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## **‘That’s the Last Time I Play the Tart for You, Jerry!’: Penelope Keith and British Television Situation Comedy<sup>1</sup>**

*Mary Irwin*

### **Abstract**

Women’s historical role in British sitcom has been critically and popularly regarded as both limited and limiting, conforming to a predictable handful of well-worn stereotypes generally comprising dutiful supportive wives and mothers, dizzy dollybirds, and unappealing, ageing harridans. Yet, any exploration of the representation of women in British situation comedy over a sixty-year period reveals that, far from being deployed solely as comedy foils or long suffering partners, women have frequently been cast in leading roles very much at the heart of the comic action. In this article I will consider the work of one such actress, Penelope Keith, who played leading roles in a diverse range of popular television sitcoms spanning the 1970s to the 1990s, and who is a key figure in any consideration of women and television situation comedy. That Keith's rich dramatic career merits long overdue academic analysis points up the scholarly neglect of many other significant British television comedy actresses, and the need for ongoing new scholarship in this area. For it is in the exploration of the television comedy careers of women such as Keith that we can begin to reinsert and reposition women into critical and popular narratives of British television comedy and television more generally, developing and creating full, rich and authoritative histories which acknowledge both women’s contributions to historical British television and, most importantly, the significance of their contributions.

### **Keywords**

Penelope Keith, women, British television comedy, television history, women in situation comedy

~~‘There is, it must be said, something wildly intoxicating about a Margo Leadbetter haranguing. We see little of her eloquent, fiery yet feminine ilk on TV today’.<sup>2</sup>~~

### **Why Penelope Keith?**

Penelope Keith is, historically, one of British television comedy’s most successful and enduring actresses, best remembered for her much loved performances as social-climbing suburban super-snob Margo Leadbetter in *The Good Life* (BBC 1975-78) and impoverished aristocratic ‘lady of the manor’ Audrey Forbes-Hamilton in *To the Manor Born* (BBC 1979-2007).<sup>3</sup> In these classic roles, Keith embodied and simultaneously deconstructed the social codes and mores of middle and upper class England and Englishness. The fond public regard in which Keith’s television comedy performances are held is well exemplified by television critic Grace Dent’s comment that. ‘There is, it must be said, something wildly intoxicating about a Margo Leadbetter haranguing. We see little of her eloquent, fiery yet feminine ilk on TV’ (Dent, 2014).

A fuller consideration of her substantial body of television comedy work also reveals a range of now less well remembered but critically interesting comedy series and performances which augment, enrich and challenge readings of Keith’s star persona as straightforwardly and consistently ‘posh and pushy’. Such series and performances contain implicit historical interrogation of lives and experiences of British women from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, as encapsulated in the fictive worlds which Keith’s characters inhabit. This article presents a detailed case study of Keith’s performances in British television situation comedy from the mid 1970s to the

mid 1990s, in so doing addressing the lack of rigorous scholarship tackling the social and cultural significance of the representation of women in the historical study of the British situation comedy.

Keith has been selected as the object of this initial study because of the complex, often exceptional, and frequently provocative onscreen women that she has played: women who provoke discourses around money, power, class, age and sexuality as well as gender.<sup>4</sup> Her characters are women variously both of, and ahead of their time, simultaneously part of the establishment and at the same time confidently transgressive of convention and niceties, as suits their desires and motivations. Keith is a statuesque, authoritative, evidently mature woman who is concurrently, and against predictable comic typecasting of such women, recognised as sexy, vulnerable, funny and unquestioned casting for the romantic lead in any number of the series in which she is cast. Additionally, she is a gifted physical comedian, her rangy, elegant physique integral to her comic characterisations and an unanticipated potential for disruption.

Surveying the current television comedy landscape some forty years distant from Keith's biggest successes in the mid 1970s and 1980s, her achievements as a woman in comedy are all the more noteworthy. There are, even in 2015, a very few television funny women with a profile of comparable range and accomplishment. The most successful current female British comedy name is writer and actress Miranda Hart. Her eponymous comedy series *Miranda* (BBC 2009-14)<sup>5</sup> depicted the comic mishaps which characterised the largely unsuccessful love life of an exaggerated fictional version of herself. Much of the series' humour revolves around the tropes of Miranda's height and stature. Hart is, like Keith, a tall woman. For Keith, height and stature are positive comic attributes, equally well deployed to depict, variously, imperious authority and challenge, unexpected wounded dignity, or confident mature sexuality as required. For Hart's Miranda, being tall is laden with negatives; it makes her clumsy, awkward, unattractive and, on occasions, even calls her gender into question when she is mistaken for a man.

Keith's television back catalogue of energetic, self-confident, idiosyncratic funny women make Hart's constant and at times troubling anxiety around women, stature and femininity seem

retrogressive, with no connection to second or third wave feminisms from which chronologically her television comedy stands to benefit. Keith's comic personae, although not linked with any feminist rhetoric, are, in contrast, imbued with confidence, self-regard and an unquestioned sense of parity with men. Any teleological assumptions that very recent programmes such as *Miranda* necessarily promulgate progressive female comedy characterisations are called into question, whilst extant notions of across-the-board sexist stereotyping in 1970s sitcoms are problematised and challenged by the strong women whom Keith depicts.

