A Historical Sensibility: Television, Postfeminism and the Second World War

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# AbstractPostfeminism is not an ideological position or coherent theoretical framework that can be applied externally to the analysis of texts. Indeed popular postfeminism – as distinguished in this thesis from academic postfeminism – is knowable only through its workings in culture, specifically in the representation of gender in “postfeminist” media texts. Therefore, this thesis does not adopt a postfeminist position or approach to analyse the source texts, but rather seeks to identify and deconstruct a postfeminist sensibility within them.

This sensibility became apparent in 1990s depictions of characters such as Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger) and Ally McBeal (Calista Flockhart); however, it prevails in texts created in the current moment and inflects their representation of women. This thesis seeks to identify the themes and characteristics of this sensibility at the site of their creation – media texts representing women – expose the reasons why they are problematic, and show that the same traits exist in the texts considered here. In so doing it seeks to demonstrate that postfeminist ideals are still informing representations of women in the media.

Furthermore, it seeks to demonstrate that this postfeminist sensibility, despite being a product of 1990s postfeminism and the current post/post-post-feminist moment, inflects representations of women from different time-periods, specifically from the Second World War and immediate post-war period. Because of the media’s (and specifically television’s) central role in the formation of cultural memory, this creates a lens through which women’s history and women’s historical identities are viewed in the present day. This postfeminist lens, or sensibility (Gill 2007), is thereby dehistoricised as an aspect of essential femininity. In this way the politics of the present are cast onto the past. Through this process, the events of the past are drained of any independent meaning and repurposed/redeployed to meet the needs of the present. The centrality and ubiquity of such postfeminist visions of the past is such that postfeminist discourse has become a central component of what this thesis terms, the Historical Sensibility which informs and structures historical drama on television.

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 Father of mine, this is for you.

# Declaration

I declare that no outputs submitted for this degree have been submitted for a research degree of any other institution. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee / University Ethics Committee / external committee [*please indicate as appropriate*] on [*date*].

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is**

Name:

Signature:

# Date:

# Introduction

A search on eBay for the term ‘Land Girl Dress’ returns ten pages of results. Some are fancy dress costumes, but the majority are 1940s/50s vintage style tea dresses (ebay.co.uk, 2017). Most are made from floral or polka dot fabric and modelled by women wearing their hair in victory rolls. None (even the fancy dress costumes) bear any particular resemblance to the actual land girl uniform and most, other than their generic “vintage” aesthetic, bear only slight resemblance to authentic dresses from the 1940s.

 What the discovery of this category of dress on eBay, a multinational online sales platform, implies was that, at least for the UK market, the term ‘Land Girl’ and its associated image is believed by some sellers to have enough cultural purchase to assist in the sale of an item. That the dresses are not “authentic” in terms of the fashion of the period and surviving images of the group of people they claim to replicate suggests that they were tapping into a popular perception of the land girl rather than a strictly historical one. This raises a question as to where this popular perception has come from and how it has gained such popularity and consensus.

 Images of the Second World War are ubiquitous throughout British culture, particularly in film and television, and women feature strongly in such imagery. Some images from Ministry of Information (MOI) propaganda campaigns may be familiar, such as *‘Keep Mum She’s Not So Dumb’* (nationalarchives.gov.uk, 2017a), *‘You Forget But She Remembers’* (nationalarchives.co.uk, 2017b) or recruitment posters such as *‘They Can’t Get on Without Us’* which encouraged women to join the Auxiliary Territorial Service (A.T.S.) (nationalarchives.gov.uk, 2017c). However, the Women’s Land Army (WLA), of which land girls were members, is a relatively unknown and little celebrated aspect of the women’s services during the Second World War. For instance, it was only in 2008 that veterans of the WLA were invited to participate in remembrance events at the Cenotaph in London. Few books have been written of the history of the WLA and, unlike other organisations such as the Women’s Institute (WI), the WLA is relatively unknown.

 However, there have been several significant representations of land girls in popular culture. In *Went the Day Well* (Cavalcanti, 1942),produced by Ealing in co-operation with the MOI, two land girls (who are part of a larger ensemble cast) assist with the retaking of a small English village occupied by German soldiers. ITV’s situation comedy *Backs to the Land* (1977-78) followed a group of land girls working for a lecherous and cantankerous farm owner on the fictional Crabtree Farm. In 1998 David Leyland directed *The Land Girls* starring Catherine McCormack, Rachel Weisz, and Anna Friel. In 2004 an episode of the long running British detective series *Foyle’s War* (ITV 2002 - 2015) entitled ‘They Fought in the Fields’ centred on the murder of a farmer in Hastings in which three land girls are suspects. Finally, and most significantly in terms of this project, in 2009 (-2011) the BBC released *Land Girls,* which followed the lives of a group of WLA recruits living and working on a manner farm.

 Therefore, despite the relative historiographical lack of information concerning the WLA, a popular image of the WLA and specifically its members, has built up in popular imagination through media representations such as those mentioned above. Such media representations are consequently a primary site from which the public gains information and understanding about the land girls: who they were, what they did, and how they looked and dressed. Despite any historical inaccuracies or divergences, these representations therefore become important sources for the generation of historical “knowledge” and as a result must be deconstructed and understood. Here lies the jumping off point for this thesis.

Television drama constitutes a key source for contemporary understandings of the role women played in the Second World War. Analysing these dramas and questioning the ideology that informs them is therefore vital: as products of the contemporary moment, such dramas are shaped and inflected by the ideological needs of that moment. Specifically, as all of the texts considered in this thesis were created in the last ten years, they are products of the prevailing postfeminist media climate that has enjoyed a hegemonic position since the 1990s. In her discussion of this climate, Rosalind Gill describes a ‘postfeminist sensibility’, which she explicitly locates in relation to the economic turn in the early 1980s that represented a particular moment of what Fredric Jameson has described as ‘late capitalism’ and which we now tend to describe as neoliberalism (1991). Accordingly, the reactionary nature of popular postfeminist discourse and its apparently hostile relationship with second wave feminism is to be understood against the backdrop of a moment in which the politics of figures like Reagan and Thatcher and the economic interventions of new organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) seemed to be mobilised specifically in opposition to the radical and social democratic politics of mass movements that had dominated the preceding decades. As a product of this moment, postfeminism encourages us to believe that political struggle is located in the past, and that there is no need to imagine alternative ways of being.

For Gill, this ‘postfeminist sensibility’ exists in its perpetuation of various interrelated themes:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference (2007: no pagination).

As well as considering the key characteristics listed above, this thesis will identify other problematic aspects of the postfeminist sensibility such as the privileging of motherhood and imperatives towards heterosexual romance and domesticity. It will also concentrate on the function of masculinity in postfeminist texts, arguing that female characters are frequently constructed in relation or opposition to male characters. It will demonstrate the ways in which pernicious postfeminist regimes of beauty and heteronormativity are disguised in discourses of female pleasure and indulgence. Finally this thesis will interrogate postfeminist discourses of “empowerment” through personal choice rather than collective political action and demonstrate their inadequacy.

This postfeminist sensibility has its roots in media texts as, rather than being a codified and discrete ideological position, it is constituted and (loosely) defined in media products which reveal its characteristics. This thesis will argue that, for the majority of people, as with conceptions of female participation in the Second World War outside of the academy, the primary site of engagement with feminism and postfeminism is in such media texts. By locating the characteristics of the postfeminist sensibility in dramas depicting female participation in the Second World War, this thesis will demonstrate the ways in which this sensibility has been naturalised and dehistoricised. This thesis will demonstrate the ways in which postfeminist gender norms undermine the political gains of second wave feminism, whilst seemingly taking them into account. It will argue that by normalising and de-historicising postfeminist discourses of acceptable femininity, these drama series perpetuate these repressive ideals whilst denying systematic inequalities that perpetuate patriarchal oppression.

In the case of both postfeminism and women’s history, television is therefore a central source of the construction and consumption of meaning. As a domestic medium that has long been associated with the feminine, television presents unique opportunities for analysis. Considerable work has been carried out on War films and their depiction of women (see, for example Aldgate and Richards, (2007); Harper, (2000); Summerfield (2009)). However little attention has been paid to similar depictions on television. Similarly, considerable work has been carried out on postfeminist television (see for example Moseley, Wheatley & Wood (2017), McRobbie (2009), Moseley & Read (2002)) but very little on postfeminist television set in the past. This thesis therefore seeks to address a gap at the intersection of scholarship regarding television, postfeminism, and women’s history and draw conclusions as to the productive potential of that intersection.

## Methodology

In the interests of clarity, coherency, and manageability analytical criteria were established at the beginning of this project, which informed the selection of source texts. Both the First and Second World Wars produced moments of considerable gender tension resulting from the mobilisation of women. As Higonnet et al observe, ‘during the two world wars, the female term – women’s situation – underwent radical change, thus destabilizing the tropic balance’ (1987: p5). However, to a much greater extent than the First, the Second World War was a ‘Total War.’ This is because the Second World War,

involve[d] whole populations; the organization of the home front …[was] as critical an influence as that of the military front; it … mobilize[d] all of the resources of science, technology and propaganda available to each side (Calvocoressi, Wint, & Pritchard, 1999: no pagination).

Heavy air raids over civilian and military targets across Britain, the conscription of women into the armed forces, Women’s Land Army or munitions factories in 1941 and large scale state intervention into civilian life were all experienced by the British people during the Second World War. This meant that the Second World War impacted life on the home front, and therefore women, to a greater extent than the First World War. As a result, there is a wealth of source material to be drawn upon by historical dramas wishing to focus on women’s experiences and to appeal to a female audience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, at the point at which work began on this project there were far more dramas set during the Second World War than the First in circulation. This has changed in the intervening years, with a slew of programming created to coincide with the centenary of the First World War in 2014. However, for the reasons stated above, the Second World War as a setting offers a greater scope for the analysis this thesis will carry out. Moreover, robust and substantial analytical work has been carried out into the representation of women and the Second World War in film, however televisual representations remain under-theorised. Furthermore, as a primary site of construction and engagement with postfeminist discourse, television programming presents itself as the logical object of analysis for a project seeking to deconstruct postfeminist representations of gender.

To carry out its analytical objectives, this thesis will perform a close, textual reading of four television dramas, underpinned by an engagement with feminist and postfeminist theory and work relating to the links between television, history and memory. The series considered here were selected based on the following criteria. They are all female led, prime time dramas with an explicit focus on the impact of the Second World War on the lives of British women. As a result, they offer a productive site of analysis of the impact of the Second World War on the lives of British women as depicted in television drama. They were all produced and broadcast within the past ten years and are indicative and symptomatic of the contemporary postfeminist media climate. This thesis’ unique contribution will be to demonstrate that these texts act as sites of intersection between postfeminist discourse and the representation of women’s history on television and to draw conclusions as to the implications of this intersection for popular understandings of the past and its relationship to the present.

 As they are discrete, self-contained and completed series, each text will be considered in a separate chapter. Each chapter will provide contextual information regarding the series’ production as well as any relevant historical background. This structure will allow a thorough, independent reading of each series, as well as facilitating intertextual comparisons across chapters and the construction of a central, unifying argument. In approaching each series, the first stage will be to identify broad postfeminist themes. Then, specific characters, plot lines and concepts will be deconstructed and analysed in relation to those themes. The chapters will be ordered chronologically, beginning with *Land Girls*,which was first broadcast by the BBC in 2009 and concluding with *Home Fires*,which was first broadcast by ITV in 2015. As well as mirroring the order in which they were released, this will facilitate the mapping of changes and shifts in postfeminist discourses over time and further underscore the relationship between the ideological needs of the present moment and the representation of the past.

 Across the thesis, terms such as transgressive and disruptive will be used to signify deviation from established postfeminist norms. While these are defined in situ where they are used within the chapters, a general definition will be offered here in the interest of clarity. The term ‘transgressive’ or ‘transgression’ is used to refer to identities and behaviours that subvert or undermine postfeminist norms of femininity. For example, in *Land Girls* one character’s desire to end her unplanned pregnancy by inducing a miscarriage undermines the postfeminist ideal of fulfilment through motherhood. Thus, it is referred to as transgressive. Similarly, the terms ‘disrupted’ and ‘disruptive’ are employed to identify the events, beliefs, or experiences that motivate transgressive behaviour. The primary example of this is the traumatic experience of the Second World War, which, in all four series, interrupts the women’s lives, preventing or delaying their postfeminist trajectories towards marriage and motherhood because of the need for female labour. While making no claims to offer a comprehensive or exhaustive analysis of every aspect of postfeminist media culture, this thesis utilises salient examples of popular, contemporary texts to make a unique contribution to scholarship surrounding the representation of women, and specifically women’s history, on television.

 Following this introduction, an overview of pertinent literature will outline the theoretical framework of this thesis and situate it in relation to existing scholarly work on postfeminism, the relationship between history and memory, and television’s role as a primary site of construction for all three. Chapter Two will examine the BBC series *Land Girls* (2009 – 2011), a female ensemble drama which follows the lives of a group of women serving in the Women’s Land Army. The series was created specifically to coincide with and commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Second World War. This suggests apposite questions regarding television’s potential as a historical repository and as a site of remembrance and commemoration. This chapter will also discuss *Land Girls*’ construction as a female ensemble drama and the potential of this format for telling women’s history. The analysis will demonstrate the ways in which this specifically feminine space facilitates a focus on female friendships and relationships before a relocation back into more traditional female roles results in a reinstatement of postfeminist gender norms.

 Chapter Three will focus on the ITV series *The Bletchley Circle* (2012 – 2014), which depicts the post-war lives of a group of former Bletchley Park code breakers. This series is also a female ensemble drama with a strong focus on female friendship. This chapter will explore the ways in which the friendships depicted in the series facilitate the characters’ transgression of postfeminist gender norms. However, as well as discussing the tension surrounding the figure of the female investigator, it will utilise elements of horror scholarship to demonstrate the ways in which the series renders this rejection of postfeminist gender norms as horrific and unsustainable.

Chapter Four will explore *Marvel’s Agent Carter* (ABC 2015 – 2016), which forms part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and depicts Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) in her post-war work for the fictional Stratiegic Scientific Reserve. This chapter will question whether the series’ ostensibly feminist main character and discernibly feminist tone are representative of a contemporary feminist resurgence. It will demonstrate that through the recuperation of its potentially radical main character and depiction of the fate of dangerous women, *Agent Carter* offers a version of “feminism” that is restricted and rendered inert by the norms and discourses of the postfeminist sensibility.

 Chapter Five will explore the ITV series *Home Fires* (2015 – 2016) which centres on the Women’s Institute of the fictional Cheshire village of Great Paxford. Through its creation of nostalgia for a pre (second wave) feminist moment, this chapter will argue that *Home Fires* undermines the political goals of feminism through its suggestion that they have already been achieved. By depicting women as happy and fulfilled in their domestic roles, this series suggests that true liberation and empowerment comes not from feminist struggle, but from the willing submission to postfeminist gender norms.

 Finally, this thesis will draw conclusions as to the significance of the contemporary postfeminist discourse as a structuring force in depictions of the past. This discourse can at times seem too ubiquitous and diffuse to grasp. It is the contention of this thesis that the subject matter of these series allow us to perceive the effects of this discourse in much the same way that iron filings reveal the otherwise imperceptible function of magnetic fields. Whether historically accurate or inaccurate, these televisual representations (even in their mere existence) are informative regarding the nature of popular postfeminism. In acknowledging the potential pleasure of such depictions, it will discuss their location in discourses of the popular and consider the implications of the relationship between history, cultural memory and the ideology of the present moment. In focusing specifically on representations of women’s labour in the Second World War, the purpose of this thesis is not to ascertain the historical accuracy of these depictions. Rather, it will identify what these representations reveal about the structuring needs and desires dictated by contemporary postfeminist discourse.

# Chapter One – Literature Review

This chapter will place the following analysis in the context of existing scholarly literature. This chapter will explore existing debates surrounding television and its relationship to both postfeminism, history, and cultural memory. In so doing, it will establish the theoretical framework that underpins this project as well as outlining its intervention into this field. The first section explores the varying definitions of postfeminism as it pertains to this thesis. It will begin by discussing the problems associated with attempting to establish a firm definition of postfeminism. It will then sketch out a broad but useful distinction between concepts of “academic” postfeminism and “popular” postfeminism, as well as enquiring as to where the latter can be located and understood. It will then discuss the key themes of this popular conception of postfeminism, beginning with its relationship to feminism and moving on to its reassertion of natural sexual difference, its emphasis on personal choice and individual “empowerment,” and finally its use of irony in the construction of postfeminist femininity.

 The second section will focus on the relationship between television and cultural memory. By exploring this relationship, this section will underscore the importance of the deconstruction and close analysis of television texts that contribute to historical understanding. It will begin by separating the closely linked concepts of history and memory, before exploring their complex relationship and the ways in which each one is informed and shaped by the other. It will discuss scholarly conceptions of cultural memory, its generation, importance and its relationship to popular knowledge.

## Understanding Postfeminism

In carrying out an extensive review of literature pertaining to postfeminism, its amorphousness emerges as its defining feature.[[1]](#footnote-1) Many scholars agree that postfeminism as a concept is unknowable in terms of a comprehensive and exhaustive definition, rather it becomes apparent in cultural artefacts that are identifiable as postfeminist or as having a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ (Gill 2007). As a result, it is difficult to establish any definitive parameters that delimit postfeminism as a separate, coherent ideology.

 Academic interactions with postfeminism have largely consisted of critical engagements with second wave feminism to expose perceived limitations, or critical dissections of the results of these engagements and their implications for broader feminist and gender discourses. From this, two broad, loosely categorised, and heavily generalised understandings of postfeminism will be established as a starting point. The first sees postfeminism as the productive intersection of postmodern discourses, such as postcolonialism, poststructuralism and so forth, with second wave feminism (Brooks 1997). This view, put forward by scholars such as Anne Brooks, envisions postfeminism as a dialogue, a continuing process that questions the universality of the second wave feminist subject and essentialist assumptions perceived to be at the heart of much second wave thinking. The second, put forward most famously by Susan Faludi’s 1991 monograph *Backlash,* envisions postfeminism as a backlash against the second wave and a determined undermining of feminist achievements and political agency. Scholars such as Angela McRobbie (2009), Tania Modleski (1991) and Rosalind Gill (2007) have put forward reconceptualised and slightly less inflammatory interpretations of this position, which nevertheless remain critical of postfeminism as an undermining of the political and cultural gains of the second wave. These interventions will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

## Academic Postfeminism

This thesis uses the term “Academic Postfeminism” to refer to the body of thought within the academy that seeks to explore the intersection with and impact of postmodern discourses on feminism, usually specifically the second wave. Most useful in understanding this movement has been Anne Brooks’ 1997 volume *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Forms*, which primarily seeks to challenge essentialist assumptions seen to be at the heart of second wave feminism and give voice to those silenced by those assumptions (Brooks 1997: p4).

 Brooks envisions her work and others like it, as an on-going dialogue with the second wave, rather than a superseding of, break with, or erasure of it. In place of a ‘backlash,’ Brooks regards postfeminist work as an attempt at a productive process that takes into account theories of difference and post-modern conceptions of the deconstructed subject. Brooks stresses that this is not a destructive process, but rather, ‘the concept of “post” implies a process of ongoing transformation and change’ (Brooks 1997: p1).

 In challenging the idea of universal identity, academic postfeminists like Brooks seek to challenge the idea that patriarchy is experienced in the same way by all and that oppression and therefore emancipation from that oppression means the same thing or is achieved by the same process for everyone (Brooks 1997: p2). Furthermore, academic postfeminists seek to challenge ‘assumptions of a unified Patriarchy with no divisions’ when clearly power is divided unequally along racial and class lines. For instance, middle class white men (and women) occupy a considerably more powerful position than working class black men (Brooks 1997: p31). Thus, postfeminist scholars such as Brooks seek to challenge the ‘universality of terms’ that, for them, problematises the politics of the second wave (Brooks 1997: p16).

 In line with postmodernist ideas about the deconstruction of the subject, postfeminism seeks to accommodate ‘a subject that is fragmentary and contradictory’ (Brooks 1997: p20). The introduction of postmodernist, post colonialist and poststructuralist ideas of difference has led to a questioning, within academic postfeminism, of claims that the experience of “being a woman” can override differences of class, culture, race and so forth to be held up as the primary unifying narrative. bell hooks notes in her 2014 work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* ‘while it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little indication that this forges “a common bond among all women”’ (p4). Therefore, the questions raised by academic postfeminism regarding the universality of the second wave subject must certainly be addressed.

 The challenging of this basic assumption of a universal experience of oppression and resistance, also problematises second wave feminist media criticism that sought to understand the ‘way patriarchal ideology and social formation of patriarchal society was sustained through media and filmic discourses’ (Brooks 1997: p163). The basis of this criticism is that this analysis was underpinned by the same problematic and universal assumption that saw the formation and maintenance of patriarchal ideologies as having the same consequences for all. This assumption erases factors such as class, race, sexual preference, religion and so forth, which ‘create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive in the lives of individual women’ (hooks 2014: p5).

 Thus, academic postfeminism is perhaps at its most productive as a framework for interrogating second wave feminism by examining the power structures that informed second wave feminist thought. Frequently turning to theorists such as Foucault, academic postfeminists have asserted that the second wave fundamentally misunderstood the nature and operation of power within society. A Foucauldian position does not challenge the basic idea that men are in a position of power over women and other minority groups, but rather ‘feminist’s understanding of the *nature* of men’s power over women’ (Brooks 1997: p53, my emphasis). This argument is rooted in the location of power, which for Foucault is a pluralistic ‘productive network that runs through the whole social body’ in minute everyday interactions (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: p61). So, while Foucault does not deny the *fact* of women’s oppression, he challenges the nature and operation of that oppression.

 Foucault argues that the dynamics of power within society cannot be understood as one homogenous group holding or possessing power at expense of another. For Foucault, power cannot be possessed or seized nor can it be understood as a purely prohibitive or repressive force (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: pp60 - 61). Rather, power ‘traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse,’ and must be understood at the point where it is exercised (Foucault in Rabinow 1984: p61). For Foucault then, power only exists in actions (Brooks 1997: p57). Thus, experiences of power are localised and unique, rendering universal categories of subjects of power pointless and in need of deconstruction. In this way, some academic postfeminists have suggested that second wave feminists not only misunderstand the nature of the power relationships they are trying to transform, but are also ignorant of their own implication ‘in many forms of oppression along class, occupational and ethnic lines’ (Brooks 1997: p55). hooks argues that this is, in part, a result of the monopolization of access to the methods and means of communication by middle class white women. She asserts that this ‘isolation from women of other class and race groups provide[s] no immediate comparative base by which to test their assumptions of common oppression’ (hooks 2014: p7). Therefore, for some academic postfeminists, sexism and oppression can only be conceptualised in individual instances and exchanges, rather than as one unifying experience of women encountering oppression at the hands of the patriarchy.

