will centre on right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* and left-wing broadsheet *The Guardian*. Focusing on the reporting contained in these particular publications will allow me to explore the tense and contradictory relationship within these news reports between ‘empirical sources’, which are cited as evidence for their claims, and the gendered inflection given to their reporting. What I am suggesting here is that newspaper articles repeatedly ‘spin’ academic and policy orientated research in the formation of ‘backlash’ narratives that are then used to explain the deepening inequalities and discrimination experienced by women. This is particularly evident in recent recession reporting and its impact on the workplace as job-losses by men (as described by the North American press) are specifically spun to emphasize a perceived crisis in masculinity, a loss of ‘breadwinner’ status, while in Britain women’s job losses, particularly those of mothers, is described as ‘positive choice’ with women returning to a more ‘natural’ state of domesticity. This article will argue that both the North American and British press are in the throes of yet another backlash against feminism and that this gendered and family oriented reporting obfuscates more pressing issues such as the impact of austerity measures upon those living on the poverty line – black and working class families.

i

Backlash then ...

According to historian Natasha Zaretsky, the mid 1970s, saw American journalists, policymakers and politicians warning that ‘the “American Century” was coming to a premature and ignoble end, and that the nation had entered an era of decline’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.1). The costly failure of America’s intervention in Vietnam, the fallout from Watergate, the OPEC oil embargo, civil unrest (the tumultuous events of 1968) and the resulting economic

recession, coupled with the sense that America was losing its dominant place in the world order, resulted in the country entering into an era of intense cultural introspection with the nuclear family becoming synonymous with the 'aspirations of the American Century' (Zaretsky 2007, p.6). The recession of 1974-5 had resulted in widespread male unemployment and, according to Zaretsky, fears over a new kind of masculinity within the workplace: 'the freewheeling, antiauthoritarian new worker gave way to that of the fallen male breadwinner, emasculated by plant-closings and corporate downsizing' (Zaretsky 2007, p.137). At the same time attention was trained on the rise of two-earner families and the changes in gender roles that were partly attributed to new social movements like feminism and gay liberation which were seen to undermine the family's normative heterosexual configuration (Zaretsky 2007, p.2). Media accounts 'focused on the deleterious effects of downsizing and plant closings on the nation's male industrial workers' (Zaretsky 2007, p.138) and it was widely reported that unemployment had a far worse psychological effect on men than on women (Zaretsky 2007, p.138).ⁱⁱⁱ

In many ways the events of the late 1970s provide a context for attitudes towards the family, and gender roles regularly found in newspaper reporting since then, particularly those media accounts that portray the unemployed man as 'rudderless and emasculated, his family torn apart by a sudden and unexpected economic vulnerability that not only robbed him of his livelihood but added insult to injury by forcing his wife out of the home and into the workforce' (Zaretsky 2007, p.138). With both Britain and America arguably still suffering the effects of the past decade – the stockmarket crash of 2000, the terrible events of 9/11, the resulting war on terror and the latest global recession – it is not surprising that newspaper reporting on austerity measures and the family are noticeably similar to those of the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, as shown by financial analyst Doug Wakefield's research into the stock market crash of 2008, there are many parallels that can be drawn between the build up to both the 1987 and 2008 recessions (Wakefield 2008). His conclusion is that, as a society, we would do well to learn the lessons of financial history in order to avoid its future pitfalls – a lesson that should also be heeded when considering the gendered bias contained in newspaper reporting on the effects of the recession in both North America and Britain.

Faludi's 1992 book convincingly argued that from time immemorial the feminist movement had been held to account for 'nearly every woe besetting women, from mental depression to meagre savings accounts, from teenage suicides to eating disorders to bad complexions' and that this anti-feminist backlash followed a pattern (Faludi 1992, p.3). A

pattern that, according to American studies scholar Cynthia Kinnard, can be seen in the ‘anti-feminist literature, [and] journalistic broadsides against women’s rights [which] ‘grew in intensity during the late 19th century and reached regular peaks with each new suffrage campaign’ (in Faludi 1992, p.103). In fact the history of backlash is not unique to America or even to recent history as, according to Faludi, every time women achieve a modicum of success in their battle for equality, a backlash occurs. A phenomenon that can even be dated back to ‘the rise of restrictive property laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgements against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe’ (Faludi 1992, p.67).

Looking back to the post World War II era, for example, Faludi tells us that the ‘much publicized homebound image of the fifties woman bore little relation to her actual circumstances’ (Faludi 1992, p.74). Cautioning us to be wary - even of seminal texts like Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, with their focus on the plight of bored and depressed white, middle-class, women - Faludi reveals that: ‘While 3.25 million women were pushed or persuaded out of industrial jobs in the first year after the end of the Second World War, 2.75 million women were entering the work force at the same time’ (Faludi 1992, p.74). Despite Friedan’s focus on the ‘problem that has no name’ the underlying and relatively un-reported problem was, argues Faludi, that women were entering more menial jobs than ever before, admin and clerical positions that were lower down the salary scale and with little or no career prospects. And while it is true that by 1947 women had managed to recoup the number of jobs lost to them in the immediate post-war years, with more women employed ‘by 1952 [...] than at the height of the war’ (Faludi 1992, p.74), public opinion toward women working outside the home had changed:

The culture derided them; employers discriminated against them; government promoted new employment policies that discriminated against women; and eventually women themselves internalized the message that, if they must work, they should stick to typing. [...] The fifties backlash, in short, didn’t transform women into full-time ‘happy housewives’, it just demoted them to poorly paid secretaries (Faludi 1992, p.75).

This change of perception towards working women and the anti-feminist uproar that ensued was, argues Faludi, fuelled by women’s ‘unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home’ (Faludi 1992, p.75) a complex cultural contradiction acknowledged by Faludi but seemingly overlooked by Friedan. A claim supported by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels who assert that, ‘by 1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation’s previous history [...] by 1960, 40 percent of women were in the work force (Douglas

and Michaels 2004, p.34). A state of affairs that led to hyperbolic reporting in publications like *The Wall Street Journal* and *Look* magazine claiming that women ‘had grabbed control of the stock market [...] and [...] were advancing on “authority-wielding executive jobs”’ (in Faludi 1992, p.85). Presumably at the same time as they retreated into the home – multi-tasking as they went.

ii

... and now

By the end of the 1980s, according to Faludi, recession polls revealed that men were of the opinion that the women’s movement had ‘made things harder for men at home’ (Faludi 1992, p.83) and that the family should be ‘traditional’ (Faludi 1992, p.82). Opinions that, according to Faludi, are nothing new as evidenced by the warnings of social anthropologist Margaret Meade who, back in 1949, cautioned that ‘maleness in America is not absolutely defined; it has to be kept and reearned every day, and one essential element in the definition is beating women in every game that both sexes play’ (in Faludi 1992, p.83). A belief that is further supported by sociologist William Goode who confirms that as the century has unfolded men have become more and more bothered by feminism and have regarded ‘even small losses of deference, advantages, or opportunities as large threats’ (in Faludi 1992, p.83). If, as Faludi argued in 1992, ‘establishing masculinity depends most of all on succeeding as the prime breadwinner’ (Faludi 1992, p.87) then it is not difficult to comprehend the impact on masculinity that is compounded with each recession and each round of job losses. Particularly bearing in mind attitudes unearthed in the Yankelovich Monitor survey, which, over a twenty-year period leading up to the 1980s, found that the leading definition of masculinity for men overwhelmingly remains ‘being a good provider for his family’ (Faludi 1992, p.87).

Recalling the way newspapers reported the physical and psychological decline of unemployed men in the 1970s recession is instructive here as journalists asserted that the ‘physical impact of the plant closings on newly unemployed men found that they disproportionately suffered from increased rates of alcoholism, mental illness, suicide, heart disease, ulcers, and sexual impotence’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.138). Some thirty years later recent North American media reports have taken the same route by claiming that: “‘the financial strain of unemployment’ is worse for the mental health of men than women’ with lengthy ‘periods of unemployment [being] a strong predictor of heavy drinking, especially for men ages 27 to 35’ (Salam 2009). According to journalists such as Salam the lack of prospects for

the white male is already leading to, among many other social problems, a decrease in the amount of marriages on offer to 27-35 year-olds (Salam 2009). Adding fuel to this particular fire is the prediction that this crisis is already beginning to unfold in the American working class family which 'is slowly turning into a matriarchy, with men increasingly absent from the home and women making all the decisions' (Rosin 2010). In addition, according to Rosin, this is a pattern that has already been seen in the families of 'lower-class African Americans: the mothers pull themselves up, but the men don't follow. First-generation college-educated white women may join their black counterparts in a new kind of middle class, where marriage is increasingly rare' (Rosin 2010). Again this is nothing new as this particular fear had already been voiced during the 1970s when, according to Zaretsky, the 'anxiety that middle- and upper-class families were coming to resemble their poorer counterparts was accompanied by the related fear that the ostensibly stable divide between white and black families were breaking down' (Rosin 2010, p.13). Quite apart from the ramifications of this kind of attitude towards racial segregation (imagined or not) it seems that the US print media would have us believe that, due to the latest global recession, the white middle-class North American family is in the midst of a crisis of seismic proportions. Unbeknownst to the general reader, however, this crisis is nothing new and has been repeated each time a recession hits the industrial sector.

This view is compounded by journalists such as Caryl Rivers who claims that 'whenever white men can't get jobs – or can't get the jobs they feel they are entitled to, and when they imagine "others" taking those jobs, there is often hell to pay' (Rivers 2010). It maybe women, and feminists in particular, that are at the receiving end of male anger nowadays but a cursory look at the history of populist rage, according to Rivers, reveals the 'incendiary situation' that inevitably arises when white men cannot get employed. A situation that reportedly leads to: 'Angry, unemployed white men tend[ing] to look around and blame blacks, Hispanics, immigrants and others for taking "their" jobs – even when minority men are unemployed at a high rate as well' (Rivers 2010). The popular American press may well warn that: 'If ever there was a crisis of masculinity, we have one now' (Rivers 2010) but studies reveal that the real crisis is actually among those black or Hispanic working class men who are finding it even more impossible to get re-employed than their white counterparts. A view supported by the September 2012 publication of a Labor Department report stating that even though unemployment rates for white working class men were beginning to fall, black unemployment had 'surged to 16.7% in August, its highest level since 1984' (U.S. Dept of

Labor 2012, p.3). And yet, this focus on black male unemployment and white middle class gender issues overlooks yet another gender twist: black working class women have higher employment rates (53.8 percent) than both their black male (approximately 50 percent) and white female (46 percent) counterparts. Maybe the fact that they only earn '\$0.91 to every dollar earned by black men' and 77 percent less than white men (U.S. Dept of Labor 2012, p.1) means that, for the American press at least, black working women do not constitute much of a threat to white masculinity and therefore do not make good copy for the US newshounds.

iii

The 'traditional' British family

It would seem that recession reporting in Britain, on the other hand, positively thrives on notions of the 'traditional family' despite newspaper reports telling of: 'More than a million women [...] now unemployed [...] the highest number in nearly a quarter of a century and a rise of 91,000 over last year' (Barrow 2012). On top of the redundancies, cuts in services, childcare and benefits, as well as the government's decision to employ an 80/20 ration of spending cuts to tax rises and, unlike reports from the rest of the world, it is Britain's women that seem to be suffering the effects of the austerity measures more than their sisters worldwide. And yet despite the overwhelming evidence of female unemployment, newspapers have continued to report that the gender pay gap is closing and that the battle for workplace equality is won. In fact policy advisors such as Dr Catherine Hakim have gone so far as to suggest that: 'equal opportunity policies, in regards to women's access to the labour market in the UK, have been successful' (Hakim 2011).

Hakim, a controversial figure who is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Policy Studies (which advises on Government policy), is famous for her formulation of 'preference theory' which, unlike most other studies, including the European Social Survey,^{iv} does not take into account how patriarchal ideology impacts upon choices available to women. Despite Hakim's claim that her study is academic, with all the related connotations of objectivity and rigorous peer review, it is clear that her formulation of 'preference theory' underlies much of the report submitted to the Government and informs such policy statements as: 'most men and women have different career aspirations and priorities. Men and women often have different life-goals and policy makers should therefore not expect the same job outcomes' (Hakim 2011). Considering that the Equal Opportunities Commission

(EOC), after undertaking a two-year study into pregnancy discrimination at work, came to the conclusion that the situation was much worse than they had expected, that an estimated 30,000 women a year lose their jobs as a result of pregnancy and the fact that women with children are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of renewed (and law breaking) discrimination (EOC 2005) it seems disingenuous for Hakim to claim that: 'Sex differentials in the professions are due primarily to substantively different work orientations and career choices among men and women' (Hakim 2011). It is equally disingenuous for author, family expert and policy analyst Jill Kirby to argue that this disparity in the workplace 'has nothing to do with discrimination' but is due to "the fact that women become less committed to the workplace at the point in their lives when they have children. They want to spend more time with their children, and regard lower pay as a trade-off for family time" (in Thomas 2011).

If, as the *Daily Mail* informs us, the amount of unemployed women has indeed reached its highest level since 1987 (Parsons and Barrow 2012), and cognizant of the agenda of Government policy advisors, how can we then be reassured by Hakim's claim that: 'Women today have more choices than men, including real choices between a focus on family work and/or paid employment' (Hakim 2011). Right-wing tabloids may blithely tell us that legions of working women are happily giving up their careers in order to become full-time mothers, that older mothers are fuelling the biggest ever post World War II baby boom (Doughty 2012) and that women are increasingly 'choosing to be stay-at-home mothers' (Allen 2011) but is it really a choice when the stark truth is that working tax credits, which used to cover 80 per cent of childcare costs, have been cut to 70 per cent in a country that has nearly the most expensive childcare in the world? Add to that the devastating effect that benefit cuts are having on single parent families who are not only losing 'services equivalent to 18.5% of their income' (Women's Budget Group 2010) but are being paid considerably less than their childless counterparts (£474 mean income per week compared to £674 for single adult in work) (Cribb et al. 2012, p.25) and it is clear that the latest recession will not only have a major impact on children and families but will also have a lasting affect on 'women's long-term career prospects' (Allen 2011).

iv

The sting in the tale ...

In 2009 President Obama reportedly predicted that Americans would have to learn to adapt to a new economy that may favour women who are ‘just as likely to be the primary bread earner, if not more likely, than men are today’ (in Salam 2009). Newspaper reports at that time were full of warnings that men were failing to acquire the qualifications necessary for ‘success in the knowledge-based economies that will rule the post-recession world’ with a ratio of three female college graduates predicted for every two males (Rosin 2011). Men reputedly began moving into areas such as the ‘private education and health-care industries – economic bright spots of the past two years’ with careers such as nursing seeing an increase of 10 per cent of male applications as well as a 125 per cent increase in men studying pharmacy technology (Irwin and Dennis 2011). But they would do well to look at the current state of employment in Britain as, according to a recent Pew research study, men in the US are now ‘faring far better than women in the recession recovery’ gaining 768,000 jobs with women losing 218,000 in the period from June 2009 to May 2011 (Lin 2011). In fact, the figures maybe even worse than that as, according to Gary Steinberg, spokesman for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, ‘Between January 2009 and March 2012 men lost 57,000 jobs, while women lost 683,000 jobs. This is the reverse of the recession period of December 2007-June 2009 (with an overlap of six months), which saw men lose 5,355,000 jobs and women lose 2,124,000 jobs’ (Bureau of Labor Statistics in *Tampa Bay Times* 2012). Underlying this reverse in fortunes is the fact that, according to Gary Burtless, a labour market expert with the Brookings Institution, during the recession, ‘Industries where women are more likely to be employed – education, health, the government – fared better in terms of job loss. In fact, health and education employment continued to grow in the recession and in the subsequent recovery. Government employment only began to fall after the private economy (and private employment) began growing again’ (in *Tampa Bay Times* 2012).

Turning back to the British economy, recent newspaper reports confirm that the recovery is taking much the same shape in Britain as, while unemployment rates have allegedly fallen by 20,000 ‘over the past year, the number of unemployed women rose by 42,000’ (Allen 2011). At the same time ‘at the height of the recession, unemployment among men increased much more than among women’ and it is only the recent welfare reforms that have had a disproportionate impact on women (Allen 2011). Something that our American friends would do well to heed in the light of the latest round of US job cuts which has,

according to a Pew Research Centre report, seen ‘local governments [...] slashing their majority-female workforces’ (Kochhar 2011). Arguably the ‘he-cession’ got a disproportionate amount of reporting compared to the amount of coverage given to the ‘tens of thousands of schoolteachers and other civil servants [who] have been laid off’ in the past year (Kochhar 2011). The recovery looks to be on more or less the same trajectory on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, despite the difference in emphasis of British and American news reports over the past few years, the facts underlying the trajectory of the gendered nature of job losses and gains appear remarkably similar after all.

v

... And the sting in the tail

One of the reoccurring problems is that, whether British or American, women’s wages are increasingly vital to the family budget. And yet while there continues to be a lack of parity in earned income it will always be women’s wages that are sacrificed to childcare costs. Women’s biology may be used as a reason for them to stay home but it is their earning power (or lack of it) and prohibitively expensive childcare that continues to work against them, recession or not. A fact confirmed by new research just published by The Resolution Foundation which suggests that keeping women in work is not just a question of choice in 21st century Britain but an economic necessity as, in the low to middle income bracket, female employment has become increasingly vital to bolster an ever-decreasing family income and maintain living standards: ‘in 1968, men provided 70% of family incomes, women 11%; but by 2009, men brought in just 40% and women 24%’ (Alakeson 2011, p.1). A figure echoing that of America where, despite what backlash reporting would have us believe: ‘More than one-third of all two parent families today would be poor if both parents did not work’ (Coontz 1992, p.260). Indeed, according to Heather Boushey of the Center for American Progress, ‘the typical working wife brings home 42.2 percent, and four in 10 mothers – many of them single mothers – are the primary breadwinners in their families. The whole question of whether mothers should work is moot’ (Rosin 2010), Boushey adds: ‘This idealized family – he works, she stays home – hardly exists anymore.’ (in Rosin 2010).

vi

And in conclusion

According to Natasha Zaretsky, the idealised ‘traditional’ family was originally conceived in the pages of *Time* magazine where, under the editorship of Henry Luce in the 1940s, the publication was used to call ‘on the nation to embrace “the opportunities of leadership in the world”’ by conjuring up an idealised image of the family. Not any family of course but ‘a white, middle-class family made up of a male breadwinner, a full-time wife and homemaker, and children.’ (Zaretsky 2007, p.5). Luce’s vision for the twentieth century – an America that would lead the world through the second World War – was realised through the repeated celebration of this ‘ideal’ family who, embodying the American Dream proved ‘that new household commodities and technologies were creating unprecedented leisure, and that the sacredness of the domestic realm made the Cold War worth fighting’ (Zaretsky 2007). This family was not only unrepresentative of many working class, non-white, non-traditional families but was also, according to historian Stephanie Coontz formed from two opposing and, in many ways, mutually exclusive family ideals – the first (from the mid-19th century) that encouraged the strong mother-child bond and the second (from the 1920s) focusing ‘on an eroticized couple relationship, demanding that mothers curb emotional “overinvestment” in their children’ (Coontz 1992, p.9). This contradictory image of the idealised white middle class woman within a ‘traditional’ family, was not only promulgated to encourage nationalism during World War II but was later used: ‘to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face-creams, hair tints’ (pp. 63-4) and was further utilised to promote the ideal of the American dream.

Looking back over the history of the family it is plain to see how social and cultural changes have historically distorted opinions on parenting. Industrialisation and World War II are prime examples of how, when the economy changed, so did the expectations of both women’s and men’s roles within it and the family. Society may have determined that women work to help the war effort, but it was equally as forthright in its determination to get them back into the home when the men returned victorious and unemployed. By the end of the 1950s, and despite the reality of women’s working practices, according to Betty Friedan, the term ““career woman” had become a dirty word in America’ (Friedan 1992, p.42) and middle class women were increasingly urged by the media to relinquish paid work to look after hearth and home while their men earned a family wage. Aided and abetted by newspaper and magazine admonitions to ‘do the right thing’ this attitude has continued since the post-War

period. And yet one thing has remained constant: since the split between the public and private sphere brought about by industrialisation, masculinity has increasingly been defined by men's ability to support a family while femininity remains linked to women's reproductive capacity.

As we have seen, the gendered nature of backlash reporting and 'trend journalism' conceals the reality behind a recession's effect on the population with women continuing to suffer from a higher global unemployment rate than men. Indeed, despite what American newspapers and British Government policy advisors would have us believe, according to a UN report from early 2009:

Long-standing inequalities in the gender distribution of economic and financial resources have placed women at a disadvantage relative to men in their capability to participate in, contribute to and benefit from broader processes of development. Despite considerable progress on many aspects of women's economic empowerment through, inter alia, increases in educational attainment and share of paid work, deeply entrenched inequality persists as a result of discriminatory norms and practices, and the pace of change has been slow and uneven across regions (DESA 2009, p.v).

This same report goes onto assert that:

The manner in which countries respond to the recession can have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, possibly reversing gains made, particularly through cuts in public spending on health and education and through inequitably designed safety nets. There is also increased risk of reductions in allocations to gender equality and women's empowerment (DESA 2009, p.24).

In addition, backlash reporting ignores the devastating effect that the global recession has had on Hispanic and black working class men and their families in America. Indeed, despite all of the scaremongering in the American press, US unemployment is now down to pre-recession levels: except for African Americans who, despite enjoying a fall of unemployment rates in January 2012 to 13.16 percent 'remains significantly higher than the 8.5 percent rate of November 2007, just prior to the recession' (U.S. Dept of Labor 2012, p.1) and whose unemployment rates remain the largest of all groups. Unemployment remains a problem in America, as it does in Britain, but the fact remains that the focus on white male unemployment in the US media masks the more pressing issues relating to race, class and female unemployment that have emerged through the latest round of job cuts.

This recession is much like any. Jobs come and go. It may well be true that the blue-collar trades are slowly being replaced and that 'thinking and communicating have come to eclipse physical strength and stamina as the keys to economic success' (The Economist 2011)

but the fact remains that all the time the family is imagined 'traditionally', while wage and employment equality remains just out of reach and while the world of work is organised into male dominated industries and female ones, there will be inequality both between male and female employees, black and white, working and middle-class and between mothers and non-mothers. In addition, backlash and trend reporting obfuscates one of the many real issues at stake: that childcare and maternity leave are vital for a nation's economic growth. It seems that families in post-recession Britain are now making the same choices as those made by young Americans in the 1980s when, by delaying marriage and childbirth and by having less children, they chose to 'preserve many of trappings of the postwar *economic* dream by sacrificing many aspects of the postwar *family* dream' (Coontz 1992, p.266), emphasis in original). For journalist Polly Toynbee: 'Family friendly policies are seen as lollypops for women voters, not as economic necessity' but 'States need more people and parents want more babies' (Toynbee 2012). Indeed, if Toynbee is to be believed: 'Making it easy for women to combine work and family is essential for the nation's standard of living: babies are a long-term economic necessity too. Countries that make combining both easy, do best' (Toynbee 2012). A fact that we would do well to remember when reading newspaper reports about the gendered nature of job losses and their effect on families on both sides of the Atlantic.

ⁱ In a world where the print media is suffering falling sales, a cynic might suggest that this kind of copy also trades on middle class angst in order to sell newspapers. *The Washington Post* admitted as much in 2007 when reporting on the agenda behind the mommy wars by saying: 'The ballyhooed Mommy Wars exist mainly in the minds – and the marketing machines – of the media and publishing industry, which have been churning out mom vs. mom news flashes since, believe it or not, the 1950s' (Graff 2007).

ⁱⁱ With only 60 per cent finding new jobs 'about half at lower pay' (Faludi 1992 p87).

ⁱⁱⁱ Presaging the contents of Reihan Salam's report of 2009 (more on this later).

^{iv} Which covers over thirty nations and has been running for eleven years.

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MOTHERHOOD AND THE MEDIA UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

THE BACKLASH AGAINST FEMINISM AND THE MOMMY WARS

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Despite the passing of sexual discrimination legislation, the difficulty of combining work and motherhood repeatedly hits the headlines. This paper looks at the American media phenomenon known as the 'mommy wars' and asks if British mothers can expect to face the same issues and attitudes as their American sisters.

Malgré les législations contre la discrimination des sexes qui s'accumulent, la difficulté d'harmoniser maternité et occupations professionnelles n'en occupe pas moins le haut du pavé et continue de faire actualité. Cet article examine le phénomène médiatique américain connu sous le nom de « *mommy wars* » et s'interroge sur la distinction entre les défis de la maternité en Angleterre et aux États-Unis.

Surveying the acres of newsprint dedicated to the subject of mothers and mothering, it would seem, on the surface at least, that childrearing remains the most important job a woman can do. For example, women are warned that if they work post-childbirth they not only risk damaging their child's prospects (Harris; Doughty), but that their off-spring are six times more likely to be overweight (Borland); they are cautioned not to delay starting a family because of declining fertility (Borland) but, on the other hand, warned of the dire consequences of teenage pregnancy (Phillips). The media storm over Republican Party candidate Rick Santorum's views on single mothers (Murphy & Kroll) coupled with accusations that Britain's 2011 summer City riots were fuelled by the failure of single mothers to raise their children properly (Gold) are further proof of how motherhood outside of marriage is viewed negatively by many. Indeed, after studying a cross section of headlines relating to motherhood from the past decade, it should be no surprise to discover that both working and stay-at-home mothers are prone to depression (Rochman; CTV), a condition no doubt exacerbated by the plethora of media stories about how they should, or should not, be raising their children. It is little wonder then that women find themselves confused and conflicted over the demands of motherhood and how that impacts upon their relationship with their sense of self.

What follows is an investigation into whether the agenda behind these media reports is less about what is best for mothers and children and more about the needs of society. I will first provide a very brief history of the configuration of the post industrial family, paying particular attention to the role of the mother: how she evolved into being the main caregiver of the family and how both the British and American media have, in turn, monitored, commented on, and policed that role. I will then turn to the more recent phenomenon known as the "mommy wars," a discourse originating in the American media that pitched stay-at-home mothers against working ones in an alleged battle between two opposing styles of mothering. This media onslaught, I shall argue, is the latest incarnation of the backlash against feminism which, as theorised by journalist Susan Faludi, comes to the fore whenever women are perceived as making too many inroads into supposed "male domains." Faludi argues that this reaction, or "backlash" can be traced back to "the rise of restrictive property laws and penalties for unwed and childless women of ancient Rome, the heresy judgements against female disciples of the early Christian Church, or the mass witch burnings of medieval Europe" (*Backlash* 67). While we can be grateful that the burning of women has long been outlawed in both North America and Europe, I shall argue that this round of media reporting is repeatedly used to reanimate (and in some cases consolidate) old misogynist beliefs about women's perceived "place" in

the home. In addition, pitting woman against woman in a fictional battle of mothering choices obscures the real issues affecting women in the 21st century, such as the lack of maternity leave, inadequate childcare provision, and equal pay and employment rights.