### Television Situation Comedy Scholarship

Situating Penelope Keith's television comedy career within relevant television scholarship is difficult, given the limited canon of critical writing on British television comedy. Sitcom as a genre has been the subject of very limited academic consideration, the role of women within it even less so. Mills has identified the paucity of rigorous extant scholarship, and has worked to address this absence in two dedicated critical studies, *Television Sitcom* (2005) and *The Sitcom* (2009). In considering the role played by [women](#) in television comedy Mills theorises that it is men who occupy centre stage: 'The dominance of masculine comedy can be seen by the tiny proportion of sitcoms which have women as the lead roles' (Mills 2009, 21). He cites Marc's *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* on the status of women in sitcom. Marc points to 'feminist critics who see in sitcom a masculine form of humour in which women are ridiculed unless they conform to a noble but humbling calling in life – housewife or mother' (Marc in Mills 2009, 21). Thus Porter, writing from a feminist perspective, is concerned by what she perceives as the very narrow and highly stereotyped range of female characterisation which occurs in British television specifically, and British comedy more generally: 'a preponderance of female comic stereotypes – the ingenious, curvaceous bimbos on the one hand and the nagging unattractive wife on the other across a range of comic forms from cinema stage TV and radio' (Porter 1998, 65).

This article offers robust challenges to Mills' and Marc's assertions about the centrality of masculinity, and absence of the feminine in television, whilst in its interrogation of just one woman's television comedy career problematises and reconsiders feminist readings, such as Porter's, of the limitations of female comic characterisation. Such work establishes that rich, nuanced, well-rounded portrayals of women were integral to the historical television comedy landscape. Further, within the oeuvre of just one actress there is much to challenge the idea that women have been historically ill-served, or have little scope and agency within British television situation comedy, that they exist only as dupes or foils, and that, most significantly, relevant, well-realised female characterisations such as [those](#) Keith consistently presents exist beyond the regrettable stereotypes of busty bimbos and battleaxes Porter has identified. Most importantly, such work begins the process of reinstatement into the currently inadequate [and](#) incomplete extant scholarly histories of television the undocumented, highly significant historical contributions that women, in this case, Penelope Keith, have made to the genre.

Such research highlights the need for similar scholarship to be undertaken on the careers of other neglected television funny women whose body of work, like Keith's, suggests a reappraisal of existing scholarship on women's historical relationships with British comedy. Additionally, the exploration of series in which women, their lives and concerns are at the heart of the action augments and nuances social and cultural histories of women's lives in the late twentieth century. In the case of Keith's work, comedies which would not be defined as feminist in any explicit sense nevertheless have qualities which mean that implicitly they make connections with mid and later 1970s and 1980s second wave feminist discussions around women's work/life balance, career opportunities and workplace politics. Andrews writes of popular culture such as television comedy that it 'was able to take the influence of feminism well beyond the narrow confines of those who identified themselves as feminist' (Andrews 1998, 52).

Andrews and also Hallam's critical work on Carla Lane's *Butterflies* (1978-83)<sup>6</sup> and Gray's *Women and Laughter* (1994), which considers Keith's television comedy career, form a small but

important body of concentrated academic work which has examined women in historical British television comedy.<sup>7</sup> Andrews identifies *Butterflies* as one of a group of 'housewives' comedy 'where women have a significant voice: indeed at times theirs is the dominant voice within the text. The voice expresses many of the same concerns and criticisms in relation to domesticity, housewifery and finally childcare as 1970s and 80s' feminism' (Andrews 1998, 51). Further, 'in these texts women and their experiences were the main focus of the text as they were in feminist texts (Andrews 1998, 58). Andrews finds in disaffected housewife Ria Parkinson a character whose heartfelt internal monologues reflect her discontent with what she sees as the limited horizons of the stay-at-home wife and mother. Hallam writes on the resonance of *Butterflies* for female viewers, noting their identification with Ria's anxieties around 'ageing, domestic entrapment and female desire' (Hallam 2007, 35). It is on Andrews', Gray's and Hallam's thoughtful, nuanced, feminist television studies critique that this article builds.