 This could be seen as propitious for postfeminist assertions that oppression should be tackled individually in everyday instances. It questions the second wave’s insistence on the necessity of collective political activism and chimes with the postfeminist deconstruction of subject identities in order to expose inequalities within feminist movements. However, even among its proponents there are concerns that the deconstruction of subject identities could lead to ‘a lack of acknowledgement of women’s systemic subordination to other women, as well as systemic domination by men’ (Brooks 1997: p58). Furthermore, the denial of common experience or complete deconstruction of the female subject has been seen by some as a move towards depoliticising feminism resulting in the erosion of a platform for collective action and political change.

 There are also concerns that such discourses alienate the very women they are seeking to empower. Feminism’s acceptance into the academy relocated postfeminist debates regarding its nature away from public discourses and the consciousness of women outside of the academy. Sarah Gamble (2001) sums up concerns that theorists such as Brooks, in moving the postfeminist debate into the theoretical, remove it from the “real” world of political agency and action (p50). Gamble suggests that the lure of more popular conceptions of postfeminism (as opposed to academic postfeminism) may stem from its accessibility: ‘its rejection of theoretical language ensures that it remains widely accessible, and its repudiation of victim status seeks to endow a sense of empowerment upon its readers’ (2001: p53). If it is these popular constructions of postfeminism, rather than academic discourses, which are the sites in which most women access and engage with postfeminist discourse then these constructions must be understood and interrogated with equal vigour. It is to work on this question of locating popular postfeminism (henceforth referred to as simply postfeminism) that this chapter will now turn.

## Locating Postfeminism – Popular Postfeminism

Rosalind Gill’s work on postfeminismhas been key to the development of a working conceptualisation of postfeminism. In the first instance, this is because she so eloquently and usefully elaborates postfeminism’s amorphous, almost elusive nature. In her 2007 book *Gender and the Media* she discusses the problem of ‘specifying what, if anything, might constitute the *content* of postfeminism. It seems infinitely flexible’ (p252). In her discussion of postfeminism as a sensibility (2007), she relocates it from a fixed analytical category, which can be compared against a pure and equally fixed concept of feminism, to a ‘critical object - a phenomenon into which scholars of culture should enquire’ (Gill 2007: no pagination). This relocation permits us to understand and explore postfeminism in its various articulations in media texts, and sheds light on the contradictions and ‘entanglements’ central to these articulations (Gill 2007: no pagination). Thus, for Gill, rather than forming or adhering to strict theoretical criteria, postfeminism should be seen as a construction, ‘a sensibility,’ brought to life by representations of gender in contemporary media (Gill 2007: no pagination).

 In their 2002 article in *Feminist Media Studies,* ‘“Having it Ally”: Popular Television (Post-) Feminism’Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read provide a useful discussion of the location of postfeminist discourse. They establish not only a working distinction between academic/theoretical and popular postfeminism, but put forward a compelling argument for the salience of this popular construction and its relevance to feminist debates and media criticism. They argue that it is necessary to engage with popular discourses of postfeminism at the sites in which they are formed, which they identify to be popular media texts such as *Ally McBeal* (Fox 1997 - 2002) (2002: p234). Scholars such as Amanda Lotz (2001), whose work the article primarily engages with, have warned against such texts creating an ‘ill-defined’ image of postfeminism (Lotz quoted in Moseley & Read 2002: p234). However, Moseley and Read contend that ‘these popular articles are important precisely *because* it is here in popular discourses, rather than academic or theoretical ones that the “general populace” mainly encounters feminism and post feminism’ (Moseley & Read 2002: p234, original emphasis). Since these popular cultural texts are the primary site of construction and consumption of postfeminist meaning for the majority of people, Moseley and Read present a compelling argument that ‘it is essential to unpack the way in which these terms operate in such discourses rather than simply dismissing them as ill-defined’ (Moseley & Read 2002: p234). Their argument problematises the idea that feminism or indeed postfeminism can ever be accessed in ‘some pure or unmediated form outside of pop-culture that can make political interventions into it’ (Moseley & Read 2002: p234). This thesis will explore and expand upon Moseley and Read’s proposal by applying similar concepts to the representation of British women from the Second World War.
 Moseley and Read offer a useful starting point in thinking about the defining features and characteristics of popular postfeminism. The key aspect of their conception of popular postfeminism as articulated in *Ally McBeal* is as a challenge to the perceived dichotomy of feminine versus feminist (Moseley & Read 2002: p231). This problematising of the mutual exclusivity of these two terms recognises a generational divide between the second wave feminists of the 1970s and *Ally McBeal*’starget audience. An audience ‘that has grown up taking for granted the feminist victories won by their mothers’ (Moseley & Read 2002: p238). In this iteration of postfeminism women are not required to sacrifice their traditionally “feminine” desires, ‘the pleasures of feminine adornment and heterosexual romance’ and so forth, to achieve their “feminist” goals (Moseley & Read 2002: p238). Thus, for Moseley and Read, postfeminism can be understood as a de-politicised sensibility in which empowerment is achievable through personal choice, rather than political activism or engagement.

 Angela McRobbie discusses this relocation of the formation of postfeminist discourses whereby ‘relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment’ (2004: p262). This process of re-making has altered perceptions of power to the extent that liberation is constructed not as the political achievement of freedom from oppression, but rather as the acceptance that submission to this oppression *by choice* will actually lead to the greatest happiness. In much popular postfeminist discourse it is feminism itself and its perceived requirement that women forgo the pleasures of “traditional femininity” that is cast as the true oppressor. The problematic implications of these ideas and their centrality to postfeminist discourse will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

 Imelda Whelehan (1995) also discusses the relocation of postfeminism into the academy, which she argues left a space into which a more accessible and appealing non-academic version of feminism/postfeminism developed. Whelehan discusses the ‘‘atheoretical’ origin of early Anglo-American feminism with its uncompromisingly pragmatic location in the politics of experience’ (1995: p128). Whelehan suggests that it was the move away from this politics of experience and into the academy that alienated a generation of women. This led to a disidentification with or disassociation from feminism. Feminism, characterised by the second wave, was perceived as the outdated product of a previous generation and their attempts to impose outmoded ideals onto a younger generation who had outgrown them. As a result of this formulation, feminism is cast as reproving and censorious. In the continuation of this discourse it is this poor fit, this misalignment of the ideals of the past with the demands on the modern woman that causes distress and unhappiness. This results in an erasure of the fundamentally oppressive nature of patriarchal society. Whelehan locates this discourse firmly as a product of the 1990s when:

the question of ownership [of feminism] becomes more pressing […] in the wake of pro-female, but often anti-feminist statements, that may be passed off misleadingly as a new ‘wave’ of feminism, although their content seems to persuade women that their fight for equality is in fact the source of much malaise (1995: p128).

 It is therefore clear that an understanding of constructions of popular postfeminism is vital to understanding postfeminism as a whole and particularly its relationship to feminism. It is also clear that categorising these constructions simply as a backlash ignores the ways in which ‘the popular operates as a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism’ (Moseley and Hollows 2006: p8). Thus, postfeminism itself is more nuanced than a straightforward repudiation of the second wave and the relationship between feminism and postfeminism is much more complex. Katixa Agirre in her 2012 article on articulations of postfeminism in *Mad Men* (AMC 2007 - 2015) makes reference to Gill’s conception of the postfeminist sensibility. She contends that ‘post-feminism is neither a movement nor a theory: it is rather a tone, a mainstream media tendency based on a number of interrelated themes that together form a sensibility’ (Agirre 2012: p157). This sensibility is therefore distinct from academic postfeminism discussed in the previous section. Taking on board this assertion that postfeminism, as it is most commonly engaged with, is to be best understood as constructed primarily in media texts that themselves have specific traits or themes, it is therefore necessary to identify and analyse these texts and themes.

## Feminism and Postfeminism – A Strained Relationship

 The intervention and intersection described by Brooks in *Postfeminisms* (1997), in which a clear theoretical dialogue between discourses of “Post-” and second wave feminism constituted a discernible theoretical position for debate. The relationship between the type of popular postfeminism discussed above and traditional feminism is, however, much more blurred. In her 2004 article ‘Post-Feminism and Popular Culture*,*’Angela McRobbie discusses this relationship. Citing *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (both the 1995 *Independent* column written by Helen Fielding and the 2001 film directed by Sharon McGuire) as an example, McRobbie argues:

that post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force (McRobbie 2004: p255).

In this way, scholars such as McRobbie argue that popular discourses of postfeminism evoked in media texts articulate a much less direct challenge to feminism. The challenge to, or move away from, the second wave is constructed in the context of ‘light entertainment’ where ‘a bold and serious argument about feminism being so repudiated might seem heavy handed’ (McRobbie 2004: p262).
 In her 2009 book *The Aftermath of Feminism, Gender, Culture and Social Change,* McRobbie elaborates on the relationship between postfeminism and feminism:

it is as though every feature of media and contemporary popular culture insofar as it engages with femininity somehow reverses and displaces those arguments made by feminists in the early 1970s (p24).

McRobbie discusses the various alternatives offered to women as replacements for feminism under the guise of ‘modernisation’ (2009: p24). A key aspect of this process is the ‘cutting off’ of women from one another across, national, cultural and historic lines until the prospect of alliance, and therefore the possibility of collective action, becomes ‘unappealing’ (McRobbie 2009: p26). This results in an undermining of the concept of a shared female experience and by extension a shared experience of inequality (however different and stratified these experiences may be). This ‘not only disarms what may still exist of feminism, but also interrupts whatever chances there might be for feminism to speak again to a wider constituency of women.’ [[2]](#footnote-2) (McRobbie 2009: p26)

 As well as this, McRobbie argues that, through a process of disarticulation, feminism itself is cast as something deeply unattractive. This process operates, on one level, ‘through the widespread dissemination of values that typecast feminism as having been fuelled by anger and hostility to men’ (McRobbie 2009: p26). Thus the severing of potential feminist bonds is expedited by evoking second wave feminism as something with which women *should not* want to be associated. McRobbie posits the idea of being ‘branded’ a feminist, calling forth clear images of feminism as something unpleasant, disfiguring, painful and, perhaps most importantly, permanent – a label impossible to remove once applied (2009: p26).

 McRobbie argues that within postfeminist discourse, ‘there is a sense or a threat that feminism could be re-awoken and that it was, in the past, a force to be reckoned with’ (2009: p27). Thus feminism becomes the ideological “Bogey Man” generating an implicit sense that by bringing it up, one is creating the problem; that it is only through mentioning injustice and inequality that they gain any foothold in modern life (McRobbie 2009: p26). As a result, the voices of those suffering from injustice and inequality are silenced and the need for collective political action denied.

 As a result of this, McRobbie suggests that popular postfeminism constructs itself as a toned down, friendlier (to the media, to men and to women) substitute version of feminism. This is achieved largely through suggestions that second wave feminists went too far, cutting themselves and the women they addressed off from the intrinsic pleasures of femininity (McRobbie 2009: p31). This process of disarticulation, McRobbie argues, has resulted in a restatement of traditional social and gender norms as immutable truths; ‘ideas like the shortage of men, or the epidemic of infertility, or women’s desire to return to the home, all become popular idioms and new forms of common sense’ (McRobbie 2009: p33). This restatement is carried out primarily in popular media (McRobbie 2009: p34) as what Gill (2008) has described as new moral and disciplinary regimes are established through representational practices. Addressing Faludi’s ‘backlash’ thesis, McRobbie discusses the switch in perspective facilitated by this representational shift. The result of which is feminism, rather than traditional repressive gender roles, is cast as the anachronism with media texts constructing themselves ‘as taboo-breaking, for daring to represent women once again in demeaning ways, but whose get-out clause is provided by the use of irony’ (McRobbie 2009: p35).[[3]](#footnote-3)

 McRobbie uses the film *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne 1987) as a key example of this disarticulation. She argues that the film served as a warning against the unchecked progress of female empowerment ‘in its creation of a new kind of villain, a monstrous woman who uses her sexual power to wreak havoc in the life of a man who is morally decent’ (McRobbie 2009: p35). This figure, ‘a contemporary witch’ was held up as a warning to both men and women of the dangers of moving beyond traditional gender roles and bonding with other, probably also mad and dangerous, women (McRobbie 2009: p35). In this way, the potential for empowerment through collective action is eschewed as a dangerous road towards unnatural, extremist, militant feminism. In its place, a “safe” version of female empowerment through the embracing and internalisation of the pernicious and objectifying male gaze is constituted (Gill 2008). Discourses of political struggles against racism, sexism, homophobia and so forth are relegated to the fringes as unpalatable and unnecessary extremism. In their place are ‘new models of assimilation’ in which ethnic minorities, women and other marginalised groups in society ‘are encouraged to abandon multi-cultural difference and find ways of identifying with the majority’ (McRobbie 2009: p42). This erasure of the continued existence of gendered and racial hierarchies within postfeminist discourse has resulted in a false vision of women:

across the boundaries of class and race […] able to make choices and to play an active role in their own life biographies, which in itself is to say that there is no longer any need for the kinds of combative or angry styles of political organisation, associated with feminism (McRobbie 2009: p47).

 In effect, the alternative discourses of empowerment offered by postfeminism actively contribute to women’s disempowerment (McRobbie 2009: p49).
  Whelehan (1995) alsodiscusses this fundamental link between feminism and postfeminism, arguing that this link becomes most apparent in the ways in which popular constructions of postfeminism distinguish and distance themselves from second wave feminism. To achieve this distinction, postfeminism has had to establish what second wave feminism is or was in order to demonstrate what it, itself, is not. This again emphasises the amorphous and a-theoretical nature of postfeminism, particularly in its popular constructions. Rather than being able to point to a distinct body of theory and thought, Whelehan suggests that postfeminism is most easily identified and understood in its contrasts to feminism. It is to explore these differences and contrasts that this chapter will now move.

## Reassertion of Natural Sexual Difference

Linked to the idea of postfeminism as a backlash, although perhaps not as explicit, is a move in postfeminist discourse to restate and reaffirm apparent natural and essential differences between men and women. This reassertion accounts for the presumed limitations of second wave feminism as being a result of its ignorance of the fixed and essential nature of biological, gendered identity. Popular contemporary texts such as John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women are From Venus* (1993) suggest that conflict and tension between genders stems from refusal or inability to acknowledge and accommodate these fundamental differences and the obstacles this creates to heterosexual romance. Here again postfeminist discourses erase structural social inequalities through implications that oppressive and discriminatory gender regimes are, in fact, an expression of the natural and “proper” male – female dynamic.

 Joseph Heller argues that, as well as insisting that such differences are real, popular media such as ‘women’s magazines […] self-help books and daytime television […] have traditionally allocated a substantial amount of space to advising women in the management of gender difference’ (1997: p228). In this way the burden of accommodating this difference is firmly placed on women’s shoulders. The resolution of this tension is linked, within postfeminist discourse, to personal choice; women can choose whether they are willing to do this. While this may fit with postfeminist ideals of personal empowerment though choice (which will be discussed later), it is problematic in a number of ways.
 Firstly, in placing the onus on women to adapt themselves and their desires to accommodate sexual difference, maleness is discursively naturalised while femaleness is discursively othered. Maleness is, in this way, constructed as stable, fixed and defined while femaleness is seen as changeable, unfixed and dependent on the demands of male desire. Herein is demonstrated one of the fundamental contradictions at the heart of popular postfeminism: while the existence of “natural’ femaleness is asserted, its changeable nature and need for constant regulation is also emphasised. This idea is further reinforced in the undermining of ‘new man’ tropes in popular culture of the time, which sees the new man as overly sensitive, unassertive and incapable of pleasing heterosexual women despite being what they purport to want (Heller 1997: p230).
 Secondly, this articulation of natural sexual difference problematises feminism as an irritant and obstacle to natural, heterosexual fulfilment. Postfeminist discourse suggests that in attempting to deconstruct the basic categories of male and female, feminism undermines traditional anchors of identity. This in turn destabilises the way men and women relate to each other, resulting in unhappiness for both. Referring again to the idea of personal empowerment through choice, this unhappiness and therefore feminism itself, is rendered unnecessary. Rather than seeking social change through the political, postfeminism suggests that gender tensions can be resolved via women’s individual responses to them.
 This links with Rosalind Gill’s discussion of the repudiation of feminism as inauthentic and inherently performative because of its perceived rejection of natural sexual difference and obstruction of heteronormative relationships (2007: p231). She notes that in postfeminist texts ‘heterosexuality is unmarked and naturalised’ and therefore reaffirmed with everything else defined against it (Gill 2007: p233). Heller and Gill both note the ways in which the discourse of personal choice allows feminism and challenges to heteronormativity to be explored ‘only to re-inscribe the necessity of difference’ (Heller 1997: p242). Feminist ideas are taken into account ‘only to repudiate them - unless they can be articulated to normative femininity’ (Gill 2007: p231). In this way, the central contradiction of postfeminism which ‘seems to want to have it both ways’ is exposed (Heller 1997: pp236). The notional necessity and moral rightness of women’s right to a choice is acknowledged and seemingly upheld. However, it is simultaneously made clear that there is a correct choice leading to heterosexual happiness and fulfilment and an incorrect choice leading to unhappiness, loneliness and unnaturalness. This results in a concept of choice that is heavily prescribed and normatively restricted by postfeminist discourse (2007: p4). Clearly the idea of personal choice and individual agency is central to popular constructions of postfeminism and must therefore be explored.

## Personal Choice and Individual Empowerment

Through its popular constructions postfeminism can arguably be seen as an exterior belief system; an ideology that is realised through external choices and practices of consumption. Ralina L. Joseph extends this idea to include constructions of race within the postfeminist media. In her 2009 article *“*Tyra Banks is Fat”: Reading (Post-)Racism and (Post-)Feminism in the New Millennium,’ Joseph uses the 2007 media coverage of American supermodel Tyra Banks’ weight gain to explore modern conceptions of (post-)racism and (post-)sexism in the USA. Joseph’s analysis also foregrounds the importance of popular culture as the site in which ‘post-moments of post-race and post-feminism flourish’ and as the ‘arena in which we imagine ourselves. It is where the so-called fictions of our identities, like those of race and gender, become facts’ (Joseph 2009: p240).

To explore these ideas, Joseph first analyses Banks’ public persona and argues that her successful performance of various ‘post-racial, post-feminist personae’ has been the key to her enormous success (2009: p241). Joseph argues that the media backlash against her 2007 weight gain proves this assertion. She argues that the circulation of images, which focused on Banks’ buttocks, breasts and stomach and their contrast to the carefully managed images of Banks from her modelling career, prevented her ‘movement through identities’ by locating her in a clearly racialised discourse (Joseph 2009: p242). Joseph argues that the images ‘reveal the so-called truth of Banks and posit that the smiling friendly, post-feminist, post-racial version of Banks that audiences are privy to on television is a lie’ (2009: p244).
 In this moment Banks’ image as an appealing “blank” canvas onto which the requirements of her various images and their meanings could be ascribed was broken, revealing these images to be false and challenging postfeminist assertions that she could “have it all.” Banks’ failure to maintain rigid control of her self-image is also constructed as the ultimate failure of the ideal postfeminist subject. Her failure to regulate her weight represents a failure to remain within narrow definitions of acceptability in terms of both race and beauty. This in turn, results in her inability to perform and maintain her acceptable and appealing media image of a woman empowered by both her race and beauty. Most importantly, it exposes that image as a performance, as something inauthentic. Thus, discourses of both (post-)racial and (post-)feminist empowerment as illustrated by this incident and Joseph’s analysis, are contingent on adherence to a restrictive, heteronormative, white, patriarchal male gaze. In discussing Banks’ former complicity with this gaze, Joseph provides examples from *America’s Next Top Model* (Banks’ flagship television series) that, Joseph argues, epitomises the (post-)racial, (post-) feminist gaze: ‘be racially specific enough to connote difference, desire and exoticism, but enough of a colorblind, blank slate to acquire success in the commercial, white-desirous marketplace’ (2009: p242). This quote demonstrates the fundamental links between postfeminist conceptions of empowerment and consumption; to be truly empowered and successful, women must be acceptable and *consumable* by the public and, specifically, the heterosexual male spectator. Thus, while race and gender are presented as unproblematic categories in popular postfeminist discourses, they are simultaneously constructed as surface identities, signified by the choices women make in their clothing, speech and actions. Such discourses negate the idea of systemic inequalities and discriminatory social norms, because when they are encountered, they may be dismissed as a failure to perform correct versions of race or gender. This is problematic because it suggests that inequality and consequent discrimination are the fault of the individual rather than society as a whole.
 For Joseph, this point is further reinforced by Banks’ ultimate response to the incident, which she describes as ‘so what?’ (2009: p246). In this response, Joseph argues, Banks re-iterated the postfeminist maxim of personal choice, by implying that individual women can choose whether to be subject to the power of racist and misogynist attitudes and thereby denying the systemic nature of these unequal power relationships.
 Joseph concludes that ‘the message remains that race and gender are floating identities untouched by structure and therefore strategically deployed by individuals for gain’ (2009: p251). She argues that, not only do these discourses erase the problems of racism and sexism in their shifting of responsibility for empowerment onto the individual but that discourses of the (post-) go further in their reduction of:

race and gender as mere categories of analysis. This is the defence of the post- ideology of race, or post-race, where it is popularly assumed that the civil rights movement effectively eradicated racism to the extent that not only does racism no longer exist, but race itself no longer matters. (2009: p239)

Joseph extends this to include discourses of postfeminism arguing that the two are fundamentally linked, ‘because discourses of post-race are undeniably gendered, and discourses of post-feminism are undeniably raced’ (2009: p240). Issues around race do not feature heavily in the texts considered in this thesis, which in itself is illustrative of the restrictive representational norms of the postfeminist sensibility. However, the above arguments demonstrate the ways in which postfeminism exists as an external ideology. One that offers “empowerment” through personal choice and practices of consumption, while leaving oppressive, racist, and patriarchal structures intact and unchallenged.