A brief history of the family in the media

The way parenting has been reported in the media has had a long and turbulent history with notions of the “ideal” family changing from one era to the next. We are familiar with the concept of the “traditional” family,—a stay-at-home mother supported by a male breadwinner—but where does this notion of the family actually come from? And does this familial grouping even exist except in the hearts and minds of advertisers, politicians, and the media? In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz writes about the concept of “traditional parenting,” in which the father, a strict patriarch, commanded total obedience from both his wife and children (10). This was in the pre-industrial era when children were the responsibility of both parents, their care woven into a family and work life that revolved around the home. Journalist and writer Judith Warner describes how the family underwent a major revolution during the late-eighteenth century when industrialisation dictated that men worked outside the home and new ideals of mother “as sacred teacher and moral guide came to American shores ... from England” (134). This new configuration soon brought anxieties about the changing

nature of family life. It was at this time that the gendered division of labour gave birth to the male “breadwinner” role (“a masculine identity unheard of in the colonial days” [Coontz 10]) and the “Motherhood Religion,” which was conceived through “sermons and parenting books that made their way from England to American shores” (Warner 135). This new form of the family meant that fathers played very little part in their offspring’s upbringing, and “maternal guidance supplanted the patriarchal authoritarianism of the past” (Coontz 11).

It was this model of family life that spawned the Victorian cult of motherhood and, according to Warner, “compensated nicely for the fact that, in truth, middle-class married women simply didn’t have much else to do anymore” (135). But it was a model of domesticity that depended on legions of working-class women hired to service those households. According to Coontz, “Between 1800 and 1850, the proportion of servants to white households doubled, to about one in nine. Some servants were poverty-stricken mothers who had to board or bind out their own children” (11). The point is that the “Angel in the House” selflessly caring for her children has, since the nineteenth century, been the preserve of a privileged few reliant on numerous working mothers paid to service the households of the more fortunate classes.¹ In addition, there was an increase in child labour with children forced to work to supplement the family income, leading to calls for

a retreat from the “harnessed” family model (in which a number of families were “harnessed” together in household production) to the “‘true American’ family—a restricted, exclusive nuclear unit in which women and children were divorced from the world of work” (Coontz 13). It was not long, however, before social reformers became increasingly concerned about the effect of new family configurations as middle-class families began to withdraw their children from the working world, and “observers began to worry that children were becoming *too* sheltered” (Coontz 12; emphasis in original).

Family life in the 1920s and 1930s came under scrutiny yet again, argues Coontz, as “social theorists noted the independence and isolation of the nuclear family with renewed anxiety” (13). The Boy Scout movement was purportedly formed in the 1920s with the explicit aim “to staunch the feminization of the American male by removing young men from the too-powerful female orbit” with Chief Scout Ernest Thompson Seton fearing that “boys were degenerating into ‘a lot of flat-chested cigarette-smokers, with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 84). The Chicago School of Sociology was amongst those that believed that the traditional family had been weakened by both urbanisation and immigration. While they may have welcomed the way companionate marriage ensured an increased democracy between the genders, “they worried about the rootlessness of nuclear families and

the breakdown of older solidarities” (Coontz 13). By the time of the Great Depression and fuelled by the economic crisis, families were again forced to share living arrangements, and generations once again depended upon each other in a way lost to pre-Industrial times. One newspaper even opined that “[m]any a family that has lost its car has found its soul” (qtd. in Coontz 14). However, this rose-tinted nostalgia for a family bound together obviously hid the terrible truth of a life lived in grinding poverty as the depression took hold. Numerous accounts detail how family life all but broke down as “[m]en withdrew from family life or turned violent; women exhausted themselves trying to ‘take up the slack’ both financially and emotionally, or they belittled their husbands as failures; and children gave up their dreams of education to work at dead-end jobs” (qtd. in Coontz 14).

The dawn of the 1940s saw the popularity of psychoanalysts like Helene Deutsch who, building on the work of Sigmund Freud, theorised that good motherhood depended upon women rejecting “masculine wishes” and accepting their passive “feminine” role (Warner 73). For psychoanalysts, this notion of ideal or “complete motherliness” was crucial if children were not to be burdened by pathologies in their future lives. It was, however, a fine balancing act and dependent upon women not embracing mother love too completely—a view compounded by Philip Wylie’s now famous 1942 book, *Generation of Vipers*, in which he attacked America’s mothers for raising

a nation of sons “unmanned” by excess maternal affection (194-217).

World War II provided an opportunity to study the results of this particular brand of “smother love” thanks to testing performed by Army psychologists, most notably the Selective Service Administration which reported that “[n]early one-fifth of all the men called up to serve in the war were either rejected or unable to complete their service for ‘neuropsychiatric reasons’” (Warner 73). Of course the reason for this was firmly placed at the feet of mothers who were blamed for over-protecting their sons, at least so thought Edward A Strecker, consultant to the surgeon general of the Army and Navy, and an adviser to the secretary of war (Warner 73). Strecker added his voice to those of Thompson Seton and Wylie and based on his war-time experiences, argued that the nation’s men had suffered negatively from the behaviour of women “whose maternal behaviour is motivated by the seeking of emotional recompense for the buffers which life has dealt her own ego.” A major fault of “mom,” he added, was that she had failed “in the elementary mother function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically” (qtd. in Warner 74).

It was not long before magazine articles started to echo these sentiments, and in 1945 *Ladies’ Home Journal* published an article asking: “Are American Moms a Menace?” Author Amram Sheinfeld linked national security to the way in which mothers raised their

children, arguing that: “mom is often a dangerous influence on her sons and a threat to our national existence” (qtd. in Warner 74). For Sheinfeld one way to counter the problem of neurotic mothers raising neurotic sons was for them to breastfeed “only as long as is absolutely necessary” (qtd. in Warner 74). But this was too late for many, as the author noted that Adolf Hitler was the “only son and spoiled darling of his not-too-bright mother” (qtd. in Warner 74). This sentiment was shared by authors Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F Farnham, who issued the following warning when studying despots like Hitler and Mussolini:

Biographers will, one day, we hope come to understand that their true subject is hardly the man (or woman) they have chosen to scrutinize ... but the mother or her substitute. Men, standing before the bar of historical judgment, might often well begin their defense with the words: “I had a mother ...” (qtd. in Warner 74).

The way mothers were increasingly blamed for the ills of society and negatively represented in magazine and newspapers famously came under the scrutiny of Betty Friedan in her now seminal text *The Feminine Mystique*. Arguing that there was a major change in the way women were represented between the 1940s and the 1950s, Friedan noted that the “New Women” of magazine stories published in the 1940s “were almost never housewives; in fact, the stories usually ended before they had children,” adding that these were the

days before the term “career woman” became a dirty word in America” (35). Friedan surveyed publications such as *Ladies’ Home Journal* commencing in 1949 and notes that after the end of the war there was an increase in titles like: “Have Babies While You’re Young,” “Are You Training Your Daughter to be a Wife?,” “Careers at Home,” “Should I Stop Work When We Marry?,” and “The Business of Running a Home” (38). She argues that by the time the new decade dawned in 1950, there was a marked change in the way women were represented in magazines with “only one out of three heroines” being “a career woman—and she was shown in the act of renouncing her career and discovering that what she really wanted to be was a housewife” (39). A decade later, in 1959, and Friedan describes how she scoured “three major women’s magazines ... without finding a single heroine who had a career, a commitment to any work, art, profession, or mission in the world, other than “Occupation: housewife.” Only one in a hundred heroines had a job; even the young unmarried heroines no longer worked except at snaring a husband (39).

By the end of the decade Friedan argues that the happy heroine had disappeared from print altogether and was no longer represented as “a separate self and the subject of her own story,” but only as one half of a married couple (41). It was as if, driven from the workplace and having no independent narrative, women could only exist in the pages of publications like *McCalls*, living life

through and for their husbands and, more importantly, their children.

As the career woman was slowly subsumed under her identity as wife and mother, the notion of “togetherness,” coined by the publishers of *McCalls* in the mid-1950s, became the watchword for family life. As Friedan notes, this was “a movement of spiritual significance [used] by advertisers, ministers, newspaper editors,” (41) and it trod a fine line between marital bliss and co-dependence:

Why, it was asked, should men with the capacities of statesmen, anthropologists, physicists, poets, have to wash dishes and diaper babies on weekday evenings or Saturday mornings when they might use those extra hours to fulfill larger commitments to their society? (Friedan 42)

Of course, no such questions were raised when it came to the squandering of women’s considerable skills. In spite of the fact that only 10 years earlier women had been deemed capable of holding down jobs and enjoying fulfilling careers, by the end of the 1950s this was considered outside of their realm, in magazine land at least.

Forced to vacate the jobs that they had filled during the war and having childcare support withdrawn, in addition to being inundated with magazine articles espousing the ideals of “happy housewife heroines,” it is easy to see how women began to

compare themselves unfavourably to the domestic goddesses lauded by the popular press. If there is something familiar about the era of *The Feminine Mystique* it is because it was during this time that the image of the “traditional family” was created. According to Coontz, the idealised family that was conceived in the 1950s was formed from two opposing and, in many ways, mutually exclusive family ideals: the first (from the mid-19th century) favoured the strong mother-child bond, and the second (from the 1920s) focused “on an eroticized couple relationship, demanding that mothers curb emotional ‘overinvestment’ in their children” (9). Friedan admits that she *is* one of those female journalists that helped create this image of womanhood “designed to sell washing machines, cake mixes, deodorants, detergents, rejuvenating face-creams, hair tints” (63-4). And it should come as no surprise to learn that “the hybrid idea that a woman can be fully absorbed with her youngsters while simultaneously maintaining passionate sexual excitement with her husband was a 1950s invention that drove thousands of women to therapists, tranquilizers, or alcohol when they actually tried to live up to it” (Coontz 9).

Factor a job and childcare issues into this mix and it soon becomes clear that this romanticised ideal, so often used as an aspirational benchmark for modern mothers, was doomed to failure. It is a fact that, in the light of recent media reports, we would do well not to forget.

And then the backlash

And yet, looking back to this post World War II period, Faludi contends that while Friedan may have written about women being confined to the home, suffering from a “problem that has no name,” this bears little relation to the reality of women’s lives (*Backlash* 74), despite what books like *The Feminine Mystique* would have us believe. “While 3.25 million women were pushed or persuaded out of industrial jobs in the first year after the end of the Second World War,” argues Faludi, “2.75 million women were entering the work force at the same time” (*Backlash* 74). However, compared to the war years, women were entering more menial jobs than ever before and public opinion regarding their working outside the home had changed. Faludi contends the following:

The culture derided them; employers discriminated against them; government promoted new employment policies that discriminated against women; and eventually women themselves internalized the message that, if they must work, they should stick to typing. ... The fifties backlash, in short, didn’t transform women into full-time “happy housewives”, it just demoted them to poorly paid secretaries. (*Backlash* 75)

In fact by 1947 women had managed to recoup the number of jobs lost to them in the immediate post-war years, with more women employed “by 1952 ... than at the height of the war” (Faludi,

Backlash 75). According to media historians Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, by “1955, there were more women with jobs than at any point in the nation’s previous history, and an increasing number of these were women with young children” (34). It is not difficult to see why Faludi asserts that it is “precisely women’s unrelenting influx into the job market, not a retreat to the home, that provoked and sustained the anti-feminist uproar” (*Backlash* 75). This is a claim borne out by the fact that, according to Judith Warner, “at the height of the period [which] we tend to think of as the at-home-mom Feminine Mystique years, one third of the workforce was female. About two-thirds of those working women were married, and more than half of those married women had children of preschool or school age” (137). By 1960 “40 percent of women were in the work force ... almost half were mothers of school-age children ... [and] the figures were even higher for African American women” (Douglas and Michaels 34-5). Statistics like these add weight to backlash arguments, particularly when read against stories in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Look* magazine complaining that women were grabbing “control of the stock market ... and ... advancing on ‘authority-wielding executive jobs’” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 85) presumably at the same time as they languished in their homes suffering from that “problem with no name.”

Looking at the 1980s backlash reporting it is clear that it presages the recent

round of mommy wars, even if the battle did not commence fully until the past decade. Bearing in mind the logic behind backlash reporting, it should not be surprising that in December 1980 *The New York Times* ran the headline, “Many Young Women Now Say They’d Pick Family Over Career,” particularly when employment figures show that by “1984, 59 percent of married mothers worked ...[and] 46.8 percent of mothers with a child under one worked. Black married mothers were even more likely to be in the labor force than their white counterparts” (Douglas and Michaels 56). With nothing other than the opinion of one woman, Mary Anne Citrino, a Senior at Princeton, who told *The New York Times* that “when she marries and has her children ... she plans to quit whatever job she has for eight years to become a full-time mother” (Kleiman 1), the article asserted the following:

She is not alone. At a time when young women have more job opportunities and chances for advancement than ever, many of them now in college appear to be challenging the values of their predecessors. They are questioning whether a career is more important than having children and caring for them personally. (Kleiman 1)

The report instigated a few similar stories, but this reportage died down until midway through the 1980s when another news report surfaced that seemed to confirm the sentiments of the *New York Times* missive. Promulgated

by former advertising executive Faith Popcorn, the idea that women were abandoning careers post-childbirth and choosing “nesting” or “cocooning” over working outside the home gained popularity. Based on little evidence, apart from the “improving sales of ‘mom foods’, the popularity of ‘big comfortable chairs’, the ratings of the *Cosby* show, and one statistic” that “a third of all the female MBA [Master of Business Administration]s of 197[6]” had already returned home (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 109), and Popcorn’s prediction that women were abandoning the office quite quickly became reported as the latest trend.

Familiar as we are with trend reporting it is worth re-re-visiting the notion as it goes hand-in-hand with the way the mommy wars have been written about in both the British and American press. Trend journalism “attains authority not through actual reporting but through the power of repetition. Said enough times, anything can be made to seem true” (Faludi, *Backlash* 104). For example, Popcorn’s MBA figure was taken from a 1986 *Fortune* cover story called “Why Women Managers are Bailing Out,” a story based on the “cocktail chatter” of a couple of female graduates who were overheard talking about their intention to stay home and look after their babies. The story eventually went to print claiming that “After ten years, significantly more women than men dropped off the management track” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 111). *Fortune*’s senior reporter Alex Taylor III neglected to report, however, that 10 years

after graduation “virtually the same proportion of women and men were still working for [the same] employers” (qtd. in Faludi, *Backlash* 110-111) and that even if 30 per cent of 1,039 women from the Class of ‘76 had dropped off the management track, so had 21 per cent of the men. Taylor’s “significantly more women” boiled down to very few, and given that women still bear most of the responsibility for childcare, the big news surely should be that the employment gap was so small.

Fastforward to 2001 and both American and British parents were horrified by newspaper reports of new US research, endorsed by a UK professor, arguing that even if parents chose very high quality childcare, it would be detrimental to children’s development (Summerskill and Helmore). The study involved only 1,300 children, but it caused enough of a furore in both British and American newspapers for one tabloid to proclaim that the “Mommy Wars” had broken out on both sides of the Atlantic. Two years later and, according to Faludi, the shockwaves of the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre meant that America had become enfolded in an “era of neofifties nuclear family ‘togetherness,’ redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood” (*The Terror Dream* 4); a perfect landscape in which to re-animate the thorny old issue of whether women should stay at home and look after their children or continue to work in high-pressure careers. *The New York Times*, with a history of this kind of reporting, was quick to publish “The

Opt-Out Revolution,” which spoke of the pressures felt by mothers in the 21st century and like the women interviewed for their 1980 article, featured a select group of well educated women (Belkin). Each had received first degrees from Princeton and some had gone on to Columbia and Harvard and yet, like the women in the article 23 years previously, once children came along all of these women had decided to “opt-out” of high-flying careers in order to stay home. Journalist Linda Belkin may assert that this is not how it should have been and that the gains of second wave feminism should have meant that women become equal partners in law firms, heads of business, and deans and Vice-Chancellors of Universities, but on the evidence of the women interviewed for this article, once they had reached a certain point in their career, no matter how long they had left it to have children and how good their careers had been, women seemed to stall.

There was an overwhelming response to the story. So many “letters to the editor” were received that for the first time in its history, the paper ran the responses over a number of weeks.² Could it really be true that another generation of women were rejecting the workplace as if it was a real option? Even if third-wave feminism told us that equality and “girl power” was all about choice, surely there needs to be some kind of an acknowledgement that this is a choice that is historically born out of privilege and not one that many twenty-first century families can actually afford to choose, especially as

the economy falters and more and more mothers must work. In keeping with the tenets of trend journalism, the “trend” that Belkin identified in her article was based on the comments of only eight Ivy League women, and despite her statistics about how many women graduated in 2003 (the numbers are unsurprisingly up on 40 years ago), and even though she takes care to outline work done by social scientists on “how the workplace has failed women,” the relentless thrust of the article focuses on how women are “choosing” to stay home after childbirth and “opting out” of the workplace.

At least, this is what we are led to believe. Going back to the issues underlying trend journalism, it should be noted that the problem not only lies in the “spin” given to statistical evidence but the way, Faludi argues, that “[a] trend declared in one publication sets off a chain reaction, as the rest of the media scramble to get the story too. The lightning speed at which these messages spread has less to do with the accuracy of the trend than with journalists’ propensity to repeat one another” (*Backlash* 104).

It is fairly safe to say that the idea of professional mothers “opting out” of the workplace was stoked by the tone of the first few paragraphs of the “Opt-Out Revolution.” Towards the end of the article Belkin goes into detail about the complexity of women’s choices, how they are not set in stone, and how mothers most often have to perform a juggling act between home and work-life.

In fact, rather than focusing on the differences between stay-at-home mothers and working ones, the article clearly articulates the real problem underlying women's choices as to whether they would prefer to stay-at-home or work post childbirth—the lack of available maternity benefits and affordable childcare. It was not long before the American media jumped on the “opt-out” bandwagon and ran a great number of stories that not only supported Belkin's claims, but also emphasized the alleged antagonisms between stay-at-home and working mothers. September 2005 and *The New York Times* added fuel to the fire with another story claiming that women at elite colleges were rejecting careers and choosing stay-at-home motherhood. The media focus on mothers rejecting good careers and embracing stay-at-home motherhood persisted and transmogrified into yet more stories about a full-out war between stay-at-home mothers and working ones.

In March 2010 it appeared as if the British media was set to go down the same route as *The Observer's* Lucy Cavendish who, writing from the viewpoint of a “self-confessed ‘slack mother,’” reported “from the frontline on why motherhood has become such a hot topic.” Cavendish argued that past mothering choices had been simpler. “Upper-class mothers farmed their children out. Working-class mothers took them in.” There was no preoccupation with the health or

happiness of children as they were “seen and not heard” and only since the Second World War had we become so obsessed with our children's health and happiness that we hold mothers to account for their offspring's psychological well-being. Indeed, for Cavendish, mothering has become “one of the most contentious issues around.” She illustrates this as follows:

Working mothers can't stand stay-at-home mothers; older ones think their younger versions are too overindulgent. Those who choose not to have children are militant about those who end up having four or more. Hothousing mothers with their endless Kumon maths classes look down on the more laid-back ones who think children should do what they want, when they want.

As a result, according to Cavendish “there's a war out there.” This is exacerbated by the fact that “working mothers ... spend most of their lives in a state of miserable guilt” looked down upon by a society that continues to laud “traditional” family groupings in which the mother stays at home and the father is the breadwinner.

Newspaper reports were beginning to sound depressingly familiar. For every story informing us that “[c]hildren of working mothers tend to have a less healthy lifestyle” (Hope), there is one reassuring us that “mothers can go back to work months after the birth of their child without the baby's wellbeing suffering as a result” (McVeigh and

Asthana). And the manner in which the press spins these reports has an increasingly negative effect on mothers who, according to Cavendish, use them to justify their own mothering choices, adding fuel to the fire of the media's mommy wars. According to family therapist, Suzanne Fleetwood: "There is a competitive streak in this generation of middle-class parents ... many women have given up highly paid jobs to look after their children, and so their child becomes their job" (qtd. in Cavendish). One of the problems with this kind of highly competitive mothering—in today's culture where mothers are held to account for their children's psychological happiness—is that "if the mother is deemed as doing a 'good job', then all of her frustration at giving up the power she held . . . is worth it. If, however, her child turns out to be not very bright . . . then her fragile confidence will be shattered" (qtd. in Cavendish).

The not-so-hidden Agenda

This may well be true but it does not explain how newspaper headlines about choices made by women become translated into an outright rejection of feminism and a war between mothers. This issue is made clear in Miriam Peskowitz's 2005 publication *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars* in which she argues that the mommy wars have turned motherhood into an identity issue and that this focus on "choice" "diminish[es] the parent problem by expressing it in the trivial terms of

catfights" (6). No one even questions the gender bias that is reinforced in every news report interrogating the effect working mothers have on their children while disregarding the role fathers may play. For Peskowitz, there is something deplorable at the core of the media's mommy wars as she argues that "[f]ar from helping us understand the social and political stakes of motherhood, the media's Mommy Wars ... transform[ed] parenting into a style war" (6). Moreover, it is a style war that has obscured the real issues facing working mothers—like those of the gender pay gap, the prohibitive cost of reliable childcare, and the continued reliance on women to not only look after the children, but to provide the majority of domestic support as well. A statistic evidenced by a 2002 study by Phyllis Moen, director of the Cornell Employment and Family Careers Institute, puts the experiences of families into a wider context. Out of 1,000 married middle-class families surveyed, 40 percent had fallen back into the "neo-traditional" working pattern of mothers either staying at home with their children or working part-time and fathers taking the role of breadwinner. However, this is not because women necessarily wanted to leave their jobs once their children came along, but because, "Parents are at odds with the workplace, and mothers are bearing the brunt of this mismatch" (Peskowitz 70). In fact, as Peskowitz argues, "today's workplace makes it increasingly

difficult for two people who are really committed to their jobs to also raise a family” (71).

The *Observer*’s political editor, Gaby Hinsliff, amply demonstrates this point. Hinsliff gave up her highly pressurised role as a journalist after giving birth to her first child. This was less about a choice than it was about the impossibility of combining two equally demanding roles. Hinsliff’s account is illuminating, as she writes: “Surrender steals up on the working mother like hypothermia takes a stranded climber: the chill deepens day by day, disorientation sets in, and before you know it you are gone.” Her article makes it clear that she did not feel that she had made a free choice to give up her full-time job, or one based on a need to spend 24-hours a day with her child, but a Hobson’s choice made within the constraints of a system that “pulls fathers into the ideal worker role and mothers into lives framed around caregiving.” It is a sentiment shared by the Distinguished Professor of Law, Joan C Williams, who argues that the persistent gendered wage gap exists because the structure of the workplace perpetuates the economic vulnerability of those caring for others, particularly mothers. In fact, for Williams, the organisation of the market place and family work leaves women with only two options:

They can perform as ideal workers without the flow of family work and other privileges male ideal workers enjoy. That is not equality. Or they

can take dead-end mommy-track jobs or “women’s work.” That is not equality either. A system that allows only these two alternatives is one that discriminates against women. (39)

We would do well to heed the words of Williams when she tells us that one of the main problems facing post-feminist women this century is “less about the obstacles faced by women than [...] about the obstacles faced by mothers” (qtd. in Belkin). It is a point well made and highlighted in every news report about smart, independent women “choosing” to walk away from their careers after childbirth.

The spin in the tale

The *Observer*’s 2001 article warned readers not to panic about stories regarding the possible detrimental effect of childcare on their children as authors Summerskill and Helmore argue that “the research trumpeted around the world might not be right”. The story behind the story was that figures are “spun” to accommodate the views of journalists, politicians, and cultural commentators alike. It seems that even academics are not above adding an inflection of their own as many of the co-researchers involved in this particular study quickly distanced themselves from Professor Jay Belsky, the Birkbeck academic who endorsed its findings. Summerskill and Helmore argue that this is “not the first time that millions of parents have been terrified by claims from apparently reputable

researchers,” but there is some surprise that this time it is a respected academic that has “hijacked” the story and interpreted the findings “in a way that will advance his anti-childcare agenda”. Leading statistician on the study, Margaret Burchinal, goes so far as to say that “Belsky interprets the findings very differently from us ... Our results do not actually support his conclusions” (qtd. in Summerskill and Helmore.). This is a statement that should have served as a warning in the ensuing decade of “mommy wars” inspired newspaper reports and more particularly in the light of the director of Daycare Trust, Stephen Burke’s, reassurance that “based on evidence in this country, ... good quality childcare has benefits for children, not just in terms of learning, but in terms of positive behaviour” (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore).

Back in April 2007 *The Washington Post* published an article revealing that “The ballyhooed Mommy Wars exist mainly in the minds—and the marketing machines— of the media and publishing industry, which have been churning out mom vs. mom news flashes since, believe it or not, the 1950s” (Graff). The story argues that despite claims to the contrary, “75 percent of mothers with school-age children are on the job. Most work because they have to. And most of their stay-at-home peers don’t hold it against them” (Graff). *The Washington Post* went even further, however. They exposed yet another agenda behind the mommy wars, revealing that

battleground terminology, which has nothing to do with mothering, was being deliberately used to manipulate readers into buying newspapers. According to E. J. Graff, “everyone knows that a war, any war, is good for the news business,” and for author Caryl Rivers, the additional turn of the screw is that it is well known that “middle and upper-middle class women are a demographic that responds well to anxiety”(qtd in Graff). With this in mind, it is easy to see how telling women “that working will damage their marriages, harm their health and ruin their children” encourages them to “buy your magazine, click on your Web site, blog about your episode and write endless letters to the editor” (qtd in Graffn. pag.).

The *Washington Post* may well argue that the mommy wars were just a cynical ploy to sell newspapers, magazines, and books, but the truth is that it also successfully distracted mothers from the real issues at stake. This fact had been exposed in 2001 by *The Observer* when Stephen Burke stated that research like that propagated by Belsky not only causes parents to worry about the choices they are making, but he also went on to explain the following:

[It] can be used to promote an agenda which contradicts the reality of women with young children playing a bigger and bigger role in the workplace. It would be far better to provide affordable childcare which enables them to do

their job and give their children a good start in life. This issue is about dealing with the reality of life today rather than some fictional world of yesteryear. (qtd in Summerskill and Helmore)

It is a point well made, particularly in the light of differences between British and American maternity benefits. In Britain women are eligible for up to 52 weeks maternity leave, and either eligible for Statutory Maternity Pay for a maximum of 39 weeks or Maternity Allowance of £136.78 per week (or 90% of the average weekly earnings – whichever is lower) for up to 39 weeks. We may well pay more for childcare than the rest of Europe but British mothers still do well compared to America, which has the worst maternity benefits in the Western world with no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force and only 12 weeks unpaid leave in companies with 50 or more employees. In fact, America's maternity allowance is so poor that it is in the company of only 3 other nations worldwide—Liberia, Papua New Guinea, and Swaziland. And yet despite this, both American and British mothers work because, like the majority of women with children, they cannot afford not to. Even without the devastating effects of the recent global recession, as Coontz notes, "More than one-third of all two parent families today would be poor if both parents did not work" (260). While there are, of course, women who do voluntarily choose to stay at home after childbirth and make all kinds of sacrifices in order

to bring up their children (and this paper is not a criticism of that choice), it should be clear that the rhetoric of choice used by the mommy-wars reports does little to expose the constraints placed on women that need to work after childbirth, or indeed choose to go back into the labour market, and the lived realities behind those decisions.

