**Miranda and *Miranda*: Feminism, Femininity and Performance[[1]](#endnote-1)**

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Ground-breaking feminist work on women and television comedy in the 1990s addressed its potential for subversive, unruly performance, largely focussing on North American stars such as Lucille Ball and Roseanne Arnold (Mellencamp 1992, Gray 1994, Rowe 1995). This essay however is concerned with how British class identities intersect with the femininity and feminism of a contemporary comedy star and her eponymous sitcom – Miranda Hart and *Miranda* (BBC 2009 - ). If Hart is an ‘unruly woman’ (Rowe 1995) she successfully mobilizes discourses of upper middle class Englishness as a means of mitigating the threat of unruly femininity in television comedy. In British comedy, class is always in play, and *Miranda* has come under public scrutiny for its ‘middle class’ constituency (Cook 1982, Lockyer 2010, Frost 2011). Shortly after his appointment as controller of BBC1 in 2011 Danny Cohen commented that too many sitcoms were about middle class people:

Sources say that he feels the Beeb is ‘too focused on formats about comfortable, well-off middle-class families whose lives are perhaps more reflective of BBC staff than viewers in other parts of the UK’, and that we need more of ‘what he describes as “blue-collar” comedies’. (Leith 2011)

*Miranda* and Miranda Hart featured heavily in subsequent debates online and in the broadsheet press about class and television comedy, not least because Hart had just won three British Comedy Awards in January 2011 (see, for example, Fletcher 2011, Frost 2011, Boyd and Ferguson 2011). Several commentators were keen to stress the ‘universal’ quality of Hart’s comedy (Frost 2011) or that it ‘wasn’t about class’ (Fletcher 2011), but there is a complex intersection of class and gender at play in Hart’s work. Fired by these debates, and her phenomenal success, this essay examines Miranda Hart as a contemporary comedy performer and celebrity, tracing how her television character and celebrity persona negotiate femininity and feminism through a particular class identity.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Hart has moved from minor parts in *Smack the Pony* (Channel 4 1999-2003) and *Nighty Night* (BBC 2004-5), to supporting roles in *Hyperdrive* (BBC 2006-7) and *Not Going Out* (BBC 2006 - ), and then to writing and starring in her own television series, *Miranda,* following the success of *Miranda Hart’s Joke Shop* on BBC Radio 2 (2007-8). In addition to her award-winning sitcom Hart has appeared on game show panels, chat shows and the BBC’s *Comic Relief*, reinforcing a celebrity persona that appears to confirm the identification of the ‘real’ Miranda Hart with the sitcom character. Beyond television Miranda Hart is a multimedia phenomenon, with a Twitter account (although she professes to despise Twitter), a website, a best-selling autobiography and another volume on the way. She is preparing for a stand-up arena tour in 2014 that is currently selling out, and has stated an ambition to appear in a West End show. She is associate producer on *Miranda* and was executive producer of the documentary *My Hero* (BBC 2013)*,* which featured Hart talkingabout her inspiration, Eric Morecambe. In September 2013 Hart hosted a show on BBC1’s prime Saturday night slot which celebrated the career of veteran entertainer Bruce Forsyth. *Miranda Meets Bruce* cemented Hart’s profile as a mainstream celebrity comedy performer, framing her as a natural successor to an older generation of light entertainment television stars such as Morecambe and Forsyth. Is there nothing Miranda Hart can’t do? All of this is the more remarkable considering the historical dominance of male comedy stars in sitcoms and the distinct minority of female comedians on British television panel shows and in stand-up. Hart is already garnering academic attention; there were papers on *Miranda* at *Television for Women*, May 2013, and at *Console-Ing Passions*, June 2013, as well as an essay in a 2012 issue of the journal *Comedy Studies* (Larrea 2013, Becker 2013, White 2013, Gray 2012).

If she is so far outside the ‘norm’ of postfeminist celebrity culture, what is it about Miranda that has made it possible for her to become a star in a field dominated by male comics? Hart’s strategic deployment of her class persona provides one answer to the enigma of her success. Academic work on stardom and celebrity in film and television notes the negotiation of both extraordinary and ordinary characteristics; that such figures are distant and familiar, unreachable and accessible (Dyer 1979, Stacey 1994, Bennett 2008). The deployment of social media such as Twitter has made this accessibility ever more tantalizingly proximate. Hart has attempted to distance herself from her sitcom character but, even as she does so, she repeatedly endorses her contiguity with Miranda. Miranda Hart has produced a persona that embeds the performance of the sitcom character as part of the ‘real’ Miranda Hart. She has successfully negotiated a seamless account of the ‘television actor or star and the television personality’ – playing ‘herself’ with little apparent distinction between onscreen and private personas (Bennett 2008:35). Hart’s construction of her celebrity persona and sitcom character in terms of upper middle class white Englishness is a large part of their appeal; this essay seeks to map how those classed and raced identities work to mitigate the ‘problem’ of Hart’s gender and offer a ‘universal’ comedy which reaches a range of audiences.