 Gill has also identified that the construction of ‘femininity [a]s a bodily property’ is central to the postfeminist sensibility (2007: no pagination). She links this idea to discourses of individual choice and empowerment and ‘the shift from objectification to subjectification’ (2007: no pagination). Gill explains this conflation in the sense that a woman’s identity is rooted in her presentation and management of a body that adheres to societal beauty standards and is generally appealing to a predominantly, or even exclusively, heterosexual male gaze (2007: no pagination).[[4]](#footnote-4) Later, she links this to discourses of individuation, personal choice and empowerment and the requirement of women to perpetually self-discipline, not only their bodies, but their emotional selves (2007: no pagination). Gill argues that in place of an external, powerful, spectatorial male gaze, ‘there now exists a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification - one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime’ (2007: no pagination). For Gill this ‘represents a shift in the way that power operates’ as patriarchal discourses of acceptable and attractive femininity are internalised and translated onto notions of free choice and individual agency (2007: no pagination). This also ties in with Foucault’s description of “docile bodies” that refers to ‘a body … that may be subjected, used transformed and improved’ through discipline (Foucault 1991: p136). Through the internalisation of the male, spectatorial gaze and adherence to societal beauty standards, women become docile and subject to both self and external surveillance, ‘at the level of […] movements, gestures, attitudes,’ and so forth (Foucault 1991: p137). In this way, postfeminist discourses of self-surveillance, bodily discipline and self-regulation equate to an internalisation of Foucault’s notion that bodies become ‘more obedient as [they] become more useful,’ (Foucault 1991: pp137-8).

 Gill goes on to argue that these key aspects of the post-feminist sensibility align it neatly with neoliberal conceptions of the subject as ‘entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating’ (Gill 2007: no pagination). This again negates the concept of limiting systematic inequalities and disadvantages. Gill argues that this requirement for constant self-regulation is framed within the postfeminist sensibility not only as personal choice, but also as a source of female pleasure (Gill 2007: no pagination). Prescriptive postfeminist beauty regimes are thereby recast as pleasurable exercises in self-indulgence that women participate in by choice.

 Gill locates the roots of much of this sensibility in the ‘resurgence of ideals of natural sexual difference across all media’ that had been steadily eroded by theories of equality in the 1970s and 1980s (Gill 2007: no pagination). The popularity of work such as that by John Gray (1993), which asserts that differences between men and women are not only inevitable and insurmountable but also desirable, served to cement and legitimise historic inequalities (Gill 2007: no pagination).[[5]](#footnote-5)

 Furthermore, Gill’s work on the connection between the postfeminist sensibility and neoliberal subjectivity (2008) is integral to understanding the relationship between postfeminism and discourses of choice. One of Gill’s primary concerns is the move within critical analysis away from questions of cultural influence in subjectivity. She argues for ‘a powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism’ in that both construct their subjects as individualised, rational actors operating within an apparent cultural and political vacuum (Gill 2008: p443). Within this vacuum, ‘notions of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves’ are erased (Gill 2008: p 443). For Gill, an awareness of this relationship is key to any critical understanding of representation practices in contemporary media.

 Gill argues that cultural influences are key to understanding media constructed subjectivities and the role of the media ‘in promulgating ideologies that served to sustain and justify relations of domination’ (Gill 2008: p433). Gill acknowledges the limits of ‘a hypodermic understanding of culture’ that suggests for instance, to use Gill’s example, a ‘simple one-to-one relationship between viewing images of very thin models and developing anorexia’ (Gill 2008: p434). However, beyond this overly simplistic cause and direct effect understanding, it is clear that cultural representations play an important role in the formation of subject identities.

 Gill suggests that concerns over the preservation of the sanctity of individual, specifically women’s perceived agency and choice, have resulted in an evacuation of ‘any notion of cultural influence’ (Gill 2008: p435). Furthermore, she argues that moral weight has been articulated to the internalisation of this idea and that ‘being influenced [by culture] is regarded as *shameful* rather than ordinary and inevitable’ (Gill 2008: p435, original emphasis). This is particularly problematic when applied to minority groups within society and chimes with Joseph’s (2009) arguments about issues of race, previously discussed in this chapter. Indeed, Gill argues that ‘one of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses’ that require their subjects to ‘narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices alone, removed from any external pressure or influence (Gill 2008: p436).

 Both Gill and McRobbie argue that such neoliberal constructions of the subject ‘sidestep all the difficult and complex questions about the relationship between culture and subjectivity’ (Gill 2008: p 436). Such questions, they argue, are necessary to understand the means by which heteronormative, middle class and largely white standards of beauty have been internalised to the extent that deviation from them is frequently classed as inauthenticity. In her discussion of Gill, Jilly Boyce Kay summarises these points well when she describes the postfeminist subject as ‘ostensibly endowed with agency, but only on the condition that she uses it to construct herself according to heterosexual male fantasises’ (2017: p78). In this way, the heterosexual male gaze performs a central, structuring role in postfeminist constructions of “empowerment” and “agency.”

 Gill, McRobbie, Sarah Banet-Weiser, and other critics of postfeminism all see this construction of the postfeminist/neoliberal subject as carried out through practices of consumption. Drawing on Goldman (1992) and MacDonald (1995) Gill suggests that this construction or signification through consumption means that by ‘buying a product. style or idea one is purchasing a sign of one’s own individuality and empowerment’ (Gill 2008: p437). This is further linked, by Gill, Banet-Weiser (2006) and others to the preeminence of ‘the makeover paradigm’ within the postfeminist media sensibility: particularly in relation to reality television. Under this paradigm femininity is seen as contingent ‘requiring constant anxious attention work and vigilance’ (Gill 2008: p441).

 Banet-Weiser argues that makeover programmes such as *The Swan* (Fox, 2004) and *Extreme Makeover* (ABC, 2002 - 2007) corroborate the postfeminist idea of individual, bodily empowerment as ‘they offer personal narratives of individuals (both men and women) as they undergo extensive cosmetic surgery as a way to ‘make over’ their lives’ (Banet-Weiser 2006: p256). Transformation is understood not to be limited to the exterior, as through the achievement of a ‘physically ideal body’ the contestants are understood to have realised a better or more “authentic” version of themselves (Banet-Weiser 2006: p256). In this way, moral weight is attributed to the ways in which individual bodies are managed and presented. Banet-Weiser pursues this idea to discuss the ways in which collective ideologies and societal norms are played out on women’s bodies. Referring to the *Miss America* pageant (1921 – present), she discusses the political inscription of ideology onto the contestant’s body. She argues that in the pageant an individual contestant’s ‘disciplined physique, her commitment to virtue, and her testimony to stability represented […] a well-managed collective American body’ (Banet-Weiser 2006: p258). Banet-Weiser suggests that, through programmes such as those mentioned above, a concept of ‘life politics’ has replaced the collective and emancipatory discourse of feminism (2006: p263). Feminism is represented as surplus to requirements as, having achieved its aims of socio-political “equality” its political agenda is no longer required for women to find happiness. Rather, happiness, for modern women, is available within the scope of consumption, personal choice, and bodily discipline rather than collective action and political struggle. Thus, struggles against racism, sexism, and classism are relegated to history and framed as successfully completed (Banet-Weiser 2006: p264). In their place, postfeminism has inaugurated a kind of ‘consumer citizenship’ (Banet-Weiser 2006: p264). This is best summed up as an ideology to which makeover programmes contribute:

through [their] relentless focus on individual pleasure and choice and through the explicit suggestion that accessing choices and individual pleasures is enabled by consumerism (through cosmetic surgery, new clothes, new houses, cars, etc.) In other words, postfeminism boldly claims that women possess active political agency and subjectivity, yet the primary place in which this agency is recognized and legitimated is within individual consumption habits as well as within general consumer culture (Banet-Weiser 2006: p260).

Thus, femininity is constructed as external and embodied. Gill also argues that this construction is inherently classed in terms of its sexualised, middle class, white aesthetic and in terms of those likely to have the means to access expensive procedures and purchase expensive products (Gill 2008: p442).

 Gill argues that this process of internalisation, or as Kay describes it, this ‘profound shift in the operations of gendered power’ (2017: p78) has led to:

the rise of a new figure constructed to sell to women: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always “up for” sex (Gill 2008: p437).

This construction encapsulates postfeminist discourses of choice as ‘women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as *pleasing themselves,* and, in so doing, they just happen to win men’s admiration’ (Gill 2008: p437, original emphasis). Thus, external objectification is reframed as a personal choice to engage with and conform to (largely) white, heteronormative beauty standards and to enjoy the “benefit” of male approval. This again serves as a restatement of the postfeminist concept of individual empowerment through the body, personal choice and consumption practices. However, this focus on embodied femininity offers a clear opportunity for the recirculation of highly sexualised, objectifying images of women, which is managed within postfeminist discourse through the evocation of irony.

## Irony and Postfeminist Femininity

To conform to the idealised feminine image described above, a woman’s body is required to be a demonstrably “sexy” and disciplined body according to the preferences of the white, heterosexual male gaze. Gill argues that ‘representation practices’ enforce this norm through the creation of ‘a cultural habitat of images [that] may be internalised to form a pernicious disciplinary regime’ (2008: p438). The ways in which this ‘pernicious disciplinary regime’ impinges upon and influences the supposedly “free choices” made by the postfeminist/neoliberal subject must be interrogated (Gill 2008: p438). Furthermore, Gill implies that this construction of femininity as active, knowing and self-realising often facilitates the recirculation of sexualised images of women that would otherwise be seen as deeply problematic (2008: p438). In this way, Gill highlights the centrality of irony to the postfeminist sensibility. Referring to advertising, Gill asserts that:

this new set of meanings is produced through the combination of sexualised representations of women’s bodies (focusing in particular on breasts, bottoms and flowing hair, with lips and eyes made up) juxtaposed with written or verbal texts that purport to speak of women’s new sexual agency and power (2008: p438).

 This juxtaposition results in a displacement of the problematic sexism of such images - implying that it is in the eye of the beholder rather than the image itself - and repositions them as a recuperation of feminine agency through sexuality.

 Sue Abel (2012) discusses the use of irony in advertising in New Zealand. In reference to a phenomenon she terms as the ‘knowing wink,’ Abel describes how advertisers will revert back to old, previously debunked gender stereotypes ‘that are still emotionally potent but no longer acceptable in their pure form’ (2012: p404). In so doing, advertisers tap into an apparent nostalgia for these old tropes, whilst maintaining the reassurance of irony to negate accusations of sexism. Abel argues that this technique:

meshes easily with a postfeminist attitude, in that its strategy is to adopt a tone of “we know that we are all equals now, and that we are not sexist anymore, and we can now all laugh at these old stereotypes” (2012: p401).

However, in so doing Abel argues that these stereotypes are ‘rearticulated and recuperated’ and given currency again; it is the viewer’s choice whether to be offended by them or not (2012: p401).

 Therefore, within this discourse, the crowning achievement of feminism is understood to be the facilitation of this recuperation. In levelling the playing field and “securing” equality, feminism has allowed women to choose to mobilise their sexuality in this way and enjoy the “power” it gives them over men. As a result, femininity is constructed as ‘powerful, playful and narcissistic - less desiring of a sexual partner than empowered by the knowledge of her own sexual attractiveness’ (Gill 2008: p438). Thus, on the one hand, postfeminism suggests that women are liberated from men in their perceived ownership of their own sexuality. However, this liberation is paradoxically dependent on affirmation of their sexual attractiveness to and resulting power over men, which is in turn dependent on their conformity to the preferences of the heterosexual male gaze.

 More than this, Gill argues that successful embodiment (literally) of this postfeminist identity and ‘a particular kind of beauty and sexiness has become a prerequisite for *subjecthood itself’* (2008: p440, original emphasis). The very notion of what constitutes femininity and womanhood is renegotiated and redefined by shifting discursive and representational practices (Gill 2008: p440). Where previously domesticity, care giving, cooking and so forth were held up as ideal markers of femininity, ‘*compulsory (sexual) agency*’ has also become necessary for the possession of cultural capital within a postfeminist economy (Gill 2008: p440, original emphasis).

 Therefore, the postfeminist sensibility is characterised by contradictions ‘in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement, sit side by side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the “wrong” “choices” (eg. become too fat, too thin or have the audacity or bad judgement to grow older)’ (2008: p442). Furthermore, the burden of managing these contradictions, whist ‘present[ing] all their actions as freely chosen’ falls primarily on women (Gill 2008: p443).

In conclusion to this section and in recognition of the complex and amorphous nature of postfeminism, it seems appropriate to restate Ann Brooks’ assertion in that there is no one satisfactory definition of postfeminism. Rather one must think of ‘postfeminisms’ in the plural (Brooks 1997). It is clear that the intersection of postmodernist discourses with second wave feminism led to necessary challenges to the exclusivity of conceptions of the second wave feminist subject, as Brooks asserts. However, it is also clear that the relocation of feminism into the academy that facilitated this intersection, also distanced feminist and academic postfeminist discourses from the experiences of “ordinary” women. In their place, a popular conception of postfeminism and the postfeminist subject grew, facilitated by the representational practices of the popular media. Faludi’s backlash thesis is overly simplistic. However, the postfeminist deconstruction of the subject, the erasure of systematic social inequalities and the emphasis on individual empowerment through personal choice *do* serve to depoliticise feminism. This is achieved by removing the possibility and denying the necessity of collective political struggle. The disarticulation of feminism and its casting as irrelevant to new generations of women have allowed repressive and pernicious patriarchal discourses and images to be recirculated under the guise of irony and the contention that they represent a return to “natural” gender norms and feminine pleasures. Furthermore, Postfeminist concepts of individual “empowerment” are inadequate because they leave the racist and patriarchal structures which limit that empowerment intact. It is clear that contemporary media culture is heavily influenced by what Gill has identified as an enduring ‘postfeminist sensibility,’ but it is also clear the media serves as the key crucible in which it is formed.

 Postfeminism can therefore be seen as a persistent sensibility and formative force in contemporary representations of women on television. While not a discrete ideological position, its normative characteristics are identifiable in television and media texts produced under its auspices. It is this sensibility and its impact on contemporary representations of women that is most relevant to the work carried out in this thesis. This chapter will now move to explore scholarly work on the link between such television and media productions, cultural memory and popular history. In so doing, it will underpin the argument that this link results in television histories, produced in the contemporary postfeminism moment, which depict women’s history through a discernibly postfeminist lens. Such histories contribute to the popular imaginary and understanding of the Second World War, and women’s role in it, resulting in an imagined past in which the needs and demands of postfeminism are naturalised and dehistoricised.

## Representing the Past: Myth, Memory and History

The starting point for many scholarly works on memory has been to distinguish memory from history. In so doing, memory scholars seek both to identify the unique function of memory in the formation of identity, representation and recognition of the past, and to justify it as an object worthy of study in and of itself. This distinction, or rather the recognition that a distinction was necessary, is a fairly recent development. Many traditional views of history see it as the sum of all memories with the historian functioning as:

a ‘remembrancer,’ the custodian of the memory of public events that are put down in writing for the benefit of the actors to give them fame and also for the benefit of posterity, to learn from their example (Burke 2011: p188).

 In this formulation, history is seen as both stable and public in that there exist a series of notable historical events of relevance to the whole of society, which the professional historian is able to catalogue and produce a comprehensive and objective account. Private recollections would appear to have little relevance to historical events thusly understood. However, scholars such as Nora have identified an ‘upsurge in memory’ that has stemmed from a ‘profound change in the relationship …with the past’ (Nora 2011: p437). Nora argues that:

This change has taken a variety of forms: criticism of official versions of history and recovery of areas of history previously repressed; demands for signs of a past that had been confiscated or surpassed; growing interest in “roots” and genealogical research; all kinds of commemorative events and new museums; renewed sensitivity to the holding and opening of archives for public consultation; and growing attachment to what in the English speaking world is called “heritage” (Nora 2011: p437).

This represents a ‘democratisation of history,’ in that it provides spaces and opportunities for those voices typically excluded from mainstream histories (Kattago, 2015: p183). Indeed, Nora recognises an emancipatory potential for previously marginalised groups, ‘for whom rehabilitating their past is part and parcel of reaffirming their identity’ (Nora 2011: p439). Raphael Samuel also notes a distrust of official acts of state sponsored commemorative history, he suggests that even historians:

have become accustomed to thinking of commemoration as a cheat something which ruling elites impose on the subaltern classes. It is a weapon of social control, a means of generating consensus, and legitimating the *status quo* by reference to a mythologized version of the past (Samuel 1996: pp16 - 17 original emphasis).

In response to this Nora suggests this upsurge is, in part, due to the accessibility of memory and its location outside of official venues of historical knowledge. In granting access to the mechanisms of meaning-making, Nora suggests that memory is sometimes perceived as a site of protest and resistance against official narratives and power structures (Nora 2011: p440). Nora sounds a note of caution however, in that he believes the turn to memory has resulted in:

a radical and dangerous shift in the meaning of words, […] “Memory” has taken on a meaning so broad and all - inclusive that it tends to be used purely and simply as a substitute for “history” and to put the study of history at the service of memory (2011: p439).

 Nora’s concern about the elision of history and memory is not widely shared. Scholars such as Hannah Ewence suggest that such oppositions overlook the productive potential of the relationship between history and memory (Ewence 2013: p160). Ewence suggests that concerns over the turn toward memory often stem from the ‘insidious tendency to cast memory aside as an emblem of subjectivity and fabrication, and a direct challenge to “truth” and “objectivity,” (2013: p161). This links back to conceptualisations of professional or “official” history as somehow pure, objective and untainted by subjective personal memories and desires. However, Ewence argues that the various intersections of national histories/memories and personal histories/memories are, in fact, mutually beneficial, resulting in a process ‘though which each constitutes and remakes the other’ (Ewence 2013: p161).

 Hodgkin and Radstone (2014) further discuss the relationship between memory and history in their edited collection, *Contested Pasts.* They suggest that discourses of memory have opened up questions regarding ‘what really happened’ with ‘new answers, particularly by groups whose knowledge has previously been discounted [that] may challenge dominant or privileged narratives’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p1). This has resulted in a need to rethink and expand the explanatory and narrative contexts that are used to make sense of the past (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p1). They suggest that many debates regarding this relationship between history and memory centre on establishing which of the two has the best claim to represent the “truth.” Here they argue that direct experience of an event is often privileged as ‘the guarantee of certainty; distortion [seen as] an ideological weapon, opposed to the real facts and imposed by ideological means (media, academy […])’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p2). However, as they go on to point out, questions about both the reliability of experience the basic notion of historical objectivity have been raised, resulting in a consensus that ‘the past is constituted in narrative, always representation, always construction’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p2). This construction is, to use Hodgkin and Radstone’s phrase, certainly open to the distortion of ideology. However, discussions regarding memory’s relationship to accuracy or to the idea of historical truth would seem to be reductive for the purpose of this project. What is pertinent here is not the distortion itself, but the normative dimensions of that distortion and what they reveal about their underpinning structures of need and desire. As Hodgkin and Radstone argue:

if at times people claim memories of what evidently never happened, or happened other than how they remember it, this does not mean their memories are invalid or irrelevant, but that different questions need to be asked (2014: p4).

If traced back to their source, such memories have the potential to be revelatory about the ideological, societal and cultural structures and needs that caused them to be “inaccurate” or “incorrect.” Therefore, if memories of female participation in the Second World War may be distorted by the media as a tool of ideology, then rather than dismissing them as inaccurate and distorted, it is imperative to interrogate the ideology that has re-shaped them. In so doing, it is possible to identify its norms and precepts, and locate the site of its construction.

 Hodgkin and Radstone go further and suggest that:

memory is not only individual but cultural: memory, though we may experience it as private and internal, draws on countless scraps and bits of knowledge and information from the surrounding culture and is inserted into larger cultural narratives (2014: p5).

Furthermore, they suggest that inconsistencies and divergences between memories of the past can be revelatory not only about the process of memory making itself, but also about the cultural context in which these memories are constructed (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p5). In this way, an analysis of discrepancies, deviations and silences in memories of past events and their normative dimensions reveals much about the ways in which ‘dominant versions of the past are inextricably entangled with relations of power in society’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p5). With regard to the texts considered in this thesis, these power relations are those established by postfeminist discourse.

 The notion of collective memory was popularised by Hallbwachs who asserts that ‘it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories’ (Hallbwachs 1992: p38). He states that:

collective frameworks are […] precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society (Hallbwachs 1992: p40).

The concept of collective memory as utilised here has evolved somewhat from Hallbwach’s conceptualisation of it. For Hallbwachs, collective memory cannot outlive the life of the group from which it originated (2011: p147). However, collective memory, also referred to as cultural memory, is now understood as a dynamic force that transcends generational divides to provide a coherent image of groups, societies and nations across time.[[6]](#footnote-6)

 Indeed, Jan Assman discusses the function of collective memory within societal groups as a force that ‘preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity’ (Assman 1995: p130). It is stemming from this, he argues, that such groups are able to construct and define their own identity. This results in ‘sharp distinctions made between those who belong and those who do not i.e. what appertains to oneself and what is foreign’ (Assman 1995: p130). Thus, identity is constituted and policed by ‘the binding character of knowledge preserved in cultural memory,’ which serves both to inform and instruct the behaviour of members of societal groups (Assman 1995: p132).

 In the introduction to his 2003 edited collection *Film and Popular Memory*,PaulGrainge discusses the idea of popularmemory and the centrality of cinema in its formation. This centrality, Grainge argues, stems from cinema’s ability ‘to picture and embody the past’ and to stimulate ‘cultural imagination’ (Grainge 2003: p1). This results in a remembered version of the past that:

while akin to the province of history […] suggests a more dialogic relationship between the temporal constituencies of ‘now’ and ‘then.’ It draws attention to the activations and eruptions of the past as they are experienced in and constituted by the present (Grainge 2003: p2).

In this way, Grainge conceptualises memory as an active relationship in which the past is reimagined and redeployed in the present.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 This ties in with Barthes’ (1957) discussion of the process of myth-making (see Chapter Two), and builds on Foucault’s (1975) concept of cinema as a site of political struggle, resistance, and most importantly, the formation of identity (Grainge 2003: p2). Grainge argues that ‘memory, in this context, is seen as a political force, a form of subjugated knowledge that can function as a site of political opposition and resistance but that is also vulnerable to containment and reprogramming’ (Grainge 2003: p2). Grainge highlights the issues of authenticity and accuracy attached to memory that is plagued by ‘the fear of its instability and unreliability, and its disposition towards fantasy and forgetting’ (Grainge 2003: p5). This is particularly acute when considering memories that have been digitally mediated via film, or television, which in and of themselves, are subject to questions over impartiality, realism and authenticity (Grainge 2003: p5).