Conclusion: Part 1

On 8 March 2012, International Women's Day, the achievements of women and the equality they enjoy in the workplace and society should have been celebrated. The day began depressingly, however, with Polly Toynbee's column in *The Guardian* confirming that women's rights are slowly being eroded not only here, but also in America. According to Toynbee, "International Women's Day marks the first era in living memory that the equality drive has gone into reverse" ('Calm down dears?')—a claim confirmed by leading British equal opportunities campaigner The Fawcett Society. The gender pay gap may have been reported as narrowing to 10 per cent in Britain, but this is only for women in their twenties. When it comes to British women with children that pay gap remains huge at 21 per cent (Thomas). Even if the pay gap has shrunk to only 10 per cent, should we really be celebrating being valued 10 per cent less than our male counterparts and when it comes to women with children, 21 per cent less? In bald terms, for every £100 that a man earns, mothers are paid £79. If one adds to this the increase in childcare costs in Britain and the

cut in childcare credits under the latest austerity measures, it is clear that British mothers are suffering economically. Single mothers are discriminated against even more by losing childcare “services equivalent to 18.5 [per cent] of their income” (Asthana) while, at the same time being paid even less than their male counterparts—£194.4 compared to £346 for men (Fawcett Society 2011).

Figures show that there are still an estimated 30,000 women a year losing their jobs as a result of pregnancy in Britain (Fawcett Society). Women with children are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of law breaking discrimination with “more than a third of bosses—38 per cent—worry[ing] that mothers will not work as hard as others and admitting to not employing them” (Doughty). Does it not then seem disingenuous for family expert Jill Kirby, writing for the Centre for Policy Studies (the think tank and adviser to the British Conservative Government), to argue that this “has nothing to do with discrimination,” but is due to “the fact that women become less committed to the workplace at the point in their lives when they have children, ... They want to spend more time with their children, and regard lower pay as a trade-off for family time” (qtd. in Thomas). Underlying the mommy wars and the endless newspaper reports about whether women should work post-childbirth or not, is this notion of choice—a notion that is embraced by some in their need to feel empowered against widespread economic and workplace

discrimination. But this rhetoric of choice obscures the real economic facts confronting women and mothers, particularly in the face of the recent global recession, the resulting austerity measures, and the historic gendering of childcare. The decision to be a stay-at-home mother or a working one is not black and white and not a choice for all as women struggle on unequal salaries, juggling badly paid part-time work and family, and shouldering an unenviable portion of domestic and childcare responsibilities.

In addition, policy decisions do not only impact on women and mothers, but on families and the future economy. As more and more couples delay starting a family and families increasingly choose to have fewer children, it will impact even more on an ageing population that depends upon the younger generation for support. This fact is made clear by Toynbee when she states that family friendly policies may be seen as lollipops for women voters, but are, in fact, an economic necessity (“Calm down dear?”). Governments on both sides of the Atlantic would be wise not to ignore this as, according to Toynbee, “Making it easy for women to combine work and family is essential for the nation’s standard of living: babies are a long-term economic necessity too. Countries that make combining both easy, do best” (“Calm down dear?”).

Conclusion: Part 2



Fig. 1

March 2013 and it looked like the mommy wars had leapt into action once again. Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing host of the highest-rated and most listened to talk-radio show in America, used his platform to disparage feminism and feminists (or, the feminazis, as he calls them) for having been wrong all these years. Limbaugh's outburst came directly on the heels of the publication of a *New York Magazine* article claiming that feminists are turning their backs on careers and independence once they have children (Miller). *The Daily Mail* demonstrated how trend reporting is alive and well, only this time on a global scale, when it ran a report on the *New York Magazine* story claiming that, "a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to" ("Rise of the Happy Housewife"). This latest round was allegedly kicked off by the publication of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* and a *MORE* magazine poll, which strove to reveal the root cause of

the mommy wars. Unsurprisingly, this latest round of reporting obfuscates many of the facts in an almost hysterical need to decry feminism and everything it stands for. Although the *New York Magazine* makes clear that the mommy wars continue to be the domain of the privileged few that are economically able to make a "choice," this fact is skated over in the subsequent reports. While not all of the stay-at-home mothers admit to feminism, neither do they decry the movement, and yet, what is repeatedly emphasised in these articles is how women are turning their backs on feminism as they eagerly choose childcare over a career, as if feminism ever told women that looking after children was not part of the deal.



Fig. 2

We need to be evermore alert to what is being reported in the media and why. These "back to the home" newspaper reports depend upon a tradition of mother-centred childcare, but it is clear that images of the "traditional" stay-at-home mother and breadwinner father peddled in the media come straight out

of an idealised past. If it is true that the media has been in the throes of a post 9/11 reaction, a throwback to Friedan's fifties, "cocooning ourselves in the celluloid chrysalis of the baby boom's childhood," then it is easy to see how the notion of opting out could seem so attractive (Faludi, *The Terror Dream* 4). As appealing as this *Leace it to Beaver* style dream seems, with its longing for clearly defined male and female roles and where women do not have to juggle maternity leave and childcare with the relentless demands of paid commercial work, we have to be clear that this is exactly what it is: nostalgia for a bygone time when "unusual economic and political alignments" meant that families had real hope that their economic fortunes would improve (Coontz 263). Even so, any nostalgia for a traditional stay-at-home mother has to be based on inequality and a loss of economic and societal power for women, however much it is dressed up in the rhetoric of choice.

Image Notes

Fig. 1 Miller, Lisa. "The Retro Wife: Feminists who say they're having it all – by choosing to stay home." *New York Magazine* 17 Mar. 2013. 2 May 2013 <<http://nymag.com/news/features/retro-wife-2013-3/>>.

Fig. 2 *Daily Mail* Reporter, "Rise of the happy housewife: How a new wave of feminists are giving up their careers to stay at home because they WANT to." *Mail Online* 18 Mar. 2012. 2 May 2013 <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2295236/Rise-happy-housewife-How-new-wave-feminists-giving-careers-stay-home-WANT-to.html>>.

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(Endnotes)

1 As Alison Woolf argues in *The XX Factor: How Working Women are Creating a New Society*, this is truer than ever in the 21st century where professional or "career" women depend on paid childcare provided by their less well-educated and poorer paid sisters.

2 From two to four, depending on which newspaper report is to be believe

Bio

Kim Akass is a lecturer in Film and TV at the University of Hertfordshire. She has co-edited and contributed to *Reading Sex and the City* (IB Tauris, 2004), *Reading Six Feet Under: TV To Die For* (IB Tauris, 2005), *Reading The L Word: Outing Contemporary Television* (IB Tauris, 2006), *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence* (IB Tauris, 2006), and *Quality TV: Contemporary American TV and Beyond* (IB Tauris, 2007). She is currently researching the representation of motherhood in the media and is one of the founding editors of the television journal *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* (MUP), managing editor of CSTonline as well as (with McCabe) series editor of the 'Reading Contemporary Television' for IB Tauris. Their new collection *TV's Betty Goes Global: From Telenovela to International Brand* was published last year.

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The show that refused to die: the rise and fall of AMC's *The Killing*

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AMC's *The Killing* (2011–2014) is notable as the 'show that refused to die.' Cancelled and resurrected three times, migrating from basic cable distributor AMC to streaming service Netflix, *The Killing* stands as a good example of how series are increasingly being bought and sold in a rapidly changing television landscape desperate for original content. With particular attention to the way motherhood is represented in the both *Forbrydelsen* (2007–2012), and *The Killing*, this article asks: do nationally and culturally specific changes to the narrative of this European acquisition render the US adapted version redundant in Europe?

The transatlantic adaptation of AMC's *The Killing* (2011–2014)¹ is, ostensibly, a simple tale of the acquisition and adaptation of a nationally successful series for a global television audience. *Forbrydelsen*, created by Søren Sveistrup, premiered in Denmark on 7 January 2007² and, beginning its transatlantic journey in Norway in 2007, aired in 32 countries between 2007 and 2014, before alighting on British shores on BBC4 in 2011. In the UK, it entered into a television landscape that had recently lost US television dramas like AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–2015)³ and new HBO shows (as well as their back catalogue) to exclusive channel, Sky Atlantic HD. Transmitting in the prime 9.00 pm Saturday evening slot on the digital channel BBC4, hitherto primarily devoted to documentaries and Arts programming, *Forbrydelsen* slotted neatly into the timeslot recently vacated by Swedish import, *Wallander* (2005–)⁴ and was aimed at the same small, but discerning audience. The dark and broody crime drama with detective, Sarah Lund (Sofie Gråbøl), at its centre attracted record viewers for the channel: soon out-rating the hugely popular *Wallander*, and getting even higher viewing figures than the channel's other breakout import, *Mad Men*.⁵ And yet, the sale and adaptation of *Forbrydelsen* to AMC's *The Killing* is a curious tale of twists and turns that reveals much about the way the US television landscape is changing as well as highlighting the problems of adapting an imported format to a US television industry in flux.

Looking at the way the narrative of *Forbrydelsen* was tailored to a US television viewership, with particular attention to how the erratic mothering of Sarah Lund transmogrified into the 'bad' mothering intrinsic to its US incarnation, this article will argue that the cultural differences inscribed into the adapted narrative inevitably impact upon the adapted series' European reception. In order to contextualize this article, I will be looking at a brief history of how the US television industry developed into an era defined by convergence and digitization arguing that the story of the adaptation of *Forbrydelsen* to *The Killing*, with its various cancellations and resuscitations, points to the way audiences are now being aggressively targeted by new streaming and delivery sites. While there are examples of shows in the past being saved through audience pressure⁶ and while branding has long been instrumental in the appeal to an ever larger audience (Johnson 2012,

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143–144), the transfer of *The Killing* from AMC to Netflix shows how small but loyal fan bases are increasingly being used to lure an audience to new forms of delivery systems desperate to break into a lucrative and global television market.

Background

According to Mark C. Rogers, Michael Epstein and Jimmie L. Reeves, the US TV landscape has, since its inception, moved through three distinct eras: ‘TV I (roughly 1948–1975), TV II (roughly 1975–1995) and TV III (from 1995–present) with each era defined by market forces’ (2002, 43). TV I stood for ‘brute ratings and [was] ruled by the “lowest common denominator” or “least objectionable” programming philosophies’ (44); TV II reconfigured “popularity” in terms of the quest for “quality demographics” and promoted ‘the development of programming that attracted segments of the population that were most valued by advertisers’ (46); and the latest era, TV III, is that in which ‘strong brand identification is not only an imperative ... [but] is also widely recognised as an indispensable marketing strategy across the various forms of commercial television services’ (48). In 2007 Reeves, Rogers and Epstein argued that, due to ‘quality’ shows being developed by cable companies, the 1990s was a decade in which ‘the centre of gravity of American popular television shifted away from the broadcast networks and towards the basic cable sector’. This latter era of television is, for Reeves, Rogers, and Epstein (2007, 83) ‘probably the final moment in the age of television’ (83), a statement that is partly confirmed by the way streaming sites like Netflix and Amazon have recently entered the marketplace to jostle for their position as providers of original TV content.

Reeves, Rogers and Epstein’s prediction, that television ‘is destined to be overshadowed by a converged set of interactive, virtual and mobile communication media’ (83) has not (yet) come true. However, despite viewers choosing to watch television on a dizzying array of mobile devices, the television programme itself continues to be produced by large TV conglomerates that are increasingly forced to find new ways to attract an audience willing to pay to watch commercial-free TV outside of scheduling constraints. HBO famously led the way in this increasingly cluttered marketplace by producing such quality shows as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *The Sopranos* (1998–2008) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005). Uninhibited by the restrictions of network television, able to sell their product to a discerning audience willing to pay for the service and leading the way with its high production values, adult-themes and original writing, HBO became synonymous with a new breed of quality TV show. It was not long until other cable channels stole HBO’s playbook with Showtime adapting the UK Channel 4 series, *Queer as Folk* (1999–2000) for an American audience (2000–2005) and producing original series like *The L Word* (2004–2009), *Weeds* (2005–2012) and *Dexter* (2006–2013). Other cable channels were quick to follow suit, most notably AMC who bought HBO reject *Mad Men* (2007–2015) and breakout winner *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013). But, this is not just a story of how cable channels broke into the US TV playing field by commissioning original series as, behind the scenes, the cable companies were increasingly looking to the development of digital delivery in order to secure their place in an increasingly uncertain future of television distribution.

Again it is instructive to look at the development of HBO as a leading brand in the cable distribution market. Although it was a relatively small company to begin with, HBO (backed by Time-Life Cable) broke into the arena of cable delivery by transmitting its first sport’s event, a now famous NHL hockey game, on 8 November 1972 to an audience of approximately 300 homes. While the programme itself was not particularly notable,

the method of distribution was and HBO found itself at the forefront of a new way of distributing content as it 'represented a new type of programming for cable, a type of programming that would presage the meteoric rise of the cable industry in the thirty years since' (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 48). At that time, cable delivery was only for the re-transmission of television programmes to households that could not receive strong enough broadcast signals and 'existed to facilitate broadcast viewership, not to compete with it' (49). While TV scholars such as Thompson (1997, 44) argue that it is the network with the lowest audience share that is willing to take risks on its programming, behind the scenes it is also often the case that a relatively small network can act as a catalyst to change and take advantage of new and innovative distribution methods. In 1975, HBO did just that and 'operating as an agitator fomenting the satellite revolution', HBO became the first cable company to 'build a national distribution network for television programming using satellite communications' (Rogers, Epstein, and Reeves 2002, 49).

Taking an investment gamble on the live televised distribution of the boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, the 'Thrilla in Manila,' HBO brokered a deal with RCA to distribute the fight via satellite through its pay-TV offering, and the following year it televised the live Wimbledon semi-finals (50). What is important about this development is that while much of the focus on HBO's innovative business practices has been on its subscription only channel and its quality series, most of the groundwork for these innovations was laid some 20 years earlier, without which its later success in the age of branding would not have been possible. Key to HBO's progress in the field was how the audiences increased with the move to satellite broadcasting: a growth from 9000 subscribers 'to nearly 200,000 by the time of the Ali-Frazier fight' (50). This innovation in distribution was enough, as Rogers, Reeves and Epstein argue, to put pressure on the broadcast TV networks with the result that: 'with added competition for viewers, broadcast networks that had once attracted 90 per cent of television households began to suffer significant audience erosion' (50). In 2002 (at the time of writing that article), the audience share was down to 60% for the networks. This erosion has continued with the primetime network audience falling to below 25.6% share by 2009 with most of the audience migrating to basic cable provision (Gorman 2010). At the same time, many of the Independent Stations have become Network Affiliates and other cable stations have increasingly chipped into the market rising from a 1.9% share in 1999–2000 to 3.1 in 2008–2009. It can be no coincidence that the rise of Internet streaming sites, particularly the launch of Netflix in 1997, is having a considerable impact on a TV audience that is increasingly rejecting the scheduled offerings of major networks for the commercial-free, time-shifted and binge-viewing alternatives offered by streaming sites.

Making a killing

It is into this rapidly fragmenting TV landscape that AMC premiered the critically acclaimed first season of *The Killing*.⁷ Comparisons between HBO and AMC are inevitable. Both made their names by screening uncut, commercial-free, Hollywood films with their acronyms attesting to their dedication to the filmic nature of their offerings: Home Box Office and American Movie Classics. While AMC may be a relatively new kid on the original programming block, it has, like its movie-themed counterpart, been part of the US television landscape since 1984. Unlike its subscriber only relative though, AMC focused on classic films and earned its money from fees from cable providers maintained by carriage agreements with the channel. Following the launch of Turner Classic Movies (TCM), another basic cable channel in direct competition with AMC's offering of classic

movies, the channel was forced to radically re-brand and, in 2002, due to the additional loss of subsidies from cable providers, doubled its advertizing slots and began airing programmes that were more attractive to advertisers but, being interrupted with more adverts, less attractive to consumers (Dempsey 2002).

It was not until 2006 that AMC ventured into original scripted programming with its first movie/miniseries that would ‘align its identity with more original programming’ (Jaramillo 2013, 177). The success of *Broken Trail* (2006’s highest rated cable movie, with four Emmys from 16 nominations [177]) paved the way for AMC’s incursion into original programming. As a channel with little to lose, AMC could afford to gamble and picked up HBO’s reject, *Mad Men*. The irony was that, while the introduction of increased advertizing time on the channel enabled AMC to venture into the original series market, at the same time it worked against the channel’s cinematic credentials (178). *Mad Men* achieved an unprecedented audience share for AMC, with the first episode reaching 1.6 million households (178). It also became the first basic cable series to win an Emmy for outstanding drama. It went on to win the same award four consecutive times, along with the Golden Globe for Best TV Drama Series for the years 2008–2010. This success assured AMC’s place in cable television history but it was its next series that would consolidate it and ensure that AMC was considered the next purveyor of original quality TV series. *Breaking Bad* (2008–2014) was a global success for the channel. Vince Gilligan’s story of a cancer stricken chemistry teacher turned crystal meth cook and dealer, along with the success of the next series, zombie thriller *The Walking Dead* (2010–present), confirmed that AMC, although a basic cable channel, could turn out quality TV series that could rival its commercial-free predecessor, HBO.

The problem came when AMC had to consolidate the success of its three breakout hits. With the end of *Breaking Bad* in sight, the channel found itself looking for new products to continue its success. It would be easy to say that, like the network battle for ratings in the past, AMC tried to play it safe, but the TV landscape has recently come up against further challenges. With some 64 US channels now searching for original material,⁸ the battle for acquisition has become even fiercer with competition from streaming channels like Netflix and Amazon. According to Christine Conley at Working Title Film: ‘Because there are so many buyers in today’s market we’re seeing more remakes and format adaptations because there simply aren’t enough writers available to develop original programming’ (2014). In addition, with streaming channels like Netflix enabling viewers to binge watch new series – all episodes of *House of Cards* (2013–), *Orange is the New Black* (2013–), *The Walking Dead* and *Breaking Bad* were made available at the same time⁹ – there is a dearth of new content. In this climate of scarcity, it makes sense then for AMC to look to internationally successful series to fill their schedules.

Adapting *Forbrydelsen* to *The Killing*

With a shortage of original material and desperate to find another ratings winner to fill a *Breaking Bad*-sized hole in the schedules, *The Killing*, it was hoped, would continue AMC’s run of commercial and critical success. The successful adaptations of *Yo Soy, Betty la Fea* (RCN, 1999–2001) to *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006–2010), Showtime’s *Homeland* (2011–2013) from Israel’s *Hatufim* (2009–2011), and HBO’s *In Treatment* (2008–2010) from Israel’s *BeTipul* (2005–2008) proved just how successful the adaptation market could be. Despite an even longer list of TV imports that failed to make the grade,¹⁰ the acquisition and adaptation of *Forbrydelsen* to *The Killing* would ensure, it was hoped, another hit for AMC. Filming on the show started in 2010 and the series premiered on

AMC in the US on 3 April 2011, only four months after *Forbrydelsen* first hit UK TV screens. Comparisons to an earlier police procedural that had been set in Seattle soon became apparent. Whether writer Veena Sud deliberately set out to evoke the long-mourned *Twin Peaks* (ABC, 1990–1991), is a moot point but the similarities were immediately remarked upon: a dreamy, hypnotic tone, murder by drowning of a seemingly popular and uncomplicated teenage heroine complete with the switch from ‘Who Killed Laura Palmer?’ to ‘Who Killed Rosie Larsen?’ (Brubaker 2011; Hale 2012). Coupled with the soundtrack – a curious mixture of music from the Danish series with a *Twin Peaks* feel – comparisons were inevitable. But without ‘David Lynch’s metaphysical whimsy’ (Bianculli 2011) the sentimentalization of a family overcome by grief for their murdered daughter soon descended into an over-blown melodramatic narrative rather than a complex study of a family torn apart by grief (see Kohnen 2013, 267–272; Staiger 2012).

In addition, AMC would have done well to research the reception of *Forbrydelsen* in its native Denmark, as well as the problems encountered by *Twin Peaks*’ refusal to reveal the murderer at the end of season 1 some 25 years earlier, as the outcry caused by the cliffhanger ending of the first season of *Forbrydelsen* in Denmark after only 10 episodes meant that production of the remainder of the series was quickly brought forward.¹¹ The demands of scheduling in the USA, however, meant that 60-minute episodes (without commercial breaks) needed to be adapted to fit around AMC’s schedules of 45-minute episodes (with commercials) in a 13-episode season. The choice was stark: either rush through towards the conclusion of the first season, revealing the murderer, or split the season into two, leaving the audience on a cliffhanger ending that would hopefully ensure their return for season 2. The fateful decision to spread the case over two seasons caused an outcry from both fans and critics, and was quickly blamed for the loss of some 33% of the US audience between the first and second season premieres (down from 2.7 million to 1.8 million) (Hibberd 2015). The downslide continued through to the second season finale that saw only 1.4 million viewers tuning in to discover who had killed Rosie Larsen, and ultimately led to the series’ first cancellation.

In the UK, *The Killing* premiered on Channel 4 on 7 July 2011, three months after the end of BBC4’s *Forbrydelsen 1*, and four months before the beginning of *Forbrydelsen 2*. Despite competition from the original Danish series, initial audience figures looked good with 2.2 million viewers tuning in despite the fact that the BBC4 audience already knew who had killed Nanna Birk Larsen (Julie R. Ølgaard) making it hard to see the attraction for an already-solved crime thriller when ‘one of the most important plot devices of a thriller is suspense’ (Agger 2012, 41).¹² It was also hard to see how AMC’s *The Killing* would fit with a fan base already in love with Sofie Gråbøl’s, Sarah Lund, all Faroese jumper and gritty determination, particularly as Gråbøl’s portrayal of a driven woman unhindered by vanity, freed from tired old gendered tropes, particularly those related to motherhood, had been so refreshing. Despite Mireille Enos’ Sarah Linden having the same disregard for appearance (with Lund’s taste for heavy knitted jumpers) and stoic commitment to solving a case, audience loyalty to *Forbrydelsen* over AMC/Fox’s version soon proved just how difficult the reception for this particular drama on UK screens would be as the second season of *The Killing* (as in the US) began ‘with fewer viewers on Channel 4 than the original series had on BBC4’ (Plunkett 2012).¹³

Adaptation of any series inevitably invites comparisons between the ‘original’ and its new iteration (McCabe and Akass 2012) but the way the narrative of *The Killing* was modified over the course of four seasons is instructive. For example, the unproblematic treatment of Sarah Lund’s haphazard parenting style, continually putting the demands of the case before the needs of her teenage son, is never questioned in *Forbrydelsen*. And, in

a country where adequate maternity leave and high-quality childcare are deemed essential for all families, this is no surprise.¹⁴ American women, on the other hand, enjoy no such luxuries and, in a country with some of the worst maternity benefits of the Western World, the narrative hostility towards the mothers in *The Killing* tells a different cultural story.¹⁵ Little wonder then that a comparison between the way mothering is represented within *Forbrydelsen* and *The Killing* reveals a negativity in the US version absent in the original, particularly towards those women who choose self-fulfilment and/or a return to work after childbirth over domestication.¹⁶ And it is not just the focus on Sarah Linden's 'bad' mothering that sets the tone but the continual narrative denigration of 'selfish' maternity that becomes evermore darker as *The Killing* moves from the basic cable restrictions of AMC to the relative freedoms afforded by Netflix.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that, while the first few episodes of *The Killing* stray little from the original, motherhood and parenting soon become the focus of the adapted version. The location of Seattle (although filmed in Vancouver) provides the perfect backdrop for a dark, brooding series with perpetual rainfall in place of *Forbrydelsen*'s wintry (if not wet) landscape. Sarah Linden is about to depart for a new life in California with partner and son Jack (Liam James) until the discovery of a body on her last day on the job in Seattle presents her with a case she is compelled to solve. Teamed with replacement Steven Holder (Joel Kinnaman), a jive-talking detective with his own shady past, and reminiscent of the odd-couple pairing of Lund and Jan Meyer (Søren Malling), the narrative unfolds in more or less the same way as that of *Forbrydelsen*. Prevented from leaving for their new lives, both Lund and Linden are portrayed as women driven to solve the murder at the heart of the series, both women prioritizing the case over their own lives, including mothering their teenage sons. It soon becomes clear though, through a gradually revealed backstory, that Linden's drive to solve the case and inability to care for her own teenage son is blamed on a childhood spent in foster care after abandonment by her own mother; a justification for her erratic mothering absent from the Danish version. Replacing Lund's mother, Vibeke (Anne Marie Helger), is social worker Regi Darnell (played by Annie Corley), a no-nonsense, straight-talking, woman who hints at the emotional and psychological toll of Linden's obsessive work ethic, an obsession that brought her close to mental breakdown and the loss of teenage son, Jack, during her work on a previous case.

It is not only Sarah Linden who bears the brunt of criticism in the first two seasons, however, as the narrative repeatedly makes links between bad mothering and troubled teens. Subtle changes to the way the Larsens react to the murder of their daughter tell us much about how this particular adaptation can be partly understood as 'a barometer for the state of [the] society' at the centre of its narrative (Nesting, qtd in Agger 2012, 8). When the prime suspect in her daughter's murder case, Rosie's teacher, Bennet Ahmed (Brandon Jay McLaren) is released, Rosie's mother, Mitch Larsen (Michelle Forbes) in a narrative move away from the Danish original, instigates his near-death beating by her husband Stan (Brent Sexton). Stan's terrible retribution and his resulting incarceration, it is suggested, is her fault, as is his subsequent re-involvement with the Russian mafia. Mitch eventually leaves her husband and two young boys and, in another change to *Forbrydelsen*'s narrative, takes time away from the family. This is a move that led to her being named one of the '10 Worst Moms on TV,' a list headed by Sarah Linden, who stood accused of 'not actively trying to kill her son, but ... may end up doing so anyway' ('The Ten Worst Moms on TV' n.d.).

With the cancellation by AMC and subsequent resurrection by Fox and Netflix, Season 3 of *The Killing* finds Linden dragged back into an investigation involving the

disappearance of Seattle street children, a case that inevitably (for US TV at least) brings with it associations of Linden's own troubled childhood. With son Jack no longer on the scene (now living with his once estranged father), Linden is free to become deeply obsessed in a race against time to save the life of death row inmate Ray Seward (Peter Sarsgaard). *The Killing*'s third outing finds Linden's 'bad' mothering temporarily set aside but Danette Leeds (Amy Selmetz), mother of missing teenager Kallie (Cate Sproule), is the picture of neglectful maternity and is squarely blamed for her daughter's fate, and guilty of putting the needs of her boyfriend, Joe Mills' (played by Ryan Robbins) above those of her daughter. Mama Dips (Grace Zabriskie) may have shielded her son's activities from the police but it is Danette who is held ultimately responsible for his actions as she slowly realizes that her violent boyfriend may be implicated in the case. As Danette slowly unravels, her 'bad' mothering is compounded by the knowledge that she invited a violent paedophilic pornographer into their home with tragic consequences.

It is not just neglectful mothers who put their children's lives at risk in season 3 of *The Killing* but also predatory men like Pastor Mike (Ben Cotton) who preys on the homeless teenagers he purports to shelter, and death row inmate Alton (James 'Little JJ' Lewis) who hangs himself in his cell after receiving forgiveness from his siblings for the murder of their parents. In the dark and twisted world of *The Killing* teenagers, removed from parental care, are at risk from all walks of life, including those that should be protecting them from harm. As Linden becomes more obsessed with the case, her final moments with an increasingly desperate Seward not only reveal his apparent innocence but Linden's feelings of personal maternal guilt towards her son, Jack. In this dark world of serial killing, street children and death row, parental responsibility is held responsible for the perils that befall these children – whether murderous or not – but it is the mothers who are ultimately blamed for their bad choices. The revelation that it is Linden's ex-lover, Police Chief James Skinner, Head of Special Investigations Unit, who is the serial killer compounds this maternal guilt. It is heavily implied that Linden is as bad a judge of character as Kallie's mother, Danette, as she rekindles her relationship with Skinner, unaware of his hidden life, before his murderous identity is revealed.