At first sight Hart’s success appears unlikely and remarkable; Hart’s celebrity persona, like her character comedy, contradicts the dictates of contemporary media culture that women on screen be small, slight, demure and disciplined. The physical clowning which runs throughout *Miranda* frequently focusses on her body with scenes of semi-nudity and falling over; every social setting offers an opportunity for embarrassing body-comedy, whether it be farting, nervous laughter or repeated pratfalls. The social milieu in which the series is set evokes an upper-middle class environment in which embarrassment is a constant threat but also a marker of authenticity. Miranda’s embarrassments, her literal and metaphorical exposures, make her both a comic figure and an ‘everywoman’, as Hart’s performance runs counter to and, at the same time, is reliant upon what Rosalind Gill calls ‘postfeminist media culture’ and its ‘obsessional preoccupation with the body’:

In today’s media it is possession of a ‘sexy body’ that is presented as women’s key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power *and* as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and constant spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness. (2007: 255)

Hart’s character on screen and her celebrity persona may be read as resistant to and a commentary upon that postfeminist body; her performance as Miranda in the sitcom embodies comic unruliness, constantly falling over, farting, getting tangled up with objects, or exposing her underwear (Rowe 1995). In her physical comedy Miranda Hart transgresses the alleged ‘norm’ of the controlled postfeminist body; and as a woman on television who is not short or slim, she visibly contradicts postfeminist imperatives of bodily discipline and self-surveillance. This postfeminist regime is closely aligned with neoliberalism: ‘a mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous and enterprising’ (Gill and Scharff 2011: 5). The new popular ‘postfeminist sensibility’ figures femininity as:

... a bodily property; a shift from objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a ‘makeover paradigm’; a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference; the marked ‘resexualization’ of women’s bodies; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with, and are structured by, stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability as well as gender ...’ (Gill and Scharf 2011: 4)

Hart’s comedy offers a critique of that ‘sexy body’, that shift from ‘objectification to subjectification in the ways that (some) women are represented’, as *Miranda* directly comments on the television culture that endorses these neoliberal postfeminist regimes, most specifically the ‘makeover paradigm’.

The first episode of the first series satirizes lifestyle programming with a parody of *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2001-7). This British fashion makeover series, subsequently franchised on American television (TLC, 2003 - ), was internationally syndicated, featuring the original presenters, Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, in series one to five. Self-help guides based on the show made the Christmas bestseller lists from 2002 to 2004 and Trinny and Susannah appeared regularly on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (CBS, 1986-2011) after they left *What Not to Wear*. *What Not to Wear* followed a now-standard format for makeover lifestyle programming, first deriding the participants for their poor choices, then teaching them how to shop and dress in a more acceptable manner, followed by a final ‘reveal’ of their new, improved looks. Martin Roberts notes: ‘… the degree to which contemporary reality and lifestyle television have taken on the role of policing identities and behaviour and their success in reconfiguring these in accordance with the economic interests of neoliberal capitalism’ (2007:244; see also Palmer 2004). The ‘makeover paradigm’ saturates postfeminist popular culture, presenting narratives of individual transformation as a solution to structural inequalities.

In *Miranda,* Miranda’s love interest, Gary, asks her to dinner. Gary says it is not a date but Miranda decides to treat it as such, throwing herself into a frenzy of preparation. In a monologue to camera Miranda says she is going to ‘Trinny and Susannah’ herself:

Miranda: ‘I couldn’t do it with them because I’d have to punch them in the face. Hate those kinds of programmes. [adopts American accent] “Welcome to I’m okay, you’re obese.” I know what I’d do if I had one of those shows…’

[cut to Miranda with a microphone and a cameraman, running up to a woman on a busy city street]

Miranda: ‘Excuse me... Hello. Right, let’s have a look at you. Well, I wouldn’t wear that top, but you look comfortable – are you?’

Woman: ‘Yeah.’

Miranda: ‘Do *you* like it?’

Woman: ‘Yeah.’