### **Penelope Keith: Actor and Television Comedy Star**

Born in London in 1940, Keith always wanted to be an actor. Her early life was neither easy nor affluent. She was brought up by a single mother and sent to a convent boarding school from the age of six. She applied unsuccessfully to the Central School of Speech and Drama but subsequently gained a place at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art. After building up experience working in repertory theatre as well as a season with the Royal Shakespeare Company, Keith began establishing a presence in television, playing a range of small and supporting parts. She had bit parts in series such as *The Avengers* (1961-1969),<sup>8</sup> *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955-1976),<sup>9</sup> *Hadleigh* (1969),<sup>10</sup> a drama about the life of a country squire, then a recurrent role as agony aunt Phyllis Calvert's secretary Wendy Padbury in *Kate* (1970-1972),<sup>11</sup> a sitcom set in a women's magazine. Her big television career break came with the role of Margo Leadbetter in *The Good Life* (1975-1978).<sup>12</sup>

Between 1975 and 1994 Keith appeared in a diverse range of successful television comedy roles. In *The Good Life* she plays Margo Leadbetter, a social-climbing suburbanite coping with the decision of her next door neighbours Tom and Barbara Good to embrace the newly fashionable trend for self-sufficiency. Created especially for Keith in the wake of the success of *The Good Life*, arguably her best-loved role was that of dispossessed lady of the manor Audrey Forbes-Hamilton in *To the Manor Born*. Recently-widowed Audrey discovers that the family estate, Grantleigh Manor, is bankrupt and must be sold. It is purchased by *nouveau riche* foreign businessman Richard de Vere (Peter Bowles). [The series was rich Embedded](#) in discourses around old and new money and Britain's place in a global economy, ~~the series~~. [That said, the key to its](#) popularity lay in the 'will they/won't they' relationship between Bowles and Keith which cast the actress, then thirty-nine years of age, as a desirable and desiring romantic lead. In marked contrast to these series, Keith starred in what *pace* Andrews 'housewives' comedy'. I categorise as 'workplace comedies', a suite of three series made by Thames and Central Television between 1986 and 1994. In *Executive Stress* (1986-88),<sup>13</sup> Keith plays Caroline Fairchild, returning to work as an editorial executive after twenty years at home raising a family. In *No Job for a Lady* (1990-92),<sup>14</sup> her character Jean Price is a first-time Labour Member of Parliament, and in *Law and Disorder* (1994)<sup>15</sup> she plays Philippa Troy, a sharp-witted barrister and children's author. Prior to this run of high-powered, professional women, Keith played Sarah Gladwyn in *Moving* (1985)<sup>16</sup>, a six-episode series based on Stanley Price's original stage play. Sarah's grown up family have left home and she and her husband Frank (Ronald Pickup) want to sell the family home and buy a smaller flat. Sarah also wants to pick up her career. Family issues mean that the house sale and move do not run to plan. The series tackles a mix of home and workplace-related issues, but while superficially more conventionally domestic than the workplace comedies, once more the focus is very much on the demands facing women in balancing home life with career aspirations.

Keith also played characters who act to challenge any popular perceptions of her television work as perennially, cosily 'middle England' friendly. In *Next of Kin* (1995-97),<sup>17</sup> self-absorbed

couple Maggie (Keith) and Andrew (William Gaunt) are about to retire to their vineyard in France. The death of their estranged son and wife in a car crash leaves them the unwilling and resentful guardians of three grandchildren. In *Sweet Sixteen* (1983),<sup>18</sup> Keith plays successful building firm manager Helen Walker, who at forty-one is pregnant with the child of the firm's twenty-five-year-old architect Peter Morgan (Christopher Villiers). *Sweet Sixteen* also fits into the group of workplace comedies. All these roles crystallise characterisation and themes to create narratives in which women are actively at the centre of, or integral to, the comic action. Above all, these series present individual women's stories or stories in which women have a significant part to play.

*The Good Life's* Margo Leadbetter was intended simply as Jerry's wife: she is an unseen presence in episode one. The quality of Keith's early performances led to the development of a substantial part for her character. Gray writes that 'one might describe her [Margo's] type as authoritative' (Gray 1994, 98). Gray observes that 'authoritative' can be used synonymously for bossy, citing examples of the sort mobilised earlier by Porter: That is, female sitcom stereotypes in which 'bossy' can only be embodied either by a 'working class dragon in apron and curlers' or a 'social climbing dragon dressed to the nines' (Gray 1994, 98). In Margo however, Gray sees someone 'young and attractive rather than a harridan' (Gray 1994, 99). Indeed, 'her youth gave Margo a dimension of vulnerability: using every opportunity the text permits, Keith makes us aware just how Margo has constructed her lady-of-the-manor persona and how fragile that construct is' (Gray 1994, 98). Here she identifies Margo's complexity; a contradictory mix of high-handed social confidence and deeper underlying personal insecurities which make her such an entertaining and frequently, despite it all, very engaging and extremely funny character. The episode 'The Wind-Break War' provides a succinct encapsulation of many of Margo's best and worst traits.<sup>19</sup> Self-congratulatory triumph at her achievements gives way to strident officiousness, [and](#) simultaneously the episode demonstrates how easily this polished exterior can be rubbed away, revealing a more human side. Margo, recently elected president of Surbiton Music Society, has decided to create an *arbour* in her back garden where she can entertain her music society friends.