 Indeed, Grainge points to scholars such as Nora who states that “real” memory must be spontaneous and ‘unbidden’ (Nora in Grainge 2003: p5). For Nora, cinematic memories represent ‘a type of memory “deformed and transformed” by its essential materialisation within mass culture’ (Nora in Grainge 2003: p5). This would seem to suggest the possibility of a pure and perfect retrieval of a past experience, ignoring the narrative and representational structures through which that past must always necessarily be reformed.

 Marita Sturken defines cultural memory as ‘a field through which different stories vie for a place in history’ (2009: p1). She acknowledges the constructed nature of cultural memory as well as its ‘political stakes,’ suggesting that it ‘both defines a culture and is the means by which its divisions and conflicting agendas are revealed’ (2009: p1). Nora envisions memory as a one directional process through which complete recollections of an unquestioned past are brought forward by individuals and groups to be relived in the present. Sturken, on the other hand, argues that the process ‘involves the interaction of individuals in the creation of meaning’ (2009: p1). Thus meaning is not waiting, intact and identifiable in the past to be recalled, but rather is constructed through the process of remembering. A process in which film and television play a key part. As Grainge notes, ‘in this definition, memory is socially produced and is bound to the struggles and investments of cultural and national identity formation’ (2003: p2).

 With this in mind, Hodgkin and Radstone suggest that ‘cultural systems of representation,’ including the media, provide ideological ‘frameworks’ that retrospectively establish what a specific event or moment from the past ‘*means*’ (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p5, original emphasis). Drake (2003) similarly argues that the past is consolidated ‘into publicly memorialised decades reconstructing the past as an episodic narrative’ (p183). In organising the past into these publicly memorialised decades there must be consensus as to what that decade was, which aspects, events, characteristics of it were important and in what ways it relates to the present. Inevitably, this process is selective and some things are left out.

 Drake argues that the relationship between past and present is dramatised in this process of narrativisation:

constructing a memory of the past through the recycling of particular iconography that metonymically come to represent it. Particular fashions, music and visual images are memorialised, and become subject to reinterpretation in the present (2003: p183).

In this way, emblematic ‘snapshots’ of the past, such as, in the case of the 1940s, evacuee children, songs such as *The White Cliffs of Dover* (Walter Kent, 1941), and women wearing victory rolls, are taken out of their original context and given meaning in the present (Barthes 2013). In this way, such images become representative of a particular decade or era. Drake emphasises the unfixed nature of these ‘recollections’ by suggesting that they are changeable and dependent on the needs and context of the time in which they are remembered; ‘memories of the 1970s in the 1980s for example, are quite different from those of the 1990s’ (2003: p183). This is apparent in the shift in tone in television series depicting the Second World War in Britain over time. Series such as *Dad’s Army* (BBC 1968-77)*, It Ain’t Half Hot Mum* (BBC 1974-81)*, Backs to the Land* (Anglia 1977-8), and *‘Allo ‘Allo* (BBC 1982 – 1992), produced in the 1970s and 1980s all have a lightly comedic tone, reflecting the irreverent ideological security of that moment. This differs significantly from series produced more recently. Series such as *The Bletchley Circle* (ITV 2012 – 2014)*, Home Fires* (ITV 2015 – 2016)*, Land Girls* (BBC 2009 – 2011)and so forth are much more reverential in tone and reflect a contemporary nostalgic longing for a stable construction of British identity. This longing stems from popular anxiety over the perceived “demise” of this identity, which is fuelled by certain sections of the tabloid press.[[8]](#footnote-8)

 Hodgkin and Radstone acknowledge that the idea of institutions and authorities imposing false histories or memories is overly simplistic. However they suggest that ‘it is clear that questions of power and authority do not disappear in thinking about what versions of history come to be identified as true’ (2014: p5). The reason for this is that neither history nor memory is created in a vacuum:

they are located in specific contexts, instances and narratives, and decisions have always to be taken about what story is to be told. Memory as it is invoked in schools, museums and the mass media may be forwarding political agendas which serve particular ideas about the virtues of the nation, the family [or indeed gender] (Hodgkin and Radstone 2014: p5).

In this way, cultural institutions such as the media are parts of the ‘historical apparatus’ that construct and maintain a ‘historical public sphere’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255). These ‘apparatus’ provide the ideological context within which people translate the importance of a past event into their present, individual life. It is to exploring this process of construction and the means by which it is achieved that this chapter will now turn.

## The Historical Apparatus – Constructing the Historical Public Sphere

Building on Foucault’s (2011) understanding of the ways in which popular memory can be disrupted and manipulated, the Popular Memory Group (PMG) discuss ‘The Historical Apparatus’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255). [[9]](#footnote-9) This consists of the myriad actors and agencies that construct ‘the public historical sphere and control access to the means of publication’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255). This results in a spectrum of public histories that are produced and shaped by these actors and agencies (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255).[[10]](#footnote-10) They argue that from this field emerges a ‘dominant memory’ that results from ‘the ways in which these representations affect individual or group conceptions of the past’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255). The concept of dominant memory will be returned to later in this section.

 The PMG also suggest that a key role in the achievement of this centrality is played by the media which ‘of all parts of the historical apparatus … are perhaps the most compelling and ubiquitous’ (2011: p256). Indeed, Foucault himself suggested that ‘television and the cinema [… have become] one way of reprogramming popular memory which existed but had no way of expressing itself. So people are shown not what they were, but what they *must remember having been*’ (Foucault 2011: p253, my emphasis). The development of this historical public sphere therefore stems from discourses that fall outside of traditional, academic history to include those rooted in the popular.

The central argument of Jerome deGroot’s (2016) work *Remaking History …* is that historical fictions, which are one such discourse, offer an alternative method of engaging with the past. In so doing they destabilise the notion that there exists a fixed, knowable, coherent version of that past. deGroot argues that, ‘fictions challenge, ‘pervert,’ critique and queer a normative, straightforward, linear self-proscribing history’ (deGroot 2016: p2). In challenging ‘rationalist epistemological models that […] maintain a hold over the vocabulary of enquiry and the imaginary of how to think about past events,’ (deGroot 2016: p1) historical fictions open up spaces of discursive possibility in which meaning may be contested (deGroot 2016: p2). deGroot therefore takes issue with arguments that dismiss historical fictions as encouraging of a passive consumption of the past that lacks engagement, understanding or nuance.[[11]](#footnote-11) He argues that ‘what is presented in these fictions is not ‘history’ but modes of knowing the past’ (deGroot 2016: p3).

 In this way, deGroot moves away from the privileging of ‘history’ as a pure or accurate rendering of the past. Indeed, he argues:

It is necessary to look on novels, or films, or plays or games, or TV series, not as poor versions of history, nor within a binary wherein they are at the margins of a centrifugal historical culture, nor as parasites on ‘proper’ historical knowledge and practice, but as establishing modes of historical awareness, engagement, narrativisation and comprehension. (deGroot 2016: p6)

In a similar manner to popular postfeminism discussed earlier in this chapter, it is these modes of knowing and engagement that are most accessible to the average audience. As deGroot argues:

in the contemporary anglophone world the ways in which individuals encounter time, the past, ‘history’ and memory mostly fall outside an academic or professional framework. Indeed, in popular culture, the professional historian is at best one of a range of voices contributing to an awareness of things that happened in the past. (2016: p7)

Samuel echoes this sentiment, contending that, ‘history is not the prerogative of the historian[...] It is rather, a social form of knowledge; the work, in any given instance, of a thousand different hands’ (Samuel 1996: p8). He goes on to discuss what he terms the ‘unofficial sources of historical knowledge’ in which, he argues, ‘television ought to have pride of place […because] quite apart from drama documentaries […] it is continually travelling down memory lane and using the past as a backdrop’ (Samuel 1996: p15). Television, therefore, renders the past knowable to its audiences by making it relevant and accessible in the present.

 This thesis will argue that these non-academic popular encounters with the past are therefore key to the cultural re-construction of past events and people. If popular culture is the primary site of engagement with and consumption of the past, then it is vital to understand the themes, discourses and politics of popular culture representations. Particularly because they offer a space for alternative and potentially revisionist or challenging representations that fall outside the scope of mainstream histories. As discussed earlier, this includes histories of marginalised groups such as women and Black and Minority Ethnic groups, whose voices and histories have previously been silenced. With this in mind, this chapter will now explore the concept of multiple, polysemic histories and memories and the ways in which certain conceptions of the past appear to achieve hegemony within cultural memory.

## Polysemic Pasts - Dominant Memory, Counter Memory and Composure

In his chapter on Oral History and its utility in analysing the intersection of private and public memories, Thomson discusses the process of ‘composure’ (Thomson 2006: p300). In so doing, he identifies the power of dominant national myths of the past to shape individual memories, histories and identities. Initially a term used by the PMG, composure is the process by which:

we compose our memories to make sense of our past and present lives […] In one sense we ‘compose’ or construct memories using the public language and meanings of our culture. In another sense we ‘compose’ memories which help us to feel relatively comfortable with our lives, which gives us a feeling of composure. (Thomson 2006: pp300 - 301)

 Thomson also discusses the repercussions of memories that do not conform to, and therefore cannot be articulated through, this public language. He calls these memories ‘unsafe,’ in that they ‘are risky and painful if they do not conform with the public norms or visions of the past’ (Thomson 2006: p301). On a personal level, such memories are unsafe ‘because they do not accord with our present identity, or because their inherent traumas or tensions have never been resolved’ (Thomson 2006: p301). Television is a central component of this ‘public language.’ Therefore its representations of the past, or more specifically the aspects and identities of the past that it does not represent, have direct bearing on the distinction between “safe” and “unsafe” memories.

 As well as demonstrating the complex relationship between personal and public recollection Thomson’s work also explores the continuing dialogue between past and present that constitutes the basis for identity formation. His work suggests that incidents of conflict and trauma, such as the Second World War, are particularly important for the formation and definition of national character. In national consciousness, such events may be perceived as moments of trial, evidencing an enduring national spirit that can be called on during times of uncertainty, or held up as a standard of ideal citizenship (Thomson 2006: p300). As a result, the inability to reconcile personal recollections of such events with dominant public memories and narratives is particularly problematic for this process of composure. Thomson focuses on the First World War and the mythic portrayal of the digger (a slang term for members of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps) in Australian culture. However the same ideas could be applied to the Second World War and discourses around “the greatest generation” that looms large in British culture and national identity.[[12]](#footnote-12)

 Using the example of a former digger who could not reconcile his own wartime experiences with public discourses, Thomson explores the discomfort and alienation of being unable to assimilate one’s own sense of identity in this way. In the case of the Second World War, such discourses are given national validation through state sponsored remembrance events and media representations of the war in films and television productions such as those considered here. Thomson suggests that the absence of a public vocabulary of past events that chimes with one’s own memories and experiences can result in an inability to articulate and talk about those memories (Thomson 2006: p305). In such instances, Thomson argues it is necessary to find an alternative ideological framework to underpin those memories. This allows them to be understood and assimilated into a broader public narrative that accommodates one’s personal feelings and experiences.

 Echoing Thomson’s idea of composure and drawing on David Lowenthal’s concept of ‘memorial knowledge,’ Drake discusses the ways in which our ‘knowledge of the past [is] based upon selective and strategic remembering in the present’ (Drake 2003: p184).[[13]](#footnote-13) Drake argues that this remembering is made up of a mix of personal and public memories that blur together, becoming indistinguishable over time (2003: p184). This process involves a system of memory validation and is termed strategic because ‘contradictory or unwanted memories’ are suppressed ‘prioritising those more favourable or immediately useful’ (Drake 2003: p184). Drake emphasises the key role of the media in this process as ‘mediated forms of memory increasingly serve to confirm history and structure the memorialising of knowledge’ (Drake 2003: p184). In this way, the media provide an order to the past that renders it rememberable. Through ‘media articulation’ the past is broken down into episodic chunks that can easily be constructed or ‘composed’ into a narrative with clear normative prompts as to how it should be understood in the present (Drake 2003: p184). This process is pervasive to the extent that these media articulations may come to supersede the events themselves as ‘through mediated memory historical events become memorialised through their mediation and remediation’ (Drake 2003: p184).

 Alison Landsberg’s (2006) chapter on prosthetic memory is particularly apposite in relation to this idea of composure. For Landsberg, the term prosthetic memory refers to memories that are not generated from a person’s own life or experiences. Landsberg’s work raises salient questions about the synonymy of the ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ (2006: p292) and the ‘portability of memory and identity’ (2006: p291). She argues that ‘when memories might be separable from lived experience, issues of identity - and upon what identity is constructed take on radical importance’ (Landsberg 2006: p291). Building upon this idea, Landsberg suggests that ‘because the mass media fundamentally alter our notion of what counts as experience they might be a privileged arena for the production and circulation of prosthetic memories’ (2006: p287).

 Although Landsberg primarily focuses on cinema, her argument that the images people see can affect them to such a degree that they are incorporated into their own narratives of experience could certainly be extended to include television (Landsberg 2006: p289). Indeed, Landsberg suggests that the significance of the mass media in the process of identity creation, remains undertheorised (2006: p287). She argues that this process is, in part, symptomatic of ‘a popular longing to experience history in a personal and even bodily way’ (2006: p288).

 Historical film and television and what Landsberg terms ‘experiential events’ (such as reenactments):

offer strategies for making history into personal memories. They provide individuals with the collective opportunity of having an experiential relationship to a collective or cultural past they either did or did not experience (2006: p288).

Therefore, if we are to accept Landsberg’s assertion that ‘memory is the precondition for identity or individuality’ then this process is central to any understanding of individual and collective identity and its construction in contemporary society (2006: p286).

 To explore this point further, Landsberg goes on to argue that the pasts that we claim and ‘use,’ whether fictional or not, are a key part of identity formation and:

whether those memories come from lived experience or whether they are prosthetic seems to make very little difference. Either way, we use them to construct narratives for ourselves [and] visions for our future (Landsberg 2006: pp 294-5).

 The nature and variety of public memories and discourses that are available to this process of composure reveals much about the ideology of the society from which they originate. As the PMG note:

Certain representations achieve centrality and luxuriate grandly; others are marginalised or excluded or reworked […T]he criteria of success here [are not] those of truth: dominant representations may be those that are most ideological, most obviously conforming to the flattened stereotypes of myth (2011: p255).

Despite its name, these dominant representations and memories are not the product of an active process of domination, but rather of the struggle between contesting versions of the past and, as such, are ‘always open to contestation’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p255). Obviously, this is not unproblematic. As Alon Confino argues, in dealing with memory it is necessary to ‘explore how the construction of the past, through a process of invention and appropriation, affect[s] the relationship of power within society’ (Confino 2011: p198). Put another way, it must be ascertained ‘who wants whom to remember what and why?’ (Confino 2011: p198).

 Indeed, the PMG note the ‘male, middle-class habit of giving universal, or “historic” significance to an extremely partial experience’ (2011: p257). As a result of this, marginalized histories such as those of women, ethnic minorities and the working class are usually ‘held to the level of private remembrance. It is not only unrecorded but actually silenced’ (Popular Memory Group 2011: p256).

 In his 1992 book *Watergate in American Memory*, MichaelSchudson explores these dimensions of power in cultural memory and the process of myth making through an examination of the enduring presence of the Watergate scandal in American cultural memory. As well as individual and group memory, Schudson argues that ‘memory is sometimes located in institutions’ that ‘include cultural institutions or practices through which people in the present recognise a debt to the past … or through which they express moral continuity with the past’ (1992: p51). However once again this concept of the past is neither straightforward nor stable. In cultural memory of this kind, Schudson acknowledges a ‘normative dimension: memory of the past may be recalled more or less in different societies at different times and so encouraged or discouraged, enabled or blocked’ (Schudson 1992: p52). To illustrate this normative dimension of memory, Schudson uses the mythology surrounding the presidency and assassination of John F. Kennedy. He discusses the ways in which, despite revelations after his death about his many infidelities and doubts cast about his intellectual achievements, there remains a stubborn ‘popular reluctance to let go of the shining Camelot image’ of his presidency (Schudson 1992: p53).

 Schudson utilises the ‘Kennedy fiction’ as an example of an ‘effort to control the present by editing the past’ (1992: p53). The liberal, intellectual image of Kennedy remains useful to the present and so it is retained and those facts and memories that counter or challenge it are suppressed or silenced. Of course, these facts and memories cannot be entirely suppressed. This results in multiple and polysemic histories that vie for contention in public discourses of the past.

 In terms of Watergate, the most famous representation of the event, apart from Woodward and Bernstein’s original articles in the Washington Post, are their subsequent book *All the President’s Men* (1974) and its filmic adaptation directed by Alan J. Pakula (1976). In reality, many different parties were involved in the events that led to President Nixon’s ultimate resignation. However, Schudson argues that the myth of two honest reporters who took down a crooked president emerged from the book and particularly from the film and endure in American culture (1992: p104).

 This is not to suggest that there is only one possible reading of Watergate in popular culture and cultural memory. As Schudson notes Watergate, as is the case with all myths, ‘necessarily [has] multiple meanings [… it is] “polysemic,” in that it has been appropriated by both champions of the free press and its adversaries (1992: p124). Schudson also notes that it is Watergate that has become emblematic of the intrepid, American free press rather than, for example, Seymour Hess’ exposition of the Mai Lai massacre during the Vietnam War. This is because Watergate upholds and celebrates the myths and ideals of American culture rather than disrupting and destabilising them. In the same way as certain aspects of women’s experiences of the Second World War that do not fit in with national mythologies are silenced and omitted in contemporary representations, the version of the past that endures in public memory is one that best serves the needs of the present. As Schudson notes:

because ideology is powerful, the needs of the present urgent, and the pull of the self and its attachments strong, the past is forever subject to reconstruction and rewriting to accord with present views (1992: p205).

 However, Schudson argues that this process of reconstruction is not without limitations that mean that ‘the past cannot be reconstructed at will’ (1992: p206). For Schudson, the events of the past provide ‘hard edges of resistance’ and:

the notion that we manufacture our own history and rewrite it according to the dictates of power, person and privilege […] denies the past any influence whatsoever. In effect this view denies history (1992: p207).

For Schudson, living memory provides one such hard edge as, despite attempts to manipulate or promote certain ways of remembering, ‘people will not release important personal or group memories without a struggle’ (1992: p207). In liberal societies this reluctance results in multiple versions of the past that can coexist safely. Shudson states that:

an all-powerful monolithic version of the past will not triumph in a pluralistic society where conflicting views have a good chance of emerging, finding an audience and surviving. This is not to say that dominant views do not exist, simply that - again in a liberal society - they are never invulnerable (Schudson 1992: p208).

 As well as serving the ideological needs of the present, the media representations of the past that survive and gain centrality are those that audiences find pleasurable to watch and consume. It is therefore necessary to explore the idea of pleasure and desire in the representation and consumption of the past and to attempt to ascertain why certain views of the past are considered pleasurable whilst others are not.

## The Pleasure of the Past: Aesthetics, Comfort and Entertainment

The popularity of historical fictions and mediated versions of the past stem not only from their accessibility and relevance to the present, but also from a sense of comfort and pleasure in the way that they depict history. deGroot identifies a sense of familiarity and comfort in representations of the past that rely in part on ‘tropes of pastness’ that he asserts ‘articulate a historiographical sensibility’ (deGroot 2016: p3). This historiographical sensibility is familiar and comforting to audiences accustomed to consuming historical fiction. This sensibility locates texts within a broader genre of historical fictions and establishes them as “historic.” It also foregrounds the fictive in that it confirms that what is being shown is not “history,” but a recreation. As deGroot argues, ‘*knowing* the past is impossible. The history film allows this to be seen and, by utilizing emotions and imaginative affect, brings comfort of a kind and a new perspective’ (deGroot 2016: p5).

 As a result of this, deGroot argues that all historical fiction is inherently contradictory. The past, by its nature, is unknowable in that it does not exist except in reconstructions, representations and re-imaginings created to serve the interests of the present. Therefore historical fiction deals in ‘false consciousness nostalgia’ that offers a version of the past that is, in reality, a comment on the contemporary moment (deGroot 2016: p74). Indeed, as deGroot asserts, ‘it is not possible to look into the past to learn truth, but it is possible to understand the chaos and grimness that is the present’ (2016: p73). In representations of the past, audiences seek comfort regarding, and an explanation for, the present. The politics of the present are naturalised as the inevitable result of the represented past. In this way, historical fictions ‘suggest that the ways of imagining the past allow an audience only one particular present’ (deGroot 2016: p159).

 deGroot goes on to suggest that, despite the demonstrably constructed nature of the past in historical fiction, pleasure for audiences is derived from overlooking that fact. He describes a desire for, and pleasure in, the fictive. He argues that ‘all historical texts are clearly works of deception, inherently fictive in their attempts at fixing some kind of meaning and describing a past that cannot be grasped’ requiring a suspension of disbelief on the part of their audiences (deGroot 2016: p153). The meaning that is fixed onto the past is often one that serves to confirm and validate the dominant world-view of the present, presenting no challenge to audiences’ sense of composure. However, as discussed, such fictions do have critical and revisionist potential, but this must be balanced against the need to produce a commercially viable product that audiences will enjoy.

 A key variable in this equation is entertainment, which often determines the success of historical fictions. As deGroot notes:

Pleasure and affect might be considered fundamental to the historiography of the texts. Or, rather, that enjoyment might somehow have to be figured into an understanding of how these texts create an effect, both in terms of their fictive work but also in terms of their historiographical impact (deGroot 2016: p151).

For deGroot, this factoring in of pleasure and desire, specifically for a certain type of past, is another key element in the work done by historical fictions. In this discussion of pleasure deGroot identifies what he terms a ‘historical gaze,’ which he defines as:

a kind of surveillance and desire as part of the diegesis of historical or adaptive texts. They are also qualities that are modelled as part of the experience of viewing, suggestive of an audience that has a kind of scopophilic relationship, not simply with the texts of the cinema or television, but also with the historical mode (deGroot 2016: p174).