Miranda: ‘Do you care that others may not like it?’

Woman: ‘No.’

Miranda: ‘Brilliant, then, wear that then. Bye. [to cameraman] Right, come on. This is going really well.’

This sequence echoes academic critiques, such as Angela McRobbie’s analysis of the ‘postfeminist symbolic violence’ of shows such as *What Not to Wear* and their ‘new hierarchies of taste and style’ (2009:127). McRobbie argues that makeover shows mark a shift in the requirements of western femininity:

The ‘movement of women’ refers to the need for women, particularly those who are under the age of 50, and thus still of potential value to the labour market, to come, or move forward, as active participants in these labour markets, and also in consumer culture, since the disposable income permits new realms of buying and shopping. Both of these activities, working and spending, become defining features of new modes of female citizenship. (2009:124)

McRobbie also notes the class economy of this ‘movement of women’:

Working-class women and lower middle-class women, who once tried to achieve simply “respectability”, as Skeggs (1997) argued, as a class-appropriate habitus of femininity, a solution to the tyranny of imposed yet unachievable norms of femininity, which eluded them, are now urged ... to aspire to ‘glamorous individuality’. (2009:125)

The class dynamic of makeover shows is rarely acknowledged within lifestyle programming yet the remit of series about food, decor, gardening and fashion overtly addresses the attempted transformation of lower class taste into something more acceptably bourgeois. Thus the menu is Mediterranean, the colour scheme on-trend, the garden aesthetically pleasing and the fashion ‘tasteful’ (Powell and Prasad 2010, Roberts 2007, Skeggs 2004: 141).

The *Miranda* sequence effectively lampoons the makeover paradigm regarding its gender dynamic, but it elides the class aspect of the format. Miranda presents herself as supportive of the woman in the street’s choice of top *even though* she wouldn’t wear it herself, thus implying that the top is, indeed, in poor taste. The woman Miranda approaches conforms to the sort of participant often seen on shows such as *What Not to Wear*; she is white, overweight, without apparent makeup and with her hair scraped back in a ponytail, all of which visually codes her as lower class. The woman frowns into the glare of the camera and offers monosyllabic replies. She is emblematic of the ‘subjectification’ visible in postfeminist makeover shows, and which those shows fail to acknowledge: the class transformations that they rehearse ( Palmer 2004, Powell and Prasad 2010). While the *Miranda* sketch satirizes the makeover paradigm it reiterates such shows’ class discourse, because Miranda is from a similar social background to Trinny and Susannah. Like many presenters on lifestyle television, Miranda is white, educated, and upper middle class; her ‘unfeminine’ size and shape, which is the focus of this episode and of the series, is foregrounded here so that she is represented as an ally of the woman-in-the-street – as an everywoman figure. The caveat in the script, however, is that Miranda would not wear the same top as the woman she confronts with her microphone; while Miranda is more forgiving (and less interventionist) than Trinny and Susannah, she is still positioned as the arbiter of taste, effectively giving the other woman *permission* to be ‘comfortable’ and ‘wear that then’. This short sequence is critical of neoliberal postfeminism, with its insistence on regulation and self-transformation; yet it reiterates a class discourse which is equally problematic. Miranda speaks to, and for, a white Englishness which is predicated on upper middle class ‘common sense’ as opposed to the consumer capitalism of postfeminist makeovers.

The dynamic of this sequence may also be construed in feminist academic work which pits ‘outsider’ second wave feminism against the exigencies of consumerist postfeminist desires. There is an odd echo in the *Miranda* sketch of an implicitly classed hierarchy which haunts academic studies:

Whether post-feminism is seen as anti-feminism or in terms of the contradictory ways in which feminism is manifested in the popular, many studies retain an implicit or explicit assumption that popular culture could still benefit from a ‘proper’ feminist makeover. Underpinning many discussions of popular feminism is the assumption that there is a better ‘unpopular’ form of feminism. ... This reproduces the idea that the feminist has good sense and therefore the moral authority to legislate on gendered relations, and also reproduces hierarchical power relations between ‘the feminist’ situated outside the popular and ‘the ordinary woman’ located within it. (Hollows and Moseley 2006:11)

Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley are addressing the relation between popular culture *per se* and feminist academics’ examination of it, but this passage harbours an uncanny reflection on Miranda’s feminist ‘good sense’ in the sequence quoted above. In positioning herself as a ‘feminist’ character (although not named as such), Hart occupies a dangerous position. The stereotyped ‘feminist’ is often imagined in popular media as a monstrous other, just as ‘proper’ feminism asserts its difference from its popular sisters (McRobbie 2009: 24-53). Hart does not name her comedy as feminist, and proposes it as ‘common sense’ – however several academics have noted the feminist tendencies of *Miranda* in their commentaries on her work (Becker 2013, Gray 2012, Larrea 2013). The hunger evident in academic and popular responses to *Miranda* undoubtedly demonstrates the paucity of popular alternatives to a mediatised culture awash with airbrushed images of women. Hart’s class identity, like that of her character in *Miranda*, enables her to voice a feminist critique of neoliberal postfeminism but is problematic because it speaks *from* and *for* the unacknowledged authority of a specific class position. As Gareth Palmer notes in his critique of lifestyle television: ‘This is the power of the norm operated by the middle class, those whose taste determines an increasing number of areas’ (2004: 184). In these terms the celebration of Hart’s feminist politics may be premature, as any challenge to the ‘norm’ the sitcom character and the celebrity offer is always already reincorporated by the cultural capital of Hart’s class identity.

A critique of neoliberal postfeminism is also visible in Hart’s autobiography, *Is It Just Me?*, a Christmas 2012 best-seller. The book addresses what Hart calls ‘the real coalface of life’ (2012:17), with witty analysis of everyday embarrassments and confusions. The autobiography is now a standard marker of the celebrity comic (see, for example, Fey 2011, Kaling 2011, McPartlin and Donnelly 2010, Walliams 2013). As Sarah Silverman notes in the preface to her bestselling autobiography, *The Bedwetter*, ‘I’m not writing this book to share wisdom or to inspire people. I’m writing this book because I am a famous comedian, which is how it works now’ (2010:xiv). Hart’s autobiographical narrative closely mirrors the verbal style of *Miranda*, which also topped Christmas 2012 ratings, beating off *Downton Abbey*, *Dr Who* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. Several chapters of *Is It Just Me?* address feminist concerns about the beauty industry, body image and the social construction of femininity, with titles such as ‘Beauty’, ‘Bodies’, ‘Exercise’ and ‘Diet’. The book as a whole argues against a consumerist femininity which is thin, passive and neurotic. In Chapter 6, ‘Beauty’, Hart addresses the concept of ‘taking myself seriously as a woman’, asking what that phrase entails:

Is it a fine lady scientist, a ballsy young anarchist with tights on her head or a feminist intellectual from the 1970s nose-down in Simone de Beauvoir? Or is it what I think my friend meant when she said ‘woman’, which is really ‘aesthetic object’. Clothes horse. Show pony. General beautiful piece of well-groomed stuff that’s lovely to look at? (2012: 94-95)

What follows is a comic deconstruction of the rigours of feminine grooming, examining spas, hairdressing salons and the beauty myth, pointing out the gender imbalance at work here:

And – I must ask – do *men* have to do this? Is this a thing for them, too? What would it mean to ‘take yourself seriously as a man’? Let’s see. Attention All Men – please put down the *Top Gear* annual and join me in a round of ‘Say It Out Loud With Miranda’. Lean back, and growl ‘I am taking myself seriously as a man.’ What springs to mind? Is it a singlet, a tool belt and a roll of electrical tape? Or is it a sharp suit, a cocktail, and the presidency of the International Monetary Fund? Or perhaps you suddenly feel the need to hole up in a dingy pub and start yelling ‘Ref!’ at the telly? Whatever it is, it’s not likely to have much to do with grooming, or carrying a particular type of slightly-too-small and essentially useless bag masquerading as a clutch (good word). (2012:95)

Hart proposes a manifesto in which clothing is governmental standard issue (one outfit for weekdays, another for weekends, and a unisex party kaftan), and anti-ageing treatments involve eating roast dinners, doughnuts and buttered toast on the principle that ‘Fat Don’t Crack’ (2012:115-116). *Is It Just Me?* states that there are advantages for women of not being considered ‘beautiful’ in contemporary consumer culture. During an ongoing dialogue with her younger self Hart states: ‘IT IS FAR, FAR BETTER NEVER TO HAVE BEEN BEAUTIFUL’ (2012:100). Even as she acknowledges that ‘a professional sociologist [would] fling their pencil aside in despair’ at the oversimplification of this assertion, Hart proposes that it confers an invisibility which offers women time and space in which to do something a bit more constructive than address the rigours of postfeminist self-scrutiny and grooming:

... space that you can constructively use to discover and hone your skills, learn a language, develop an interest in cosmology, practise the oboe, do whatever you fancy, really, so long as it doesn’t involve being looked at or snogging anyone. And you’ll very likely emerge from your chrysalis aged twenty-five as a highly accomplished young thing ready to take on the world. Meanwhile, The Beautiful Ones will have been so busy having boyfriends and brushing their hair that they’ll just be ... who they always were. (2012:100-101)

In this comic scenario, the makeover paradigm is transformed from the consumerist ethic of shows like *What Not to Wear* to an upper middle class Protestant work ethic where culture and education, rather than shopping, is transformative.