She enthuses gleefully to Tom and Barbara that, 'the members of my society will come along and be able to listen to music in an atmosphere of sylvian, almost Elysian charm'. Tom and Barbara mock Margo's creation with mounting hilarity. Towards the episode's end, the couples have dinner together. Margo, drunk, tearful and alone with Tom in the living room confesses that, 'sometimes I get very tired of always being the butt of the joke.' She concludes, 'I am not a complete woman - I haven't got a sense of humour'.

Keith's characterisation of Margo is finely textured and has much to say about gradations of class and identity in the middle England of the mid 1970s. Margo encapsulates many of the materialistic aspirations and values of the period, the very values which prompted the self-sufficiency dreams of couples like the Goods. Margo can also be usefully compared with another character who also embraces this mid-1970s middle-class idyll. In Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*, best known in its 1977 televised *Play for Today* format, Beverley (Alison Steadman) is another aspirant, affluent, housewife in thrall to the consumer dreams of the 1970s. Beverley's presentation of self and surroundings is however of a much showier, shinier, *nouveau riche* ilk than Margo's more solid and secure strand of 1970s middle class existence, founded on Jerry's executive managerial position and Margo's far greater understanding of the implicit codes and nuances of appropriate behaviour.

It is also useful to view Margo as part of Andrews' 'housewives' comedy'. Margo has superficially much in common with Ria in *Butterflies*, both stay-at-home wives living comfortable lives in the suburbs. While Ria feels imprisoned at home, Margo sees her housewifely role as affording her agency and respect. Margo considers herself a highly skilled, high-status executive wife, her expertise in running an immaculate home at least the equivalent of her husband's corporate responsibilities and vital to their joint prosperity and success. Margo also carves out an independent existence for herself outside the home as an active member of local clubs and societies and as a prominent vocal member of the community. Over and above Margo's individual merits as

a character, she, like Ria, challenges the dismissals of the 1970s television sitcom housewife as an uncomplicated unreflective stock figure, there simply to support her man.

*To the Manor Born*'s Audrey Forbes-Hamilton is at first glance categorisable as another of Keith's authoritative posh women; an upmarket version of Margo Leadbetter. *Grantleigh Manor*, however, presents a contrasting political, cultural and social milieu to Margo's middle-class Surbiton. As the 1970s turn into the 1980s, the certainties of British old money, breeding and an unquestioned social order are ranked against a coming world of globalised business, international new money and self-made millionaires as represented by *Grantleigh*'s new owner Richard de Vere: '*To the Manor Born* concentrates on Audrey as a member of a dying order' (Gray 1994, 100). Gray identifies the prescience of the series' arrival in late 1979, drawing comparison between its representations of aristocracy and that of another popular television drama series of the time:<sup>20</sup>

Like the characters in *Brideshead Revisited* running concurrently in a lush production by Granada, she [Audrey] symbolises the new role of aristocracy as spectacle. Combining antiquated rituals of politeness with profound ignorance about the real world, they became for the Tory 80s objects of superior laughter but also of nostalgia, always apparently on the way out (Gray 1994, 100).

Audrey is rather more resilient than this comparison might suggest. True, she has a limited grasp of the workings of business tycoon Richard's professional world. What emerges is the strength and resilience that she displays in dealing with this difficult new life, which has brought widowhood, bankruptcy, eviction, and most significantly the loss of standing within the community. Whatever audiences may feel about her background and social class she is evidently much more than a laughable, fading, aristocratic throwback. However, it is the developing romantic relationship between the two as much as the old/new money clash that drives the series. The cast and crew asserted that the developing love story is what brought viewing figures regularly to twenty-seven million.<sup>21</sup> The casting of a woman approaching forty as a romantic lead is of particular interest. The critical literature around sitcom, as has been earlier demonstrated, suggests that the genre's

representation of women's sexuality is linked to binaries of nubile, youthful fecundity in contrast to the undesirable ageing woman. Audrey is not trapped in this equation; she is presented as desirable, sexy and flirtatious. The sexual tension built throughout the series between Audrey and Richard is finally gratified in their union and wedding at the end of the third and final series.

Just as Keith's sexuality is not contiguous with youth, neither is it with conventions of submissive femininity. As Gray says of Keith's portrayal of Audrey, 'Her upright carriage in crowd scenes often gives the impression that she is the tallest person in the room' (Gray 1994, 100). Most usually, Keith's height and stature are an integral part of her characters' attractiveness and appeal. For Keith, in comedy characterisation, tall, female and funny is not at odds with being sexually attractive nor intelligently authoritative.

Keith's suite of 'workplace comedies', in which she plays three high-powered, professional women working in publishing, the law and politics as an editor, barrister and MP respectively, present women far removed from any unconsidered notions of ineffectual, feminine, sitcom stereotypes. Nor yet do they offer the generic and easily satirised shoulder-padded, hard-bitten 'career women' with implicit undertones of the ultimate 1980s career woman Margaret Thatcher, to which popular cultural shorthand often has recourse when evoking women's workplace culture of the mid and later 1980s. These women are individuals, inhabiting contrasting sets of personal and professional circumstances demonstrating different attitudes and different perspectives on what it is to be a woman in demanding workplaces. Noteworthy is that feminist US television scholarship takes seriously representations of the working woman in both drama and comedy alike. Texts such as Dow's *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement Since 1970*, and D'Acci's *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney & Lacey*, offer comment on women in the workplace series, broadly contemporaneous with Keith's televisual output, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77), *Murphy Brown* (1988-98) and *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-88). The contribution that Keith's workplace comedies can make to fuller and richer understanding

of the historical workplace experiences of British working women has to date has been afforded little consideration in British television scholarship.