If bad mothering is held responsible for the terrible fates of the teenage victims in the first three seasons of *The Killing*, by the time the series had been cancelled and resuscitated for a third time, this time by Netflix, Linden and Holder would venture into even darker territory. In a fourth season, narrative liberally adapted from seasons 3 and 4 of *Forbrydelsen*, Holder and Linden, who are both implicated in the shooting of Skinner, are called to the bloody scene of the murders of the Stansbury family. The only survivor, Kyle Stansbury (Tyler Ross), can remember nothing of the incident and this final outing of the series follows the parallel investigations into the murders of Skinner and the Stansbury family. Publicity in advance of the final season assured viewers of the freedom afforded by Netflix, reminiscent of interviews given by David Chase and Allan Ball in the early days of HBO: 'we can curse now,' enthused Veena Sud in an interview with TVline.com, 'Holder's not the only one who developed a potty mouth over the hiatus. "Even Linden gets an F-bomb"' (Ausiello 2014). The article goes on to celebrate the joy of the commercial-free environment afforded by Netflix: 'in other words, the show's relatively short six-episode season will actually have a running time closer to eight' (Ausiello 2014). These six one-hour long episodes would allow series creator, Veena Sud, the freedom to delve even deeper into the dark world of maternal denigration.

If Sarah Linden, Mitch Larsen and Danette Leeds were victims of *The Killing*'s misogyny, then the freedoms afforded by distribution through Netflix allows an intense hostility towards women who fail to live up to a culture's expectations of maternal duty.

In this season, it is not only the accusations of bad mothering that Holder spits at his partner that are noteworthy, but the way the narrative develops into a melodramatic invective against women who fail in their 'natural' maternal role. St. George's naval college, at the centre of the mystery, consists of male cadets under the care of Colonel Margaret Rayne (Joan Allen), an unsympathetic commanding officer who practices 'tough love' on her charges. Without that nurturing mother, it is suggested, young men descend into an Orwellian dystopia where aggression and bullying are the norm and empathy for others is scarce. At the heart of the case is the gradual exposé of events leading up to the night of the murders and the revelation that, as suspected, Kyle Stansbury is guilty of the crime. Gradually hinted at along the way is the unprofessional nature of Linda Stansbury's (played by Anne Marie DeLuise) tennis coaching and her sexual penchant for young boys, the cruelty of Philip Stansbury (Bruce Dawson) towards his son and the eventual revelation of the true maternal relationship between Rayne and her charge. Again, while fathers do not escape unscathed from a world in which parental neglect runs amok, it is the mothers who are treated with the harshest narrative treatment as is evidenced by the initiation ceremony that leads to Kyle Stansbury's eventual breakdown and murderous rampage.

If, over four seasons, *The Killing*'s focus had been on bad parenting and neglectful mothers, the penultimate episode of season 4 ('Truth Asunder', 4:5), freed from the constraints of network and cable TV, prove how 'bad' mothers are adjudged when they commit the ultimate maternal sin of sending their sons away to boarding school. Forced to witness yet another initiation ceremony in which boys, left to their own devices, could find ever more inventive ways to humiliate each other, *The Killing* shows just how disturbed these misomaters can be. New recruits, forced to strip and masturbate over a picture of their mothers, with encouragement to 'come over the face of the woman who loved you enough to send you away,' would never have made it past network and basic cable censors. But, in a world in which mothers have been vilified for their shortcomings, this seems like a sad inevitability even if it is doubtful that the audience was actually better off for witnessing a moment like this. Reviews refer to the 'ham-fisted' approach to the family theme contained in season 4 (no pun intended here) and 'the boarding-school unpleasantness' as 'not new ground in its own right, not even by the longest of long shots' (Kirkpatrick 2014). The narrative trajectory of the final season of *The Killing* may show how cultural attitudes can be engrained in a narrative and how industrial context can allow certain portrayals, but the question remains: are such contemptuous attitudes towards mothers and motherhood so acceptable as to go unremarked?

Back in 1975, Mulvey (1989, 40) argued that

the strength of the melodramatic form lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, the cloud of overdetermined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled, in the last five minutes, into a happy end.

Negative attitudes towards mothers in the world of *The Killing*, unlike that of *Forbrydelsen*, are told through the melodramatic form and it is not surprising that, despite the dark maternal territories the viewer has been taken down, the final episode of the series works hard to reach a satisfactory conclusion, a happy-ever-after ending that ties up loose ends and glosses over the preceding unpleasantness. Skinner's killers walk free from a police department desperate to avoid scandal, the remaining bodies of the Seattle street children are recovered, Holder makes peace with Kallie's mother, Kyle Stansbury confesses to the crime of familicide and Linden is reunited with her absent mother as well as finding peace with her son Jack. The last scenes find us some time later. Holder is

separated from the mother of his child and running the local Narcotics Anonymous branch and Linden is travelling, unable to settle, still looking for her place in the world. In a departure from the Danish version that saw Lund boarding a plane, running away from certain incarceration, towards a new life alone, Holder and Linden, this last scene suggests, will become a romantic couple. The world of *The Killing* may have damned the possibility of happy family life, but the movement towards a happy ending for Linden and Holder suggests that there is a hope for the future despite her many maternal 'failings' exposed along the way.

Conclusion

AMC clearly learnt lessons from the outcry resulting in the lack of resolution at the end of season 1 of *The Killing* and, despite critical acclaim, the decision to end the season without resolution shows how difficult it is to adapt a 22 episode series to the demands of the US TV schedules. Its season 2 premiere reflected the disillusionment of the viewers in the USA (and the UK) with only half of its audience staying with the series to find out who killed Rosie Larsen (Outlaw n.d),¹⁷ a drop that led to its first cancellation. With half the viewers lost, it seemed a odd decision for Fox to be so determined to save the series but, reluctant to lose out on their investment, they made a deal with Netflix to carry the third outing. With the audience figures remaining low, it was clear that this was a brief respite before the second cancellation at the end of season 3. The decision by Netflix to revive the show for a third time, this time only available as original content on its streaming service, may seem strange in the face of audience apathy but, viewed in a global context, with a dearth of original content and desperate to break into the mainstream TV market, it makes perfect sense. The audience for the final season of *The Killing* may have been small but it was perfectly formed and happy to invest in the subscription-only service, meaning that Netflix could potentially gain over a million viewers in the USA alone.¹⁸

In the world of adaptation *The Killing* is a good example of the way the television market is changing. Netflix, determined to become the HBO of the early twenty-first century, is aggressively marketing itself as the home of dark edgy original series and, along with Amazon Prime, a purveyor of commercial and schedule free content available for binge viewing in this new global TV marketplace. The rapid consumption that is symptomatic of binge viewing, however, means that the need for new series is becoming more urgent. A show that would have been spread over 12, 13 or 22 weeks, over a period of decade, can now be voraciously consumed in a short space of time.¹⁹ Much like any period of rapid expansion, the gap between audience consumption and content is wide. It would seem that we are entering an era in which adaptation from the European market is a way forward. Whether the US TV market is able to successfully adapt series to suit the cultural expectations of its audience remains to be seen,²⁰ but with streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime entering the fray, willing to buy an audience from cable companies, however small, audiences should be prepared to enter an unprecedented era of European acquisition and adaptation for the US (global) TV market. What remains to be seen, however, is whether the European audience will be able to accept the way narratives are adapted for a US audience. Particularly when, and as I have argued, cultural apathy towards working mothers seems to have changed so little since Philip Wylie's 1942 vilification of American mothers in *A Generation of Vipers*. It maybe that the US audience has grown accustomed to the way mothers are treated on network and cable TV but it remains to be seen whether a European audience will be able to unquestionably accept the

judgemental and melodramatic attitudes towards maternity contained in series like *The Killing*, particularly when viewed alongside their original incarnations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. KMF Films/Fuse Entertainment/Fox Television Studios/The Killing Production. *Source*: IMDb.
2. Danmarks Radio (DR), Norsk Rikskringkasting (NRK)/Sveriges Television (SVT)/ZDF Enterprises (2009–2012)/Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) (2009–2012). *Source*: IMDb.
3. Lionsgate Television/Weiner Bros. (in association with)/American Movie Classics (AMC) (for)/U.R.O.K. Productions. *Source*: IMDb.
4. Yellow Bird/Canal + /Danmarks Radio (DR)/Degeto Film/Film i Skåne, Mainostelevisio (MTV)/Svensk Filmindustri (SF)/TV2 Norge/TV4 Sweden. *Source*: IMDb.
5. The first four seasons of *Mad Men* originally aired on BBC4 from 8 August 2010 to 23 February 2011. Sky Atlantic aired all subsequent seasons.
6. *Star Trek* and *Cagney and Lacey* are two famous examples.
7. *The Killing* won Best Supporting Actress for Michelle Forbes in the 38th Saturn Awards and Outstanding Directorial Achievement in Dramatic Series for Patty Jenkins in the Director's Guild of America Awards. In addition, the series was nominated for 19 other awards including 6 Emmys and a Golden Globe for lead actor, Mireille Enos.
8. Broadcast (6): NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX, THE CW, PBS. Basic Cable (25): A&E, ABC Family, Adult Swim, AMC, Bravo, Comedy Central, Discovery, E!, ESPN, FX, FXM, FXX, Hallmark Channel, History, Lifetime, MTV, National Geographic, Nick At Nite, Spike TV, SYFY, TBS, TNT, TV Land, USA, VH1. Niche Cable (17): Audience Network, BBC America, BET, CMT, EL REY, Esquire, Fearnet, IFC, Logo, Nuvotv, Ovation, Own, Pivot, Sundance Channel, UP, WE TV, WGN America, Premium Cable (5): Cinemax, Epix, HBO, Showtime, Starz. Digital (11): Amazon Studios, CC: Studios, Crackle, CW Seed, Geek & Sundry, HULU, Machinima, Netflix, Playstation, Popsugar Studios, Wigs.
9. Although notably later series like *Better Call Saul* (High Bridge Productions/Crystal Diner Productions/Gran Via Productions/Sony Pictures Television/AMC, 2015–) are being released one episode per week.
10. *Men Behaving Badly* (BBC, 1992–1998), *Absolutely Fabulous* (BBC, 1992–2012), *Coupling* (BBC, 2000–2004) and *Life on Mars* (BBC, 2006–2007) to name but a few.
11. The first part of *Forbrydelsen* was originally screened in 2007 (1–20), and is referred to as *Forbrydelsen I*, df. DFI, in contrast to *Forbrydelsen II* and *III* (1–10, 2009 and 1–10, 2012). With thanks to Gunhild Agger for these details.
12. The killer was, in fact, different from the Danish version but the audience could not have known how the US series would adapt the narrative at this point.
13. *The Killing* season 2 launched with just over 700,000 viewers and *Forbrydelsen* attracted 815,000 viewers (Plunkett 2012).
14. Denmark provides one of the most generous parental leave systems in the EU with 'a total of 52 weeks (one year) of leave containing maternity, paternity and parental.' In addition, once the first year of parental leave is over, Danish day care facilities are provided for all children from the age of 26 weeks to 6 years as Danish municipalities recognize that: 'proper day care facilities are a necessity for women's full-time participation in the labour market on equal terms with men' with the Government providing guaranteed day-care facilities with fees linked to income (European Union report, n.d.).
15. With no paid leave for mothers in any segment of the work force, only 12 weeks unpaid leave in companies with 50 or more employees and where childcare expenses can be as high as \$16,430 per annum (Desilver 2014).
16. In a nation that continues to be preoccupied with the so-called 'mommy wars,' where stay-at-home mothers are praised and working mothers condemned (see Akass 2013).

17. From 4.7 million viewers for the premiere of season 1 down to 2.5 million for season 2's premiere.
18. Netflix never releases audience figures so it is impossible to tell how many stayed with the service at the end of the series.
19. Many thanks to Harold Grosenthal, Head of International Acquisitions for AMC, for pointing this out.
20. Particularly in the light of recent news that Denmark's *The Legacy* (DR, 2014–) has been acquired for the US network market by NBC/Universal Cable Productions (nordicnoir.tv 2014).

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The Sopranos

If *Sex and the City* showed us that motherhood is not necessarily a natural and desired state for all women, the next series from HBO, as well as consolidating the cable channel's success in the original drama market, offered us an alternative insight into attitudes towards motherhood – particularly the impact of mothers on their male offspring. Shortly after the premiere of *Sex and the City*, HBO launched *The Sopranos*, a landmark series which quickly became the most successful original drama for the cable channel and synonymous with the channel's branding strategy.¹ Central was Tony Soprano's (played by James Gandolfini) visits to therapist, Dr Jennifer Melfi (Lorraine Bracco), due to the stress-induced anxiety attacks which threaten his ability to retain power in a world in which he came 'in at the end' ('Pilot', 1:1). Also central to the early seasons is the complex relationship Tony has with his mother, Livia Soprano (Nancy Marchand), a bitter and resentful woman who is squarely blamed for the precarious state of his mental health. This chapter will focus on the first two seasons of *The Sopranos* as an insight into the way motherhood is viewed within very patriarchal worlds while setting the tone for many of the quality TV series that come after.

Before moving onto discuss the representation of motherhood in this series I am going to offer an outline of the mother's positioning within psychoanalysis and how it has impacted on the way mothers have historically been situated within culture. This approach is particularly apposite due to the centrality of psychoanalysis in the narrative of *The Sopranos*. Particularly useful is Sociologist, Miriam M Johnson's work on misogyny and motherhood, specifically her discussion of how motherhood has been used by psychoanalysts to 'explain why men are motivated to denigrate and dominate women',² Johnson argues that: 'The devaluation of women (by both men and women) is not an inevitable reaction formation to women's prominence in early child care. It is a choice, helped along by the male dominance institutionalized in political and economic structures and supported in male peer groups.'³ Understanding the positioning of motherhood within the millennial series emerging from

HBO is particularly powerful when read alongside this statement as they see mothers and motherhood through a specifically patriarchal lens. Further, as the critical community comments on these women, they reveal a cultural antipathy towards motherhood that is as misogynistic as the representation itself. As Johnson argues, ‘attempts to effect real change (as opposed to a change in the forms male misogyny takes) may fail *unless we recognize unconscious motivational tendencies and their underlying dynamics*’ (my emphasis).⁴ This chapter is my attempt to bring these unconscious motivational tendencies and underlying dynamics to the fore.

There can be little doubt that the work of Sigmund Freud has influenced the way western society thinks about its mothers. Central to Freud’s formulation of the maturation of children is his 1909 case study of an equinophobic boy ‘Little Hans’ and his subsequent theory that all children desire their parent of the opposite sex and have to repress those feelings; a process resulting in the Oedipus Complex, which takes place between the ages of three and six.⁵ According to Freud, faced with the sight of their mother’s genitals (or lack of a penis), boys worry that they too will suffer from castration and, rejecting their mother (their first love object), turn to the father as possessor of the penis and symbol of power and privilege.⁶ It was during the 1940s that Freudian theory impacted on US culture through psychoanalysts like Helene Deutsch who theorized that good motherhood depended upon women rejecting their ‘masculine wishes’ and accepted their passive ‘feminine’ role. For psychoanalysts like Deutsch, ideal or ‘complete motherliness’ was considered vital if children were not to be burdened by pathologies in their later lives.⁷ This idealized (and culturally sanctioned) version of motherhood was soon put to the test during World War II when examinations performed by Army psychologists, most notably the Selective Service Administration, reported that: ‘Nearly one-fifth of all the men called up to serve in the war were either rejected or unable to complete their service for ‘neuropsychiatric’ reasons.’⁸ Of course, the reason for this was firmly placed at the feet of mothers who were blamed for

over-protecting their sons, at least according to Edward A. Strecker, an adviser to the secretary of war and consultant to the surgeon general of the Army and Navy. Based on his war-time experiences, Strecker argued that the nation's men had suffered negatively from women, 'whose maternal behavior is motivated by the seeking of emotional recompense for the buffers which life has dealt her own ego'. A major fault of 'mom,' he added, was that she had failed 'in the elementary mother function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically.'⁹

This criticism of mothers was supported by magazine articles like the 1945 *Ladies' Home Journal* article which asked: 'Are American Moms a Menace?' Author, Amram Sheinfeld, linked national security to the way mothers raised their children, arguing that: 'mom is often a dangerous influence on her sons and a threat to our national existence.'¹⁰ For Sheinfeld one of the ways to counteract the problem of neurotic mothers raising neurotic sons was for them to breastfeed 'only as long as is absolutely necessary'. But, the author noted, this was too late for many as Adolf Hitler, for example, was cited as the 'only son and spoiled darling of his not-too-bright mother'. A sentiment shared by authors Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia F Farnham, who warned that, when studying despots like Hitler and Mussolini it should be remembered that 'their true subject is hardly the man (or woman) they have chosen to scrutinize ... but the mother or her substitute. Men, standing before the bar of historical judgment, might often well begin their defense with the words: "I had a mother ..."'.¹¹

This outrageous misogyny was most notoriously reinforced in Philip Wylie's 1942 book, *Generation of Vipers*,¹² in which he aimed a vicious invective at America's mothers for raising a nation of sons 'unmanned' by excess maternal affection. Although Wylie's book attacked many groups in American society: scientists, the Government, doctors, the military and priests, his most vitriolic rant was reserved for post-menopausal American mothers who, according to Wylie, emasculated their sons. Wylie praised Freud for drawing attention to the

‘fierce and wonderful catalogue of examples of mother-love-in-action which traces its origin to an incestuous perversion of a normal instinct’,¹³ and talks of the Oedipus complex becoming ‘a social fiat and a dominant neurosis in our land’.¹⁴ Obviously striking a nerve, the book stirred up a hornet’s nest of outrage and, by its twentieth printing in 1954, had sold over 180,000 copies. For Wylie, a whole generation of men were the victims of women who, he describes, as having ‘raped the men, not sexually, unfortunately, but morally’.¹⁵

It is into this world that the fictional Tony Soprano’s mother, Livia, is born. In *The Sopranos*, the domestic jostles for importance within the patriarchal worlds of the mafia and the Roman Catholic Church, constantly threatening to overwhelm as Tony’s relationships with his more elderly relatives, Uncle Junior (Corrado ‘Junior’ Soprano [Dominic Chianese]) and mother Livia Soprano, as well as those of his immediate family – wife Carmela (Edie Falco) and children, Meadow (Jamie Lynn-Siegler) and A.J. (Robert Iler) – prove to be as challenging as the mobster world he inhabits. Tony’s mother, Livia, has been universally condemned by critics, described as: ‘monstrously manipulative, chronically cantankerous, and utterly unchic’¹⁶ a character whose presence was so overbearing that, according to Todd VanDerWerff, ‘she was even more powerful in death, as though she were a ghost that had cold hands seized around Tony’s heart, ready to squeeze at any instant and bring on another panic attack.’¹⁷

Our introduction to Tony links him inextricably to his relationships with his mother as, waiting for his first therapy session, he is framed between the naked legs of a female statue. For Joseph S. Walker, who has written one of the most sustained analyses of the relationship between Tony, his psychiatrist and Livia Soprano,¹⁸ this visual composition is ‘a symbolic foreshadowing of the program’s central drama of Tony’s conflict with his mother. Livia – a shorthand reference to the complex relations of birth, subservience, sex, fear desire, and guilt which connect them, and which have essentially incapacitated Tony.’¹⁹ It is through his therapy sessions that we come to know Tony Soprano, mobster boss and family

man, and, despite the fact he has been warned by Dr Melfi that he cannot reveal illegal acts to her, the viewer is granted privileged knowledge of Tony's violent gangster life. For Walker it is the juxtaposition of these two worlds that reveals Tony's battle between two constructed identities asking: 'is Tony to be a coherent subject, or a hysterical object?'²⁰ A question animated in the sequence opening 'Meadowlands' (1:4), the first time we experience Tony's dream world first-hand.²¹ Following his lingering and lustful gaze at his therapist's legs and then onto a series of improbable scenarios – Hesh Rabkin (Jerry Adler) passing by the window in time for his 3pm appointment, AJ (Robert Iler) looking through a gap in the door/exchanged with Tony who sees Silvio Dante (Steven Van Dante) in flagrante delicto with an un-identified woman. The sexually fuelled grunts and groans of Silvio continue as the camera pans to Paulie 'Walnuts' Gaultieri (Tony Sirico) and Salvatore 'Big Pussy' Bonpensiero (Vincent Pastore) in Melfi's waiting area. The shot then cuts to Tony addressing the back of Melfi's head with: 'What the hell's going on?' and then onto Jackie Aprile Sr (Michael Rispoli), hooked up to chemo and 'smelling rain in the air'. This montage of disjointed shots ends with Tony asking the back of his therapist's head: 'Dr Melfi what the hell you doing to me?' Of course, Dr Melfi is revealed as Tony's own mother which, considered alongside his earlier lascivious gaze, reveals a decidedly and overtly Oedipal longing.

Analysed through Melfi's psychoanalytic framework, Tony's mother is firmly established as 'the one' at the bottom of his anxiety issues despite the various stresses associated with the nature of his work and the generational chasms between the older and younger members of his crew. In the past Janet McCabe and I argued that, through Tony's therapy sessions, 'the assimilation of Jennifer's psychoanalytical vernacular by Tony ... allows a feminine voice to penetrate into a generic text that has traditionally excluded it.'²² Complicating this assertion is the patriarchal voice that insinuates itself through these therapy sessions, with Melfi's authoritative positioning giving expression to a therapy that is

rooted in an overtly male Freudian psychoanalytic discourse and a series created by male showrunner, David Chase. Although the words are spoken by Melfi, it should be remembered that this is a male perspective that ensures Livia's positioning as a truly monstrous mother and, through a traditionally Freudian lens, the source of Tony's anxiety. While there is no doubt that maternal power is an issue for Tony, it is remarkable that there is so little acknowledgement that his father, the violent mafia don, may also be the source of his psychological traumas.

It is not long before we are given valuable insight into Tony's childhood. Called into AJ's school for a parent/teacher conference for AJ and two of his friends when they have been discovered drunk after stealing sacramental wine from church, Carmela and Tony are confronted by the possibility that their son may have ADD (attention deficit disorder) ('Down Neck', 1:7). While Carmela remains calm, Tony is sent into a spiral of self-doubt and recrimination over the effect that his line of work may be having on AJ and the possibility that his 'disease' maybe genetic. At dinner that night, and as if to exacerbate Tony's fears, Livia and Uncle Junior support AJ, telling the family that his mother 'practically lived at the Vice-Principal's office' and that Tony only remembers 'what he wants to remember'. To Tony's increasing discomfort, and AJ's incredulous expression, both Livia and Uncle Junior regale the family with stories of Tony's childhood misdemeanours: stealing a car 'before he was ten years old' and selling stolen lobsters for 'a buck apiece down on Bloomfield Avenue'. A series of flashbacks throughout this episode, punctuated by therapy sessions, reveal how his father's line of work was disclosed to the young Tony. Remembering how his elder sister Janice (Madeline Blue) was taken for mystery car rides every Sunday, Tony tells Melfi that his heart 'was broken' at his father's favouritism, only to be assuaged when Johnny Boy is arrested at the fairground along with his mafia cronies. Rather than a preference for his sister, the mafia men were using their daughters as a front for illegal activities. Despite his therapist's suggestion that this would have been 'devastating' to a

young child, Tony tells her that he was proud of his father, considered him a ‘freedom fighter’ and recounts how he bragged about Johnny Boy’s violence to his friends. His mother, on the other hand, was always ‘a night at the opera’ who threatened to stick a fork in his eye when he wouldn’t stop complaining and would sooner ‘smother’ the children than let their father take them to Reno (‘Down Neck’, 1:7).

When Livia eventually discovers that Tony is seeing a psychiatrist, she tells AJ (with some insight) that ‘he goes to talk about his mother – that’s what he’s doing. He talks about me – he complains, she didn’t do this, she did that. I gave my life to my children on a silver platter and this is how he repays me.’ It is in these sessions that Dr Melfi focuses on Livia’s emotional hold over Tony telling him: ‘she’s very powerful.’ And yet, Tony is reluctant to admit that ‘this little old lady’ has such an impact on his emotional life telling Melfi: ‘she’s a good woman. She put food on that table every night. I’m the ungrateful fuck because I come here, complain about her, and I let my wife exclude her from my home.’ And this despite Carmela’s assurances that Livia is welcome to live with the family (‘46 Long’, 1:2). When Carmela takes her to lunch unexpectedly, Livia immediately suspects the worst, and well she might as Tony stashes his guns and illegal contraband in her room while she is out (‘The Legend of Tennessee Moltisani’, 1:8). Her son clearly sees an opportunity to use the retirement home as a prime hiding place for incriminating evidence and, like the fairground meetings of his father before him, a good place to meet his gangland cronies. Livia is certainly nobody’s fool though and, after living with Johnny Boy so long, she knows the rules of the mafia world.

Yet, despite this, the narrative never gives Livia a break with *Sopranos* folklore firmly blaming her for ordering a hit on her son. Filicide does not seem overblown in a world where the matriarch has been depicted as a monstrous force from the start. As the story goes, Livia is unhappy about the way her son moved her into the retirement home and, coupled with the possibility that he could be revealing family secrets to his psychiatrist,

engineers his demise at the hands of Uncle Junior. So far so dysfunctional. Yet, subsequent re-viewings of the episodes in question reveal a slightly different narrative; Livia may well be expert in revealing truths to suit her own agenda, but it is the way that knowledge is traded and subsequently utilized that is crucial here. Livia chooses her moment to impart her news about Tony complaining that 'he goes to talk about his mother' only after her brother-in-law has told her that they have a 'bad apple' in the crew. Of course, Tony is immediately suspected by Uncle Junior, who is paranoid about the meetings held at the retirement home fearing his demise during an 'end game' and, ignoring Livia's plea that she doesn't 'want there to be any repercussions' orders the hit.

It is only after the failure of the mission that Livia's narrative truly begins to unravel. Tony tells everyone that he was the victim of a carjacking but he knows that this attempt on his life was at the hands of Uncle Junior. Of course, depression ensues and Melfi ups his dosage of Lithium thus rendering Tony unable to move beyond the bedroom and seeing him in the thrall of daydreams of Isabella – a beautiful and seductive Italian dental student living next door ('Isabella', 1:12). Over the course of this episode Tony's hallucinations take hold as the depressed mafia don stumbles around with a vacant look on his face and the inability to 'get a grip' on his depression. His mother is quick to tell everyone that she cannot understand his behaviour and, complaining about Tony to her brother-in-law, is confused when Uncle Junior tells her: 'It's done.' Melfi hints to Tony that his mother may have been behind the attempt on his life telling him that she is 'always talking about infanticide' and it is only later, when the FBI play Tony edited highlights of conversations between his mother and Uncle, that the therapist's accusations appear to be confirmed. While it is true that Livia has likened Tony's appearance to her lobotomized cousin telling Junior: 'better he died than went on living like that – that's what his mother used to say' ('I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano', 1:13), the conversation that is replayed to Tony is edited alongside other

snippets of dialogue between sister and brother-in-law, conjoined to make Tony believe that his mother wished him dead.