This idea of an historical mode requires further deconstruction as it suggests that the ‘fictional past becomes a repository of themes, ideas, images and discourses’ (deGroot 2016: p170). In his discussion of historical film, Chapman describes a ‘visual style [deployed] to create a sense of historical verisimilitude’ (Chapman in deGroot 2016: p174). deGroot suggests that this verisimilitude is also key to the pleasures of the historical text in that it facilitates audiences’ connection with the represented historical space (deGroot 2016: p170).

 Agirre (2012) also draws on this idea of pleasure and imagined historical place in her discussion of *Mad Men.* She notes the ‘period objects and meticulously designed clothing’ that conjure the American 1960s within the series and suggests that ‘we look in the mirror *Mad Men* sets up in front of us and we enjoy that world entirely’ (Agirre 2012: p159). Furthermore, Agirre argues that it is not just from the aesthetics and recreation of the historic space in *Mad Men* that pleasure is derived. Indeed, she observes that ‘the internet is full of fan-made web pages and video clips celebrating the most politically incorrect scenes, quotes and characters from the show’ (2012: p159). Agirre suggests that there is a validating pleasure in contrasting the problematic attitudes of the past with the perceived liberal and progressive present. However, there would also seem to be a sense of pleasure in the depiction of the otherness of history and in utilising the safety of historical distance (discussed in detail in Chapter Four) to depict attitudes, behaviours and events that would otherwise be problematic or taboo.

 deGroot describes this phenomenon as ‘historical exploitation’ or ‘histploitation.’ which he defines as the ‘use of outrageous storylines from the past to present material that is sexually explicit, gory, visually excessive, and often extremely violent’ (deGroot 2016: p176). deGroot’s primary example of this is *The Tudors* (BBC2 2007 - 2010) which was commissioned as ‘an entertainment, a soap opera, and not history’ (Hirst in deGroot 2016: p175). Despite creator Michael Hirst’s assertion that what he was creating was not history, deGroot’s argument suggests that series like *The Tudors* still contribute to the ‘historical imaginary’ and therefore must be deconstructed and understood (deGroot 2016: p71). deGroot asserts that series such as *The Tudors* ‘as[k] the audience to consider why and how they remember within contemporary television culture […] what kind of history they are wishing for and enjoying’ (deGroot 2016: p175). As well as reaching viewers that may fall outside of the target audience for traditional period drama, series such as *The Tudors* disrupt and highlight ‘the ways that mainstream period drama presents a polite, disciplined, controlled past’ (deGroot 2016: p177). By creating such disruptive histories, such series again demonstrate the possibility of multiple, polysemic, histories.

 Drake also discusses the idea of pleasure in viewing different types of representative pasts. He suggests that:

the pleasure of retro-cinema is not one of (necessary) self reflexivity or even recreation of the past, but rather its deployment of signifiers of pastness and its exuberant and inventive recycling of the past in new stylistic combinations (Drake 2003: p199).

 Discussing Hollywood film, Drake argues that there are three ways in which the past is mobilised: the ‘history film’ that recreates a ‘historical trauma or a famous character’ and is ‘indexical to a *referential* past,’ the ‘period film’ that ‘does not deal with a publicly memorialized event or figure, but […] with the past in general’ and ‘is indexical to a *historical* past’ and finally the ‘retro film,’ which ‘is less concerned with historical accuracy that with a playful deployment of codes that connote pastness’ (Drake 2003: pp 187 – 188, original emphasis). Such films ‘utilize particular codes that have come to connote a past sensibility as it is selectively remembered in the present […] as a structure of feeling’ (Drake 2003: p188). Considered alongside work such as Agirre’s discussion of *Mad Men,* this is illustrative of film and television’s scope for evoking the past. Examples such as the visual similarity of Anthony Hopkins as Richard Nixon in *Nixon* (Oliver Stone 1995) or Tom Cruise as Col. Claus von Stauffenberg in *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer 2008), to the use of costume, *mise en scène*, language and attitudes in *Mad Men* demonstrate the effectiveness of such structures of feeling*.* It becomes clear that one, despite differing attention to detail, or rather, attention to different details, is not more accurate than the other. Rather, they utilise different means to create different senses of the past. It is therefore necessary to understand the aims of a historical television or film product and its motivation for representing the past when discussing the ways in which it goes about achieving them. The conventions through which it is consumed and understood must also be taken into account. Furthermore, it is necessary to understand that these aims will not solely be concerned with recreating history, but also functioning as a commercially viable film or television product and this in turn will impact the text’s representation of the past.

 This commercial aspect of historical media products, such as the nostalgia film, among other issues, has led some critics to label them a ‘bad object’ (Jameson in Drake 2003: p 189). Critics argue that such products are ‘not concerned with critiquing history but with evoking the past through selective stylistic iconography’ and in this way ‘empt[y] history of politics, reducing it to a recombination of stereotypes of the past’ (Drake 2003: p189). This suggests that any sense of “true history” is drained away and replaced with a sense of pastness based solely on aesthetics and style. However, as Linda Hutcheon points out, this is to deny any critical potential in a nostalgic reading or reproduction of the past (in Drake 2003: p190). It also denies the potential for exploring the relationship between past and present in the use and construction of nostalgia and the process of ‘selective remembering’ (Drake 2003: p191).

 As deGroot argues ‘television is not necessarily about dogma, or purpose, or indeed, even education. The pleasure of the historical text allows a different kind of experience to be had’ (deGroot 2016: p176). This has often led to TV histories, and those that fall outside of more traditional academic discourses, being dismissed or overlooked. However, engagements with such discourses undeniably contribute to popular discourses and understandings of the past. To take an example from literature, both Jessica Cox (2013: p36) and deGroot (2016: p172) discuss, what Cox terms ‘*that* moment’ from the BBC’s 1995 television adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (Austin 2013) in which Mr. Darcey (Colin Firth) emerges from a lake semi clothed. Despite not occurring in the original novel, “*that*”scene cemented Darcy (and Firth’s) status as an object of desire and struck such a chord with audiences that versions of it have been included in subsequent adaptations. Regardless of its lack of accuracy, “*that*”scene has become an integral part of the cultural memory of Mr. Darcy and *Pride and Prejudice* as a whole. Rather than a simple act of misremembering, this is demonstrative of television’s power to contribute to the broader life of the text. Instead of asking whether it is accurate, it is more useful to ask why it is pleasurable, why it is remembered, and what it reveals about contemporary ideals of masculinity and female desire.

 It is clear then that beyond stark questions of accuracy and faithfulness to a “real” past, steps must be taken to explore the ways in which media productions such as televisual historical fictions contribute to what deGroot terms ‘the historical imaginary’ and what may be understood more generally as popular history (2016: p 71). The construction of popular history bears strong resemblance to the construction of popular postfeminism in that both are discursively constructed in relation and in some cases in opposition to “official” or academic discourses.

## ‘Unofficial Knowledge’ and Popular Versions of the Past

In his 1996 work *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* Samuel argues that:

we cannot be indifferent to those extra-curricular sources of knowledge which subvert the learning process, change its direction or create alternative histories of their own. As historians […] we might be expected to be interested in the conditions of existence of history itself, and the reasons for the wildly different versions of it on offer. The sense of the past, at any given point of time, is quite as much a matter of history as what happened in it; if the argument of *Theatres of Memory* is right, the two are indivisible’ (Samuel 1996: p15).

At the forefront of these ‘extra-curricular sources of knowledge’ Samuels places television, which he suggests has a particular aptitude for the depiction of history. He argues that:

in one register; television offers us a past that is completely static […] a retrospective haven of stability to which we can escape from the disorders and uncertainties of the present. In another, all is movement and we are whirled about in a kaleidoscope of change: a hundred years of American history are rushed through in a dozen episodes; inter-war Britain is encapsulated in six one-hour slots’ (Samuel 1996: pp14-15).

He argues that popular representations of the past, and particularly popular fictional characters such as Edmund Blackadder (Rowan Atkinson) and *The Flintstones* (Hanna-Barbera Productions 1960-66) offer ‘a far more substantial contribution to popular appetites for an engagement with the past than the most ambitious head of a department’ (Samuel 1996: p17). It is therefore vital that such popular representations of the past are not discarded or discounted as inaccurate or unworthy of attention. Just as postfeminism are best understood at the site of its construction in popular media texts, so are popular conceptions of the past. The cultural legacy of the Second World War, particularly at a time when it will soon pass out of living memory, is largely constituted in its media representations. The recent nostalgia boom in Britain and the heavy focus on the Second World War as a formative and emblematic time for British national identity and character makes an in-depth, normative analysis of these representations vital. Choices and deviations from the accepted remembered past are worth noting not for their inaccuracy, but for their normative dimensions and the ways in which they speak to contemporary ideology. It is the central conceit of these series that the postfeminist gender norms evident in their narratives are in fact those of the time-period in which the series is set. As works of fiction, viewers of these series do not engage with the actual 1930s, 1940s or 1950s, but rather with fictional versions of those decades from which they can extrapolate a postfeminist consensus.

 As a result of their construction and consumption through the medium of television, popular engagements with both history and postfeminism have emerged that supplement and question official or academic narratives. The struggle for meaning which takes place amongst polysemic versions of the past bears striking resemblance to the process of disarticulation in postfeminism. Disarticulation, McRobbie argues, functions in much the same way as the process of composure, in which memories and narratives of the past are adapted and shaped to justify the ideology of the present. Postfeminism relies upon ‘a hysterical and monstrous version of feminism’ to undermine the appeal and political potential of feminism (2009: p27). This provides a further example of the ways in which the past is repurposed to serve the needs of the present moment. This thesis is particularly interested in the ways in which the needs of *this* moment are, with regard to gender identity, shaped by postfeminism.

 Due to the prevailing postfeminist media climate, television drama depicting women’s history is necessarily refracted through a postfeminist lens. The popularity of these sites of engagement speak to an audience who are receptive to historical dramas produced according to this postfeminist pattern and resulting in the dehistoricisation of the postfeminist sensibility. The extent of this dehistoricisation has led to postfeminist norms and constructions of gender becoming an accepted aspect of the historical imaginary and forming a distinct and identifiable historical postfeminist sensibility. In the following chapters this thesis will identify and analyse the traces of this sensibility in four contemporary texts that deal with the impact of the Second World War on the lives of British women.

# Chapter Two – ‘You’d never have spoken to me like this before you joined up!’ – postfeminist visions of female liberation in *Land Girls*

This chapter will examine the representation of the Women’s Land Army (WLA) in the BBC series *Land Girls* (2009 - 2011). It will discuss the drama in the context of the postfeminist media climate in which it was created and as an example of female ensemble drama (FED), which is an important site for the representation of women in fictional television. Thinking about the potential of FED, it will explore the concept of women’s history and women’s television history, and the possibilities open to these histories when male characters are removed from their usual centre stage space. It will consider the ways in which *Land Girls* utilises generic devices, melodrama, and recognisable postfeminist tropes to generate a sense of realism reliant not on the faithful recreation of history, but on its affiliation with ‘women’s genres’ (a category interrogated more thoroughly later in the chapter). Through this affiliation, this chapter will suggest, postfeminist norms are dehistoricised and woven into the cultural mythology and memory of the Second World War. This contributes to the construction of a postfeminist-inflected historical sensibility and propagates postfeminist norms of acceptable femininity.

 Roland Barthes suggests that the ‘facts’ or basis of cultural myths take on a secondary significance to their original purpose during the process of mythologising, which endows them with a new purpose (2013). Therefore, as this chapter will suggest, to understand the relevance of the myth of the land girl, it is often more important to understand the cultural significance attached to the image than the “reality” from which it was taken. Rather than an a-political snapshot of the past, such images are necessarily the product of the ideological moment of their production – serving the needs of the present rather than recreating the past. Just as in Barthes’ example of *Paris-Match* magazine utilising the image of a black soldier saluting the *Tricolour* as an answer to criticisms of French imperialism (Barthes 2013), the image of the land girl is removed from its actual history and repurposed. This chapter and the three that follow seek to deconstruct this process of repurposing in the series considered. In this way, they will identify and deconstruct the ways in which women’s history is discursively reconstructed through the lens of postfeminism.

## Production Context

First aired in 2009 to coincide with the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, *Land Girls* was the first time BBC daytime had commissioned a period drama. BBC Daytime controller Liam Keelan saw the series as a ‘tribute, not only to the many lives that were lost in the Second World War, but also to the land girls who played such an important role in the Home Front’ (BBC, 2009).The first series formed part of a ‘unique week of programming’ that aimed to commemorate and celebrate ‘everyday heroes on the Home Front’ and was broadcast on five consecutive days beginning on Monday 7th September 2009 (BBC, 2009).Created by Roland Moore, the series was less a depiction of the role and duties of the Land Girls, and more an exploration of the ways in which service in the WLA affected and changed the lives of those who served. It sought to shine an ‘overdue spotlight on the land girls’ but also to explore some less well-known realities of life on the home front, such as the use of prisoners of war as agricultural labourers and the treatment of Italian nationals (BBC, 2009). In a publicity interview, Becci Gemmell, who plays land girl Joyce Fisher, explained ‘We could have made something very gritty, but really this series is about people’s lives. It had wide appeal because it picks up on the hope and camaraderie and on people from all walks of life pulling together’ (BBC, no date). The series was broadcast alongside *The Week We Went to War* (BBC 2009) that was presented by Katherine Jenkins and Michael Aspel. *The Week We Went to War* focused on everyday experiences of ordinary people living on the home front during the Second World War. This places *Land Girls* in a context of personal and previously untold stories outside of dominant historical narratives; during the series Aspel discussed his own experience of being evacuated. *Land Girls* was awarded ‘Best Daytime Programme’ at the 2010 Broadcast awards and has been praised as an intelligent drama series, aimed at a more discerning audience and benefitting from 'creative inspiration [that] comes from loftier places than the usual pedestrian off-peak drama' (PopMatters, 2010).

 The WLA, despite its vital role in the food production campaign of the Second World War, has been frequently overlooked in official histories of the time. This chapter will therefore start by giving a brief historical overview of the Women’s Land Army and its significance to the national war effort during the Second World War.

## Historical Context

Carol Twinch’s *Women on the Land: Their Story During Two World Wars* (1990) provides a comprehensive history of the WLA from its creation in 1917 to its dissolution on 21st October 1949. However, writing on the Women’s Land Army has tended to focus on the personal, largely consisting of collections of written memoirs, with some oral histories, taken from surviving Land Girls. This focus on the emotional experiences and personal recollections of the individuals who served in the WLA distances recorded histories of the organisation from more “official” histories, confirming their status as secondary to more traditional, male centred war narratives. Knighton Joyce’s *Land Army Days: Cinderellas of the Soil* (1994) is one such collection. Vita Sackville-West’s *The Women’s Land Army* published first in 1944 whilst the WLA was still active and again in 1997 by the Imperial War Museum was ‘the first self-conscious attempt to highlight the efforts of the organisation in saving the country from starvation’ (Watton, 2015). Commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the book was intended to provide an account of the activities of the Women’s Land Army alongside personal recollections and photographs. In it, land girls are characterised as ‘Cinderellas of the Women’s Services,’ a description which carries connotations of undervalued dedication and hard work, whist still maintaining a connection with the domestic rather than public sphere. This would prove to be a constant theme of representations of the WLA (Sackville –West: 1993 p7).

 The creation of the first Women’s Land Army stemmed from the desperate need to increase food production during the First World War. At the outset of the First World War in 1914, 50% of British food was imported and in 1915 the enemy began what proved to be a highly successful blockade of allied supply lines (Powell & Westacott 1997: p5). This compounded the problems of a disastrous harvest in 1917, as well as the loss of horses and skilled farm labour to the armed forces. The resulting shortages meant that before the end of that year, with the population at 36 million, British food reserves could be expected to last no longer than three weeks. Women were recruited to form the first Women’s Land Army from a register compiled in 1915 of ‘women willing to do industrial, agricultural and clerical work’ and could serve in one of three sections: Timber, Agriculture, or Forage (Thackeray & Findling 2002: p144). By 1918 23,000 girls had been recruited from 45,000 applicants (Powell & Westacott 1997: p5). The first Women’s Land Army was disbanded with the peace in 1919 but by 1938 it was clear that war, with its associated hardships and shortages, was once more inevitable. Anticipating the need for female labour to supplement agricultural work and food production, preparations were put in place to resurrect the WLA. The second Women’s Land Army was officially formed on 1st June 1939 and by the time war was declared in September of that year, recruitment offices had opened up all over the country.

 Despite its absence from many official histories, Gill Clarke has described the Women’s Land Army as ‘one of the most conspicuous and memorable aspects’ of the food production campaign in Britain during the Second World War (2009: p101). The origins of the popular image of land girls found in film and television can be found both in the many personal portraits of land girls in their uniforms that have survived in museums and published collections, and in the Ministry of Information recruitment campaign, which offered girls a very specific image of life in the WLA. One of the most famous recruitment posters advises girls *‘For a happy, healthy job, join the Women’s Land Army’* (Imperial War Museum, no date). It features a highly stylised image of a land girl: slim, attractive and wearing a very well-fitting uniform, highlighting her slender figure and emphasising her feminine beauty even in a traditionally masculine pose and setting. She holds a pitchfork and carries her jacket while she looks over the fields she presumably has helped to plough. The image suggests work and activity whilst still being tranquil and appealing; there is no mud and no sweat. The countryside is beautiful and inviting and the image reads more like a holiday advertisement than a recruitment poster. It offers women the possibility of travel and living away from home in a place far removed from the dangers of the cities. This demonstrates the ways in which the popular image of the land girl has always been appropriated. From its first iteration in these posters, it has been portrayed with a view to consumption rather than as an attempt to reflect lived experience.

 Further posters continued this theme of beautiful young women doing their bit in idyllic settings whilst also assuring women that the people of the country were eager to welcome them and keen for their assistance. *‘We could do with thousands more like you!’* states another poster, in which a kindly farmer smiles on a beautiful young land girl leading a horse (Arts St. Andrews, no date). These posters not only sold the lifestyle of the WLA and a life in the countryside, but also established the persona of the land girl, imbued it with glamour, and offered it as something women could aspire to emulate. The composition of the images established her as an active, healthy woman but also as an object of desire, which assuaged potential anxiety over her masculine uniform and duties. All of these characteristics are picked up and perpetuated by later portrayals on television and reflect the discursive ideals of the postfeminist media climate in which they were created.

 The formation of a discernible visual culture surrounding the WLA was recognised almost from its inception as vital to promoting cohesion and a sense of community to an otherwise factious body. Ann Kramer argues that the fragmented nature of the Women’s Land Army, with small groups of girls serving on remote farms or living in hostels, rather than a single body of women operating from a common base was detrimental to the formation of a community spirit (Kramer 2001: Loc 1911). The land girls were intended to be a trained and mobile contingent of women who could be sent around the country wherever the need arose. Some girls were banded together in gangs and stationed in hostels to be moved as required. The magazine *The Land Girl* was intended to create a channel of communication between members of the WLA and promote a positive image of the land girls themselves and their contribution to the war effort as well as reducing feelings of isolation for individual land girls (The Women’s Land Army, no date, b). The magazine began in 1940 as an unofficial publication for members of the WLA, however, after its popularity garnered sales of approximately 21,000 copies per week, the Ministry of Agriculture began to fund its publication (The Women’s Land Army, no date, b). In an extract from April 1943, *The Land Girl* warned its members against complacency and reminded its members that, although ‘two out of every three meals’ were being produced at home, that still left ‘forty-seven million meals a day … to be brought in from overseas’ (The Women’s Land Army, no date, b).

 As well as underlining the importance of the WLA’s contribution to food production and the war effort as a whole, the magazine also discussed the lasting effect women’s service in the Land Army would have on the role of women in future society. As early as 1918 the *Landswoman,* predecessor to *The Land Girl,* had begun to speculate that ‘the Land Army may be the pioneer of a newer and a far higher civilization for the British Race’ in which women would have a more active an equal role in society and enjoy much greater freedoms (Kramer 2001: Loc 358). Thus, visual culture and the importance of representation was recognised from the inception of the WLA. The evolution of this image has continued over time as the land girl has been incorporated into popular culture and into the visual imaginary of the Second World War as a symbol of bravery, self-sacrifice and the desire for emancipation of women.

 As part of the food production campaign the Women’s Land Army was, however, one of several initiatives that saw dramatically increased state intervention in food production and distribution. The various initiatives represented a considerable intrusion by the state into the affairs of country farmers, who were noted for their conservatism and reluctance towards centralised agricultural change (Martin 2000: p36). In many ways, the land girl became a symbol of state interference in the countryside and provided an issue to which farmers could offer resistance and express their displeasure. The happy image of welcome and co-operation that was promoted by recruitment posters was not always the reality for girls reporting for training and duty on farms in the early years of the Second World War. This hostility is one of the numerous commonly recounted aspects of life in the WLA that is ignored or downplayed in *Land Girls*. As well as issues such as vermin infestations, the physical dangers and discomforts of farm work and the threat of sexual harassment and assault, conflict with farmers is used as a plot device to provide opportunity for the land girls to prove themselves – which they inevitably do. Furthermore, the majority of hostility and resistance towards the land girls in the series does not stem from male characters such as farmer Fred Finch (Mark Benton), but from female characters such as the Lady of the Manor and local busybody Mrs Gulliver (Carolyn Pickles). The land girls are disdainfully referred to as “common girls” who as a group, it is implied, have a reputation for “loose” morals. This plays on common perceptions of female cattiness and offers the land girls “bad” female characters against which they can prove and define their postfeminist identities.

 This focus on female relationships, though not always positive, is one of the defining features of *Land Girls* and is a hallmark of female ensemble drama. This chapter will now move to explore female ensemble drama’s potential as a conduit for women’s histories and the limitations imposed on this potential by the contemporary postfeminist media climate.

## Making Space for Women: Female Ensemble Drama and the Telling of Women’s Stories

With a cast dominated by women and a central group of female leading characters, *Land Girls* can be categorised as a female ensemble drama (FED), which Vicky Ball (2013: p245) describes as a specific and important form of ‘heroine television’ (a concept first discussed by Charlotte Brunsdon, (1997)). Brunsdon describes heroine television as programming that in some way ‘address[es] feminism, or address[es] the agenda that feminism has made public about the contradictory demands on women’ (1997: p34). Specifically, she defines heroine television as:

centrally about female characters living their lives, usually working both inside and outside the home, usually not in permanent relationships with men, sometimes with children, and trying to cope. (Brunsdon 1997: p34)

Building on this idea, Ball identifies FED as a ‘neglected form of British, feminine - gendered fiction’ that proliferated in response to increased cultural mobility for women from the 1960s (2013: p244). Although not an entirely separate genre, with individual series having different generic links, Ball argues that FED constitutes ‘a significant form of gendered fiction’ (2013: p244).