*Executive Stress*'s Caroline Fairchild returns, post marriage and children, to her previously very successful career in publishing. She is subsequently headhunted for a role in what, due to a merger, becomes the firm in which her husband Donald is currently sales and marketing director. The twist is that husbands and wives are not permitted to work in the same organisation. In terms of Andrew's 'housewives' comedy' paradigm, Caroline's narrative unpicks what might happen if a housewife decided to return to the workplace, examining the transition between such states and the regaining of a former self in this new role. For Gray, *Executive Stress* does not 'explore the potential for dealing with the tensions that are inevitable in such a situation', instead 'the writer Layton grounds the comedy in a farcical (and unbelievably dated) premise: the firm would never approve of this arrangement and so Donald must conceal their marriage' (Gray 1994, 104). Yet Gray also acknowledges the unfamiliarity of Caroline's situation as construed by the series, continuing that, 'in a society in which many families need two incomes to survive, the working wife is still depicted as comic novelty' (Gray 1994, 104). Within this highly artificial premise, the series, contrary to Gray's position, does indeed offer an attempt to explore something of the complexities of Caroline's new situation, bringing to the fore all manner of questions about what it is for women to leave a career, raise a family, what resentments she might feel about this, and what it is like to go back into the workplace. The series is constructed so that it is Caroline with whom the audience is positioned to empathise. It is Donald here who is the straight man and fall guy, reversing the popular representations of the sitcom wife as forever the comic stooge. Caroline is consistently sharper, funnier, more resilient. Her experiences also prefigure and embody key concerns and discourses around women, workplace politics and corresponding male attitudes for the past thirty years or so since the series was made.

The opening episode synthesises such debates in a lengthy exchange between Caroline and Donald when she tells him she wants to return to work. Now the children have left home she wants ‘to do something more challenging, more fulfilling’. Donald counters by asking if he should have given up his career instead. He concludes by pointing out that being twenty years away from the industry and as a middle-aged woman she would not even get as far as an interview. Caroline’s eventual return to the workplace goes well; the series presents her as an exceptionally able woman, popular with colleagues and clients alike and doing a good job, despite recurrent obstacles, of balancing her business and home affairs. She combines efficiency and authority with warmth and humour, displaying a depth and complexity not usually expected of a female sitcom character of the early 1980s. Her situation appears still to have relevance for a female audience in 2014, with a recent Amazon purchaser of a DVD of the series commenting that, ‘even though it was made in the eighties the struggle for women who try to balance life as a wife, mother and employee has not changed that much’.<sup>22</sup>

*No Job for a Lady*’s newly appointed Labour MP Jean Price is depicted struggling in a disorderly and frequently chauvinistic House of Commons. While Gray sees in Jean something of a comic victim at the mercy of her circumstances, ‘in terms of the plots we are generally expected to laugh at Jean’ (Gray 1994, 105).<sup>23</sup> I would argue rather that Jean is presented as an intelligent, sympathetic and principled character, trying to make her mark in a divided and duplicitous workplace in which women have always been a minority. The fictional Jean Price’s historical context is as part of the opposition to prime minister Margaret Thatcher’s third term of office (1987-90) and then John Major’s (1990-97). Jean would have been one of only around thirteen per cent of female MPs and she precedes the controversially named ‘Blair’s Babes’, a reductive title applied to the ~~one hundred and one~~ [101](#) women elected as part of the 1997 Labour Government (Pilcher 1999, 107). Jean’s situation reverses Andrew’s ‘housewives’ comedy’ construct in that it is Jean’s husband Geoff (Mark Kingston) who is frequently presented at home in the kitchen trying to cope with her antisocial hours, and the demands that the job places on them as a household are a frequent

backdrop to their discussions. Had Jean been a male MP, such problematising of their circumstances would have been far less likely to assume a central role. The series tackles meaty subject matter, synthesising issues likely to be of concern to Jean as a Labour MP in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alongside the constant added inconveniences that being a woman in this environment place upon her. On her first day she is pointedly directed to the male toilets and asked if she thinks that it is appropriate to wear trousers to the House. Over the course of three series Jean tackles a wide range of issues, from childcare in the workplace, [to](#) the banning of offensive magazines, child custody, the transport of toxic waste, homelessness, health care reform, wrongful imprisonment and deportation. As with the presentation of Caroline Fairchild, Jean Price is shown as a competent, capable, thoughtful woman; the point of identification in an overtly cynical House of Commons. Price is presented as resolute in holding onto her identity and idealism, in contrast to the scheming, power-grabbing money-hungry antics of her fellow male MPs. *No Job for a Lady* also covers similar territory to two other much better known political satires of the 1980s and 1990s, *The New Statesman* (1987-92) and the earlier *Yes Minister* (1980-84) and *Yes Prime Minister* (1986-88). The absence of *No Job for a Lady* in explorations of political television comedy is telling. The presentation of a female perspective on events, which concentrates on the day to day trivia of parliamentary life, offers a valuable corrective to these male-dominated accounts which focus on larger-than-life characters and extraordinary events.