In terms of narrative motivation, it is clear that the FBI are cognizant of the fact that, in order to get Tony to talk, they must use all means necessary to motivate him. But what of Melfi? Is she so enamoured of Freudian theory that she can only believe that his mother is at the heart of Tony's emotional issues and behind an attempt on his life? Set in a society that blames the maternal for all things psychologically damaged and underscored by a training in Freudian psychoanalysis, this could be true. But Melfi's continual and pernicious deprecation of Livia to her client are also due to the nature of Tony's therapy sessions and his inability to reveal his criminal activities to his psychiatrist. For David Chase the sessions with Melfi and her client are 'flawed from the start: "What people forget is that Melfi was compromised from the get-go ..."'²³ and necessarily restricted to what he can tell his therapist. In this case it is easy to see that, while the audience knows that Tony's criminal activities are central to his stress, for his psychiatrist, who can only work with what he tells her, his anxiety attacks can only be attributable to his difficult relationship with his mother. For David Pattie 'the various violent deaths in Tony's life are glossed over in the therapy sessions ... because the two narratives they are involved in are fundamentally incommensurate'²⁴ with the therapeutic process dependent upon full and 'final disclosure' whereas Tony works 'towards the maintenance of the criminal status quo'.²⁵

In addition, and as Douglas L Howard argues, language in *The Sopranos* is subject to an 'inherent ambiguity' with the interpreter 'often forced to rely upon nonverbal cues or to consider context and intent in order to make sense of a linguistic statement.'²⁶ Livia is certainly an expert in wielding nonverbal clues and, like all the mafia wives inhabiting this world, have learnt how 'Mafia dialogue is predicated on suppression, misdirection and euphemism.'²⁷ The eventual culmination of their therapeutic process in these early days is precipitated by Melfi who, reading from a book, tells Tony that his mother suffers from

borderline personality disorder: ‘She suffers from intense anxiety; real people are peripheral – these people have no love or compassion and create bitterness and conflict between others in their circle’ (‘I Dream of Jeannie Cusamano’, 1:13). Tony’s violent reaction leads to the termination of their relationship as his therapist oversteps the mark, openly discussing his mother’s pathology. In the world of mafia-speak the therapeutic relationship, built upon bringing what is repressed into the open, cannot survive and Melfi is not only alienated from Tony, but finds herself removed to a motel as her association with the mafia don threatens her life and her livelihood.

Of course, their relationship does not end there. After another anxiety attack in season two, Tony finds it impossible to replace his psychiatrist and eventually persuades her to take him back. But, and as Janet McCabe and I have argued in the past, Melfi’s relationship with Tony, along with her place in *The Sopranos* narrative, never really recovers as she becomes ‘ever more entangled in her enthrallment of his performance of male power and her knowledge of its untenable reality.’²⁸ For Jason Jacobs: ‘Tony may not understand himself but he understands the world better than Melfi. ... In this way the show challenges us to consider a mob leader as a better human being than his therapist.’²⁹ In addition, after Melfi blurts out her diagnosis of Livia’s issues, her lack of skill in negotiating these linguistic hurdles becomes increasingly apparent (surprisingly for a therapist whose work depends on interpretation of silences and ambiguities). After Livia’s stroke at the end of season one, and due to Nancy Marchand’s illness, Livia’s power wanes and ‘the Oedipal story arc more or less ended.’³⁰ But the impact of the mother/son bond does not end with her death as Melfi continues to shore up Tony’s dysfunctional relationship with his mother throughout the series. It is not until much later that Tony muses to Melfi that he realizes that mothers ‘are the bus. They’re the vehicle that gets you here. They drop you off, then they go their own way, continue on their own journey. The problem is we keep tryin’ to get back on the bus

when we should just be lettin' it go' (Kennedy and Heidi', 6:18). Maybe the therapeutic relationship has had more of an impact on Tony than we think.

If Tony is ready to let go of Livia's hold on him then what of the critical community that insist on Livia's guilt and a culture that continues to blame the mother for society's ills? If the world of *The Sopranos* is so heavily weighted against understanding the insidious misogyny against the mother, then surely the world outside should be more sympathetic to the mobster mom, left widowed by her husband's risky lifestyle and powerless in this most patriarchal of worlds. Not so. For cultural commentators writing about *The Sopranos*, Livia will go down in history as the monstrous mother that ordered a hit on her son. Regina Barreca, for example, while identifying with 'almost every female character ... at some point during the first three seasons' maintains that Livia 'arranges to have her son whacked for putting her in a retirement community'.³¹ She goes on to describe Livia as anticipated in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*: "[She] lies in wait like the carnivorous plant," passive and lethal. "She is absorption, suction, humus, pitch and glue, a passive influx, insinuating and viscous".³² She continues: 'the patriarchal matriarch is scary; she batters those around her into action while seemingly only to beguile them with the powers of the weak and thereby effectively disguises her iron maiden malevolence'.³² Barreca's insistence on Livia's guilt and damning description of her nature arguably smacks of the same kind of unconscious motivation that fuelled Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* some sixty years previously.

On the other hand, as Joseph S Walker argues, despite Livia's immense power in the series, her ability to wreak havoc on her son and his family and her reputation as the mother that ordered that hit: 'it is surely worth noting that she never once utters such a command, or even such a suggestion; her agency is expressed through silence, analogy, innuendo.'³³ Despite this, Walker suggests 'that her manipulation of Junior is clear – to the audience, to Tony, to the FBI, even to Junior himself – it is nonetheless silent and invisible'.³³ This is not the only controversy surrounding Livia. It is noteworthy that there is still dispute over her

illness and whether she feigns dementia and a stroke. Her smile as she is wheeled off on a gurney could easily be read as facial paralysis but season two begins with the idea that even if her symptoms are real, her stroke could be psychologically induced. What is clear is that, such is our cultural antipathy towards the mother that we readily accept Livia's guilt and, like the soap opera villainess, she easily becomes someone on which to project our own negative maternal experiences.

In the end, amidst all the controversy around Livia Soprano, David Chase admits that he actually 'had a really good childhood' and that, while he did go into therapy to deal with his childhood issues, he was not haunted and daunted by his mother in the same way. He tells Mark Lawson: 'for everyone who writes about *The Sopranos*, ... Tony Soprano's mother is [his] mother, [and] that there is a strong degree of identification.'³⁴ Certainly, by his own admission, his mother was a 'handful' but she was also 'funny'³⁵ something that Livia Soprano is never allowed to be, particularly amongst the cultural commentators that have written about the show. It would be HBO's next series that would again shine a light on the centrality of the mother in the American family but this time her representation would be a much more sympathetic portrayal and allow *Six Feet Under*'s matriarch, Ruth Fisher (Frances Conroy), the kind of compassion and subjectivity denied Livia Soprano.

¹ Jimmie L. Reeves, Mark C. Rogers, and Michael M. Epstein, 'The Sopranos as HBO Brand Equity: The Art of Commerce in the Age of Digital Reproduction', in David Lavery, (ed.), *This Thing of Ours: Investigating The Sopranos* (New York: Columbia University Press; London: Wallflower Press, 2002), p. 48.

² Miriam M. Johnson, 'Women's Mothering and Male Misogyny', in Andrea O'Reilly (ed.) *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, (Canada: Demeter Press, 2007), p. 202.

³ Johnson, 'Women's Mothering', pp. 204-5.

⁴ Johnson, 'Women's Mothering', p. 201.

⁵ Based on the Greek myth of Oedipus who mistakenly kills his father and marries his mother.

⁶ This necessary turning away from the mother is, for Freud, more complex for girls as, with no penis to start with, their journey towards adulthood is more fraught, a 'negative Oedipus Complex' which results in 'penis envy' rather than the castration anxiety suffered by boys.

⁷ Warner, *Perfect Madness*, p. 73.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Quoted in Warner, *Perfect Madness*, p. 74.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Philip Wylie, *Generation of Vipers* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1996),

¹³ Wylie, *Generation*, p 198.

¹⁴ Wylie, *Generation*, p 194 (footnote).

¹⁵ Wylie, *Generation*, p 200.

¹⁶ Virginia Rohan, 'Marchand's Death Hits "Sopranos" Hard', *Orlando Sentinel*, 28 June 2000, <https://tinyurl.com/2kky7f3b> (accessed 8 June 2022).

¹⁷ Todd VanDerWerff, 'A ghoul in angels' clothing: *Mad Men's* Betty Draper is *The Sopranos'* Livia Soprano. Or she will be', *avclub.com*, 5 October 2010, <https://tinyurl.com/y5t6y73p> (accessed 8 June 2022).

¹⁸ Joseph S Walker, "Cunnilingus and Psychiatry have brought us to this": Livia and the Logic of False hoods in the first season of *The Sopranos*', in *This Thing of Ours*, pp 109-123

¹⁹ Walker 'Cunnilingus and Psychiatry', p 110.

²⁰ Walker 'Cunnilingus and Psychiatry', p 114.

²¹ Although he has already revealed much about his unconscious anxieties through the discussion of his dream about his penis (being grabbed by a seagull) in the pilot.

²² Kim Akass & Janet McCabe, 'Beyond the Bada Bing!: Negotiating Female Narrative Authority in *The Sopranos*' in *This Thing of Ours*, p 153.

²³ Brett Martin quoted in David Pattie, "Whatever Happened to Stop and Smell the Roses?": *The Sopranos* as Anti-therapeutic Narrative', in David Lavery, Douglas L Howard, and Paul Levinson, (eds.), *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), p 168.

²⁴ Pattie, 'Whatever Happened?', p 169.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Douglas L Howard, "'Soprano-Speak": Language and Silence in HBO's *The Sopranos*', in *This Thing of Ours*, p 195.

²⁷ Pattie, 'Whatever Happened?', p 172.

²⁸ Kim Akass and Janet McCabe, "Blabbermouth Cunts"; or Speaking in Tongues' in *The Essential Sopranos Reader*, p 97.

²⁹ Jason Jacobs, 'Violence and Therapy in *The Sopranos*', in Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (eds.), *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p 155.

³⁰ Akass and McCabe, 'Blabbermouth Cunts', p 98.

³¹ Regina Barreca, 'Why I Like the Women in *The Sopranos* Even Though I'm Supposed Not To', in Regina Barreca, (ed.), *A Sitdown with The Sopranos: Watching Italian American Culture on T.V.'s Most Talked-About Series*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p 30.

³² Barreca, 'Why I Like the Women', p34.

³³ Walker, 'Cunnilingus and Psychiatry', p 118.

³⁴ Mark Lawson, 'Mark Lawson Talks to David Chase,' in *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*, (London: I.B. Tauris 2007), p 187.

³⁵ Lawson, 'Mark Lawson Talks', p 188.

Game of Thrones

Much has been written about the adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* to *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-19) – its historical veracity,¹ as an adapted text,² audience engagement with the series,³ the philosophy that informs it,⁴ and as part of the wider gendered transmedia universe⁵ – and this is only a very brief list that does not include the reams of newspaper, magazine and journal articles devoted to the series. This chapter does not even try to engage with all of these contributions but will return to themes already raised in this book, specifically the chapters on *Deadwood* (historical verisimilitude) and *The Killing* (national attitudes towards the maternal) and, while not principally concerned with theories of adaptation, I will again focus on what is revealed about attitudes towards motherhood through the adaptations of books to television. A central question in this chapter is to discern whether *Game of Thrones* is intrinsically misogynist or whether the series is actually a critical commentary on the overtly sexist nature of a patriarchal fantasy world.

As we have seen, since the mid 1990s HBO led the way in the cable sector by producing quality original series and selling them directly to the audience – a business model that would later be taken up by Netflix and others. In the midst of the increased competition for original series during these years, HBO appeared to falter – *Deadwood*'s surprise cancellation in 2004, *Carnivale*'s (2003-5) a year later and the negative critical reaction to *Rome* (2005-7) – heralded some fallow years for the channel. The 2008 departure of CEO, Chris Albrecht, who was credited with ushering in this latest golden age of TV, compounded HBO's woes as did the cancellations of David Milch's *John From Cincinnati* (2007) and *Luck* (2011). Amidst rumours that the channel was losing its way, HBO made that now infamous mistake of passing on Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* (2007-15). AMC's huge global success with both *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad* (2008-14), led cultural commentators to speculate that HBO had 'finally tumbled from its pedestal'.⁶ It certainly seemed that way with insiders calling them 'HB-Over' despite the fact that shows like

Entourage (2004-11) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-) were riding high and *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-14) was already in the works.

It is impossible to tell whether HBO really did read the runes or if it was just coincidence, but they optioned *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the same year that *Mad Men* premiered on AMC (2007). The channel had already enjoyed limited success adapting Israel's *BeTipul* (HOT3, 2005-2008) to *In Treatment* (2008-) as well as witnessing the meteoric success of the adaptation of *Yo Soy, Betty la Fea* (RCN, 1999-2001) to *Ugly Betty* (ABC, 2006-10). Looking back, it certainly seems that HBO saw the future of television moving away from original series and into adaptations as George R.R. Martin's five-part book series, if successful, would ensure longevity and insure against the lack of originals on the market. With AMC hot on their heels, *Game of Thrones* and *The Killing* both began filming in 2010 with both channels hoping that their respective adaptation would be the next breakout hit for the channel. We have already seen how AMC's adaptation of *Forbrydelsen* fared after three cancellations and a move to Netflix, but the success of HBO's adaptation of *Game of Thrones* would be quite a different story, putting HBO back on the map, launching its streaming model and attracting a new wave of subscribers.⁷ Certainly not a series for the faint-hearted, first reports were that *Game of Thrones* was unapologetically misogynist, cruel and violent and, with the first episode seeing Bran Stark (Isaac Hempstead Wright) pushed from a tower after witnessing incest between twin brother and sister Jaime and Cersei Lannister (played by Nikolaj Coster-Waldau and Lena Headey), the TV series promised to live up to expectations.

Critics were initially lukewarm with Ginia Bellafante of *The New York Times* famously asking 'What is "Game of Thrones" doing on HBO?'⁸ and, dismissing the series as 'boy fiction,' assured readers that "'Game of Thrones" serves up a lot of confusion in the name of no larger or really relevant idea beyond sketchily fleshed-out notions that war is ugly, families are insidious and power is hot."⁹ Journalists from the *New York Times* certainly seemed to have a problem with the series leading TV critic, Martha Nussbaum, to comment

that, even though she had initially dismissed the series she soon realized that: ‘Fantasy – like television itself, really – has long been burdened with audience condescension: the assumption that it’s trash, or juvenile, something intrinsically icky and low.’¹⁰ Nussbaum points out that, although superficially just another ‘guts-and-corsets melodrama,’ *Game of Thrones* should be considered on the same level as the classic shows that came before it where the ‘undergirding strength of each series is its insight into what it means to be excluded from power: to be a woman, or a bastard, or a “half man”’.¹¹

Again it is useful to look at the background, particularly when Martin says that he got his inspiration for the source novels from ‘the European medieval age, during which time royal marriages were political and women used as pawns’.¹² While *Game of Thrones* has been said to draw on ‘social realism and historical fiction’ turning these elements into ‘pitch-back fantasy, which holds torture, terror, sexual abuse, murder, and suffering’¹³ it is worth looking at the HBO adaptation to see if we can discern anything about the attitudes of the TV industry and the way motherhood is regarded in the twenty-first century. We have seen how disingenuous some writers can be with their insistence on the veracity of historical sources and bearing in mind that, even if *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a work based on the War of the Roses,¹⁴ it is still a fantasy fiction, it may well be worth delving into medieval history to see whether the representation of motherhood in *Game of Thrones* is based on any kind of historical veracity. Nicole M Mares looks back to medieval times to investigate whether the women in *Game of Thrones* would have actually been as powerful in history as they are in the series. For Mares the series ‘depicts a number of powerful women who exercise remarkable agency in determining their own fates’¹⁵ arguing that, even if ‘George R.R. Martin and the producers of the *Game of Thrones* series take liberties in the depiction of female characters in the Seven Kingdoms, the women portrayed in the series do enjoy freedoms that may have been available to certain subsets of medieval women.’¹⁶ For Janice Liedl, the ‘parents in Westeros have as many problems as any historical parents in the Middle Ages and

Renaissance – maybe even more, because they were raising families in a world where dragons and magic hold sway.¹⁷ So far, so inconclusive and if the women in *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* do share characteristics with medieval women, ‘the power these women command in the series often comes at a high price: it is a consequence of a certain kind of powerlessness.’¹⁸

With little further to be gained from investigating historical veracity, maybe more insight can be achieved by looking at the differences between mothers in the adaptation from books to television. According to Marta Eidsvåg this is a far more profitable endeavour as, while motherhood ‘is an integral theme in George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*’ the HBO adaptation fails its source women. For Eidsvåg the HBO mothers are ‘weaker, more traditionally motherly, less provocative and often less central to the narrative than the mother figure in Martin’s books.’¹⁹ Eidsvåg bases her analysis on the four archetypes outlined by E. Ann Kaplan in her essay ‘The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in *Stella Dallas*’. Listed as ‘The Good Mother,’ ‘The Bad Mother or Witch,’ ‘The Heroic Mother,’ and ‘The Silly, Weak, or Vain Mother,’²⁰ Eidsvåg argues that while Martin’s original tale contains ‘complex and diverse’ mothers that share some characteristics with these archetypes, they do not easily fit into any of the categories while the HBO adaptation ‘shows a consistent pattern’ of bringing the mothers closer to the archetypes outlined by Kaplan.²¹ Eidsvåg’s essay is particularly useful in its delineation of Cersei Lannister and Catelyn Stark (Michelle Fairley) showing how their adaptation to screen moderates their motherhood. In this schema, both Cersei and Catelyn emerge as clear maternal archetypes – the Bad Mother and the Silly Mother – while their literary antecedents are drawn with much more complexity. Eidsvåg’s analysis argues that the adaptation shies away from subjects like abortion, maternal sexuality as well as the more powerful murderous aspects of both women. Her conclusion? Despite Martin’s source novels having ‘women and mothers aplenty. They are strong and weak, kind and cruel, often provocative’²² and while other controversial

aspects of the adaptation are amplified and exaggerated, the mothers in the HBO adaptation fall short. For Eidsvåg the result is a ‘mainstreaming of the mothers and to some extent the families’²³ where ‘their motherhood ends up weakening rather than strengthening them’.²⁴

This is where our look at motherhood and its adaptation to TV becomes really interesting. If HBO is a place that prides itself on being ‘Not TV,’ where sexuality and violence can become even more provocative and outrageous than on any other channel, why is motherhood treated this way? Particularly as there is no restraint when it comes to female nudity with ‘HBO’s staging of women having sex ... while male characters offer information (exposition) ... coined as ‘sexposition,’ and applied retrospectively to other HBO shows and ‘its gender politics in general’.²⁵ In addition, HBO has added female nudity and sex ‘into scenes of violence and torture’²⁶ and, even more revealing, where sex is consensual in the book it has been ‘changed into rape’ in the TV series.²⁷ It does seem peculiar that while HBO seems to be intent on sexualizing violence and torture, introducing scenes of depravity that do not appear in the book series, mothers are shaped into sanitized and diluted versions that easily fit into Kaplan’s maternal archetypes. Could it be that there is another agenda here? One that continues to put mothers in their place even when the source material empowers them? Throughout this book we have seen how revealing an application of feminist psychoanalysis can be in any discussion of TV mothers, is it possible that feminist psychoanalytic theory will again be able to shed light on the way women and mothers have been adapted in HBO’s series – this time *Game of Thrones*?

Known as ‘The French Feminists,’ Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous, emerged from Lacanian psychoanalysis to formulate women centered theories, particularly related to the maternal. Like Karen Horney, Irigaray certainly paid a price for questioning the male bias of both philosophy and psychoanalysis in her 1974 publication, *Speculum of the Other Woman*²⁸, in which she criticised the phallogentric nature of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. This led to her expulsion from the University of Vincennes on the

orders of Jacques Lacan himself, a major interruption to her career but one that ultimately led to her becoming one of the most influential feminists in Europe. Arguing that the phallogentric nature of both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis neglected to address a feminine perspective and could not explain woman's journey towards adulthood, Irigaray began to work towards a theory that could explain women's societal and economic subjugation. In 1977, Irigaray published *This Sex Which is Not One* (*Ce Sexe qui n'est pas un*) which built on *Speculum of the Other Woman* arguing that, if female sexuality 'has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters' then this bias 'seems rather too clearly required by the practice of male sexuality.'²⁹

While her formulation of the sexuality of women is key to subsequent feminist theories, it is her writing about motherhood and its place within a capitalist patriarchal society that is of most interest here as she argues that all women throughout history are defined by their potential as 'mother'. Taking a Marxist feminist approach, Irigaray argues that our culture is 'based upon the exchange of women' which is due to the phallogentric nature of a system in which women are always struggling to achieve subjectivity. Quoting anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss whose theories of kinship depend upon the scarcity of women and the incest taboo, Irigaray argues that, as the world of work is inherently male:

The production of women, signs, and commodities are men's business. The production of women, signs, and commodities is always referred back to men (when a man buys a girl, he 'pays' the father or the brother, not the mother ...) and they always pass from one man to another, from one group of men to another. The work force is thus always assumed to be masculine, and 'products' are objects to be used, objects of transaction among men alone.³⁰

Women, then, become defined solely by their value to patriarchy, which is ultimately tied to their reproductive potential and capacity.

In this account it matters not whether *Game of Thrones* is based upon a medieval society or not, as all of these worlds, whether medieval, fantasy, literary or televisual, are patriarchal. As Martha Nussbaum puts it: *Game of Thrones* is ‘the latest entry in television’s most esteemed category: the sophisticated cable drama about a patriarchal subculture.’³¹ That patriarchy is invested in keeping women in their place, in the service of men, defined by their biology, is key to this idea and explains why it makes no difference whether the women in *Game of Thrones* are based on historical fact or not but that they are ‘key assets in the struggle for power and the creation of political networks’.³² Irigaray’s work is useful to an analysis of the trade in women in Westeros and, ultimately, how all women are defined by their potential as mothers within patriarchal societies. As Irigaray argues, in society, there are only three kinds of women: the virgin who is valuable for her exchange value, the mother for her use value and the prostitute who embodies both. Indeed, for Irigaray ‘as commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value.’³³

Putting Irigaray’s theories to the test, it is only thirty minutes into the pilot that we witness the exchange value of the virgin. King Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy) tells Ned Stark (Sean Bean) that he will be the new King’s Hand and that they will join their families through the marriage of Ned’s daughter, Sansa (Sophie Turner), to his son, Prince Joffrey (Jack Gleeson). It maybe the mothers that discuss the trade at the King’s banquet but the fact remains that they are merely doing the bidding of the King.³⁴ Cersei summons Sansa to her table, asks her age, whether she ‘is still growing’ (a sign that she is pre-pubescent) and if she has ‘bled yet.’ Cersei tells Catelyn ‘I hear we might share a grandchild one day’ (‘Winter is Coming’, 1:1). Just as Catelyn was unable to prevent her youngest son from witnessing the beheading of his father, she is powerless to stop the trade in her daughter’s womb, and is resigned to Sansa leaving the North in order to provide future heirs for the King.

Sansa’s innocent naïveté and excitement at the proposed union between her and Joffrey fast disappears as this first season draws to a close. Her womb maybe worth much

to the future King and his mother but Joffrey has no investment in keeping her happy and, once he has ordered the execution of her father ('Baelor,' 1:9), Sansa realizes that his cruelty knows no bounds. By the time we get halfway through season two Sansa understands that she is in grave danger and, in 'A Man Without Honor' (2:5), wakes from a violent gangrape nightmare to discover blood-stained sheets. With the horrifying realization that she now has to marry King Joffrey and bear his children, Sansa attempts to conceal the evidence of her menstruation by cutting the blood from her bed. Cersei summons her and tells the frightened child 'You flowered dear, no more, no less.' The ensuing discussion reveals Cersei's collusion in King Joffrey's cruelty as well as her grasp of Sansa's fate. She observes that the prospect of bearing the King's children was one 'that once delighted you. Bringing little princes and princesses into the world. The greatest honour for a queen.' Yet, her discussion of mothering exposes her true agenda and reveals her understanding of Sansa's feelings towards Joffrey. Despite Sansa's passionate assurance that she loves the King with all her heart, Cersei tells the young girl to never to love the King as: 'the more people you love, the weaker you are. ... Love no-one except your children. On that front a mother has no choice.'

If there was ever any need for evidence of how disposable the prostitute is in a patriarchal world, we need look no further. To prevent her brother, Tyrion (Peter Dinklage) from sending Joffrey onto the battlefield, Cersei finds the prostitute that she thinks is her brother's lover, and holds her captive ('The Prince of Winterfell,' 2:8)³⁵ and tells him: 'The most important thing about whores [is] you don't buy them, you only rent them'. This is especially poignant as Ros (Esmé Bianco) has, so far, been bought by Tyrion, turned down by Jon Snow (Kit Harrington) as well as being bought for sex and then rejected for marriage by Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen). Early on in *Game of Thrones* it is made clear that prostitutes can never be mother or wife, and the only value they bear is as 'utilitarian objects' of exchange. Whether she is Petyr 'Littlefinger' Baelish's (played by Aidan Gillen) favourite or

not, Ros's value is soon exposed. Caught spying for Lord Varys (Conleth Hill), Littlefinger gives her to Joffrey as a punishment and, after a season of sadistic pleasure for the young king, she is used as a crossbow target. Ros's shocking demise proves just how disposable the prostitute is in a world where men can, and will, replace any woman with another for sexual services ('The Climb', 3:6).

There is one woman who escapes the restrictions placed upon the virgin, mother and prostitute. Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke) is one of the last surviving members of the House of Targaryen, rulers of Westeros for nearly three hundred years, and daughter of the mad King, who was killed by Jaime Lannister. Daenerys' initial source of power is through birth, as daughter of King Aerys II Targaryen, her womb is valuable enough to be traded for a whole army by her brother Viserys (Harry Lloyd), in his determination to seize the iron throne ('Winter is Coming', 1:1). Her marriage to Dothraki horse-lord, Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), begins with a rape (absent from the book) but, after winning her husband over and making him treat her as his equal, ('The Kingsroad', 1:2), Daenerys becomes one of the strongest and most powerful of all the women in *Game of Thrones*. Cursed by the witch, Mirri Maz Duur (Mia Soteriou), Daenerys' only child is hideously deformed and dies along with her husband. It may well be that the death of both child and husband are the making of Daenerys as, in this medieval fantasy world, being widowed endows women with the power usually reserved for men as 'widows demonstrate clearly how household-status could confound gender-status, since as heads of the households left by their husbands, widows enjoyed certain rights and obligations usually reserved for men.'³⁶ It also helps that, emerging unscathed from her husband's funeral pyre, Daenerys has 'given birth' or 'hatched' three baby dragons that will hold Westeros in fear for the rest of the series ('Fire and Blood', 10:1). From this moment on Daenerys' power is only rivalled by the Red Witch Melisandre (Carice van Houten)³⁷ and, after Melisandre's death, her arch-rival Cersei. As 'breaker of chains and mother of dragons' Daenerys revels in the power that her association with her all-

powerful offspring brings, which is even greater than Cersei's powerful positioning as mother of the King. Her commitment to fairness and her release of enslaved people, particularly those of Yunkai, culminate in the season three finale where, held aloft by freed slaves, she is given the name 'Mhysa' - the old Ghiscari word for mother ('Mhysa', 3:10).