Miranda’s feminist makeover of postfeminist regimes of appearance is thus negotiated though a class discourse which is reclaimed even as it is disavowed. Languages, cosmology and the oboe seem unlikely options for a working class teenager, but, as in the sitcom, the eighteen year-old Miranda in *Is It Just Me?* is framed within a cartoonishly-drawn upper-middle-class environment. She introduces herself as: ‘Six feet tall, thin as a rail, school-issue straw boater, one red, one green sock, and a lacrosse stick slung over my shoulder’, and is greeted by the older Miranda: ‘How absolutely lovely to see you in all your *Mallory Towers* [*sic*] finery’ (2012:6). The reference to Enid Blyton’s *Malory Towers* series set in a girls’ boarding school is significant as it situates Miranda as stereotypically upper middle class, calling upon nostalgic images of 1940s and 50s childhood, while simultaneously lampooning that tradition. Much like the ‘ironic dismissal’ performed by male sitcom characters to acknowledge homoerotic behaviour even as they deny its implications, this technique manages Miranda’s class identity by simultaneously acknowledging it and refuting it as a category (Miller 2006). British television’s comic deployment of class stereotypes has a long history; most notably, the ‘alternative’ comedians of the 1980s launched a critique of middle class narratives through satirizing Enid Blyton in television programmes such as *The Comic Strip Presents: Five Go Mad in Dorset* (Channel 4, 1982). This first episode in a series of self-contained comedy dramas, all prefaced with *The Comic Strip Presents...* , featured comedians from London’s Comic Strip Club, most of whom went on to become household names, including Adrian Edmondson, Dawn French, Jennifer Saunders and Peter Richardson. While the series relied on its audience’s knowledge of and nostalgia for Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five* books, it also parodied the reactionary politics of Blyton’s characters, who were always suspicious of foreigners and the lower class. In *Five Go Mad in Dorset*, the misogyny, homophobia, racism and snobbery of the originals are made manifest; *Five Go Mad on Mescalin* was screened the following year, and the series helped to cement Channel 4’s early reputation as a youth-oriented, taboo-breaking broadcaster. In *Miranda* and *Is It Just Me*, however, Hart’s upper middle class background is deployed somewhat differently, to signify a nostalgic return to ‘common sense’; it is removed from its political history and employed to confer authority and authenticity on Miranda as narrator.

The focus on Miranda as authentic moral voice is evident in the visual style of the sitcom; the to-camera narrative style of *Miranda* has been widely noted (Becker 2013), as has Miranda’s authoritative position as narrator:

She breezily starts each episode by welcoming the viewer, going through the motions of politely asking after us but brusquely adding that she’s not really interested, before taking control of her visibility by launching the opening credits and declaring, ‘On with the show’. Everything we see is with her consent; frequent looks to camera remind us of this; she uses cameras like punctuation marks to fine-tune the comic structure to her satisfaction. (Gray 2012:195)

Hart’s ability to construct a character so apparently at ease with and in command of the television camera is irrevocably linked to her class identity. From the outset, Hart’s background has repeatedly been addressed in articles and interviews. In an early interview for *The Lady* Hart asserts that ‘the British middle class is a great source of humour’ while her interviewer adds that ‘It is precisely because she embraces her middle-class privileged background that the show stands out’ (Jonzen 2009:25). More recently *The Daily Express* ran a story about the ‘Tragedy and despair behind Miranda Hart’s rise to the top’:

Behind Miranda Hart’s steady rise to the top lies a genuine tale of overcoming the odds, with the star beating depression and dealing with the horror of nearly losing her father in the Falklands War. … She says she is from an upper-class background, but does not consider herself upper-class. Her mother, Diana, is the daughter of Sir William Luce, a former governor of Aden. (Roche 2012)