*Law and Order*, the third of the 'workplace comedies', presents Philippa Troy, a gifted barrister who moves effortlessly through her professional life. That a television sitcom should revolve around a highly effective female barrister of itself offers yet another challenge to constructions of the sitcom as a site of generally negative or ineffectual female representations. Her caseload features quirky and unusual cases – a hot air balloonist is charged with frightening a bull to death, a sleepwalking nephew is accused of murdering his uncle, and a retired safebreaker is alleged to have broken into a cashpoint using a bulldozer. In all cases Troy is defence counsel. Her speeches evidence her dazzling verbal virtuosity, and certainly in the six cases which make up the

series always result in [the](#) defeat of prosecuting counsel Gerald Triggs (Simon Williams). Triggs and the instructing solicitor Arthur Bryant (Eamon Boland) are very much in Philippa's shadow. Triggs possesses neither Philippa's verbal fluency nor her keen legal acuity. He laces his prosecution speeches with abstruse biblical quotations, and his prejudices are always clearly on show. Philippa Troy is self-evidently an extremely successful woman and there is no question that she more than holds her own in a profession where women are very poorly represented. She clearly outshines the predominantly male legal hierarchy who surround her. Her seemingly effortless workplace superiority makes her potentially a little less human than struggling Jean Price or Caroline Fairchild, both making daily compromises to integrate their home and family life. There is no picture given of Philippa's domestic situation, aside from the fact that she is a widow. Her home life has no part in the stories told in *Law and Disorder*. The series might be better categorised within the crime/courtroom genre, where Philippa Troy could be read as an intrepid, idiosyncratic heroine in the vein of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple or H. M. Beaton's Agatha Raisin. (Keith coincidentally read a selection of these books for a BBC Radio 4 series.) While Philippa Troy's detachment from the domestic makes her a much less recognisable female figure than Fairchild or Price, her witty, professional brilliance distinguishes her as yet another of Keith's gallery of strong, confident sitcom women.

Keith's television comedy canon also contains characters who, as suggested in the introduction to this article, behave in ways unlikely to appeal to the middle England constituency most popularly associated with her roles and her assumed audience. These characters are determined, single-minded and look to please themselves rather than others. That they are women makes their course of action especially noteworthy. *Next of Kin*'s Maggie Prentice is a mother and grandmother estranged from the son she self-confessedly did not like. His death in a car crash has prompted little emotion and now she has no desire to be responsible for her three orphaned grandchildren. She is unrepentant about her attitude and appears to have very little compassion for her grandchildren's plight. Maggie's cleaner Liz (Tracie Bennett) talks to her about her son's death,

assuming she must be in shock. 'You must have loved him very much.' Maggie replies, 'I never even liked him. I didn't know him very well. I thought he might have got nicer as he got older.' More provocative still are her reactions to Andrew when he tells her that they must take responsibility for their grandchildren:

Why us? I'm not going to be next of kin. There must be agencies for this kind of thing. Find them some nice foster parents, people who like children. I don't like children. Graham, why did you have to go and leave me with your children - I don't want them!

It is Andrew who seems the more 'maternal' of the two. There is something of a role reversal, with Maggie embodying what could be construed as more conventionally male behaviours, and Andrew displaying more of a feminine side. He is the one who negotiates between Maggie and the children, trying to make life easier for everyone. It is Maggie who puts her foot in things and shows little tact or compassion: 'I never wanted to be a parent first time round'. Subsequent episodes showcase Maggie and to a much lesser extent Andrew's ungrandparently attitudes to their new situation. *Next of Kin* ran to three series, and as time progresses, Maggie, Andrew and the children do begin to get along. Maggie does not mellow; she remains acerbic and forthright. Rather, she begins to develop a genuine relationship with the children and consider her own failings. At the same time the children begin to acknowledge her strength of character, wry sense of humour and honesty. She will never be a traditional 'granny' (she even forbids the children from using the word), but she does by the end of series three become a reliable and stable parental figure for the children. What the character does do notably and boldly is interrogate expectations around age and gender. Maggie challenges head on understood cultural conventions both around women's allegedly 'natural' instinct to nurture and how older women might generally be expected to behave and be represented. Maggie is no sweet maternal old lady nor an elderly, laughable has-been, the butt of others' jokes. She is flawed, frequently not especially likeable, but also recognisably a three-dimensional woman calling the shots in her own life. Some of the same might be said of Helen Walker.