But, of course, nothing is ever that easy, particularly in the world of HBO adaptations and, with George R. R. Martin failing to write the end of the book saga, the channel was forced to go its own way for the final three seasons. Despite the audience's love of Daenerys and her powerful place within the narrative of *Game of Thrones*, the end of her story is predicated on a downfall that should come as no surprise for viewers of HBO. After all, such power threatens the very heart of patriarchy and, as Anne Gjelsvik has argued, 'gender is at the core of the question of whether HBO's production is faithful to Martin's world and its values.'³⁸ Critics and fans were dismayed at the way the last season of *Game of Thrones* developed. The promise of a relationship between Jon Snow and Daenerys, consummated at the end of season seven ('The Dragon and the Wolf', 7:10), was immediately threatened by the incestuous nature of their relationship – the mirroring of Jon/Daenerys and Cersei/Jaime was now complete. For Callie Ahlgrim, the pitting of 'Mad Queen against Mad Queen' was the final straw in a series that had been demeaning to women throughout. Ahlgrim argues that 'the illustration of Dany's sudden madness played into harmful stereotypes about women and female rulers' it is not just that Daenerys descended into insanity, after all as daughter of the Mad King it had always been a possibility, but that the trigger was so misogynist. After all she had always been able to overcome her various issues: 'abused by her brother throughout her childhood, sold to a warlord as a political bargaining chip, and being repeatedly raped, enslaved, threatened, and nearly killed'. It does seem a stretch then that 'Daenerys is seemingly pushed over the edge because a man won't return her affection.'³⁹

What of the Queen Mother herself? For the creators of *Game of Thrones*, Cersei's villainy is directly linked to her motherhood, as explained by twin brother/lover Jaime: 'All the worst things she's ever done, she's done for her children' ('The Bells,' 8:5). In the final scene, abandoned by bodyguard Ser Gregor Clegane (Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson), Cersei finds her way to dying lover Jaime. In the midst of the collapsing Red Keep, atop the huge map of Westeros, Cersei and Jaime are reunited. It seems fitting that the lovers meet their end in the crypts of King's Landing, surrounded by dragon bones, rubble and dust, witnessing the dying embers of the Lannisters' reign together. Cersei's last words, 'I want our baby to live. I want our baby to live' are to no avail. A fierce, protective, mother to the end, Cersei dies begging for her life, but more importantly the life of her unborn child.

The way *Game of Thrones* was adapted by HBO reveals the link between biology and reproduction at the heart of this violent and medieval patriarchal world. Over eight seasons, and in a world ruled by primogeniture where heirs are essential and women's only value is their wombs, motherhood is the only power that women can possibly wield. As Karen Horney has suggested, possession of the phallus and the power that it signifies in a patriarchal society is equalled by women's physiological superiority – the capacity to bear children – which is inextricably bound up with the male child's intense envy of motherhood. It is not too big a leap to argue that this envy really does manifest in the depreciation of women in society, particularly mothers, and that men continue to control the representation of motherhood on our television screens to allay those fears.

In *Motherhood Misconceived, Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films*, the authors argue that there is a 'striking consistency in Hollywood's constructions of motherhood' where: 'Mothers reproduce dominant ideology ... yet also become ready targets if they fail to uphold prevailing notions of "good" motherhood'.⁴⁰ This would explain why HBO has not only made the mothers in *Game of Thrones* weaker than their literary antecedents but also why the most powerful women in the series have to be literally driven mad and killed rather than

take their place on the Iron Throne. In the end it is Bran Stark – the disabled soothsayer that eventually sits on the throne. Arya continues her journey by sailing West and, after being imprisoned for killing his Queen, Jon Snow takes the black and goes back to a lonely existence in The Knight's Watch at The Wall. Sansa is given the North to rule. It is noteworthy that no mothers remain.

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6 Bill Carter, 'HBO's Rivals Say It Has Stumbled, Though Catching Up Is Tough', *New York Times*, 23 August 2007, <https://tinyurl.com/ay4teaew> (accessed 2 June 2022).

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12 Schubart and Gjelsvik, 'Introduction', *Women of Ice and Fire*, p 7.

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15 Nicole M Mares, 'Writing the Rules of Their Own Game: Medieval Female Agency and *Game of Thrones*', in *Game of Thrones versus History*, p 147.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Janice Liedl, 'Rocking Cradles and Hatching Dragons: Parents in *Game of Thrones*' in *Game of Thrones versus History*, p 134.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Marta Eidsvåg, "'Maiden, Mother, and Crone': Motherhood in the World of Ice and Fire' in *Women of Ice and Fire*, p 151.

20 Quoted in Eidsvåg, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone", 152-3.

21 Eidsvåg, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone", p 153.

22 Eidsvåg, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone", p 164.

23 Eidsvåg, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone", p 165.

24 Eidsvåg, "Maiden, Mother, and Crone", p 166.

25 Schubart & Gjelsvik, 'Introduction', p 8.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (New York: Cornell University Press 1985) (first published 1974).

29 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One (Ce Sexe qui n'est pas un)* (New York: Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1981), p 23. (first published 1977).

30 Irigaray, *This Sex*, p 171.

31 *Ibid.*

³² Mares, 'Writing the Rules', p 148.

³³ Irigaray, *This Sex*, p 185.

³⁴ To avoid outcry from viewers all of the younger characters are aged in the TV series, for example Joffrey from 11 to 16 and Sansa from 11 to 13.

³⁵ Unbeknownst to Cersei, Tyrion is actually in love with Sansa's handmaiden Shae (Sibel Kekilli).

³⁶ Judith M Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penfader of Brigstock c 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College 1999), p 124.

³⁷ Who also gave birth to an other-worldly child ('Garden of Bones', 2:4).

³⁸ Anne Gjelsvik, 'Unspeakable Acts of (Sexual) Terror As/In Quality Television', in *Women of Ice and Fire*, p 58.

³⁹ Callie Ahlgrim, 'Making Daenerys a "Mad Queen" on "Game of Thrones" is the culmination of every demeaning sexist trope over the show's 8 seasons', *Insider*, 15 May 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4yz7yfed> (accessed 8 June 2022).

⁴⁰ Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly and Elaine Roth, *Motherhood Misconceived, Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films* (New York: New York State University Press, 2009), p 4.

The Handmaid's Tale

We have seen how the Danish series, *Forbrydelsen*, despite having a female showrunner, took motherhood to some very dark places, especially in its final season. Turning to the adaptation of books to TV the last chapter looked at *Game of Thrones* and how the strong mothers in George R. R. Martin's source material saw their power significantly diminished in the television series. So far, I have argued that, mothers on television are often used to work through unconscious cultural, social and psychological issues and, attempting to follow in the footsteps of film scholar, Laura Mulvey, have used psychoanalytic theory as a 'political weapon' to expose how the 'patriarchal unconscious' structures form, this time, quality American television series.¹ This chapter will turn to Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* as yet another example of how a streaming channel has used an adaptation to break into the cluttered TV landscape. With its focus on a dystopian America now named Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* centres on the oppression and sexual exploitation of women, with the series taking the narrative into even darker and more violent territory than the source novel. In this chapter I will, through an application of some of the work of feminist theorist, Dorothy Dinnerstein, argue that *The Handmaid's Tale* warns of a land where women's oppression has been taken to the extreme. The question remains, however, is it Gilead or America itself that is under scrutiny?

Dorothy Dinnerstein's controversial book, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise*,² published in 1976, builds upon past feminist psychoanalytic theory to argue that 'all of us are psychologically and socially disadvantaged by being brought up under asymmetrical parenting roles'.³ Critiquing patriarchal mothering and how these immutably assigned gender roles lead to women's oppression, Dinnerstein takes a complex route which is impossible to adequately summarize here. For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will focus on her proposal that the omnipresence of the mother and her subsequent power over children of both genders causes women to always be 'regarded as

dangerous and debased' which will continue 'as long as it is she, and she alone, who first introduces us as infants to the mixed blessing of being human.'⁴ As a result of the mother's ubiquity in a child's life, argues Dinnerstein, it is not just men that distrust women but women too as we hold our mothers responsible for 'our discovery as infants that we cannot command the world'.⁵ Charlotte Shane makes the point that Dinnerstein herself anticipated 'that her book would "enrage readers"',⁶ which may have gone partway towards it being out of print until 1999. Some of the criticisms levelled at her work are that she does not acknowledge racial difference, is utterly heteronormative, does not allow for male caregivers and assumes much about infants that simply cannot be proved.⁷ However, Dinnerstein's recognition of how patriarchy forces women into mothering roles reminds us of the theories of Adrienne Rich and Karen Horney and is a 'rigorous analysis of the conditions of motherhood as mutable and in dire need of improvement' and, as such, 'is worth engaging given today's landscape of degraded inquiry on the topic.'⁸ Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in 1985 when ex B-List actor Ronald Reagan was President. The novel takes place in a world where, due to environmental pollution and the transmission of sexual diseases, fertile women (those that remain) are enslaved. Gilead is an ominous warning of what could happen because of patriarchy's lack of regard for nature and Margaret Atwood's now famous statement that when she 'wrote *The Handmaid's Tale* nothing went into it that had not happened in real life somewhere at some time'⁹ becomes ever more chilling with each passing year. Dinnerstein warns of this dystopia in her discussion of the unequal organization of gendered roles within our society. Arguing that the world-building project, which in a patriarchal society is assumed to be male, leads to an overvaluation of masculine qualities, including men's 'propensity toward brute "mastery" of external circumstances' and 'apocalyptically exploitative relationship to nature through rampant fetishization of technological enterprise.'¹⁰ A warning that may well have come to fruition as recent newspaper reports tell of 'reproductive health in men and women' declining

‘dramatically at least over the past 40 years, [with] a major part of that decline ... linked to everyday exposure to chemicals in the environment that can affect our hormone system.’¹¹

It is the collapse of the natural world and reproductive fragility that leads to fertile women being passed from household to household in *The Handmaid's Tale* as the totalitarian theonomic Government of Gilead strips them of all their rights in their bid to boost the birth-rate. Evocative of Luce Irigaray's theories which tell of a ‘new matrix of History’ where ‘wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in, relations among men’,¹² the women in Gilead are brutally subjugated. Coded by the colours they wear, women are reduced to basic functions: Marthas (who cook and look after the Commanders' houses) dress in muted green; Aunts (who train the handmaids) wear brown; Econowives, (who are of lower social class and have to fulfil all basic functions) wear grey and Commanders' wives wear blue or teal. The handmaids, who are known only by their patronymic monikers, denied even the use of their own names, all wear long red dresses and cloaks with white coifs or wings to conceal them from public view. For Offred (June in the TV series played by Elisabeth Moss), the narrator of the book, the handmaid is worth less than concubines, geisha girls or courtesans - they are ‘two-legged wombs, that's all, sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices’ valuable only ‘for breeding purposes.’¹³

Optioned by Hulu as a ten episode straight-to-series adaptation, *The Handmaid's Tale* was announced in April 2016, four months before the streaming channel revealed that it was planning to discontinue its free video-on-demand service. For many this move was inevitable as, even if it had been, ‘a revelatory user experience: leagues better than pirated content, and a boon for audiences and networks alike’¹⁴ with the competition from other subscription services, the cessation of the free streaming service was the next logical step for the channel. For senior vice president, Ben Smith, Hulu had already begun ‘emphasizing its subscription offering over its free service’ by improving its subscription model as well as ‘creating the best experience possible and delivering the best content.’¹⁵ It is this need to

attract new, premium, subscribers and deliver quality content that gave Hulu the impetus to sign *The Handmaid's Tale* and, much like AMC before it, the channel used the adaptation to attract audiences to the higher priced ad-free service that it had launched the year before.

It is easy to see how the series would resonate with viewers, particularly after the November 2016 election of ex-reality TV star Donald Trump when sales of the novel had already 'spiked 200 percent'.¹⁶ The TV adaptation not only boosted Hulu's subscription service but also spoke directly to a populace horrified by the election of the Republican President. With no credentials for the role, other than a stint in *The Apprentice* (NBC, 2004-17) Trump's election, like Reagan's before him, threatened women's rights, particularly those related to reproduction and abortion. Even though the first season of the TV series had already been scripted and had begun filming at the time of the Presidential election in 2016, it is hard not to view it as an 'allegorical response to the dystopian moment that Americans' had stumbled into: 'After all, the country had just elected a president who, among other things, had bragged of his own acts of sexual assault and was doing his best to eliminate reproductive rights for women, both nationally and internationally.'¹⁷

The difficulties inherent in adapting the feminist novel to television were not lost on Bruce Miller, the series' creator, who reportedly said: 'One of the big aspects of "Handmaid's" was that Offred (Elisabeth Moss) was victimized by a society that was institutionally misogynist ... There are aspects of that you just can't understand being a boy.'¹⁸ Whether 'boy' or 'man,' Miller certainly knew that employing women would help overcome this particular hurdle and it was cinematographer, Reed Morano's, commitment to the vision of the series that got her the job as she presented him with 'a 60-page lookbook for the show, capturing the exact tone and emotional state they were aiming for.'¹⁹ Although worried about being accused of 'positive discrimination' in an industry that is so overwhelmingly male, Miller confirms that they got 'the best person for the job and part of that job was to represent a female and a male sensibility accurately and compassionately.'²⁰

Employing women to bring the novel to life was clearly a positive step for the series and, working as a team on the show's aesthetic was important to Morano as: 'The look of Gilead needed to convey tension; to convey segregation and strictness of the new world'²¹ which 'inspired her to opt for a very symmetrical composition in establishing shots'²² including the overhead shot focusing on 'dozens of crimson-clad handmaids gathered on a green field'.²³ The feeling of claustrophobia was compounded by Morano's tight, close-up, camerawork forcing us to get into Offred's head 'so the audience felt as though they were hearing Offred's thoughts and seeing the world through her eyes'.²⁴ This feeling was enhanced by Ane Crabtree's costume design which, although feeling 'karmically wrong' forced her 'into the mind set of a man tasked with remaking the world'²⁵

The first season of *The Handmaid's Tale* won eight Emmy Awards (out of thirteen nominations) including the Award for Outstanding Drama Series – the first time that a series produced by a streaming site had won the award.²⁶ Reed Morano won awards for Outstanding Directing of a Drama Series and Outstanding Cinematography for a Single-Camera Series (One Hour) for the pilot episode 'Offred', not bad for a woman whose previous cinematography experience was limited to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (HBO, 2016) and *Vinyl* (HBO, 2016). Initial reviews of *The Handmaid's Tale* were overwhelmingly positive. Sophie Gilbert, for example, claimed that: 'The Hulu show has created a world that's visually and psychologically unlike anything in film or television' adding that the 'cult status of the novel' has 'transcended the realm of fiction to become a kind of cultural shorthand for female oppression.'²⁷ Gilbert cites the 2017 Women's March on Washington as evidence that Hulu's TV series was truly touching a nerve as protestors carried signs that read 'Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again'. In addition, women in Texas in March in the same year 'dressed as handmaidens' to protest bills undermining abortion rights in the state.'²⁸ Gilbert adds: 'That so many women feel so keenly attuned to it now demonstrates an acute

awareness that the impulse to police women's behaviour and reproductive systems is as old as history itself.²⁹

Despite these accolades, the second season of *The Handmaid's Tale* did not deliver on the feminist promise of season one as the tone got increasingly darker. The book finishes with Offred unsure whether she is leaving 'into the darkness or the light,' as she is bundled into a van by 'Eyes,' who may or may not be members of the rebel group Mayday. The second season, with no source novel to guide it, opens with a gagged Offred who, along with other handmaids, are man-handled out of vans and herded into a vast stadium ('June', 2:1). Nooses are already in place and, as the rope is placed around each of their necks, we witness their abject terror as the execution order is given. Even though the trapdoors do not open, allowing the rebellious handmaids a last-minute reprieve, the opening minutes of season two are truly shocking. Aunt Lydia (Ann Dowd) is, of course, instrumental in their punishment as she emerges from the darkness quoting scriptures. That this was their lesson for refusing the order to stone Ofwarren (Janine Lindo played by Madeline Brewer) to death in season one is met with Offred's incredulous voiceover: 'Our father who art in heaven ... seriously? ... what the actual fuck?'

It is not just the harsh treatment meted out in Gilead that comes under scrutiny in season two as, in flashback, we witness June and Luke's (O-T Fagbenle) daughter, Hannah (Jordana Blake), sent to hospital with a fever. Although clearly a loving mother, June is treated with disdain for working and, in a scene reminiscent of the nineties 'mommy wars' is treated as an unfit mother by the hospital aide. Implied here is that whether women live in Gilead or a 'free' America, mothers who do not stay at home and devote themselves to childcare are considered selfish and negligent. In this iteration, *The Handmaid's Tale* becomes much more than a 'feminist horror'³⁰ story and 'reveals how visionary television can feel when it immerses itself in the experiences of women'.³¹ Being written after the 2016 election, for many commentators, season two directly commented on Trump's America. No-one

could ever have imagined, however, how the first episode would foretell future events when the news, which is told in flashback, tells of a Washington under siege with ‘twenty or thirty guys with machine guns shooting from the gallery’ of the Capitol Building. Although Margaret Atwood had included this insurrection in her book,³² it would have been impossible for either Atwood or the series creators to foresee a future where Washington DC and the Capitol Building really were under attack and yet, on January 6 2021, after Trump failed his re-election bid, that is exactly what happened. Edited alongside June’s escape in a refrigerated meat wagon, the parallels between Gilead and ‘free’ America could not be clearer. It is fair to say that, even though these events were fictionalized 35 years earlier, nobody could have envisaged an America where right-wing religious fanatics and conspiracy theorists would attempt to overturn the capital. Sometimes truth really is stranger than fiction.

Over the course of season two, *The Handmaid’s Tale* slowly reveals ever more inventive ways to control the handmaids, June (Offred) in particular. The season two episode, ‘The Last Ceremony’ (2:10) opens with the ritualized rape of Emily (Ofroy, played by Alex Biedel) who has been returned from the Colonies because a bomb killed thirty-one handmaids (‘First Blood,’ 2:6). The voiceover tells how the monthly ritual becomes ‘normal’ just another ‘job to be gotten through as fast as possible.’ ‘An act of copulation, fertilization perhaps, no more to you than a bee is to a flower.’ Compare this to the scene halfway through this episode as, after June’s false labour has led to Serena Joy’s humiliation in front of the Commander’s wives, she decides (on the advice of Aunt Lydia) that the birth of June’s baby must be ‘helped along.’ As if the monthly rape ritual is not bad enough, this scene is remarkable even in a series that is built upon the sexual violation of women. Despite their past differences, Serena Joy unites with her husband to ‘get the baby out’ of June quickly so that she can be sent to another household as far away as possible. As Serena holds June

down, her husband forces himself on her and, rather than quiet acceptance of her fate, June fights back.

There can be few that missed the furore over this episode of *The Handmaid's Tale* as, coupled with the scenes of sexual assault on series like *Game of Thrones*, the media accused the series of featuring this scene 'just to rile up viewers'³³ and HBO was strongly criticised by the press and viewers alike. Yet, some commentators suggested that June's violent rape, while rightly criticised, was worthy of inclusion as 'it drives home how horrific this society is at its core.'³⁴ A similar defence had been given by the actress Sophie Turner over Sansa Stark's rape in *Game of Thrones* when 'Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken (5:6)' aired to immense media criticism. Following the rape of her character by new husband Theo Greyjoy (Iwan Rheon) she said: 'The more we talk about sexual assault the better, and screw the people who are saying we shouldn't be putting this on TV and screw the people who are saying they're going to boycott the show because of it'.³⁵ There is clearly a fine line between rape as entertainment and the fact that in the US 'RAINN estimates that an American is assaulted every 98 seconds'³⁶ and, while we can accept that at least the resulting media storms did air the issue of rape in society, there are still problems with the way it is routinely represented on television screens.

Later in the same episode, June is briefly reunited with Hannah, the daughter she has been searching for over the course of nearly two seasons. Far from being a joyful reunion, this lengthy scene caused critics to comment on how unbearably true to life the series was 'with some pretty shocking direct parallels to an actual ongoing national crisis – that of the forced separation between parents and children.'³⁷ *Vulture's* Hillary Kelly was moved to comment: 'it's a strange thing knowing that your democratic nation is committing atrocities that we once only imagined took place in distant lands or in the pages of history books, and that our Attorney General is using the same faulty and delusional thinking as the officials running Gilead — that the Bible sanctions such behavior.'³⁸ However true this statement is,

it does reveal an ignorance of the history of enforced separation of children as: ‘The violence imposed on women’s bodies in Atwood’s dystopia has already been visited upon the bodies of black and Indigenous women many times over.’³⁹ This season of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, quite apart from being ‘meticulously directed, [and] disturbingly reflective of current events’⁴⁰ proves how patriarchal rules, both in Gilead and the US, do not take into account the wishes of the mother or the needs of the child and, for Hamad at least, shows how white motherhood is privileged over any other. She asks: ‘Does misogynistic violence really not count until it is inflicted on the body of a white woman?’⁴¹ A question that the critical commentary may well ask itself.

Season three shows it is not only the aunts and Commanders’ wives that oppress and control the handmaids. For Dinnerstein, the entire system of male dominance in patriarchy ‘is based on a conspiracy by both men and women.’⁴² While ‘the complicity of many wealthy women in the tyranny of Gilead is another aspect of the show that sharpens its topical relevance, particularly after an election in which a majority of white women voted against a female president’⁴³ it is excruciating for viewers to see June join the legion of women who oppress each other, particularly as ‘the most memorable villains in ... *Handmaid’s Tale* are women: Strahovski’s enigmatic Serena, Ann Dowd’s vicious Aunt Lydia’.⁴⁴ Midway through the season June, who is by this time openly rebellious, informs on a fellow handmaiden, Ofmatthew or Natalie (Ashleigh LaThrop), for confessing that she does not want to carry another child to term (‘Unfit,’ 3:8). Even though Ofmatthew has been spying on June, the chain of events that are instigated by June’s actions are shocking as the pregnant handmaid is shot by a Guardian and taken to hospital to carry the baby to term. While there have been other atrocities committed on the handmaids (as if monthly rape, torture and sexual slavery were not enough) the most disturbing aspect of this narrative is how, in her desperation, June has turned against her fellow handmaid. Forced to pray until Ofmatthew’s baby is born, June comes to terms with her actions but, later in this season we witness just how ruthless

and desperate she has become as she fails to save Eleanor Lawrence's (played by Julie Dretzin) life after a suicide attempt ('Sacrifice', 3:12). Despite their mutual fondness, June worries that Eleanor will reveal her plan to smuggle the daughters out of Gilead and fails to raise the alarm when she finds her unconscious. It seems that June's assimilation into the legions of mutually oppressive women is complete.

If the attack on Washington foretold a future event, the finale of season three, 'Mayday' (3:13), evokes one of the most heinous periods of global history as the opening scenes are reminiscent of Nazi Germany with women forced into buses and cages in the same way as Jewish people were herded into trains and gas chambers. Naked women are glimpsed in the background and there is no need to explain that these past scenes of June's capture link the Nazi death camps and their ruthless experimentation on women and children with Gilead and its own peculiar form of population control. June's open revolt against Commander Lawrence confirms this mirroring as she tells him that the thought of fourteen-year-old children being married and raped and maimed 'in this insane fucking world' is just too much and that even a commander's daughter is not protected from having: 'her clit cut off when she falls in love'. Despite everything that has gone before, this final episode closes on the power of the collective as Marthas and handmaids all rally together to save the young girls of Gilead. The final scene, where a wounded June is carried off by the handmaids recalls so many of the overhead shots of the series – this time, rather than conveying segregation and the strictness of the regime, the shot works to emphasize movement of the handmaids as one. This powerful ending hints at how the collective strength of women can overcome patriarchal oppression but only by working as a team.

The New York Times declared that season two was 'dutifully brutal, complete with ample torture, rapes, executions and murders' adding: 'It gave in to every one of the show's most tedious instincts ... every inch of existence is awful.'⁴⁵ For *Time*, at the end of season three, 'a series that began as a revelation has ... become a chore'⁴⁶ with the second season

merely rehashing ‘the misery of the previous season: Women got raped, families got torn apart, lawbreakers got executed, the hypocrisy of powerful men get a free pass.’²⁴⁷ Many critics remarked on the fact that the ‘ordinary’ Offred was turned into an exceptional woman: ‘Instead of being a person, this woman who’s spent the last few years in sexual servitude is now a quippy unstoppable Feminist Badass.’²⁴⁸ More than one commentator talked about the continued political relevance of the series, particularly ‘the flurry of abortion bans making their way through various state legislatures [which] has made it seem like our society is only a ‘Praise be’ or two away from turning into Gilead right now.’²⁴⁹ While it is difficult to disagree with the criticism that *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a relentless round of misery inflicted on women, it is possible to see that Gilead and Trump’s America were not a million miles apart.

According to author, Margaret Atwood, even though the book is an allegory of a fictionalized world, contemporary America does acutely resonate. For example, ‘the witch and demon imagery’ that was ‘applied to Hillary Clinton’ coupled with the fact that ex Vice-President Mike Pence refused to have dinner with any woman that is not his wife. Just these two examples smack ‘of the same kind of Puritanism that saw women condemned as witches and harlots.’²⁵⁰ We could quite easily add the treatment of working mothers to this list, the infertility issues, the way the women of Gilead are oppressed by each other and the way mothers and children continue to have their babies ripped from their arms – all to suit a patriarchal agenda. Even while President Biden moves to make America a more equitable society, there are many that would keep it in the dark ages - a country not unlike the fictional Gilead.

¹ Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), p 14.

² Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York: Harper & Row, 2021). (Original publication date 1976).

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- ³ Charlotte Shane, 'Mommy Issues: Reconsidering The Mermaid and the Minotaur', *Dissent* 65:3, (New York 2018), 93, DOI: 10.1353/dss.2018.0058.
- ⁴ Ann Snitow, 'Thinking About The Mermaid and the Minotaur', *Feminist Studies*, 4:2, (June 1978), 190, DOI: 10.2307/3177469
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Charlotte Shane, 'Mommy Issues', 93.
- ⁷ Jane Flax, 'Reentering the Labyrinth: Revisiting Dorothy Dinnerstein's The Mermaid and the Minotaur', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27:4, (2002), 1037-1057, <https://tinyurl.com/57us42rm> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ⁸ Charlotte Shane, 'Mommy Issues', 97.
- ⁹ Becca Longmire, 'Handmaid's Tale Author Margaret Atwood Insists Everything in The Book "Happened in Real Life"', *ETCanada*, 11 July 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8vmcd3> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁰ Charlotte Shane, 'Mommy Issues', p 93.
- ¹¹ Matthew Rozsa, 'How plastics are making us infertile - and can even lead to human extinction', *Salon.com*, 4 April 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfhc4tz> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹² Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the Market' in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p 170.
- ¹³ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986), p 136.
- ¹⁴ Emily Jane Fox, 'Hulu's Streaming Service is No Longer Free', *Vanity Fair*, 8 August 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/ynurtpnr> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁵ Shalini Ramachandran and Deepa Seetharaman, 'Hulu Bids Goodbye to Its Free Service', *Wall Street Journal*, 8 August, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/y8wcbvy7> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁶ Heather Hendershot, 'The Handmaid's Tale as Utopian Allegory: "Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby"', *Film Quarterly*, 72:1, (Fall 2018), 13. DOI: 10.1525/fq.2018.72.1.13.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Libby Hill, 'Meet the women who brought the misogynist world of "The Handmaid's Tale" to life', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 May, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2p99z7by> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁹ Sophie Gilbert, 'The Visceral, Woman-Centric Horror of The Handmaid's Tale', *Atlantic*, 25 April 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2ascix34> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁰ Hill, 'Meet the women'.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Lanre Bakare, 'Emmys 2017: The Handmaid's Tale makes history on politically charged night', *Guardian*, 18 September 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2p8dy3cy> (accessed 8 June 2022).
- ²⁷ Gilbert, 'The Visceral'.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² 'It was after the catastrophe when they shot the president and machine gunned the Congress and the army declared a state of emergency.' Atwood, *Handmaid's*, p 174.
- ³³ Hillary Kelly, 'The Handmaid's Tale Recap: Brief Encounter', *Vulture*, 20 June 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhuabmr> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ³⁴ Taylor Maple, 'Why That Horrifying "Handmaid's Tale" Scene Was Actually Necessary', *bustle.com*, 20 June 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/i6n7253y> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ³⁵ Quoted in Nina Bahadur, 'The Complicated Politics of Sansa's "Game of Thrones" Rape Scene', *self.com*, 7 July 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y9cm9m7p> (accessed 8 June 2022).
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ David Canfield, 'The Handmaid's Tale recap: Can this show get any darker?', *ew.com*, 20 June 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/bdhuabmr> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ³⁸ Kelly, 'The Handmaid's Tale Recap'.
- ³⁹ Ruby Hamad, *White Tears, Brown Scars* (New York: Catapult, 2020), p 170.