 Emerging as a response to ‘a more pluralized sense of female identity in the wake of liberalizing movements and women’s increased visibility in the public sphere,’ Ball argues that FEDs offer a space for engagement with aspects of female experience and identity usually sidelined and silenced in mainstream dramas (2013: p246). Salient examples include working-class communities (*The Rag Trade* BBC 1961 - 63, *Playing the Field* BBC 1998 - 2002), un-glamorous portraits of women’s work (*Dinner Ladies* BBC 1998 - 2000) and lesbian stories (*Bad Girls* ITV 1999 - 2006, *Mistresses* BBC 2008 - 2010) (Ball 2013: p246). Of particular significance to this project is Ball’s suggestion that ‘it is […] the female ensemble drama that has offered some insights into […] marginalized aspects of women’s history in terms of war (*Tenko* BBC 1981 - 1984)’ (2013: p246). Ball points out that that historical FEDs, such as *Tenko* and *Shoulder to Shoulder* (BBC, 1974), ‘engage explicitly with the ideas of the second-wave feminist movement’ and ‘historiciz[e] the demand for sexual liberation’ (2013: p246).

 Because of the dominance of male perspectives in television narratives, the absence of male characters within FED must usually be explained. In some cases, such as in Lynda La Plante’s seminal FED *Widows* (ITV, 1983 -1985) this is achieved through a narrative plot device. In this case a group of women find themselves widowed when a bank robbery planned by their husbands goes awry and the men are killed. This prompts the women to take centre stage and carry out the robbery themselves. In the case of *Land Girls*, the setting of the series during the Second World War creates the potential for men to be absent in service of the armed forces.This plausible absence of men allows for the focus of the series to be on female experiences of war and specifically on an entirely female body: the Women’s Land Army.

 In this absence of men, Ball identifies the significant feminist potential of FED that makes space for the depiction of female-female relationships outside of the context of marriage or the family. This is something that Ball suggests is accommodated only occasionally in British soap opera (2013: p246). It is because of this shift in perspective, untethered from male-centred narratives, that FEDs are able to focus on overlooked aspects of women’s history such as the WLA. Furthermore, Ball notes that through its focus on women’s lives and relationships outside of the home, FED ‘undermines the heteronormative ideologies that have governed the normative feminine life course’ by demonstrating that women may find meaning and fulfilment outside of marriage and motherhood (2013: p246). As a result, FEDs provide a narrative and ideological space in which normative postfeminist discourses may be disrupted and subverted.

 However, despite this progressive potential, Ball argues that the progressive space of FED is undermined by both a low regard for drama explicitly coded as feminine and by a shift towards more conservative, postfeminist gender norms in the 1980s. Ball suggests that, ‘existing gendered hierarchies of cultural value,’ result in:

areas of culture tied to ‘the feminine’ hav[ing] not only been marked out as gendered in comparison with the masculine norm, but hav[ing] also been *class*ified, enjoying low cultural status because of their association with women and femininity (2013: pp 244 - 245, original emphasis).

Therefore, women’s history and women’s television, referring to television made with a discernible address towards women (Moseley, Wheatley and Wood, 2017), can both be considered as marginalised forms within their respective fields. The requirement of ‘the “women’s” prefix imbues them with an otherness that segregates them from mainstream or traditional narratives — both in history and on television’ (Mahoney 2015: no pagination). As well as the ‘enduring understanding that television was a feminised medium,’ […] ‘certain genres have been assumed, and later theorised, as “belonging” to women through representation and content and/or form’ (Moseley, Wheatley and Wood 2017: pp 4-5). As well as its construction as a FED and its focus on women’s history, *Land Girls* shares numerous traits with the most prevalent of these ‘“gynocentric”’ genres;’ the melodramatic soap opera (Kuhn 1997: p145). The significance of this association will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

 As a result of these gendered hierarchies, dramas that engage with overtly radical sociopolitical themes have come to be seen as the province of a select group of male producers, writers and directors. This is despite the fact that FEDs such as *Rock Follies* (ITV 1976)and *Send in the Girls* (ITV 1978) engage with radical and socialist feminist discourses (Ball 2013: p247).

 Furthermore, Ball argues that the postfeminist shift of the 1980s saw the plots of FEDs revert increasingly to narratives concerning romance and marriage. She suggests that this relocation of women into more traditional familial and community structures limits the scope of FEDs to push beyond the conventions of traditional gendered fiction. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Gill (2007), McRobbie (2004, 2009), and Negra (2009) Ball argues that despite this increase in visibility, these dramas adhere to postfeminist and neoliberal discourses of personal choice and individual empowerment, erasing ‘deep and pernicious gender inequalities that continue to affect women’ (2011: p250). Ball asserts that, through their linking of empowerment to the quest for heterosexual romance as well as the shift from a singular focus on female-female relationships to female-male relationships, such dramas retraditionalise women, thereby restating and reaffirming the postfeminist imperative towards heterosexual romance. As a result, Ball’s work problematises popular accounts of the ‘feminization of television’ that equate the ‘increased visibility of female experience in prime time female ensemble dramas’ with gains in terms of feminist political aims (2011: p249).

 Ros Jennings discusses the ways in which FEDs *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* (BBC 2012 - present) and the ‘range of characterisations brought to the screen by their female ensemble casts […] open up impressive engagements with intersectionalities of age, experience, politics and identity in variable distinctive historical spaces’ (2017: p180). She argues that the presence of multiple female characters with whom the audience may identify, as opposed to a single, leading character, opens up a broader scope for viewer engagement and pleasure than standard television drama (Jennings 2017: p183). This increased scope facilitates the depiction of complex characterisations, relationships and themes that reflect ‘the complex intersectional negotiations of gendered identity that women make on a daily basis within the different contexts of their lives’ (Jennings 2017: p184).

 Through its foregrounding of female experiences ‘the female ensemble format has constructed important social relationships between women that work across and often against, common cultural and social divisions’ (Jennings 2017: p184). Such dramas can therefore more readily accommodate representations of a broad spectrum of racial, sexual and class identities. In series such as *Tenko*, set in two Japanese prisoner of war (POW) camps, the narrative tension created by the enforced proximity of women from different backgrounds results in extended negotiation and exploration of the women’s different world views and experiences (Jennings 2017: p187). Furthermore, the setting of both *Tenko* and *Call the Midwife* (set in a convent) separates these negotiations of femininity to a ‘liminal space’ removed from the structures of patriarchal society and relocates them within a female dominated context (Jennings 2017: p187). This liminal space provides, ‘an environment where men have structural power but are peripheral to the central relationships between the female ensemble cast and, more specifically, to the central focus of narrative action’ (Jennings 2017: p193).

 In *Land Girls* this description of a liminal, female dominated space, corresponds closely with Pasture Farm, the manor farm on which the girls are billeted and work. The farm constitutes a space distinct from society at large in which the female characters are bound less by the norms and expectations of that society and more by the discipline and demands of agricultural labour (Jennings 2017: p193). Jennings argues that, in *Tenko*, the women’s dramatic change in circumstances requires them ‘to develop a level of independence and strength they never dreamed of before the war’ (2017: p189). She argues that with their removal from their normal social contexts and the ‘socio-cultural consensus of how womanhood should be and look, conventional understandings of gender, power and age were no longer as binding for them,’ which, despite the overarching theme of captivity and isolation, could be read as potentially liberating (Jennings 2017: p189).

 I have argued elsewhere that the WLA, as represented in television drama, can be regarded as a space of liberation (Mahoney 2015: 2017). Examples from *Land Girls* include Annie (Christine Bottomley), for whom the WLA offers the chance to escape both an abusive father and a hasty and unhappy marriage. In joining the Women’s Land Army, Annie discovers a space in which she can be free of her father without dependence on her husband. Annie’s choice to place herself in this new context, defined not by men, but by the women around her, allows her the freedom to redefine herself and escape the role of unhappy wife and victim of abuse and find love with another man. Annie’s liberation is seemingly made permanent when she is informed that her husband is missing, presumed dead. After admitting her sense of guilt, Annie is able to acknowledge her feelings of relief and freedom and to find love with another man (‘Secrets,’ 2009). For Connie (Seline Hizli), the WLA offers the chance for liberation from a life of crime and an abusive relationship in her home town of London. For Iris (Lou Broadbent) it offers her the chance to learn new skills and to address the illiteracy that had previously held her back and undermined her self-confidence.

 However, whereas Jennings suggests that in *Tenko* the women’s wartime experiences leave them unwilling to return to their limited roles in a patriarchal society (2017: p189), in *Land Girls*, this type of return, or reversion to postfeminist gender roles, is figured as a reward. This reflects Ball’s argument regarding post 1980s FEDs and retraditionalisation. In the case of *Land Girls*, at the beginning of their story arcs the majority of the main characters’ circumstances are cast as somewhat dysfunctional. Annie and Bea (Jo Woodcock) are struggling to come to terms with their status as victims of abuse, Connie is a former criminal and Esther (Susan Cookson) and Joyce are attempting to deal with their enforced separations from their husbands. The WLA offers them the space to work through these issues and secure more stable postfeminist identities as wives and mothers. For Esther and Joyce, the WLA acts as a kind of placeholder, to provide purpose and occupation whilst they await their reunions with their husbands. For the others, their successful transformation as a result of their time in the WLA is indicated by their attainment of functional, heterosexual romantic relationships. Bea and Connie are both saved from their past mistakes through marriage to upstanding members of the local community. Nancy (Summer Strallen) and Annie, who pursue less legitimate, adulterous romantic relationships that cannot be validated through marriage, are written out of the programme at the end of the first series. In this way, rather than providing an alternative way of life for its female characters, postfeminist gender norms are reaffirmed within the series and in fact given new legitimacy as a chosen rather than imposed destiny.

 In *Call the Midwife*, Jennings argues that the ‘liminal woman-centred space’ of the convent in which the series is set also facilitates the exploration of women’s issues and identities ‘within a safe and supportive milieu’ (2017: p193). Issues of class, gender and sexuality are worked through within the supportive context of the community on screen and:

viewers are […] invited to identify with the feminist ideas that suffuse *Call the Midwife*, ideas that operate within a spectrum of changing understandings of gender, race, sexuality and class oscillating between the female ensemble cast members and viewers (Jennings 2017: p194).

In *Land Girls* the creation of a supportive space of empathetic identification is apparent, to an extent, in the women’s response to Bea’s pregnancy in series one. To prevent her being sent home to her abusive father, the rest of the land girls work together to help Bea hide her condition, take on work that she is no longer able to carry out and comfort her when the father of her child refuses to have any contact with her or the baby. Similarly, when Annie’s and later Joyce’s husbands are both declared missing in action, the group offers support and comfort. The female community depicted in *Land Girls* offers its members a supportive space in which to work through demands placed on them by the war. Therefore, the ways in which women’s issues are dealt with in some FEDs ‘through many levels and layers of communal support, challenges the individualism of neoliberal[ism]’ (Jennings 2017: p197). This offers an alternative support structure in which women need not be reliant on men, but can work through issues, such as grief, unplanned pregnancies, unhappy marriages and so forth, with the help of other caring and intelligent women. However in *Land Girls*, despite the existence of a supportive community of women, issues are only fully resolved through adherence or reversion to postfeminist norms, as will be demonstrated.

 This focus on female community does facilitate the depiction of female characters that are developed and complex. The space offered by FED also allows these women to develop further and to grow across the three series. However, despite this growth, these characters are still bound by the limits of postfeminist discourse and proscribed heteronormative narrative destinies. This chapter will now analyse the representation of women in *Land Girls* by exploring the development of key characters throughout the series.

## ‘I don’t want to be that girl […] anymore:’ Realising the Postfeminist Self in *Land Girls*

As a result of the differing backgrounds of the female characters in *Land Girls* the space of the WLA opens up different possibilities and dangers for each of them. Esther is figured as the matriarch of the group. As the oldest and longest serving land girl, she has both natural and official authority. With her husband a POW, Esther is a single parent to son Martin (Mykola Allen). Esther’s characterisation is rooted in her maternity, with her actions determined by the needs of her son or the land girls in her care, her own needs are rarely expressed or attended to. Furthermore, the hardship of her husband’s absence is acknowledged only in its effect on Martin and her effectiveness as his mother, rather than her own loneliness and struggle.

 In series two, Esther’s success as a mother is tested when an accident leaves Martin in need of an operation to save his sight. Unable to afford the cost, Esther is forced to sell her body to pay for the procedure and later discovers that she is pregnant. Unlike Bea (who is discussed later in this chapter) whose acceptance of her unplanned pregnancy opens the door to what Negra describes as ‘full womanhood,’ (2009: p63) Esther’s maternal identity is undermined. As well as exposing her to the shame and ridicule of the local community, Esther’s pregnancy also alienates her from her son, who accuses her of being unfaithful to his father. At no point is it acknowledged that Esther was in fact raped, with the incident consistently referred to as *her* mistake.

 The series does acknowledge the inequality of Esther’s situation. When discussing her options with Finch, Esther says angrily, ‘The shame Fred. You’re a man, you can get away with these things. I’m not seventeen, I won’t be forgiven’ (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). However rather than expressing the need to effect change and address this systematic inequality, Esther undergoes a dangerous back-street abortion and then works to win back the respect of her son. With Martin’s support, Esther is able to deny ever having been pregnant and able to choose to ignore the condemnation of the local community. Here the series endorses the postfeminist concept that inequality is most effectively tackled, not through collective political action, but by a personal choice not to be victim to it. It is a reflection of Esther’s privilege as a white, middle class, woman backed by her son and by Finch that she is able to escape discrimination in this way. It could be argued that Esther’s story may be read as a criticism of societal inequality. However, the offered solution is to shore up one’s postfeminist identity, in this case as a mother, in order to escape the consequences of that inequality. In this way, postfeminist texts such as *Land Girls* offer women ways of navigating patriarchal society successfully through adherence to postfeminist norms. This makes it possible to minimise the impact of inequality on themselves as individuals, but leave the oppressive structures of patriarchy intact.

 For Joyce — who like Esther is happily married, to a flight sergeant in the RAF — the WLA offers the opportunity to escape from the ruins of her home city of Coventry. It is revealed that Joyce’s whole family were killed by German bombs, leaving her husband John (Nicholas Shaw) as her only living relative. Despite this, Joyce remains committed to the WLA and her role in the war effort, frequently encouraging the other land girls to work harder and to take pleasure in their contribution to the national war effort. In certain moments, Joyce seems to symbolically embody the message of propaganda created by the Ministry of Information and the WLA recruitment posters mentioned earlier. For instance, when she reminds reluctant land girl Nancy, ‘We’ve got to do our bit else the country will starve!’ (‘Childhood’s End,’ 2009).

 Joyce’s entire being is rooted in her role as a wife and in part this is due to the loss of her home and family, leaving John as the only remaining anchor to her identity. Her WLA training is equated with John’s RAF training through voice over and montage (‘Childhood’s End,’ 2009) and her narrative is punctuated by his letters and visits which provide much of her emotional motivation and exposition. When John goes AWOL (Absent Without Leave) before his first mission due to concerns over the morality of bombing civilians such as the ones who died in Coventry, Joyce reassures him. Assuring him that ‘I’d get in those bombers myself if I could!’ she helps him to work through his feelings of guilt and sanctions his use of deadly force as necessary to win the war (‘Codes of Honour,’ 2009). When she shoots and kills a crashed German pilot after John is declared missing in action, it is the thought that John might have met the same fate that causes her the most disquiet. The potential of this incident to lead Joyce to alternate self-definitions is considerable. The guilt over taking a life could lead her to identify as a murderer. Alternatively, because the man she killed was a German and therefore an enemy, she could choose to see herself as a hero or, at the very least a soldier. However, her primary identification remains simply ‘John’s wife,’ thereby signifying the extent to which that gender role is entrenched. When John is later discovered alive but suffering from amnesia, Joyce diligently nurses him back to health despite him having no memory of her or of their life together. Joyce’s character is entirely constructed through her relationship with John and her reaction to his absence. Indeed, despite her demonstrated skill, compassion, dedication and courage — for which she is decorated in series three (‘The War in the Fields,’ 2011) — Joyce insists that John, ‘saw things in me that no-one else ever bothered to look for. He made me sparkle. I can’t be that girl without him’ (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). The only thing that causes Joyce to doubt her role as a wife is the discovery of John’s infidelity during his amnesia. However, the other land girls, seeing Joyce’s unhappiness encourage her to forgive John and reclaim her identity as his wife.

 John is constructed as a rather two-dimensional character. He embodies a key version of postfeminist masculinity in that he is sensitive and demonstrative in his affection towards Joyce, but is not a developed character in his own right.[[14]](#footnote-14) While this is perhaps unsurprising in a FED with its explicit focus on women, it remains an important subversion of trends in film and television in which female characters are generally instrumentalised to provide emotional depth and motivation for men.[[15]](#footnote-15) However, John’s primary purpose throughout *Land Girls* is to affirm Joyce’s postfeminist identity and to serve as her ultimate reward for her constancy and correctly performed postfeminist femininity. This is confirmed in the final episode of *Land Girls*, in which John and Joyce are reunited and leave the Hoxley estate to start the family and future they planned together in the series two episode ‘Back to the Land’ (2011).

 Unlike Joyce and Esther, the WLA offers the rest of the land girls who are not part of functional heterosexual relationships the chance to work through the disruptive aspects of their femininity that are preventing it. For Bea, the WLA offers a means of escaping her abusive father. Removed from her previous life, Bea sees her time away from home as an opportunity to chase new experiences, foremost of which is to lose her virginity. However, this desire for sexual liberation and maturity exposes Bea to emotional danger and the sexual manipulation of an older and much more experienced American GI. Furthermore, the pregnancy that predictably results from their one-night-stand threatens Bea’s position in the WLA and therefore her new, liberated life. After unsuccessful attempts to end the pregnancy by drinking alcohol distilled from carrots and placing herself in deliberately dangerous situations in the hope of bringing on a miscarriage, Bea accepts her impending motherhood.

The limitations motherhood and her subsequent marriage places on Bea – in terms of her future and her desire to travel and have new experiences – are discussed within the series. However, they are presented as the result of her choices rather than a reflection of structural inequalities that impose such limitations on all mothers. Bea’s reluctance to embrace motherhood is thereby dismissed as a product of her petulant youth, negating any challenge to its status as the ultimate feminine goal. Her storyline is resolved with her realisation that her dreams of travel were empty and foolish and that life with her son and husband will provide her with fulfilment. Bea’s questioning of the postfeminist ideal of motherhood, therefore, serves only to validate it as she willingly and gratefully repositions herself back into the traditional role of wife and mother.[[16]](#footnote-16)

 The WLA also offers an opportunity to escape for Connie, who is fleeing a dysfunctional past. It is revealed that Connie’s neglectful childhood led to involvement in organised crime and an abusive relationship. Described in the shooting script for the first episode of series two as ‘a contradiction of vulnerable and tough; tomboyishly sexy,’ wearing, ‘a dash of bright red lipstick,’ Connie is fleeing a life of crime in London’s East End (BBC Writers Room, no date: p10). She arrives on the farm on the back of an American GI transport, entertaining the troops by singing *Chattanooga Choo Choo* (Glen Miller 1941) as if she were a show girl. In the script, her entrance and demeanour are described thus: ‘Connie saunters off towards our watching gang, soaking up the whistles from the departing soldiers. (Note; she behaves like this primarily for a need for attention)’ (BBC Writers Room, no date: p11). Connie’s brash self-confidence is thereby undermined from the start and her unhappiness and low self-esteem are hinted at frequently throughout the series. Such as, when local vicar Henry (Liam Garrigan series two, Gwilym Lee series three) compliments her singing voice and she replies, ‘I’m only really happy when I sing,’ (‘Displaced Loyalties,’ 2011) and later when she plaintively informs Henry, ‘I don’t want to be that girl I was in London anymore!’ (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). It is performing a duet with Henry that first brings the two together and their developing romance offers Connie the chance of redemption for her past crimes. Her history of childhood neglect and abuse in various care homes is revealed through her concern for an evacuee child whom she believes is being similarly mistreated. As well as establishing Connie’s maternal capacity, this also provides an explanation for her criminality and her rejection of conventional heterosexual relationships in favour of a series of ‘fancy men,’ who ‘looked out for’ her (‘Back to the Land,’ 2011).

 In this way, Connie’s singledom is depicted as the result of crisis brought about by her traumatic childhood and subsequent poor choices. Most recent of which and the reason for her need to leave London, was to become involved with gangster Danny (Joe Armstrong). Her promiscuity, to which she alludes several times throughout the series, is figured not as the empowered enjoyment of her postfeminist sexuality but as the empty quest for attention and survival implied in her initial character notes. Indeed, when describing her involvement in Danny’s criminal activities she defines her role as ‘tits and teeth, that was my job’ (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). Connie’s sexuality has therefore only ever been deployed in the service of men who would seek to profit from it rather than for her own pleasure. Unlike postfeminist discourses which position heterosexual female sexuality as a route towards “empowerment,” Connie’s attempts to persuade Henry to have sex with her before they are married are used within the narrative to indicate her low self-esteem.[[17]](#footnote-17) They reflect her own failure to acknowledge her self-worth and that she is ‘worth the wait’ (‘Farewell My Lovely,’ 2011). The WLA offers Connie the chance to support herself, break out of this pattern and discover a space in which she can redefine herself. Here, the WLA is depicted as a space with the potential for emancipation and liberation for women, who previously had no such opportunity.