*Sweet Sixteen*'s Helen Walker, the final of Keith's sitcom characters which this article considers, is potentially the most problematic. While Maggie is difficult, self-centred and frequently resentful of her circumstances, her story is ultimately a conventional one, that of a woman bringing up her grandchildren. Helen's life challenges a perennial cultural taboo. She has a relationship, then a baby, with a man fifteen years her junior. Gray writes of the characters who have been covered here that they 'lead lives of blameless sexual conformity' (Gray 1994, 107). The implicit suggestion is that confronting and flouting sexual norms is not something which Keith's comedy does. This is certainly not the case with Helen Walker. What is especially interesting from the perspective of 2015<sup>4</sup> are the number of ways in which Helen stands outside the conventional cultural climate of early 1980s Britain and to an extent that of today. Helen is an extremely successful manager of a building firm. She manages a predominantly male workforce, and her business dealings are with men. Additionally, her success is not in a more feminised industry such as fashion or magazine publishing, more usual working contexts to find powerful women; Helen has made it in the most masculine of worlds. As with all of Keith's female characters, Helen uses her confident and statuesque femininity and powerful wit to manage her business affairs. The most controversial aspect of her life is her very visible affair with the firm's young architect. She is completely open about this. Helen is frequently seen embracing her young lover. Her perspective on her affair is pragmatic: she understands that her life choices will provoke comments and difficulties but she is not deterred by this. She meets these challenges head-on. She has no doubts whatsoever about having her baby and is quick to confront her boyfriend about what they are going to do about the seriousness of their situation. She makes sure that Peter's parents - both younger than she is - are invited to their wedding. It is useful here to make comparison with a recent sitcom *Me and Mrs Jones* (2013)<sup>23</sup> in which one of the key themes is the 'will they / won't they' relationship between fortysomething Gemma Jones (Sarah Alexander) and her son's twentysomething friend Billy (Robert Sheehan). This situation, some thirty years on from Helen's relationship dilemmas, is depicted as far more covert and illicit than Helen and Peter's, and despite the growing sexual

tension between the Gemma and Billy, the most that is shown of their potential relationship is one very guilty kiss. In *Sweet Sixteen* and in *Helen Walker*, Keith embodies a woman ahead of her own time in terms of her professional attainment and her willingness to act on her own sexual needs and desires. Such a female character is hard to find even in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century television; the description of Helen suggests that such a character has most in common with the possibilities for women explored in the pioneering post-feminist television comedy of *Sex and the City* (1998-2004)<sup>24</sup> and its character, PR consultant Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall). Thus to find a woman such as Helen in early 1980s sitcom offers a direct challenge to current readings of historical British sitcom and the women to be found in them.

## **Conclusion**

This critical overview of Penelope Keith's television comedy offers double service in highlighting both the range and quality of her work, as well as drawing attention to the very limited critical attention paid by the academy to the significance of women in post war British television comedy. Looking at Keith's career demonstrates that powerful, culturally relevant female characters are to be found in historical British television comedy and that for full and accurate histories of television to be written, their work needs to be reinserted into extant histories to allow for currently incomplete historical narratives to be augmented and fully developed. The reappraisal of Keith's career leads to reflection on the careers of other key comedy actresses who have played a significant role in British historical television comedy.

An obvious example would be Felicity Kendal, Keith's *Good Life* co-star who played the lead in two other series created by *Butterflies* writer Carla Lane. In *Solo* (BBC 1981-82),<sup>25</sup> Kendal is Gemma Palmer, trying to create a single life for herself after her boyfriend Danny Tyrell (Stephen Moore) is unfaithful to her. In *The Mistress* (BBC 1985-87),<sup>26</sup> Kendal plays Maxine Mansel, a florist who is having an affair with a married man. Both series, written by a woman,

examine relationship dilemmas from the perspective of the central female protagonist. Petite, blonde doe-eyed Kendal is the acme of feminine appeal and would fit nicely into the role of pretty, acquiescent girlfriend or supportive wife. Kendal has played with this potential for typecasting. *The Good Life's* Barbara, while on the surface Tom's pretty wife, is also spirited, funny and frequently sends up Tom and his ideas. In *Solo* and especially *The Mistress* she plays self-absorbed and not always entirely likeable young women, intent on their own lives and pleasures. Especially in these two latter series, Kendal's characterisations like many of Keith's roles, offer interesting, sometimes problematic women who cut through any commonplace binaries situating sitcom women as either bimbos or battleaxes.

At the present time of writing, there is a growing recognition of the calibre of contribution which women are making to small screen comedy from the internationally recognised comedy writing and performance in the US of funny women such ~~like~~ as Tina Fey and Mindy Kaling to UK domestic successes such as Miranda Hart (already mentioned) and Catherine Tate. While this development is worthy of much celebration, it is important to remember that today's television funny women are building on well-established foundations and are part of an older, little-acknowledged ancestry of female comedy.