⁴⁰ Jan Chaney, 'The Handmaid's Tale Wraps Up a Good But Frustrating Season', *Vulture*, 11 July, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/3awkdn3c> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁴¹ Hamad, *White Tears*, p 170.

⁴² Miriam M Johnson, 'Women's Mothering and Male Misogyny,' in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, Andrea O'Reilly (ed.) (Toronto: Canada, Demeter Press, 2007), p 204.

⁴³ Gilbert, 'The Visceral'.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Margaret Lyons, 'The Handmaid's Tale' Season 2 Is Brutal and Not Much Else', *The New York Times*, 11 July, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/4jmf4chm> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁴⁶ Judy Berman, 'The Handmaid's Tale Could Be So Much Better. But First It Has to Leave Its Star Behind', *Time*, 27 June 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/59a7cixz> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Jen Chaney, 'In *The Handmaid's Tale* Season 3, Gilead's Still Gonna Gilead,' *Vulture*, 4 June 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/5b2jem4y> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁵⁰ Gilbert, 'The Visceral'.

Big Little Lies

As a result of the rise in women-centered series much attention has been given to the idea that the twenty first century is a golden era for women and television. The recent rise in streaming sites and subsequent demand for content to fill them has indeed had a positive impact on female employment. Even so, as Martha Lauzen's annual 'Boxed In' report reveals, there are still 'a startlingly high' percentage of programs that employ 'no women in behind-the-scenes roles'.¹ In fact, there were still only thirty three percent of women in key behind-the-scenes positions on broadcast networks in 2020-2² a figure that has declined by two percent from 2019-20.³ Remembering that programs substantially benefit from having at least one female in behind-the-scenes creative roles as they feature 'more female characters than programs with exclusively male creators',⁴ it should be no surprise that gendered inequality in representational terms is still an issue for US cable and network television.

At the same time, there has been a critical shift in the profiling of women's television work. Even if most of the recognition of women's agency is largely centered on US television, the resulting discourse constructs 'a perception of the current cultural moment as a golden age of television for women'⁵ which runs counter to the privileging of male anti-heroes in drama with their 'sexist and abusive treatment of women'.⁶ More women working in television in creative roles has been equated with the rise of 'feminist' television although, as Perkins and Schreiber point out, this idea pivots on the idea of the female auteur where 'these figures are popular *because* they are visible, and the more visible they become the more self-evident the feminist content of their work is made to appear' (emphasis in original).⁷ Warning against the notion of a feminist genre of television, the authors argue that, due to the number of female filmmakers moving across to television, the medium is being understood 'as a new site of independent production for women, with amplified connotations of freedom and authorial control'.⁸ A suggestion that could quite easily be

applied to the involvement of Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman and their respective production companies in the creation of *Big Little Lies* (HBO, 2017-).⁹

In this final chapter I will look at what happens to mothers on TV when more women are employed behind the scenes of a production. How do female producers, directors and writers make sense of maternity? Does it necessarily follow that more women behind the camera make for a more nuanced and sympathetic onscreen interpretation of motherhood? It maybe that the rise of streaming services has allowed women to ‘exercise more control and singularity of vision than has historically been offered in television production’¹⁰ but does this necessarily mean that there will be a fairer treatment of mothers in television narratives or will these ‘post-feminist’ productions still become mired in the same old archetypes? This chapter will argue that, even with big stars (mothers themselves) at the helm, and with mothers front and centre of the narrative, Dorothy Dinnerstein’s suggestion that women also ‘suffer from the overbearing power of the mother’ which leads to them distrust ‘the mother in themselves’¹¹ must be correct. On the evidence of *Big Little Lies* it seems that women behind the scenes sadly have no more power over the depiction of motherhood than the male showrunners that have come before them.

The first season of HBO’s *Big Little Lies* (2017-) screened to much anticipation. Advance publicity told how both Reese Witherspoon and Nicole Kidman’s production companies wanted to option Liane Moriarty’s book less than a month after its publication in 2014. With a female-centered cast including Kidman and Witherspoon, Zoë Kravitz, Laura Dern and Shailene Woodley, adapted for TV by veteran writer David E. Kelley, and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée, the show looked promising. Set in the fictional town of Monterey California, the pilot episode opens to idyllic ocean views, a parade of beautiful children and stylish women, all set to the strains of Michael Kiwanuka’s ‘Cold Little Heart’¹² Although glossy and welcoming, a darker undercurrent is evident: fish under water, a hand points a gun, hands encircle a throat, sharks swim, but these shadows do nothing to disrupt the

sunny atmosphere of the opening credits. Until the first scenes of blue and red lights flashing over an Elvis poster hint at trouble ahead. Police are investigating an accident at a school trivia night. We hear the dialogue between two investigators, the camera edits between a point-of-view shot, with the sound of rapid and heavy breathing, back to the detectives' reaction to a dead body. We then immediately switch to a series of 'talking heads' where various witnesses tell us that, underneath this glossy exterior, things are not quite as they seem at Otterbay Elementary School ('Somebody's Dead', 1:1). So far, so enigmatic.

Big Little Lies garnered rave reviews and was nominated for sixteen Primetime Emmy Awards in its first season, winning eight, including Outstanding Limited Series, Directing (Jean-Marc Vallée), Supporting Actress (Laura Dern) and Supporting Actor (Alexander Skarsgård).¹³ Reese Witherspoon was beaten to the Award for Lead Actress by Nicole Kidman, which immediately led to rumours that the stars were feuding. For some it was clearly too much to believe that successful women could work together as an anonymous source reported: 'The success of *Big Little Lies* has gone to both of their heads and there's now a power struggle between the two stars. Behind closed doors, their egos are clashing and they bicker over the smallest thing.' The evidence for this? The Emmy Awards in September where, having won Outstanding Limited Series, 'Reese grabbed the statue and refused to let it go – even when Nicole tried to have a turn holding it.'¹⁴ Rumours again surfaced in 2020 when the two women were reported as being at loggerheads over Nicole Kidman's adaptation *9 Perfect Strangers* (Hulu, 2021) which was 'apparently the catalyst tearing these women apart'¹⁵ and again when it was reported that the friends had fallen out over *Big Little Lies* season three.¹⁶ The point is not whether Kidman and Witherspoon are friends or not, but the way the media positions them in furious competition, as if it is impossible for women to be anything but rivals.

This is significant to a reading of the TV series as, like the press reports about Kidman and Witherspoon, the first episode 'sets up all the cliches of female rivalry, maternal

hypercompetitiveness and marital fidelity (or lack thereof) and then sets about investigating and deconstructing them.¹⁷ If we cast our minds back to the mommy wars that raged in the American press back in the mid-nineties, they certainly seem to have reared their ugly heads again in Monterey California as Madeline (Reese Witherspoon) tells new arrival Jane Chapman (Shailene Woodley): 'I'm a stay-at-home mom myself so I'm happy to welcome another full-time mom to the ring. You know sometimes I think it's like us against them. You know the career mommies, them and all their various board meetings that are so important ... I think they spend more time on those board meetings than they do actually parenting.' Jane's response, that she actually has a part-time job, prompts Madeline to tell her 'So do I. But it doesn't really count. The over and under in this town is actually about one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, I work in community theatre, twenty hours a week so, I'm definitely an under.' Within the first seven minutes of the series, the battle-lines are drawn and, as *Vulture's* Hillary Kelly tells us: 'In no time at all, *Big Little Lies* will make you squirm with discomfort and schadenfreude as you watch beautiful, complicated women build each other up and rip each other to shreds. Rejoice, for the Mommy Wars are back!'¹⁸

Of course, it is not only the mommy wars that are the focus of *Big Little Lies* as, underneath the outwardly privileged lives of the women, lurks the murky undercurrent of Jane Chapman's rape and the domestic abuse taking place in the outwardly perfect marriage of uber mom Celeste Wright (Nicole Kidman) and her good-looking husband, Perry (Alexander Skarsgård) whose violence against his wife is explosive and often leads to sado-masochistic 'make-up' sex between them. For the *Guardian's* Lucy Mangan, 'its portrait of domestic violence - ... - is masterly,¹⁹ a tour-de-force performance from Nicole Kidman that, not only won her a sheaf of awards but, quite rightly, brought attention to the fact that spousal abuse can impact anyone – even rich and powerful couples.²⁰ Moriarty tells us that she drew inspiration from real-life for Celeste and Perry's story from a woman 'who reverted to a childhood instinct of hiding under her bed when she saw her elderly abusive father

repeat the violent behaviour toward her mother that he had exhibited while she was growing up.²¹ She also reveals that Perry, is based on ‘a really horrible ex-boyfriend ... who I took great pleasure in killing off.’²² Also revealed in the moments before the final episode’s fateful push is that Jane’s rapist is Perry and that the assault took place while he was married to Celeste (‘You Get What You Need’, 1:7).

Despite the positive reviews received by *Big Little Lies* in its first season, there were rumblings about the way the series had dealt with race. Its source novel, originally set in Australia, had been completely devoid of racial diversity, so the fact that bi-racial lead Bonnie Carlson (Zoë Kravitz) was included in the adaptation was certainly a step in the right direction. By making Bonnie, Nathan Carlson’s (played by James Tupper) new wife a mixed-race woman, the creators must have thought that the racial diversity box, missing from the source novel, had been ticked. What a pity that Bonnie’s portrayal, as a benign, make-up free, Alpaca-cardigan wearing yoga teacher, was less well developed than the other leads. For many this decision smacked of rote casting or tokenism, after all, what other way to read a character who exists only to pour oil on troubled waters and is largely excluded from the community of white privileged women? What are we to make of the fact that Bonnie’s race is never mentioned? Should we understand her portrayal as a good example of ‘how black people, black women especially, have to exist in predominantly white spaces’ or, could it be, because ‘the writers themselves were unable or unwilling to deal with race?’²³ This all makes the decision to have Bonnie run out of the crowd to push Perry to his death puzzling and totally out of character.

It is in season two that the trouble really started for *Big Little Lies*. Clearly the grumblings about race were taken seriously by producers and yet, the inclusion of more black characters did nothing to alleviate criticisms. True, a more racially diverse cast including second-grade teacher Michael Perkins (Mo’Nique), Celeste’s lawyer, Katie Richmond (Poorna Jagannathan), and Detective Adrienne Quinlan (Merrin Dungey) did

assuage the whiteness of the cast but, lacking backstories, the characters do nothing to lessen the way: ‘the show approaches ethnicity in a post-racial, color-is-not-an-issue way.’²⁴ But, this is not even the biggest issue at stake in *Big Little Lies*’ racial casting. The biggest problem is the inclusion of Bonnie’s mother, Elizabeth Howard (Crystal Fox) who is invited by her son-in-law, Nathan, in his attempt to ‘Get to the bottom of what is bothering Bonnie’ (‘Tell-Tale Hearts’, 2:2).

We have seen how, when a source story is exhausted, writers of adaptations often make wrong turns but, the decision to switch Bonnie’s abusive parent from her father to her mother is more than a little puzzling. The book tells us that Bonnie has been victim and witness to her father’s abuse, which gives her motivation for the sudden, and unexpected, attack on Perry at the end of season one. This also chimes in with Moriarty’s explanations of the domestic abuse storyline. What makes no sense, however, is the substitution of an abusive white father with an abusive black mother. Unless, of course, there is a desire to stir up some of the angry black woman tropes that continue to circulate in a racially troubled society. Add to this Elizabeth’s psychic abilities and the way she leaves voodoo totems in her daughter’s bedroom, and she has turned into a textbook racialized stereotype to which no series should ever give airtime, particularly in a country where race ‘remains one of the country’s most heated and divisive issues.’²⁵ For *Atlantic* writer, Sophie Gilbert, the idea to make Bonnie’s mother the abusive parent was ‘a fascinating one. Far more women I know were damaged by the mothers than their fathers, and *Big Little Lies*’ steps in this direction broadened its exploration of the harm that children can suffer.’²⁶ There is much to disagree with here, particularly Gilbert’s colourblind assessment of Elizabeth. In a series that has already failed the only lead black character, to then blame her mother for everything that has gone wrong in her life is misguided at best and looks like a deliberate attack on older mothers whether black or white (‘The Bad Mother’, 2:6).

If season one focused on male violence, season two deals with its aftermath and, in a series desperately working against closure, the inclusion of yet another older mother, Mary Louise Wright (Meryl Streep), is a bitter pill to swallow. Grieving her son's death, Mary Louise's investigation into what really happened to Perry is the driving force behind the second season and, yet again, we are treated to an example of the older woman so spitefully described in Phillip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers*. Like Livia Soprano before her, Mary Louise is a bitter woman who views everyone with distrust. She uses the same double-register as Ruth Fisher but, unlike Ruth, wields her barbs knowingly, regularly, and with spite. Mary Louise's avowed intent is to get to the bottom of what happened to her son who, in her eyes at least, is a saint. Again, for Gilbert, who seems totally unaware of the venom behind these portrayals of older women: 'In Streep's hands, Mary Louise was the most subversive of female characters: an elderly woman with opinions.'²⁷ Yet, in television terms at least, Mary Louise is not the first elderly woman to be narratively punished for holding opinions and, sadly, it seems like she won't be the last.

Mary Louise wreaks havoc on the women in Monterey as her passive aggressivity is honed to perfection. Remarking on how short Madeline is she adds, 'I don't mean it in a negative way. Maybe I do. I find little people to be untrustworthy.' ('What Have They Done', 2:1). Later, when Madeline meets Mary Louise at the realtor, she confronts the older woman. Mary Louise agrees that Madeline did not deserve her rudeness and tells her that she reminds her of her best friend from boarding school who 'was just an itty bitty thing with a big bubbly personality to hide that she was utterly bad inside. ... I suppose I punish you for that.' The backhanded apology is a reminder that Mary Louise is anything but sorry and is single minded in her mission to uncover who killed her son. For Shirley Li, Mary Louise 'embraces her role as the grieving mother and dutiful grandmother - and she uses it as a Trojan horse for her villainy.' Li continues, 'underneath that soft-spoken demeanor is a woman capable of exploiting the insecurities and underlying guilt of the women her son

knew. It's an insidious form of cruelty packaged inside a well-meaning, maternal façade.²⁸

But why do we need to have yet another older harridan on our TV screens?

It is not just the older mother that is so badly served in this second season of *Big Little Lies* as the breakdown of Renata Klein's (played by Laura Dern) marriage to Gordon (Jeffrey Nordling) reveals a narrative hostility towards the working mother. The only career woman in the group, season one saw her and Madeline at loggerheads, only coming together because of the death of Perry, and in season two her husband loses all of their money through insider trading and stock ('Tell-Tale Hearts', 2:2). Renata's reaction to Gordon's arrest by the FBI precipitates a character assassination that is not restricted to her pitiful husband but she is narratively annihilated as, learning her husband has lost their money, she visits him in jail and angrily spits at him 'I will not not be rich.' Gordon is portrayed as an uncaring, foolhardy and childish man and Renata's invective is only a shadow of what is to come over the course of the season as she totally loses control at the overwhelming terror of being poor. Treating every man within her radius with searing sarcasm and contempt and, as a portrait of a woman breaking down, Laura Dern gives an outstanding performance. Renata is clearly motivated by the terror of coming from a poor childhood but it is at coincidence that the sole career woman in *Big Little Lies* is so unsympathetically drawn?

It is, of course, Mary Louise that gives voice to what Renata fears all the other mothers are saying about her. At this point Mary Louise has victim-blamed both Celeste and Jane, tried to get custody of her grandsons, given evidence that her daughter-in-law is an unfit mother and, in keeping with the 'bad' mother of the soap opera, is one of the most unlikeable characters in the series. On the way to the final day in court, she bumps into Renata in a coffee shop. By this time the bankruptcy court has revealed that Gordon and Renata's nanny is suing them for \$160,000 for the special 'services' she has provided for Gordon. Renata is at breaking point. She gives the barista short shrift and, in answer to Mary Louise's barbed comment about Celeste refusing a nanny for being 'more trouble than

they are worth' causes Renata to explode telling her: 'This is exactly what you did the last time you were at my house. Stay-at-home moms who make me feel that I should be locked up for neglect because I have a fucking career? I have spent every day of my goddamn life putting my family and my child first. So don't go there judgy judger.' ('I Want to Know', 2:7). This is not the end of Renata's Revenge however as, later, she discovers Gordon playing with his train set. His cocksure demeanour as he tells her that, despite selling it for four hundred and ten thousand dollars, he gets to keep it as, now the nanny is gone, 'I need something to play with' sends Renata into a blind rage and, grabbing a baseball bat, destroys the only property left from their marriage screaming 'maybe you should have showed a woman a bit of respect. No more bullshit. No more lies' and storms out of the house.

Big Little Lies concludes with the women joining together again as, differences aside, they support Bonnie into the police station. It is not only Renata that refuses to live with lies. And yet, the narrative rewards the women that toe the line. Madeline and Ed have renewed their vows, Celeste has retained custody of the twins and Jane has overcome the trauma of her rape and, in a relationship with work colleague Corey Brockfield (Douglas Smith), has the first consensual sex of her young life. On the other hand, some women are not so lucky: Bonnie's mother Elizabeth dies, Mary Louise is revealed, in court, to be an unfit mother herself, Bonnie leaves Nathan and surrenders herself to the police and Renata, penniless and alone, has to confront her own past and rebuild her life after bankruptcy.

The conclusion and narrative punishment for the women of *Big Little Lies* is compounded by media stories surrounding season two director, Andrea Arnold, OBE. As if to undermine the 'connotations of freedom and authorial control'²⁹ afforded by the employment of independent filmmakers, Arnold, known best for Cannes Jury Prize winning films *Fish Tank* (2009) and *American Honey* (2016) was brought on to direct *Big Little Lies* while Jean-Marc Vallée directed HBO's *Sharp Objects* (2017).³⁰ Media reports tell how she was the perfect choice for the series, with sources describing how the dailies were filled with

‘Arnold’s trademark restless camera searching for grace notes – those gestures, movements, and poetic frames of natural light that added another layer to what is not being said.’³¹ It seems that Arnold was initially given free rein with the series, Kidman and Witherspoon loved working with her, and she had been told that they wanted ‘an Andrea Arnold version of the show and all that entailed.’³² If there seems to be a choppy, not-so-feminist, take on the second season, complete with the puzzling insertion of a parade of men that Celeste is supposed to have had one-night-stands with, it may be explained by the fact that in late 2018 ‘creative control was handed over to executive producer and season one director Jean-Marc Vallée’³³ who re-edited the series and did his best to unify the look of season two with his style from season one.

Of course, it is impossible to know the truth at the bottom of these rumours. Nicole Kidman and Reese Witherspoon, themselves at the heart of a number of stories, denied that creative control was taken away from Arnold and she is still credited as director on all seven episodes of season two. According to Casey Bloys, HBO’s president of programming, ‘We’re indebted to Andrea. But as anybody who works in TV knows, a director does not have final creative control’³⁴ adding that ‘it is not unusual in television for an executive producer like Vallée to come on board and ‘hone’ episodes’ and that ‘director’s cuts of television episodes are rarely what end up being released.’³⁵ This idea, that an executive producer and erstwhile director (male) and screenwriter (also male) and the (mainly male) executives at HBO have ultimate power over the finished product, should answer the question of whether we can view contemporary women’s television as feminist. Even the joint powerhouse of Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman and Andrea Arnold are subsumed under the men behind the scenes and, rather depressingly, as Bloys tells us: ‘anyone who understands television and how it works, this is business as usual.’³⁶

- ¹ Lauzen, 'Boxed in Report', 4.
- ² Lauzen, 'Boxed In', 2020-21, p 2.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Lauzen, 'Boxed In', 2020-21, p 6.
- ⁵ Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber, 'Independent women: from film to television,' *Feminist Media Studies*, 19:7 (2019), 919. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1667059.
- ⁶ Perkins & Schreiber, 'Independent women', 920.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Hello Sunshine (Witherspoon) and Blossom Films (Kidman).
- ¹⁰ Perkins & Schreiber, 'Independent women', 920.
- ¹¹ Ann Snitow, 'Thinking About', 190.
- ¹² Polydor, 2016.
- ¹³ In total, the series received nineteen major nominations in 2018, winning thirteen awards including Golden Globes, Screen Actors Guild and Empire Awards among others. Anon. 'Big Little Lies', *Los Angeles Times*, <https://tinyurl.com/bdh3f726> (accessed 9 June 2020).
- ¹⁴ Patricia Smails, 'Nicole and Reese: They can't stand each other,' *New Idea*, 7 December 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/32fy7mfi> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁵ Brianna Morton, 'Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon Friendship Ending Over "9 Perfect Strangers"?' *Gossip Cop*, 28 July 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yck6tzh3> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁶ Griffin Matis, 'Report: Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon Feuding Over Season 3 Of "Big Little Lies"', *GossipCop*, 17 February 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9dynmd> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁷ Lucy Mangan, 'Big Little Lies: Kidman and Witherspoon shine in masterly twist on Desperate Housewives,' *Guardian*, 17 February 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/5n984e36> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁸ Hillary Kelly, 'Big Little Lies Season-Premiere Recap: Murder. Mean Girls, and Monterey,' *Vulture*, 19 February 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2p86cuz8> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ¹⁹ Lucy Mangan, 'Big Little Lies'.
- ²⁰ 2017 Emmy, Gold Derby Award, Online Film & Television Association, 2018 Screen Actors Guild Award, UK Empire Award, GALECA Award, Golden Globe, Satellite Award, Broadcast Film Critics Association Award for Best Actress.
- ²¹ Mahita Gajanan, 'Big Little Lies Author Liane Moriarty on Why Her Story is Universal', *Time*, 17 February 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/4whwdfbs> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²² Antonia Blyth, 'Liane Moriarty Reveals The Horrifying True Story Behind *Big Little Lies*', *Elle*, 18 September 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/bdfs94ne> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²³ Zeba Blay, 'Bonnie And The Brilliant Racial Tension Of "Big Little Lies"', *Huffpost*, 6 April 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9x73xy> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁴ Reshmi Hebbbar, 'The HBO hit has expanded its cast, but it's struggling to diversify its stories', *Slate.com*, 11 July 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2zdca9pt> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁵ Greg Braxton, 'Commentary: "Big Little Lies": is less white this season. That doesn't mean it's smart about race', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 June, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/36xxmthd> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁶ Sophie Gilbert, 'In Defense of *Big Little Lies* Second Season: Could any show meet the expectations that the HBO series set?', *The Atlantic*, 22 July, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/mtnwe2pb> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*
- ²⁸ Shirley Li, 'Why Meryl Streep's Sly Matriarch Works So Well on *Big Little Lies*', *The Atlantic*, 11 June, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/m5fty87w> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ²⁹ Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber, 'Independent women', 920.
- ³⁰ Another series featuring a monstrous mother.
- ³¹ Chris O'Falt, '"Big Little Lies" Season 2 Turmoil: Inside Andrea Arnold's Loss of Creative Control', *IndieWire*, 12 July 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/k2ened93> (accessed 9 June 2022).
- ³² O'Falt, 'Big Little Lies'.
- ³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Quoted in Zack Sharf, 'HBO's Casey Bloys: Andrea Arnold Was "Never Promised" Creative Control on 'Big Little Lies' Season 2', *IndieWire*, July 24 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/4eevbycx> (accessed 9 June 2022).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Sex and The City

According to Andrea Press: ‘television “discovered” the female prime-time market in the 1970s’, as evidenced by a spate of ... “hybrid” prime-time shows, which combine melodramatic elements with traditionally male genres like the cop show or the action show.’¹ Fast-forward to 1998, and it was a hybrid of television sitcom format and the filmic romantic comedy, that saw HBO’s breakout hit series *Sex and the City*, shine a light on a specific milieu of millennial women and how they negotiated life as single women. The series was broadcast on HBO between 1998-2004.² Screened in an era defined by post-feminism and in an economy that was enjoying the largest growth that we would see this century, the series had much to reveal about women and friendship and became synonymous with consumerist culture and have-it-all feminism. As many feminist scholars have argued, *Sex and the City* was about so much more than fashion, shoes and sex. A fact evidenced by the size of the audience and how quickly the series became compulsory viewing with the finale reaching an audience of 10.6 million in the US and over 4.1 million in Britain.³ Not bad for a show on what was then a relatively minor cable channel exported onto the third most popular terrestrial channel in Britain.⁴

Much of the discourse around *Sex and the City* focused on the potential feminism of the show – with a great deal of discussion centering on whether the women (principally Carrie Bradshaw) could be read as either feminist, post-feminist or third wave feminist icons – or whether they were feminists at all with their obsession with shoes, clothes and men. The fact that the series was about four single women meant that the characters were always going to have to bear the burden of representation in this way and HBO’s commercial decision to consciously attract affluent, female, subscribers make any feminist credentials seem like an afterthought. Despite author Naomi Wolf claiming that the series was – ‘the first global female epic – the answer to the question posed in Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own”. What will women actually do when they are free?’²⁵ – most of the media hype

surrounding the first seasons of *Sex and the City* focused on the sex of the title with very little thought given to the possible ramifications of the act itself. In addition, the lack of restrictions by HBO meant that *Sex and the City* could follow in the footsteps of prison drama *Oz*, showing and saying what had previously been prohibited on American television but, while *Oz* had focused on male relationships in the pressure cooker of a high security prison, *Sex and the City* would do the polar opposite and feature four glamorous and decidedly white, middle class, Manhattan women.