Hart has repeatedly ‘come out’ as middle class; here her class identity – she went to the same private school as Claire Balding and her father was a senior officer in the Royal Navy – is commuted with reference to her ‘journey’ through depression and family trauma. In *The Lady* she also discussed her depression and agoraphobia. Class is thus always visible in *Miranda* and in Hart’s press interviews, but framed in a manner which asserts the authority of middle class identity even as it is mitigated by a range of strategies. In *The Lady*, for example, with its constituency of middle class readers (or readers who aspire to a particular fantasy middle class lifestyle), Miranda is commended for her honesty in embracing ‘her middle-class privileged background’. In an interview profile for liberal broadsheet *The Independent*, Hart again acknowledges her class background but also asserts her ‘classlessness’:

‘I suppose my thing is to make sure it's as universal as possible. I only really think comedy's got a problem if the central character is middle-class and her values are only middle-class and then people aren't going to relate or be interested. This character is completely classless really. She happens to be from Surrey but her goals and her fears and her problems could happen to anybody.’ (Gilbert 2011)

This ‘classless’ identity is reiterated in the *Daily Mirror* where Hart is cited as saying that she’s ‘from an upper-class background, but does not consider herself upper-class’, although this is placed somewhat ironically before the description of her as the granddaughter of ‘Sir William Luce, a former governor of Aden’ (Roche 2012). All the extended profiles of Hart make mention of her struggle with depression and anxiety, and her father’s war experience in the Falklands, creating a narrative of Hart’s ‘journey’ to success – a narrative not unlike that of the makeover paradigm, but framed in very different terms.

Beverley Skeggs, in her work on class and culture, argues that in a popular landscape heavily weighted against the working class – usually represented as excessive, wasteful, fecund, unable to change, tasteless and (perhaps for all these reasons) authentic – the middle class has one particular pejorative characteristic to negotiate: pretentiousness. Nineteenth-century music hall comedy acts critiqued ‘the uptight restrained middle-class’, helping to establish a tradition which addressed pretension and snobbery as a source of humour (Skeggs 2004:114). Following the ‘alternative’ comedy of the 1980s, where class and politics were again to the fore, British middle class television comedians have negotiated their class identity in particular ways:

So Adam Buxton and Joe Cornish (of the cult *Adam and Joe Show*) when interviewed in the *Guardian* (15 September 2001, p.11), reflect on their fan base and argue that they were categorized (unfairly, they thought) as ‘unfashionably middle class and too posh … It’s just because we are this sort of nebulous item, so people fixate on the school we went to and think “Oh they’re not northern, they’re not stand-up, they’re not anything really, so let’s make them slacker toffs”.’ To make sure that the reader and interviewer understand their ironic take on such matters they add: ‘Fair enough really’. (Skeggs 2004: 114-115)

This ironic acknowledgement of middle class identity is necessary in a cultural milieu where to be middle class and ‘cool’ is an oxymoron (Skeggs 2004:115). Yet *Miranda* trades on not being ‘cool’; as Gerald Gilbert states in the interview for *The Independent*:

While the critics traded endless permutations on the words 'slapstick', 'old-fashioned' and 'acquired taste', Miranda built up a devoted word-of-mouth audience able to appreciate her humour without tying themselves up in knots to justify their enjoyment of something seemingly so old-school and uncool. (Gilbert 2011)

These categories – ‘old-school and uncool’ – help to delineate the particular strategies at play in the packaging of Hart’s celebrity persona and her sitcom’s popularity. Far from refuting her class identity, Hart deploys it to inform the narrative language and style of *Miranda*. Despite her many assertions that her character is ‘classless’ or that comedy is not about class, her success is reliant on responses to British upper-middle-class identity as authoritative, eccentric and endearing (see, for example, Fletcher 2011). Hart’s comedy, like her femininity, is thus understood through its iteration of white upper-middle-class Englishness. Her family background inextricably anchors her to the history of Empire and secures Hart more firmly within the class identity that her role as Camilla ‘Chummy’ Fortescue-Cholmondley-Browne in *Call the Midwife* (BBC, 2012 - ) serves to confirm; a ‘retro’ white middle class persona which entails the aesthetic of a fictional public school. This is an imaginary England where people speak in RP, quaff (not drink) ginger beer, and believe in fair play. It calls upon a nostalgia that is most evident in Hart’s playful use of language, harking back to a fictional upper middle class pre-feminist era which, while framed in terms of an ‘ironic dismissal’ is nevertheless invoked. The repeated ‘Such fun!’ uttered by Miranda’s mother (Patricia Hodge) has become one of the show’s catchphrases. This aspect of *Miranda* fits with neo-traditional femininities evident in other television formats, such as cookery and makeover shows (see Brunsdon 2006, Hollows 2006, Smith 2011). Neo-traditional references are also apparent in the comparisons made by Hart and others about the style of comedy she evokes; most frequently Morecambe and Wise, but also Joyce Grenfell and Hattie Jacques. Hart is rarely compared to more contemporary comedians, although Jennifer Saunders was allegedly instrumental in helping her break through with her Radio 2 series, which led to the television sitcom (Jonzen 2009).