### **Biography**

Mary Irwin is a lecturer in Media at Northumbria University. She is a specialist in Television Studies and has published widely on both historical and contemporary television. She has articles forthcoming on women's television history in the journals *Feminist Media Studies* and *Media History*. She is currently working on [the](#) monograph *Love Wars: Television Romantic Comedy*.

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<sup>1</sup> Margo to Jerry, *The Good Life*, 1975. 'The Thing in the Cellar', 1: 5. First broadcast 2 May by BBC Television. Produced and directed by John Howard Davies, written by John Esmonde and Bob Larbey.

~~<sup>2</sup> Grace Dent, 2009. 'Give me The Good Life every Christmas', *Guardian*. Accessed 15 August 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2009/dec/22/christmas-good-life?commentpage=1>~~

<sup>3</sup> *To the Manor Born*, 1979. First broadcast 30 September by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan, written by Peter Spence.

<sup>4</sup> This article forms part of a wider ongoing research project [by the author](#) considering women in television situation comedy. This includes a monograph on television romantic comedy *Love Wars: Television Romantic Comedy* (2016) I.B. Tauris, ~~and an AHRC project bid "Bimbos or Battleaxes?"~~ [Representations of Women in British Television Situation Comedy, 1960-2000](#)

<sup>5</sup> *Miranda*, 2009. First broadcast 9 November by BBC Television. Produced and written by Miranda Hart, directed by Mandie Fletcher.

<sup>6</sup> *Butterflies*, 1978. First broadcast 10 November by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan, written by Carla Lane.

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<sup>7</sup> *Butterflies* followed Ria Parkinson's discontent with her role of stay at home wife and mother to two teenage sons. Ria was still in love with her husband but bored and preoccupied with the possibilities of an affair with rich and handsome business man Leonard (Bruce Montague)

<sup>8</sup> *The Avengers*, 1961. First broadcast 7 January by Associated Rediffusion. Created by Sydney Newman

<sup>9</sup> *Dixon of Dock Green*, 1955. First broadcast 9 July by BBC Television. Created by Ted Willis.

<sup>10</sup> *Hadleigh*, 1969. First broadcast 16 September by Yorkshire Television. Created by Robert Barr.

<sup>11</sup> *Kate*, 1970. First broadcast 6 January by Yorkshire Television. Produced by Pieter Roger and directed by June Wyndham-Davies.

<sup>12</sup> There are no biographies of Keith to date nor has she written an autobiography. This biographical background has been drawn largely from a 2009 interview with Keith in *The Scotsman* and television listing sites TVcom and IMDB. <http://www.scotsman.com/news/interview-penelope-keith-actress-1-471625>

<sup>13</sup> *Executive Stress*, 1986. First broadcast 20 October by Thames Television. Produced and directed by John Howard Davies and written by George Layton.

<sup>14</sup> *No Job for a Lady*, 1990. First broadcast 7 February by Thames Television. Produced and directed by John Howard Davies and written by Alex Shearer.

<sup>15</sup> *Law and Disorder*, 1994. First broadcast 17 January by Thames Television. Produced and directed by John Howard Davies and written by Alex Shearer.

<sup>16</sup> *Moving*, 1985. First broadcast 9 January by Thames Television. Produced and directed by Les Chatfield and written by Stanley Price from his stage play.

<sup>17</sup> *Next of Kin*, 1995. First broadcast 15 May by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan and written by Jan Etherington and Gavin Petrie.

<sup>18</sup> *Sweet Sixteen*, 1983. First broadcast 16 October by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan and written by Douglas Watkinson.

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19 1976, *The Good Life*, 'The Wind-Break War', 3: 5. First broadcast 8 October by BBC Television. Produced and directed by John Howard Davies, written by John Esmonde and Bob Larbey.

20 Coincidentally Margaret Thatcher, whose period in office is associated with the flood of global capital into British money markets and an end to the city as a de facto 'gentleman's club', was elected as Prime Minister only three months earlier in May 1979.

21 John Howard Davies, producer and director, talked about the lure of romance in *Comedy Connections* (BBC 2006). He recalled that, 'The strongest element was the love story which built and got stronger and stronger throughout. All over the country there was speculation as to how it would end. The last episode had in excess of 27 million viewers'. Penelope Keith in a recent interview said, 'I think the strength of the series was that it was, essentially, a love story.' Anna Tims, How we made: Penelope Keith and Peter Bowles on *To the Manor Born*, *Guardian*.

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22 'Claudia' (online purchaser/reviewer). Accessed 28 August 2014.

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23 *Me and Mrs Jones*, 2012. First broadcast 12 October by BBC Television. Produced by Beryl Vertue, directed by Nick Hurran and written by Oriane Messina and Fay Rusling.

24 *Sex and the City*, 1998. First broadcast (US) 6 June by HBO. Created by Darren Star.

25 *Solo*, 1981. First broadcast 11 January by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan and written by Carla Lane.

26 *The Mistress*, 1985. First broadcast 17 January by BBC Television. Produced and directed by Gareth Gwenlan and written by Carla Lane.