 However, the feminist potential of this space to disrupt traditional heteronormative “happy endings” or narrative destinies in *Land Girls* is somewhat limited. For Connie, the primary narrative purpose of her service in the WLA is to offer her the chance to secure a better and more functional heterosexual relationship with Henry. Connie’s storyline and characterisation within the series is ultimately reduced to a choice between returning to a life of crime with Danny or becoming a respectable vicar’s wife through marriage to honourable and devoted Henry. Furthermore, these versions of herself are entirely constructed by Danny and Henry’s visions of her, depriving Connie of any opportunity for self-actualisation. When trying to persuade her to run away with him after one last robbery, Danny tells her, ‘We’re meant to be together, Connie. You’ll thank me in the end, saving you from a miserable little life in the middle of nowhere’ (‘Farewell My Lovely,’ 2011). Later in the same episode, Henry, attempting to persuade her not to go through with the robbery and explaining why he insisted they wait until marriage before sleeping together says, ‘I know you’re worth more than that. I know you’re worth the wait’ (‘Farewell My Lovely,’ 2011). There is no suggestion of a third option for Connie, that she might be able to live a happy and fulfilled life and find worth as a single woman. This reflects the notion in postfeminist discourse that singledom represents either transition or crisis. It is a state to be endured and navigated carefully until a suitable partner is acquired, or it is the result of unsuccessfully performed femininity necessitating radical change through the ‘makeover paradigm’ discussed in Chapter One.[[18]](#footnote-18) Essentially, Connie’s choice revolves around her sexuality and its function: whether she should surrender it to Danny in the service of his criminal activities, or to Henry in marriage and confirmation of her new identity as his wife. In either case, there is no opportunity for Connie’s sexuality to be entirely her own or for her identity to be defined other than by the man she chooses.

 Her choice is also between two different types of masculinity, with Danny representing un-reconstructed, violent masculinity as opposed to Henry’s construction as a sensitive and emotionally mature postfeminist masculine identity.[[19]](#footnote-19) Danny’s professions of love for Connie are undermined by his threatening behaviour and violence towards her, and sharply contrast with Henry’s devotion and firm desire to protect his perception of Connie’s virtue. It is notable that his virtue is never called into question. Her choice can therefore be seen to be ultimately indicative of the kind of man she deserves based on her understanding and performance of postfeminist femininity. As discussed in Chapter One, postfeminism’s heavy emphasis on personal choice belies the normative dimension of those choices. Were Connie to choose the insensitive, violent and unreconstructed Danny over the emotionally available, sensitive and protective Henry, it would be indicative of her failure to internalise and adhere to postfeminist discourses regarding heterosexual romance. Her eventual choice to be with Henry and the transformation and validation of her femininity that that signifies is ironically surmised in the following quote from local gossip Mrs. Gulliver; ‘I can’t believe the reverend’s making a respectable woman out of that Jezebel!’ (‘Last Days of Summer,’ 2011). Despite the obvious malice of the delivery, this comment accurately signifies Connie’s transformation from unacceptable sexual and social conduct to the sanctification of her sexual identity as a wife.

 The female community in *Land Girls* bears the hallmarks of what Karen Hollinger, in her discussion of the female friendship film, describes asa ‘social female friendship’ (1998: p8). Although Hollinger focuses specifically on film in her analysis, some of the characteristics she identifies are observable in *Land Girls*. As discussed, the WLA provides an alternative space for the land girls in which their primary relationships are with other women rather than men. However, this space is temporary, and brought about by the physical absence of men, rather than any desire to subvert or escape the patriarchal order. By its nature, this space is liminal, subject to the demands and duration of the war. Furthermore, this space is also closed down once a suitable heterosexual romantic partner has been acquired. Its primary narrative purpose, therefore, is ultimately to facilitate the women’s re-entry into patriarchal society once the war is over.

 Outside of the WLA, *Land Girls* features other postfeminist depictions of gender. The development of Lady of the Manor Lady Ellen Hoxley's (Sophie Ward) character across the three series is of particular relevance. Throughout the first series Lady Hoxley is cast very much as an antagonist. Enjoying a position of considerable social power as a result of her status and philanthropic work, she has control over the lives of the land girls, but also of her husband Lawrence (Nathaniel Parker). Despite his status as Lord of the Manor and as a veteran of the First World War, Lawrence’s masculinity is undermined by the audience’s knowledge that he shot himself in the foot to escape the front lines and even more so by his wife’s frequent allusions to that secret.

 In this way, traditional concepts of gendered power are subverted within this relationship, with Lady Hoxley entirely dominating her husband. In some ways this could be read as having feminist potential for its subversion of traditional concepts of gender. Lady Hoxley’s refusal to conform to the postfeminist discourses of domesticity and natural sexual difference (as outlined in Chapter One), could be read as a rejection of its limitations in correlation with second wave feminist discourses. However, in this case this power dynamic is not achieved by Lady Hoxley’s feminist empowerment, but by her emotional manipulation and abuse of her husband. For instance, in the second episode of series one, when Lawrence’s horse is badly injured, Lady Hoxley ridicules and undermines his attempts to save it, implying that he is too cowardly to end the animal’s suffering (‘Secrets,’ 2009). After Lawrence capitulates, shooting the horse as she suggests, he remains insistent that he could have saved it. To which Lady Hoxley replies, ‘then why on earth did you shoot him dear? Seems you’re an even worse coward than I thought’ (‘Secrets,’ 2009). Here the power she wields over Lawrence is figured as a corruption of the normative bond between husband and wife. It is also the primary motivation for Lawrence’s affair with land girl Nancy, in which the power dynamics between them are much more reflective of the norm.

 After Lawrence is killed during an altercation at the end of series one, Lady Hoxley takes on the role of grieving widow signified by her move to wearing black. In the shooting script for the first episode of series two, she is described as ‘an icy beauty’ and her aloofness in the absence of her husband changes from a fixed aspect of her character, to a barrier to be surpassed by a succession of love interests. Indeed, Lady Hoxley is the only character to have a different love interest in each series. In series two it is Jack Gillespie (Clive Wood), an American business man searching for his grandson (Bea’s illegitimate child William). In series three it is Dr. Richard Channing (Dominic Mafham), an old flame with whom she is reunited when her home is requisitioned for use as a hospital. In both cases, Lady Hoxley’s decision to pursue the relationship is symbolised by her putting aside her widow’s black in favour of her more colourful and fashionable wardrobe. In both instances her initial reluctance and icy demeanour must be overcome. In series three this takes a particularly problematic turn on two occasions. The first is during a car ride with Channing when he deliberately drives dangerously to elicit an emotional response from her, ignoring her repeated requests for him to slow down and ultimately crashing her car. When she complains about his behavior Channing retorts, ‘Not safe enough for you? Not boring enough for you?’ and takes obvious pleasure in her distress (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). Rather than acknowledging that his reckless behavior endangered both of their lives, Channing justifies his actions by claiming that he was attempting to free Lady Hoxley from her life of ‘routines and tradition,’ which he implies she uses to distance herself from her “natural” feminine emotions (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). Resultantly it is suggested within the narrative that (as a man seeking heterosexual romance), Channing has a greater understanding of Lady Hoxley’s emotional needs and desires than she does herself. The second comes during a particularly problematic love scene in which Channing’s disregard for Lady Hoxley’s repeated refusals and requests for him to leave her bedroom is figured as romantic. In the scene in question Channing enters Lady Hoxley’s bedroom ostensibly to apologise for offending her earlier in the episode. She explicitly asks him to leave to which he replies, ‘are you sure?’ before moving towards her and, despite her quite clearly saying ‘no,’ forcibly kisses her (‘The Enemy Within,’ 2011). The scene resolves with the two of them in bed together after having had sex, wistfully discussing the life they might have had. The implication that this life has been denied them only by Lady Hoxley’s stubbornness is clear.

This scene closely resembles one from the second series of the BBC adaptation of Winston Graham’s *Poldark* (BBC 2015 - present) that caused controversy for similar reasons. In an episode broadcast in October 2016, Ross Poldark (Aidan Turner) forces entry into the bedroom of his former lover Elizabeth (Heida Reed), before pushing her onto the bed and having sex with her despite her protestations. Although in both cases it has been argued that the female characters did, at the last, consent to having sex, it does not make the implications regarding consent nor the intended romance of the scenes any less problematic. Speaking about the *Poldark* scene Sarah Green, co-director at charity End Violence Against Women, argued that it ‘made the representation of non-consensual sex ambiguous by making her appear to change her mind’ (BBC News 2016). She elaborates that:

it is definitely portrayed very much as a rape […] The female character says 'no' and there are also non-verbal signs. She is moving away from him and pulling away from him (BBC News, 2016).

In both cases there is a clear undermining of the female character’s agency and bodily autonomy, suggesting that both of these things form barriers to the fulfilment of heterosexual love. In this way, the postfeminist norm of heterosexual romance is privileged over a woman’s right to withhold her consent. This romantic imperative is emphasised further in both series two and three of *Land Girls* when Lady Hoxley’s putative relationships fail and she reverts back to her widow’s black. In this way, despite the fact that in both cases it was the unacceptable behavior of the men that ended the relationship – one attempted to kidnap an infant, the other was a German collaborator – the loss of a romantic relationship and Lady Hoxley’s resulting singledom is clearly affiliated with the grief and death associated with widowhood.

 It must also be noted that, for the majority of the female characters in *Land Girls* their stories are contained by the narratives of their relationships with men. Nancy leaves at the end of series one with the death of Lawrence with whom she was having an affair. Annie also leaves at the end of series one and it is left ambiguous as to whether that is to care for her wounded husband or to make a new life with her lover Adam (Richard Harrington). Bea leaves the farm at the end of series two to be with her sister when her husband Billy (Liam Boyle) is called up for active service. Indeed, it would seem that recurring female characters in the series require a male love interest in order for their stories to seem viable. This indicates that the only acceptable destiny of a female narrative in *Land Girls* is one that culminates in heteronormative romance.

 Clearly there is a strong focus on love and romance in *Land Girls*. As discussed, it is this privileging of personal and particularly romantic relationships that aligns the series with genres typically considered “women’s genres” and particularly melodramatic soap opera. This chapter will now move to an exploration of the interaction between melodrama and women’s history in *Land Girls.*

## ‘We Dream of Loving You, While We’re Away:’ Melodramatic History

As mentioned previously, *Land Girls*’ alignment with genres not typically associated with war stories, does not necessarily problematise its depiction of history. Rather, due to its melodramatic characteristics, which necessitate that ‘personal life is the core problematic of the narrative,’ the Second World War is translated through its impact on the characters’ personal relationships (Ang 1997: p159). This does not mean that the events and conditions of the war are entirely ignored within the drama, but rather that ‘the way in which they are treated and take on meaning is always from the standpoint of personal life’ (Ang 1997: p160). This is evident in the way that the dislocation and disruption of service in the WLA is depicted primarily through its impact on the land girls’ existing romantic relationships and the potential for them to forge new ones. *Land Girls* also incorporates another key feature of the melodramatic soap opera in its use of excessive and fantastic plot lines (Ang 1997: p160). The wartime setting of the series lends itself well to this, as dramatic events – crashed German pilots, bombs, spies, the black-market – are all common aspects of the imaginary of the Second World War and its impact on every-day life and hence not out of place.

 The melodramatic elements of the series come to the fore more so in series two and three, which were released two years after the original series and do not share the same focus on commemoration. For instance, both of the later series omit the *Movietone News* clip that begins each episode of series one and serves as a historical anchor.[[20]](#footnote-20) As well as providing direct aesthetic and historical context to each episode, the clips mimic the presentation of newsreels in cinemas of the time, adding to the conceit that viewers are watching real history. Lyrics were also added to the series’ theme music:

While we’re away we dream

The way all soldiers do

We dream of loving you

While we’re away

We dream of loving you While we’re away (The Soldiers 2011).

This song is a cover of an original wartime ballad performed by *The Soldiers*, a group made up of three serving soldiers who are known for emotive covers of popular love songs (O’Brien, no date). This clearly signals the series’ melodramatic investment in romance. Bursts of the theme music are also used more overtly in series two to signify moments of heightened emotional intensity.

 The later series also centre much more heavily on the idea of ‘the family in danger of dissolution’ that Lynne Joyrich identifies as a key component of melodramatic texts (1992: p231). Although this theme is present in series one, it is the symbolic family created by the WLA that is under threat by Bea’s pregnancy. In series two and three, however, it is rendered more literally. Bea’s young family is threatened both by the arrival of American Jack Gillespie and by her own growing dissatisfaction with her life as a farmer’s wife. Realising that her marriage to farm hand Billy means she is unlikely to leave Pasture Farm even after the war, and meeting a handsome Italian POW who encourages her desire to travel and see the world, Bea becomes resentful and angry. As a result, when Jack offers to take her and her son back to America with him Bea is sorely tempted, placing her life with Billy at risk. Joyce’s family with husband John is, as discussed, placed at risk by John’s amnesia — in itself a plot device reminiscent of melodramatic soap opera — and Esther’s by gossip about her presumed infidelity and pregnancy. Even Connie’s prospective family is placed in danger by the arrival of criminal Danny and his threatening behaviour. With further storylines including two murders, espionage, child abuse, rape, amnesia and a gunfight involving London gangsters, the lives of the land girls are ‘replete with extraordinary conflicts and catastrophes’ (Ang 1997: p160). This again could seem problematic in a text ostensibly concerned with the recreation of history. However, as Ang notes:

The parameters of melodrama require that such clichés be regarded and assessed not for their literal, referential value — that is, their realism — but as meaningful in so far as they solicit a highly charged, emotional impact (1997: p160).

 While such emotive devices are clearly used in *Land Girls*, as demonstrated above, the series does diverge from soap opera in its format and therefore in the way that such plot devices are dealt with in the narrative. Rather than ‘a beginning, a middle, and an end, […] soap opera realism works through an infinitely extended middle’ (Fiske 2007: p180). John Fiske argues that, as a result of this ‘infinitely extended middle,’ soap operas are in a constant state of disruption and threat (2007: p180). Because of its construction as a mini-series — limited to three series of five episodes each — *Land Girls* has a much more closed narrative structure necessitating the resolution of these narrative arcs at the end of each series.

 Like a soap opera, *Land Girls* doesfunction as a narratively complex drama, with individual character arcs running alongside overarching collective narratives (Dunleavy 2009: p149). However, the cyclical nature and closed structure of this type of television drama require resolution. As a result, storylines that could be perceived as challenging to normative constructions of femininity are neutralised by the need for closure at the end of each series. This repositioning of women back into more readily acceptable “feminine” roles perpetuates and ‘relies on universal, essentialist conceptions of gender that naturalize and reinforce the relationship between women and “the feminine” (Ball 2011: p252). Therefore, although a space is offered for the representation and exploration of unstable and transgressive femininities, it is limited by the need for narrative closure, which requires the female characters to be relocated back into traditional gender roles (Mahoney 2015: no pagination). As Fiske notes, the traditional narrative structure of equilibrium, disturbance, resolution, new equilibrium, means that ‘comparing the states of equilibrium with which it begins and ends and specifying the nature of the threat of disturbance is a good way of identifying the narrative thrust of a story’ (2007: p180). In this case, the lives of *Land Girls’* female characters are disrupted by the Second World War and their service in the WLA, this disruption is resolved for the majority of the land girls through a relationship with a suitable heterosexual romantic partner, or a reaffirmation of their pre-war roles as wives and mothers. A new equilibrium is reached at the end of the series, with the postfeminist norms of marriage, motherhood and heterosexual romance reinforced through their dislocation and reinstatement. Thus, the historical circumstances of the Second World War are narratively re-inscribed and re-structured to support the ideological demands of the contemporary postfeminist moment.

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## Conclusion

As a result of its melodramatic affiliation with established “women’s genres” and its resultant generic and structural security, *Land Girls* is able to represent the Women’s Land Army as a liberating space within strict postfeminist limits. It offers a space in which women can achieve some transcendence of traditional gender roles for the duration of their service, before they are repositioned back into more traditional postfeminist gender roles. *Land Girls* also presents the Women’s Land Army as an ephemeral alternative for women when the roles of wives and/or mothers are temporarily unavailable to them. In this way, the series makes clear that the transcendence of traditional gender roles offered by membership in the WLA can only ever be a temporary state, granted in exceptional circumstances, and offering no possibility of long-term happiness or fulfilment. Furthermore, consistent with the requirements of serial prime time drama, the series provides resolution and an ultimate re-location back into more traditional feminine roles for their female leads and a reaffirmation of postfeminist norms of femininity (Mahoney 2015: no pagination).

 The Second World War as a setting in *Land Girls* is also conducive to stories of female empowerment, emancipation and non-traditional gender roles. The exceptional circumstances of the war, both as a plot device and as a contextualising historical reference point, mean that transgressive storylines and problematic identities can be explored based on the audience and writers’ shared understanding that these circumstances are not permanent and a return to more traditional gender roles is inevitable. This understanding offers the reassurance of familiarity and ‘that the outcomes are known and will present no radical challenge to their conceptions of gendered identity’ (Mahoney 2015: no pagination). This operates in tandem with the cyclical nature of serial television and the need for closure and resolution at the end of each episode or series.

 The retraditionalisation of the female characters in *Land Girls* situates the Second World War within the dominant, post-feminist, media discourse of women willingly returning to more traditional domestic gender roles. It is evident that *Land Girls*’ depictions of both British and gendered identity reveal more about contemporary concerns and norms of acceptable femininity than any particular essential “truth” of women’s service in the Women’s Land Army and the Second World War. *Land Girls* appears to depict the WLA as empowering women, but their liberation from patriarchal oppression is restricted and is ultimately rescinded. In this respect, *Land Girls* is indicative of the way in which FED reflects and acts as a conduit for the postfeminist sensibility.

# Chapter Three –‘You couldn't be ordinary if you tried’: postfeminist visions of post-war femininity in *The Bletchley Circle*.

*The Bletchley Circle* (ITV 2012 - 2014) written by Guy Burt, ran for two seasons and followed a group of former female code breakers at the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park (1938 – 1946). Across both series the women use their deductive and analytics skills to solve crimes through the identification of codes and patterns in criminal behaviour. In the first series, which consists of three forty-five minute episodes, the women attempt to solve a series of murders and to identify and trace serial killer Malcolm Crowley (Steven Robertson). The second series, consisting of four forty-five minute episodes, features two separate stories. The first two episodes follow Susan (Anna Maxwell-Martin), Millie (Rachael Stirling), Jean (Julie Graham) and Lucy (Sophie Rundle) – the original four members of the Circle – as they attempt to prove the innocence of fellow Bletchley veteran Alice (Hattie Morahan) who has been convicted of murder. The second two episodes, follow Alice, Jean, and Lucy’s attempt to rescue Millie from the clutches of the Magros family, a group of black-marketeers and sex traffickers with whom she has become involved, and the Circle’s subsequent attempts to break up their operation.

 As well as its primary function as a murder mystery, *The* *Bletchley Circle* (henceforth referred to as *Bletchley*)like *Land Girls* and *Home Fires* (which will be the focus of Chapter Five), is also a female ensemble drama (FED). However, unlike the other two series, *Bletchley* is set in the years after the Second World War and:

explores the post-war experience of many women forced to return to the home after wartime service, highlighting their attempts to reconcile their changed identities and wartime experiences with a society seeking to erase both (Mahoney 2015: no pagination).

The series’ historical setting, as well as its focus on female perspectives and foregrounding of a female interrogative gaze, allows the series to capitalise on the popularity of both historical detective series such as *Foyle’s War* (ITV 2002 - 2015) and *Ripper Street* (BBC & Amazon Video 2012 - 2016) and of female detective series such as *Scott & Bailey* (ITV 2011 - present), *Vera* (ITV 2011 - present) and, of course, *Agatha Christie’s Marple* (ITV 2004 - 2013). Its female perspective has been heralded as one of the series main selling points, with Anna Maxwell Martin suggesting that ‘people enjoyed seeing four intelligent women on TV’ (ITV Press Centre*,* 2014)and Julie Graham insisting that the success of *Bletchley* is proof that ‘television has woken up to the benefits of all-female drama’ (Dowell, 2014). The first series of *Bletchley* garnered a 23% share of the available audience with an average 5.6m viewers, ‘making it the best performing new drama series from a share perspective throughout 2012’ and prompting the series’ exportation to America where it was screened on PBS (ITV Press Centre, 2013).

 This chapter will show how *Bletchley* can be read as a postfeminist text because of its various depictions of femininity in crisis that manifest as a result of deviation from the postfeminist script. These crises, this chapter will suggest, can only be resolved through an acceptance of and adherence to postfeminist gender norms. In its representation of its characters’ attempts to reject or simply move outside the normative boundaries of postfeminist gender roles, *Bletchley* demonstrates the instability and unsustainability of the attempted alternatives. With reference to some aspects of horror scholarship, it will discuss the series’ depiction of gender as a whole and particularly the depiction of Susan, the series’ ostensible main character. In this way, this chapter will seek to demonstrate the ways in which the space outside of postfeminism is constructed as a dangerous space in which women can expect to encounter “monsters” and, ultimately, death.

 To accomplish this, this chapter will build on the work of Chapter Two and explore the space offered by female ensemble drama that is distinct from mainstream, male-centred drama. It will consider the possibilities this opens up for the telling of women’s stories. This chapter will then discuss the depiction of female friendship and sociality in *Bletchley,* before moving on to the series’ representation of masculinity, considering how the female focus shapes both of these concepts. It will then move to explore the series as an example of the crime/detective genre and discuss the specific tension of the role and person of the female detective. This chapter will then demonstrate the utility of certain aspects of horror scholarship as a framework for thinking about the depiction of gender in *Bletchley*, as well as discussing the particular affect of horror created for television. The chapter then draws conclusions that will locate *Bletchley* in the field of postfeminist media texts. It will argue that the series offers postfeminist gender roles as the only viable option for women because of its depiction of the awful consequences of their transgression.

## Female Friendship and Sociality in *Bletchley*

As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the primary features of FEDs is their necessary foregrounding of female relationships and friendships. By shifting narrative focus away from men, FED open up a space in which women’s social and emotional engagement with other women outside of the home drives the narrative (Ball 2013: p246). The primary function of *Bletchley*’s construction as a FED is to offer a unique spin on the detective serial in order to attract female viewers. As a result, the Circle’s relationships and interactions with each other serve firstly to advance the storyline of the investigation and secondly to explore the interior lives of the characters and the roles their friendships with each other play in them. Nevertheless, in a postfeminist media climate with a strong focus on individualism, FEDs such as *Bletchley* offer a welcome space in which to portrayclose knit and functional female friendships that are based on shared interest and skill rather than jealousy, competition and consumption.