Famously adapted from Candace Bushnell's 1996, book, *Sex and the City*,⁶ the series' opening gambit – whether women can have sex 'like men', without emotion or attachment – is soon brought up short with Carrie's pregnancy scare ten episodes into the first season. A storyline framed by the four friends' reactions to their invitation to Laney Berlin's (played by Dana Wheeler-Nicholson), baby shower ('The Baby Shower', 1:10). Described by Carrie as 'hell on earth' the women discuss the prospect over popcorn and a movie. Miranda tells her friends that they couldn't 'drag her to that thing with a grappling hook in her mouth' adding: 'It's a cult. ... They all think the same, dress the same and sacrifice themselves to the same cause. Babies. I've lost two sisters to the motherhood.' While the friends' reactions are mixed Miranda remains hostile. Sam's eventual justification for attending – 'just imagine how fat she's going to be' – sends the four friends on a road trip to Connecticut to observe former wild-child, Laney, in full maternal glory. If Samantha's gift of a bottle of scotch is wildly inappropriate for a pregnant woman, then Miranda's present of a packet of pastel condoms reveals much about her attitude towards reproduction. Once inside Miranda warns Carrie: 'We can't separate. Once they isolate you from the herd it's all over.' And while three of the friends, Miranda, Carrie and Sam, are appalled at the performance of 'idealized' motherhood at the party – with mothers breastfeeding toddlers and Laney's nude, Demi Moore style, painting in the bathroom – Charlotte, who is the only one of the friends to long for marriage and motherhood, is in her full beribboned glory. Miranda and Carrie

eventually escape to sit on the steps of Laney's house where Miranda bemoans that the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* was very misunderstood: 'I mean the woman builds her dream house and those brats come along and start eating it.'

From this early episode, the series steadily works towards exposing the myths of motherhood that have, according to Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, been peddled in the media since the eighties. In their book, *The Mommy Myth*, they argue that the media works to pit woman against woman and, more importantly, mother against mother. For Douglas and Michaels, the myth of new momism 'seeks to contain and, where possible, eradicate, all the social changes brought on by feminism' adding: 'It is backlash in its most refined, pernicious form because it insinuates itself into women's psyches just where we have been rendered most vulnerable: in our love for our kids.'⁷ Douglas and Michaels offer two media stereotypes: the ideal/Madonna/nurturing mother and the bad working mother that are used to judge mothers against and, simultaneously, set women impossible standards by which to judge themselves,⁸ Douglas and Michaels propose that it is time to 'exhume what feminists really hoped to change about motherhood' and 'to go back to a time when many women felt free to tell the truth about motherhood – e.g. that at times they felt ambivalent about it because it was so hard and yet so undervalued.'⁹

Miranda's ambivalence towards motherhood is identified early on in season four. While Charlotte and Trey's (played by Kyle MacLachlan) attempt to have a child is the focus of their married life, Miranda's surprise pregnancy only three episodes after the death of her own mother,¹⁰ is a narrative fillip that deflates any romantic notion of motherhood and conception: a single woman with a lazy ovary knocked up after a 'mercy fuck' with ex-boyfriend Steve Brady (David Eigenberg) a man with 'only one ball' ('Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda', 4:11). As Miranda tells Carrie, 'it's like the special Olympics of conception.' At brunch she tells her friends the news. Charlotte, who has devoted herself to being an exemplary wife to Trey, a fulltime homemaker and is desperate to conceive their baby, leaves

the restaurant abruptly when Miranda tells them she is thinking of terminating the pregnancy. A conversation about abortion ensues. If you consider that it was only in the fifties that Lucille Ball revolutionized pregnancy on our television screens, the early seventies that Maude terminated her abortion and the early nineties that Vice President Dan Quayle had berated the sitcom character Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock, you can see how radical this discussion was. Despite telling Carrie that she can barely find time in her busy life to schedule an abortion let alone have a baby, Miranda finds herself in the clinic and, at the very last moment, cancels the procedure. It may, after all, be her last chance and even the cynical Miranda cannot pass up the opportunity to experience motherhood, which according to Peggy Orenstein has ‘supplanted marriage as the source of romantic daydreams for childless, unmarried women in their twenties and early to mid-thirties.’¹¹

It is not only that Miranda chooses to keep her baby (much to her friends’ delight), but her swelling body, with its fatigue, uncontrollable flatulence, and out-of-control sex drive, are a constant source of comedy. As she so eloquently puts it, ‘I don’t know why they call it “morning sickness” when it’s all fucking day long’ (‘Just Say Yes’, 4:12). Told that she is expecting a boy, Miranda finds herself ‘faking her sonogram’ (‘Change of a Dress’, 4:15) telling Carrie that ‘everyone else is glowing about her pregnancy,’ and wondering whether she ever will. When Magda (Lynn Cohen) finds the sonogram photograph of the baby and tells Miranda that a boy is good luck, Miranda is compelled to perform her, now perfected, ritual of fake joy. She pulls a muscle in her neck as a result. If this is not a good enough example of how women are expected to possess an innate ‘maternal instinct,’ it is reinforced by Carrie’s reluctance to marry Aidan and her question ‘are we just programmed?’ to want marriage and babies – a question partly answered by Miranda’s rant two episodes later: ‘The fat ass, the farting, it’s ridiculous! I am un-fuckable and I have never been so horny in my entire life. That’s why you’re supposed to be married when you’re pregnant – so somebody is obligated to have sex with you’ (‘Ring a Ding Ding’, 4:16). Miranda’s nine-month abjection

is eventually complete when, interrupting Carrie's last fairy-tale date with Mr. Big (Chris Noth) – a horse-drawn carriage ride through New York's Central Park – her waters break over Carrie's coveted, beautiful, and expensive new Christian Louboutin shoes. Never before has the reality wave of motherhood been exposed so starkly as when Miranda's amniotic fluid gushes over Cinderella's fairy-tale glass slippers ('I Heart New York', 4:18).

In addition to exposing the indignities of pregnancy, *Sex and the City* reworks existing representations of new motherhood away from the more usual glowing idealized Madonna-and-child imagery. Throughout season five, Miranda struggles with the trauma of being a new mother surrounded by single childless women who are patently unqualified to guide her through this particular maze. In 'Anchors Away' (5:1), Samantha bundles Miranda and baby Brady into a cab with indecent haste so that the child-free friends can go shopping. Carrie's spontaneous visit to Miranda later that day finds her friend unable to coax Brady to breastfeed or concentrate on their conversation. The sight of Miranda's swollen, veiny, milk-filled breasts, fills Carrie with horror and, taking her leave abruptly, ignores Miranda's assurances her that she can now focus as Brady has latched on successfully. Carrie kisses her friend on the head and tells her, 'Miranda, you're a mother, but it's OK, I won't tell anyone.' This phrase, although offered with love, exposes a gulf between the two friends, identifying Miranda's transformation from 'one of the girls' to 'mother'. Considering how ambivalent all four women have been about marriage and motherhood, it is no reassurance to Miranda when Carrie tells her that nothing will affect their friendship and that she is still one of them.

Not only is this scene revealing of the gulf between pre- and post- motherhood women, but it also exposes the steep learning curve that women have to undergo to become confident, breastfeeding mothers. Breastfeeding is often in the headlines as women continue to be criticized for turning their backs on the practice even while they are harassed for

nursing their babies in public spaces¹² but the difficulties women face with the act itself are rarely seen in fiction or addressed in the mainstream media. Far from being ‘natural’ to all women, something that all mothers should want to do, Miranda’s difficulties with feeding Brady show us that this is yet another skill to be learned and is not instinctive to all new mothers. The appearance of Miranda’s breasts leaves no doubt that, for the foreseeable future at least, they will be feeding and not titillating, which may hint at the truth behind the complaints against breastfeeding in public. It is not that women expose their breasts while nursing that is the problem, but how onlookers (usually male) react to the sight of fully-functional, non-sexual and un-objectified breasts.

There are two bastions of motherhood that Miranda attempts to storm in season five: sex and work. Telling an old flame that she has had a baby but she’s ‘still allowed to have sex’, Miranda takes him back to her apartment. As Carrie’s voiceover tells us, ‘Miranda was trying to prove that she could still do it all. Bring home the bacon, bring home a baby and bring home an orgasm.’ Giving a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘mummy’s coming’, Miranda eventually concedes defeat, accepts that her life has to change and that motherhood and dating are mutually incompatible, for the time being at least (‘Plus One Is the Loneliest Number’, 5:5). In ‘Critical Condition’ (5:6) Miranda’s exhaustion with Brady’s constant crying reaches its peak as she tells her friends that she has not slept for days, all her clothes smell of barf and she hasn’t had time to have a haircut: ‘If he was 35, this is when we would break up! This 13-pound meatloaf is pushing me over the edge. I feel disgusting.’ Pleading with Brady to stop crying that night, a neighbour complains. The next day sees a distraught and bedraggled Miranda snapping at Carrie on the phone worrying that she’s a bad friend as well as a bad mother. Her fear of being distanced from her single friends is only exacerbated by the neighbourhood community of mothers who prove Douglas and Michaels’ assertion that we are often ‘judged by the toughest critics out there: other mothers’¹³ and show how isolating and terrifying new motherhood can be. It is only the intervention of one of those

neighbours, Brady, Kendall (Lisa Gay Hamilton), that gives voice to the problem that has, so far, remained unspoken. Offering Miranda an oscillating chair to stop Brady crying she learns that Miranda has only childless friends and tells her: 'Well then, you're screwed. If they don't have kids, they don't have a clue.' While this comment arguably undermines the show's commitment to respecting single, child-free women's lives it also cuts in the opposite direction, reminding us that child care is a matter of effective props and knowing friends rather than natural instinct and proves Douglas and Meredith's assertion that 'motherhood is a collective experience'.¹⁴

The challenges of new motherhood and dating are nothing compared to the impossibility of Miranda's attempt to combine her successful law career with single parenthood. It can be no coincidence that the episode 'Hop, Skip and a Week' (6:6) was originally screened in 2003, the same year that *The New York Times* published Linda Belkin's article 'The Opt-Out Revolution'.¹⁵ This article, which ignited a fierce debate known as the US media's 'mommy wars' also made its way to UK newsprint,¹⁶ and spoke of the pressures on working mothers in the twenty first century. Featuring a select group of well-educated women with first degrees from Princeton, and some MBAs from Columbia and Harvard, the article focused on the way they had 'opted-out' of high-flying careers in order to stay home and look after their children. Journalist, Linda Belkin, argues that this is not how it should have been, and that second wave feminism should have led to equality in the workplace but, on the evidence of the women interviewed for this article, once they had children, no matter how good their careers, women seemed to stall. Yet, rather than address the real issues at stake here, such as the lack of support for working mothers, the women talked about their 'choice' and decision to 'opt-out' of the workplace in order to stay at home. For Joan Williams¹⁷ and Miriam Peskowitz, it is this rhetoric of choice that has done so much to undermine women's careers post-childbirth and has betrayed the idea of equality in the workplace. As Peskowitz points out we: 'talk about the glass ceiling and the mommy track

so regularly that these phrases seem passé, yesterday's news'¹⁸ and yet they still hold much currency in twenty-first century American life. She adds:

Scratch the surface and there's the glass ceiling. Peer into the company accounts and there's the persistent gender wage gap. Look at who's taking family leave, or why our public life seems so devoid of fortysomething women, and why it's still mostly men running for office or men running the TV news, and it's pretty clear that we aren't as postfeminist as we'd like to be.¹⁹

As she puts it 'the gains for women in the past decades have not meant a similar gain for mothers ... childraising remains mothers' work, and in many families it's the mother's salary that is balanced against daycare costs.'²⁰ In an environment where long working hours and intense competition are the norm, mothers often find themselves 'at odds with the workplace, and ... bearing the brunt of this mismatch.'²¹ In fact, as Peskowitz argues, 'today's workplace makes it increasingly difficult for two people who are really committed to their jobs to also raise a family.'²²

It is in this cultural context that Miranda's narrative is as poignant as it is revealing. Her return to her job as partner in a law firm finds her 'politically incorrectly happy to be there.' Thinking that she is being called into a meeting about progress on her latest case, Miranda is faced by two colleagues – Maurice (Lee Shepherd) and Fern (Rosemarie DeWitt) – who accuse her of tardiness and struggling with her caseload. It is Miranda's female colleague, Fern, that (rather smugly) lists the times that Miranda has been late, with full details of when, where and how. Miranda's rejoinder 'way to watch my back Fern' points to the gap between mothers and non-mothers and also exposes the myth of sisterhood in the neoliberal workplace. As she leaves the room Miranda tells her colleagues that, in terms of her workload she is, in fact, 'kicking ass' but it is 'at home that she is doing a bad job.' If, as Peskowitz argues, it is difficult for two parents to

commit to their jobs and raise a family, Miranda's narrative emphasizes the impossibility of being both an ideal worker and a single parent. After Brady begins to prefer Magda's company over his mother's, Miranda eventually succumbs to the pressure and decides that she has to cut her working week to around 50 or 55 hours max if she is to survive motherhood.

Sex and the City may well have exposed the truth behind the fiction but the celebrity discourse surrounding the series constantly undermined that process. Nowhere is this more evident than in the magazine stories that regularly appeared about the stars' real-life pregnancies and motherhood. Pregnant throughout season five (although not in the series) Sarah Jessica Parker gave birth to her first child, James, in autumn 2002. Six months later she was reported to be 'back in shape'. Promotional shots for the final season revealed no trace of her recent pregnancy.²³ Compare this to Miranda's tortuous narrative in seasons five and six and her struggle with postpartum weight which, according to the media, Parker did not share: 'She'll slip into motherhood as easy as she does her Manolo Blahniks'.²⁴ Read alongside Miranda's story of lugging around a puking baby, and defending her 'fat ass' in Atlantic City ('Luck be an Old Lady', 5:3) the 'blissfully wed' Parker story confirmed the 'have it all' discourse so vehemently dismantled within the show. It also adds rather interesting reading to what Michaels and Douglas call the 'celebrity mom profile' which, in their analysis, snowballed in the 1980s and became a fixture in the 1990s. According to them the celebrity-mom profile 'was probably the most influential media form to sell the new momism, and where its key features were refined, reinforced, and romanticized'.²⁵ They add that the celebrity-mom profile has been an 'absolutely crucial tool in the media construction of maternal guilt and insecurity, as well as the romanticizing of motherhood, in the 1980s and beyond'.²⁶ Not only does it present mothers who have allegedly found a balance between working and caring for children, but there is an added pressure. If the celebrity mom is willing to give up her glittering showbiz career in order to nurture and mother her

children, the suggestion is, why aren't we? Douglas and Michaels argue that the celebrity-mom portraits resurrect many of the stereotypes that women had hoped were buried thirty years ago, including the notion that: 'Women are, by genetic composition, nurturing and maternal, love all children, and prefer motherhood to anything, especially work, so should be the main ones responsible for raising the kids.'²⁷ This discourse, add Douglas and Michaels, exemplifies what motherhood has become in our intensified consumer culture: a competition. One that pits mother against mother and leaves the notion of sisterhood in the dust.

The radical potential of *Sex and the City's* Miranda is that she forces us to look at the messiness of mothering and gives agency to the actual affective labour of caring for a child whether single parent, stay-at-home mom or working woman. This representation offers an alternative version to the 'idealized motherhood' stereotypes that exist in the media. Dragged into motherhood with a 'grappling hook in her mouth', Miranda faked her sonogram, let a friend's baby fall off the sofa at her baby shower ('A Vogue Idea', 4:17) and had difficulty coping with and bonding with Brady. She was never someone for whom mothering would come easily and it is fair to say that Miranda's maternal journey shows us how motherhood causes exhaustion and guilt, is isolating and demands impossible standards of perfection. In fact, Miranda Hobbes' narrative is a perfect example of Adriene Rich's theorization of female-centered and female-defined 'mothering' and how it rebels against the steely grip of the patriarchal institution of 'motherhood'.²⁸

This is not where her story ends though as Miranda has to, despite her misgivings, move out of Manhattan to Brooklyn for the sake of her family ('Out of the Frying Pan', 6:16) and must take on the next stage of her life's journey, which includes caring for Steve's mother, Mary (Anne Meara). Despite their difficult relationship, it is Miranda who offers Mary a home after her mother-in-law's stroke. Sitting at her kitchen table with Charlotte, the women acknowledge each other's problems and how 'amazing' they both are – Charlotte

and Harry have just lost a baby girl by surrogate and Miranda has gained an unruly adult child in the ‘guise of Mary (‘An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux)’, 6:20). Rescuing her mother-in-law after she wanders off in a confused mental fugue, Miranda is forced to care for Mary as a mother would a child. Framed in the bathroom, their red hair linking them and Brady’s bath toys emphasizing Mary’s child-like state, the *mise-en-scène* suggests that Miranda has finally accepted a role that she fought against for so long. Later that night Magda tells her ‘What you did, that was love. You love.’ Kissing her on the head gently, Magda gives Miranda the approval that was missing from her relationship with her own mother. Over six seasons, and through her cynical world view, Miranda’s journey in *Sex and the City* offered us an unusually rich and previously unseen insight into mothering and all its messiness.

***Sex and the City* – the films**

This seems as a good a time as any to return to the films that came after *Sex and the City* to ask what went wrong? Especially as the narrative arc set up in the first season episode, ‘The Baby Shower’, was brought to its ultimate expression in the second film. In many ways, Big and Carrie’s decision not have children in *Sex and the City 2* (Michael Patrick King, 2010) was foreshadowed in ‘Catch-38’ (6:15) when, confronted with Alexander Petrovsky’s (played by Mikhail Baryshnikov) vasectomy and her realization that indecision may mean that Carrie has left motherhood too late, she asks: ‘Did we want babies and perfect honeymoons, or did we think we *should* have babies and perfect honeymoons?’ While Charlotte and Harry Goldenblatt (Evan Handler) now have two longed for children, the ‘terrible twos’ and reality of stay-at-home mothering has hit Charlotte hard. Miranda has learned to juggle childcare and a demanding job, but we are shown how precarious this balancing act is through the arrival of her misogynist and vengeful boss who eventually forces her out of her job. Even Sam struggles with the onset of menopause, not because she mourns the end of her childbearing years but because she worries about losing her sex drive.

Even before *Sex and the City 2* premiered, the critical community was scathing. *Newsweek* had already asked (about the first film) ‘if it’s not a case of ‘Sexism in the City’. Men hated the movie before it even opened [and] ... gave it such a nasty tongue lashing you would have thought they were talking about an ex-girlfriend.’²⁹ By the time the second film was released, the knives were again already out and, before it even premiered, had been given savage reviews. ‘The women were too old, the storyline too thin and the ostentatious consumerism was too out of place in a post-recession world. For Lindy West of *The Stranger*: ‘*SATC2* takes everything that I hold dear as a woman and as a human – working hard, contributing to society, not being an entitled cunt like it’s my job – and rapes it to death with a stiletto that costs more than my car.’³⁰ The worst criticism, however, was aimed at the women. For Sukhdev Sandhu the women’s crime was ‘getting older’ aiming his most vitriolic attack on Sarah Jessica Parker for ‘looking, if you happen to go for human pipe-cleaners, absolutely fabulous ... like a cross between Wurzel Gummidge and Bride of Chucky.’³¹ Andrew O’Hagan in *London Evening Standard* went one further by describing the women as ‘greedy, faithless, spoiled, patronising ... morons’ calling Samantha a ‘blond slut’ whose inner life ‘stops at her labia’ and possessing ‘the desperate mentality of the School Bike.’³²

True, there is a misplaced trip to Abu-Dhabi complete with Burqa clad women and the storyline around the all-expenses luxury trip, (actually filmed in Morocco rather than the United Arab Emirates) was ill-advised. What was even more stark, however, was the exposure of the reality behind the ‘happy-ever-after’ fairy-tale, which was always going to sit awkwardly on the big screen. *Sex and The City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008) had already threatened this narrative with Big and Carrie’s overblown wedding replaced with a simple one and, with all the critical opprobrium, the radical nature of the women’s stories in this second outing was largely overlooked. For *The Hollywood Reporter*, at least, the women had never seemed so ‘proudly feminist’ as they were in *Sex and the City 2* and, even if for the same

critic, the film could be understood as ‘blatantly anti-muslim’,³³ the sheer chutzpah of this final outing, which was openly critical of a patriarchal ideology that oppresses women, was subsumed under near-hysterical criticism. *Sex and the City 2* did, however, speak directly to legions of loyal fans. Always famed for its honest and forthright depiction of women, the film, while flawed, delivered on its original promise. Of particular note for this chapter is how it lays bare the expectations associated with motherhood and the real affective labour of mothering. Miranda, sick of being dumped on by her boss, decides to leave work and become a stay-at-home mom. Something that we would never have expected from the most feminist of the friends, leading many to wonder whether she had truly been picked off from herd and become part of the ‘cult of motherhood’ identified by her back in 1998.

In their opulent Abu-Dhabi hotel suite Miranda invites Charlotte for a pre-dinner drink. Dressed in gold and sipping their signature Cosmopolitans, Miranda raises her glass and tells her friend: ‘being a mother kicks your ass.’ Charlotte’s well-rehearsed rejoinder: ‘the benefits make it worth it’ hides the despair that has driven her on the trip in the first place. Miranda takes the situation in hand and in a moment of feminist consciousness raising tells her friend: ‘OK. We’re sixty-seven hundred miles away from everyone. You can say it to me, I’m a mother too ... all the things you’re thinking but won’t allow yourself to say out loud.’ When Charlotte looks at Miranda quizzically, Miranda takes a swig of her drink and says: ‘OK. I’ll go first. As much as I love Brady, and I do love him more than words, being a mother is not enough. I miss my job.’ That being a stay-at-home mother is not a role that fulfils all women has never been said so plainly. Gathering her courage, Charlotte confesses that as much as she loves her girls, she enjoys being away from them as her daughter’s crying is driving her crazy. Emboldened by Miranda’s sympathy and fuelled by cosmopolitans, Charlotte tells her friend: ‘Sometimes, I go in the other room, close the door and just let her scream. Isn’t that awful?’ she continues: ‘Can I tell you something else? I feel guilty. I feel so guilty because all I ever prayed for was to have a family and now, I have these two

beautiful girls and they're driving me crazy. And I feel like I'm failing. I just feel like I'm failing all the time.' Many critics have commented on the fact that the *Sex and the City* women are far removed from 'normal' women's lives, particularly in this luxurious setting, but Charlotte names this very problem by saying that, despite having a nanny, mothering 'is so hard ... How do the women without help do it?' Miranda's simple answer: 'I have no fucking idea' reveals a simple truth, and one that undercuts that myth of motherhood that the *Sex and the City* series did so much to explode. If two privileged women like Miranda and Charlotte find mothering hard and unfulfilling (even with nannies) what do we make of the 'new momism' outlined in Douglas and Michaels 2004 book?

While it is true that *Sex and the City* does not speak to all women, the maternal narrative arc played out across twelve years is truly revolutionary and has never been equalled. It exposed the fact that not all women want to be mothers, mothering is not an instinct, breastfeeding is tough, not all mothers want to stay-at-home and, even if they do, it is not always perfect. While mothering is often a job that is gladly embraced, it is just as often full of guilt and, furthermore, it is mothers that are castigated by society for not doing a good enough job. These stories, told through the eyes of our *Sex and the City* women, expose the inconsistencies between a fictional narrative, the myth of ideal motherhood and the celebrity mom discourse. In the end, Miranda clearly shows us, not only the ambivalence toward motherhood that many women feel, but also the difficulties of trying to fit the role into a neoliberal workplace organized around a full-time ideal worker 'who works full time and overtime and takes little or no time off for childbearing or child rearing'.³⁴

Afterthoughts on *And Just Like That ...* (HBO Max, 2021-)

HBO Max premiered *And Just Like That ...* on 9 December 2021. Set eleven years after the last film, HBO later announced that it was 'the most viewed series premiere of a new HBO or HBO Max series on the streaming service'.³⁵ It was certainly hotly-anticipated and

contained some surprises from the get-go. 'The creators of the series' decision to kill off Big (Chris Noth) in the first episode ('Hello It's Me' 1:1) was a surprise to everyone, not least Carrie, who finds her husband suffering a heart attack after his record-breaking session with a Peloton. In retrospect, this was a fortuitous sleight of script in the light of accusations of historical sexual assault levelled at Chris Noth which forced a rapid re-editing, removing him from Carrie's flashback scenes, ensuring that the series was not affected by negative publicity. This was not the only problem with the revived series. Stanford Blatch actor, Willie Garson, suffered pancreatic cancer during shooting and had to be written out after four episodes due to his death in September 2021 and Kim Cattrall famously refused to have anything to do with the sequel.

And Just Like That ... picks up with Miranda and Charlotte both struggling with older children. Miranda and Steve's marriage is in a sexual hiatus while their son is so sexually active that Miranda worries that they have done the right thing allowing Brady (Niall Cunningham) to sleep with his girlfriend at home ('Hello It's Me', 1:1). Meanwhile Charlotte is conflicted about her daughters' competing needs – Lily (Cathy Ang), a model child, plays concert piano and wears dresses chosen by Charlotte in direct contrast to Rose (Alexa Swinton), who wants to be a boy named Rock ('When in Rome', 1:3). It is not that Miranda and Charlotte are totally unprepared for sexual activity and gender fluidity, after all we have seen what they have experienced in the past, but here we can see how uncomfortable children's developing sexuality often is for mothers – pre-pubescence and adolescence are universally disliked – whether suffering the process or remembering it as an adult. In addition, as if to remind us that motherhood is not easily attainable for everyone, Miranda's new friend college professor Dr Nya Wallace (Karen Pitman) is struggling with infertility issues, a subject that she and Miranda regularly discuss. Charlotte's new friend, documentarian Lisa Todd Wexley (Nicole Ari Parker), is part of the 'power moms' group who run school events. A 'super woman' with three children, and effortless glamour, Lisa

and Charlotte prove that stay-at-home moms and working moms can get along without rancour.

While motherhood is still central to the series, some twenty years since Miranda and Charlotte's initial pregnancy and infertility storylines, *And Just Like That ...* revisits motherhood but with less revolutionary potential. Times have changed and the fact remains that none of the women even hint at relationships with their own mothers. At least we can celebrate that at the end of the first season no soap opera villainess has reared her ugly head, except potentially Lisa's mother-in-law Eunice (Pat Bowie). It's a pity that we can't say this about the first drama series to put HBO so firmly on the map. A subject I will explore in the next chapter.

¹ Andrea Press, 'Gender and Family in Television's Golden Age and Beyond', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, (September 2009), 143. DOI: 10.1177/0002716209337886.

² The first run was syndicated in Canada, Australia and Ireland.

³ Joe Flint, "'Sex and the City' Finale Scores Series' Highest Ratings Ever', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 February 2004, <https://tinyurl.com/4j8bxjuu> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁴ The first run of the show appeared in the UK on Channel 4 between 1999-2005.

⁵ Quoted in Heather Hodson, 'The Sex and the City girls are back in town', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2008, <https://tinyurl.com/2p87nmv9> (accessed 9 June 2022).

⁶ Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City* (New York: Warner Trade Books, 1996).

⁷ Susan J Douglas and Meredith W Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2005), p 23.

⁸ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, pp 11-12.

⁹ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, p 27.

¹⁰ 'My Motherboard Myself', 4:8. It is noteworthy that this is the only episode in which any of the women's mothers are mentioned. And this despite the fact that the men remain close to theirs.

¹¹ Quoted in Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, p 25.

¹² Julie Mazziota, 'Breastfeeding in Public is FINALLY Legal in All 50 States', *People*, 25 July 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/2p9bv8rf> (accessed 9 June 2022).

¹³ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, p 19.

¹⁴ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, p 25.

¹⁵ Lisa Belkin, 'The Opt-Out Revolution', *New York Times Magazine*, 26 October 2003, <https://tinyurl.com/yc42z9s3> (accessed 8 June 2022).

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