This makes for an odd juxtaposition with the ‘feminist’ discourse evident in Hart’s sitcom and autobiography. Or maybe not. It is that classed voice which makes Miranda and *Miranda* intelligible within the terms of postfeminist media culture. Her class identity makes a feminist discourse speakable and legible in popular culture via the popular romance of English heritage television; not just *Call the Midwife* but the nostalgic appeal of shows such as *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010 - ) and *Upstairs Downstairs* (LWT, 1971-75; BBC, 2010-2012)*.* In its own way *Miranda* is also an historical drama, situated in a fantasy of Englishness underpinned by Hart’s upper-class eccentricity. The cultural capital of Hart’s class identity enables her to *speak* feminist; it situates that speech in a political vacuum where gender issues can be raised without consequences. In *Gender and the Media* Rosalind Gill notes how ‘feminism is now part of the cultural field’ but also how it has become ‘incorporated, revised and depoliticised’ (2007: 268). Hart’s celebrity persona, like her sitcom, speaks to a 1950s ‘common sense’ which repudiates the demands of postfeminist media culture – to be groomed, self-regulating and under control – while conveniently forgetting the historical realities of the fifties, or the political work of second wave feminism. Lynn Spigel remarks on a similar dynamic at work in more explicitly nostalgic television series, such as *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007 - ), where the narrative offers a postfeminist nostalgia for a pre-feminist past without acknowledging the existence of feminist struggles in between:

Contemporary nostalgia offers a strange form of time travel. Moving back to a fantasy future imagined sometime in the baby-boom past, it is easy to lose track of where you are. The most unfortunate consequence of this new form of nostalgia is that despite its sophisticated cosmopolitanism and aspiring ‘liberated’ career girls, it forgets feminism as a political struggle – both its battles against patriarchal injustices and its own internal struggles among women of different sexual orientations and from different class, racial, national, religious and political backgrounds. Prefeminism and postfeminism without the feminism in the middle is a hard thing to imagine. But somehow, much of contemporary nostalgia culture seems to be just that. (2013:278)

Hart’s work does not offer the glossy surfaces of a series like *Mad Men* but her narrative calls upon nostalgia for a pre-feminist television culture as a means of railing against postfeminist excesses. The commentaries which *Miranda* and Hart’s autobiography offer on the demands made of women and girls (and sometimes of men and boys) to conform to a bizarre celebrity version of ‘normal’ are framed within a pre-feminist sensibility. Most notably, her work avoids directly addressing issues of race and class.

This negotiation of prefeminist, feminist and postfeminist television femininities is executed through a complex deployment of comedy tropes and references, not least of which is the confessional telling of the self. In the to-camera narration, and in the chummy first-person narrative of *Is It Just Me?*, *Miranda* and Miranda Hart deploy the tradition of confession as a means of constituting the self. As Skeggs argues, this is a classed process, available to those with access to middle-class resources (2004:120-127): ‘self-narration was also strongly related to the construction of “character” and “personhood”, whereby only the bourgeoisie were seen to be capable of being individuals’ (Skeggs 2004:124). Miranda the sitcom character and Miranda Hart the celebrity are presented via self-consciously playful textual performances, playing with language and foregrounding particular words or phrases. Skeggs examines textual strategies within contemporary feminist research; approaches which reflexively ‘de-centre the singular voice of the researcher by using a variety of literary techniques of dialogism’, arguing that this is another means of demonstrating cultural authority:

Textual demonstration displays the cleverness of the writer, whilst also supposedly de-centering the author at the same time. This is not just a matter of the powerful claiming marginality. Rather it is about the powerful showing how well they understand power by playing with it. It is a matter of having your authority and eating it. (Skeggs 2004:131)

The power of narrating the self in these de-centred times is manifold: by doing so one can reposition oneself as an emblematic figure while ostensibly disclaiming the privilege that made such a manoeuvre possible.

This would seem to produce a damning critique of Miranda Hart’s success – that is not my intention. Rather I want to propose this as an explanation *for* her extraordinary success, not just with *Miranda* but also across the field of popular celebrity. Hart’s alignment with Bruce Forsyth places her at the pinnacle of the BBC’s current television stars, and may indicate the corporation’s perception of her as a possible panacea to be deployed against the negative press they have received following recent scandals about mismanagement, institutional sexism and paedophilia. Skeggs argues that the reflexive narration of self in contemporary culture:

offers a re-traditionalization of gender, class and sexual relations. … The logic of this experimental individualism (or the prosthetic self) for those who can tool themselves up is that disembedding, de-racination, de-gendering and de-classing is possible, even at a time when such classifications are becoming more acute for those at the extreme ends of the social scale. (2004:133)

In these terms *Miranda* and Miranda Hart represent a timely configuration of comedy and celebrity, offering audiences a seemingly de-raced, de-gendered and de-classed entertainment in a period of widespread austerity. The *Daily Express* profile notes Hart’s mass appeal, quoting ‘Jack O’Toole, a 19 year-old student from Newcastle’, who claims that she is ‘must-see viewing on campus’: ‘“She just seems one of the most humble and genuine celebrities out there,” he added. “And very funny to people of all ages”’ (Roche 2012). Once again, this reiterated endorsement of Hart’s humility and authenticity – her lack of middle class pretentiousness – and her ‘universal’ appeal, positions her as outside social categories; as, simply, a star who transcends the everyday. This configuration elides the labour of *making* television; Miranda’s ‘authenticity’ in *Miranda,* as in much of Hart’s television work, is carefully crafted and scripted – a ‘natural’ self which is laboriously constructed. In the same article Hart claims, yet again, that: ‘“Playing Miranda in *Miranda* – I’m sure some people might not see it as acting but, I assure you, I am. … I very much see it as playing a character.”’ This protestation offers a feeble resistance to the success of Miranda and *Miranda*, as Hart’s celebrity persona is fully aligned with her sitcom character. It is hardly surprising that viewers are convinced that this is an authentic representation of Miranda Hart.

As I write, in November 2013, Hart is preparing for a first stand-up tour (which is already sold out at many venues) in 2014, and has launched an exercise DVD, *Miranda Hart’s Maracattack*, featuring new material and guest appearances from her co-stars on *Miranda*: ‘Take a firm grip of your maracas and laugh along with comedy queen Miranda Hart’ (advertisement in *Metro*, 20th November 2013). Hart has also guest-edited the November 2013 issue of *Stylist*, a free weekly magazine aimed at ‘affluent career women’ (Magee 2009). Hart’s issue calls on an array of celebrity ‘friends’ to oversee different sections in a ‘celebrity takeover’:

Among other very special treats for you, I have the beyond fabulous Claudia Winkleman on travel. She was sent to write about Rio – tough gig. The lovely Lauren Laverne on food. And she baked a cake. With three tiers. Oh yes. Three cheers for her three tiers (word play – you’re welcome). And in a, what I call *twist*, Nigella is Beauty Director. Oh yeah, look at me thinking outside of the magazinery box. I hope you enjoy this special edition as much as we all enjoyed creating it. I have loved being Editor in Chief of Magazinery. I spent the week wearing trouser suits with padded shoulder jackets (child of the Eighties), barking orders at an imaginary assistant while clutching a skinny Frappuccino (which I always think sounds like a tiny Italian man), and finding the sexiest pose I could at my elegant desk (I only fell off four times). It was very much like Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*. (Hart 2013)

This editorial address is framed in characteristic *Miranda* style, proposing a persona that is still falling off desks and playing with words. In the light of Hart’s growing multimedia success, however, her celebrity persona may wear a bit thin, stretched as it is between performance as ‘Miranda’ and a highly successful (and increasingly svelte) Hart. Miranda Hart’s unruly comedy has become a commodity within postfeminist media culture, selling merchandise and fronting a glossy fashion magazine; a shift which denotes the limits of Hart’s address to feminist ‘common sense’ in her sitcom and autobiography. The remarkable success of Miranda and *Miranda* demonstrates how a particular version of bourgeois feminism has been rehabilitated in contemporary popular culture. As Ros Gill observes, ‘feminism is now part of the cultural field’ but it has become ‘incorporated, revised and depoliticised’ (2007: 268). It would appear that *Miranda* and Miranda articulate precisely the sort of feminism that neoliberal consumer culture can sell.

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at *Console-Ing Passions 2013*, 23rd-25th June, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In order to distinguish between the comedy character and the actor I will employ Miranda to refer to the former and Hart to refer to the latter. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)