 There are numerous scenes throughout both series that emphasise the friendship between the members of the Circle. The camaraderie between the women is obvious in the flashbacks to Bletchley Park that begin the first episodes of each series. In the first episode of series one, as well as showing the whole group working happily and productively together as a team, the sequence shows genuine affection between Susan and Millie and makes clear their intention to remain friends after the war. Also in series one, after Lucy is savagely beaten by her husband, the other women rally around to offer her help and support, with Millie offering to share her home with her. It is the intervention of those friends that ultimately saves Susan from serial killer Crowley when he attempts to murder her. In series two, when a former employee of Bletchley (Alice) is accused of murder, it is Jean’s continuing affection for ‘one of my girls’ that prompts her to reconvene the Circle to prove Alice’s innocence (‘Blood on Their Hands: Part One,’ 2014). Later in the series, Millie supports Alice when she cannot secure work because of the infamy of her murder trial and the two socialise as friends (‘Uncustomed Goods: Part One,’ 2014).

 In her article on the FED *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998 - 2004, henceforth referred to as *SATC*), Jane Gerhard discusses the transgressive potential of committed and long-standing female friendships, which she suggests are ‘potentially the most disruptive to heterosexual allegiances’ (2005: p43). Gerhard argues that this is a result of the depicted permanence of the female friendships in *SATC* that are more reliable and enduring than the women’s relationships with men (2005: p43). She observes that the primary source of emotional and psychological support for the women of *SATC* comes from each other as they meet and ‘measure themselves against one another, listening [to each other] in sympathy or outrage’ (Gerhard 2005: pp43). Similarly, in *Bletchley*, because of the restrictions of the Official Secrets Act that prohibits them from discussing their war work,it is only with each other that the women may be fully open about themselves and their pasts. Therefore, the women’s service at Bletchley park opens up a space in which men are absent that is similar to the space constructed by the WLA discussed in the previous chapter.

 However, Alison Winch also discusses the spectacle of female friendship in postfeminist media productions such as *SATC.* She suggests that while ‘postfeminist media emphasises women’s *entitlement* to female sociality’ (original emphasis) it is primarily ‘as a space of consumption’ and surveillance (Winch 2011: p360). She argues that what she terms ‘girlfriend culture:’

does not develop female connections in order to defy patriarchal systems. On the contrary, it celebrates women networking in the service of postfeminist lifestyle industries which sell the allure of girliness (Winch 2011: p360).

 Indeed, she suggests that in order to be active participants in girlfriendship, women must demonstrate discerning practices of consumption and a successful performance of normative femininity (Winch 2011: p362). In this way, postfeminist female friendships such as those in *SATC*, may also be read as apparatus of enforcement of and accountability to neoliberal postfeminist gender norms.

 In *Bletchley,* however, it is their friendship with each other that facilitates the Circle’s transgression of such norms when they turn away from traditional postfeminist gender roles to pursue their investigation. This results in a disruption to their normative femininities that is depicted primarily in the tension between Susan’s role as a wife and mother and her role as an investigator (this is discussed in detail later in the chapter). Her rejection of postfeminist beauty norms is clearly signified in the first episode of series one of *Bletchley*, when she turns over the mirror on her dressing table to reveal the newspaper clippings she has collected regarding the series of murders. The mirror as an object is heavily associated with ideas of female vanity, the postfeminist ideal of beauty and the pleasure of self-surveillance. Susan’s rejection of these norms is therefore clearly symbolised as she turns the mirror over and chooses not to scrutinise herself and her appearance but the clippings and photographs pertaining to the murders. This sequence is demonstrative of Susan’s disrupted postfeminist femininity as a result of her desire to take on the traditionally male role of investigator.

 Rather than being based on traditional feminine practices of consumption, the Circle’s friendship stems from their experience of working at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. This experience is coded within the series as one of the main motivations for their desire to pursue Crowley and consequently as a key cause of their disrupted femininities. Therefore, unlike *SATC*, in which female friendships facilitate the women’s performance of postfeminist femininity and are therefore more permanent and stable, these spaces in *Bletchley* are depicted as unstable and temporary.

 In part, this is due to the function of *Bletchley* as a detective drama, which requires that the primary purpose of the Circle’s interactions generally be to provide exposition concerning the progressing murder investigation. Narrative progression within the series is determined by the progression of the Circle’s investigation rather than events in their friendship or interior lives. Furthermore, the necessary resolution at the end of each series means that these spaces serve more as placeholders or temporary sites where transgressive tensions can be worked through until they are ultimately resolved. *Bletchley*’s short series structure of three and four episodes also means that the space to develop such relationships is limited, unlike longer running dramas.

 Indeed, examples of female sociality within the series generally serve a secondary purpose and are rarely just for the pleasure of female friendship. Susan’s initial reconnection with Millie, after choosing to get married over travelling the world with her, was motivated by her need for assistance in solving the murders. A “Phil and Lit” club in which the women get together ostensibly to discuss literature is actually a front for their investigation. Millie and Alice’s cocktail evening serves a secondary purpose for Millie to further her black-marketeering and ultimately leads to her kidnap. Unlike *SATC*, therefore, the women of *Bletchley* seeminglycannot have both long lasting and functional female friendships and happy family lives. The line between their investigative and domestic roles is clearly demarcated, with one consistently jeopardising the other. As a result, because their friendship is so clearly linked and in service to their investigation, it is limited to being a site of tension and instability. Indeed, the only relatively permanent female only space is the flat shared by Alice and her daughter Elizabeth. Millie’s flat could also be seen as such a space. However, as a small and poorly cared for bedsit it emphasises her loneliness and isolation as much, if not more than, her bohemian freedom. This would seem to suggest that the only stable and permanent female relationship within *Bletchley* is one based on the postfeminist norm of motherhood.

 It is therefore evident that, although not the primary focus of the series, female friendships play an important role in the construction of gender in *Bletchley*. However, despite their status as secondary characters, it is also important to consider the role of men in the series as they relate to the construction of feminine identity. Susan’s husband Timothy (Mark Dexter) particularly serves to represent the domestic life placed in jeopardy by Susan’s investigative activities. In this way, he is integral to the series’ exploration of Susan’s disrupted femininity. It is therefore to an exploration of the ways in which male characters are utlised in *Bletchley* as a means to constructing female identities and elaborating the postfeminist sensibility that this chapter will now turn.

## Acceptable and Abhorrent, Masculinity as a foil in *The Bletchley Circle*.

As noted above, being a female ensemble drama, *Bletchley* invests much less development in its male characters than its female characters. However, male characters retain an important function within each series of *Bletchley* as a form of contrapuntal characterisation*.* Male characters serveboth as antagonists against which the Circle must struggle to prove themselves and as points of normality against which the individual members of the Circle may measure their altered and transgressive subjectivities. In the first category are the obvious adversaries of both series, murderer Malcolm Crowley and Professor Masters (Paul Ritter), head of the shadowy government organisation the women seek to expose in series two. However, this category may also be expanded to include patriarchal institutions – such as the police, the army and the government – against which the women must struggle in order to be heard and have their suspicions taken seriously. The second category includes Susan’s husband Timothy who as discussed, represents the life put at risk through her transgressive behaviours. It also includes Scotland Yard detective Ben (Nick Blood) and Millie’s business partner Jasper (Rob Jarvis) in series two, who, at different moments, offer Lucy and Millie perspective on the consequences of their transgressive choices. In effect, the first group validate the Circle’s decision to transgress traditional roles and take up their investigation, due to their clear lack of insight or their dangerous and prejudicial behaviour. The second group, made up of men who embody much more functional postfeminist masculinities, demonstrate why it is necessary that that transgression be temporary and ultimately abandoned, so that relationships with these men are not irrevocably damaged. This highlights the series’ investment in female narratives which culminate in traditionally heteronormative narrative destinies.

 In the first series, the Circle’s ability to identify and pursue Crowley is hampered by their inability to break into the professional male sphere of the police force. In the first half of the second series, it is a covert department of the army against which the Circle struggle to prove Alice’s innocence. Both of these organisations represent the patriarchal social structures that perpetuate and enforce the Circle’s relegation from the public sphere. As a result, the relationship between the women of *Bletchley* shares some characteristics of what Karen Hollinger, in her work on female friendship in film, describes as ‘political female friendship’ (1998: p8). For Hollinger, ‘political female friendship portrayals involve an alliance that leads to some action against the social system, its institutions, or conventions’ (1998: p8). In both series, the Circle’s unwillingness to accept their inability to penetrate and to affect the outcome of the workings of patriarchal social structures, could be read as this type of political action. Susan’s persistence in returning to the police numerous times despite their repeated dismissal of her theories demonstrates her frustration at their prejudicial outlook. Furthermore, the Circle’s accurate identification of the killer in both series, indicates the short-sightedness of the Police’s patriarchal exclusion of women.

There is, however, no sense within the series of the Circle having any desire to affect long-term political change or to alter those structures in a meaningful way. Other than Susan’s expressed desire that her daughter be allowed to study advanced mathematics in the second series (‘Blood on their Hands: Part One,’ 2014), there is no real acknowledgement of a need for widespread systemic change. Rather, having completed their investigations the women gratefully retreat back to the postfeminist domestic sphere. Although ‘their achievements are acknowledged and celebrated, both within the texts and by their audiences […] their transcendence was only ever to be temporary,’ thereby limiting its political potential (Mahoney 2015: no pagination).

 In some ways, then, the female friendships in *Bletchley* function more as ‘sentimental friendships,’ which Hollinger argues are ‘often portrayed as stimulating personal growth, but […] rarely lead to the promotion of significant social change’ (1998: p7). Hollinger suggests that such friendships ‘function […] primarily to serve as a temporary respite from the problems women face in their heterosexual romantic encounters’ (1998: p7). This rings true for both Susan and Lucy, for whom their investigation provides escape from their unsatisfactory home lives. It is also true for the others whom the investigation offers the potential for personal growth and reassessment of their lives. However, the relationships in *Bletchley* lack the ‘emotional effusive[ness]’ and ‘fervent passion’ that Hollinger ascribes to portrayals of sentimental friendship (1998: p7). Perhaps, then, they can be best understood as an amalgam of both, with additional aspects of Hollinger’s concept of ‘social female friendship portrayals’ (1998: p8). These, she argues, ‘involve a nurturing tie that does not so much pit women against [patriarchal] society as smooth their passage back into it’ (Hollinger 1998: p8). In this way, the models of individual and corporate masculinity offered by *Bletchley* serve as a foil, which reveals and defines the precise nature of the female-female relationships within the series. The distinction identified between ‘political’ and ‘social’ friendships comes into view as a direct result of this foil of unreconstructed masculinity.

 In *Bletchley,*this idea is evident in the ephemerality of the transgressive space opened up by the Circle’s investigation. These spaces offer an opportunity for the women to work through the unstable and disruptive aspects of their femininities that hinder their heterosexual romantic relationships and impinge on their domestic lives. Rather than opening up alternative life and career paths for the Circle, their disruptive desire to move outside of the domestic and investigate must be resolved in order that they might happily resume their normative postfeminist roles once those spaces are closed down. In this way, *Bletchley* reinforces postfeminist femininity, and postfeminist relationships as stable and viable. However, itdoes offer a ‘challeng[e] [to] articulations of conventional femininity … by portraying female friendship as an alternative to women’s complete dependence on men,’ albeit only a temporary one (Hollinger 1998: p8).

 Thinking about the idea of male characters in *Bletchley* serving as points of constancy and comparison, this section will first consider Susan’s husband Timothy. He functions as a control, or neutral point, against which the experimental and unstable nature of these challenging articulations of femininity can be defined. From his introduction in episode one, ‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One’ (2012)Timothy is depicted as caring, dependable and largely unremarkable, much like the figure of the ‘new man’ discussed in Chapter One. Indeed, Susan’s description of him to Millie, ‘he’s nice actually, you’d like him,’ appropriately encapsulates his development and function within the series. Although it is established that he was wounded in service of the Royal Artillery during the Second World War, little further insight is given into his background or personality. In this way, it is possible to draw links between the characters of Timothy, Lawrence who features in *Land Girls* and Daniel Sousa (Enver Gjokaj) in *Agent Carter*. Although Timothy and Daniel’s wounds are not self-inflicted and therefore carries different connotations, there are pfarallels between the three series use of wounded masculinity as a counterpoint that facilitates the depiction of disruptive femininity.

 Timothy’s willing acceptance of his mundane civil service occupation and steady family life is contrasted with Susan’s desire to break out of that pattern. When explicitly asked by Susan whether he likes his job, his response that ‘it’s not all that exciting but it’s important … and I think perhaps I’ve had my fair share of excitement for one lifetime,’ reflects a knowledge of the dangers of the masculine public sphere that Susan will come to appreciate through her ordeal with Crowley (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). His initial support of Susan’s theory about the murders in series one, his obvious affection for his children as well as his concern for Lucy after her beating and his disgust with her abusive husband, all testify to his sensitive, postfeminist masculine subjectivity. This enables him to serve as the counterweight to Susan’s desire to transcend her postwar domestic role and to elaborate the life that her actions jeopardise.

 For example, when Susan’s investigative activities cause her to miss an important engagement with Timothy’s former battalion, he insists, ‘This has to stop you know. Whatever this is. You’re my wife. But above that you’re a mother. That has to come first’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012). Here, the series draws a firm boundary between Susan’s family life and her investigative activities, endorsing Timothy’s belief that she cannot pursue both successfully. Moreover, as well as reminding Susan of the life she stands to lose, in this statement Timothy clearly assigns all parental responsibility to Susan. There is no suggestion that his paternal role should come first for him, or that his actions and engagement with the public sphere could jeopardise his role as a father. However, this allocation of parental responsibility to women is in line with postfeminist constructions of motherhood. This allows Timothy’s previously demonstrated affection for his children and willingness to engage in tactile displays of affection to secure his status as a postfeminist father (Hamad 2013).[[21]](#footnote-21) In this way, rather than a developed and autonomous character in his own right, Timothy serves as a reference point for Susan. He becomes a point of constancy and normality against which she can measure her own transgression and deviation from the postfeminist norm.

Crowley’s repeated assertions that Susan is like him across all of their interactions are evidence of this. In their final confrontation he tells her:

neither of us have a choice. Everyone else can carry on their hopeless, empty, boring existences, your son, your daughter, your husband. But in here … it will be just the two of us (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012).

The correlation between Susan’s and Crowley’s perspectives, that her family life is mundane and lacking purpose, provides a point of no return for Susan through its suggestion that her continued transgression may further align her with Crowley’s deviant subjectivity. It also represents the need for Susan to choose between Timothy and Crowley, or rather, the versions of herself that correspond to each of those men. This emphasis on choice is encapsulated by the closing sequence of series one in which Susan rejects her alignment with Crowley’s deviant gaze as she watches her family through a window before going inside the house to reclaim her postfeminist identity as a mother (the significance of this moment is discussed in detail later in the chapter). Susan’s characterisation throughout the series is therefore framed and structured by her relationship with Timothy (and Crowley), thereby demonstrating the function of masculinity in *Bletchley*.

 In series two, albeit to a lesser extent, both Scotland Yard detective Ben and Millie’s black-market partner Jasper, serve a similar reflective function for Lucy and Millie. After escaping her abusive husband, Lucy is shown to have secured a job working as a secretary at Scotland Yard where she meets and shares an obvious attraction with Ben. However, her participation in the Circle’s investigation of the criminal Magros family requires her to lie to him and ultimately causes her to mistrust him and to jeopardise their burgeoning romance. Her confession to Millie that she is also scared to trust Ben because of her mistaken trust in her abusive husband reveals the depth of her disrupted femininity, which has resulted in her inability to form meaningful heterosexual romantic relationships. This disruption is rooted in her experience of male violence both as an abused wife and in the course of the Circle’s previous investigation.

Within each series both of these things are, to an extent, framed as a result of Lucy’s own choices. Her exposure to Crowley’s depravity in series one is presented as the result of her decision to pursue the investigation. In series two, her abusive relationship with Harry is suggested to be the result of her poor judgement: trying to reassure her about Ben, Millie says, ‘just because you made a mistake once, it doesn't mean you can’t judge another man’s character’ (‘Uncustomed Goods: Part Two,’ 2014). Lucy’s unhappiness is therefore presented as a result of her disrupted femininity and resultant failure to secure a suitable heterosexual romantic partner. This is confirmed by the fact that her anxiety and unhappiness is resolved at the end of the series. After deciding to trust Ben and allowing him to help them bring the Magros family to justice, they walk away together hand in hand to a presumed life of heterosexual fulfilment and happiness (‘Uncustomed Goods: Part Two,’ 2014). In the same way as Susan and Timothy, Lucy’s postfeminist characterisation is constructed through her relationship with male characters: first Harry, then Ben.

 For Millie, it is Jasper’s death that ultimately forces her to reconsider her own transgressive lifestyle. Although Millie embodies some postfeminist characteristics through her presentation of a disciplined, glamorous, and stylishly clothed body and her apparently active social life, her performance of care-free, liberated, femininity is consistently undermined. Her post-war decision to forgo marriage and maternity in favour of travelling the world is revealed to have been an unsustainable fantasy because she was unable to fund it. Ironically, it is Susan, through her choice to pursue the postfeminist ideals of marriage and motherhood who ultimately lives out a sustainable version of Millie’s travelling fantasy, when she follows Timothy to his new posting in India. Their reversal of fortunes is confirmed when Millie, who used to send Susan postcards from the exotic locations she visited, asks Susan to ‘send us a postcard. Let me know where you wind up’ (‘Blood on their Hands: Part Two,’ 2014). Millie is subsequently depicted as working in unfulfilling jobs as a waitress and a German translator. After she is kidnapped and threatened by the Magros, it is Jasper’s brutal death at their hands that prompts Millie to reassess her lifestyle and choices, admitting to Jean: ‘I know I’ve been a bloody idiot. I don’t need you to tell me’ (‘Uncustomed Goods: Part One,’ 2014). In the same way as Lady Hoxley’s transition in *Land Girls* from wife/lover to single woman is signalled by her black clothing, Millie’s break with her previous identity is signified through her wardrobe. After the kidnapping, her appearance changes dramatically as she exchanges her glamorous, bohemian aesthetic for dull, loose-fitting, utilitarian clothes, no make-up and lank, un-styled hair. In this way, Millie casts off her previous identity, which could provide neither fulfilment nor security. Her desire to adopt a more traditional lifestyle is implied when Millie takes responsibility for two young victims of the Magros’ sex-trafficking operation, revealing her previously unacknowledged maternal capacity and opening up a path towards a more stable maternal postfeminist identity.

 However, it must be noted that it is Millie’s transgressive participation in the Circle’s investigation that ultimately brings the Magros to justice. Indeed, in both series of *Bletchley* the women are shown to be competent and effective investigators, successfully appropriating the male interrogative gaze. Furthermore, their aptitude for investigation is frequently aligned and compared to other, more traditionally feminine skills, such as knitting and cake baking. For example, Susan uses a baking analogy to think through and justify her belief that the killer has more victims than they are aware of:

Susan: The first time you baked a cake, what happened?

[…]

Lucy: Mine Fell

Jean: They often do first off

Susan: Everything comes with practice. The first time is a mess. The vectors are straight. He’s already good at this (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012).

This suggests such aptitude has its roots in the Circle’s successful performance of femininity rather than an appropriation of masculine traits. Indeed, the masculine approach to policing is presented as markedly less effective in *Bletchley* as the male police arrest and charge the wrong man after failing to identify Crowley. (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012)

 In her chapter on popular television as a form of feminine historiography, Moya Luckett argues that, in *Bletchley*:

Avowedly feminine skills are shown as central for even the most markedly patriarchal and traditional workplaces, with these programmes consistently presenting women as the more visually literate sex and thus more perceptive to the visual clues key to a variety of tasks, including solving crimes (2017: p15).

Luckett also notes that *Bletchley* ‘offers a particularly complex meditation on women’s work, glamour and decoration’ (2017: p28). She argues that throughout both series the women are closely associated with elaborate and complex patterns, both through their period clothing and their work as code-breakers. Luckett suggests that this linking of ‘patterns and glamour as particularly feminine visual forms’ reflects the women’s aptitude for the work they undertake and is symbolised by Millie’s use of glamorous red lipstick to mark the train routes utilised by Crowley (2017: p28). However, their affiliation with glamour also emphasises the danger that this specific aspect of their visual literacy places them in. It is through the promise of glamorous, hard-to-find cosmetic items that women are lured to their deaths in series one (Luckett 2017: p28). Therefore, although *Bletchley*acknowledges and celebrates feminine visual literacy and its value in the professional workplace, it also emphasises the danger of attempting to capitalise on that value to break into the male public sphere.
 Furthermore, Luckett argues that the liminality of women’s working lives in Bletchley serves to undermine its empowering and emancipatory potential. She suggests that, in *Bletchley*, ‘work is linked to regression and the evasion of maturity, something that positions it as predominantly a liminal stage in women’s lives’ (Luckett 2017: p29). This is evident both in the ways in which Susan’s participation in the Circle’s investigations jeopardises her true profession as a wife, as well as in Lucy’s narrative arc across both series. After her ordeal at the hands of her abusive husband in series one, Lucy escapes her unhappy marriage and takes up secretarial work at Scotland Yard. On the one hand this could be read as a positive storyline with a discernible feminist inflection, in which an abused woman secures emancipation from both her abuser and the domestic sphere to take up professional employment. However, the introduction of Ben as an immediate and obvious love interest suggests that, rather than offering her the potential for professional fulfilment, the purpose of Lucy’s employment was, in fact, to provide her with the opportunity to meet a *good* man and open up the possibility of heterosexual romantic fulfilment once more.

 Therefore, the different male characters in the series primarily serve two purposes. In the first instance, antagonists such as Crowley and Masters and patriarchal institutions such as the police provide an impetus for the women to prove their capabilities in defiance of patriarchal prejudice and violence. However, other characters such as Jasper and the more reconstructed, postfeminist male characters, such as Timothy and Ben, serve as a clear boundary for that defiance and underline the necessity of the women’s relocation back into the postfeminist sphere. The women’s investigative activities, generate tension, both because of the way they jeopardise the women’s romantic relationships with these “good” men, but also because of the inherent instability of the figure of the woman in the role of investigator. Despite the popularity of female detectives in fiction, scholars such as Linda Mizejewski argue that at the very least female detectives are constructed as ‘nonconformist,’ as their storylines frequently obscure their paths to ‘love and marriage’ (2004: p5). In some cases this is magnified with the female detective becoming ‘a deviant body, female but equipped with the male power to probe’ (Mizejewski 2004: pp86-87). The following section will explore the figure of the female investigator in *Bletchley* and the manifestation of this tension, as well as the series’ construction of a female interrogative gaze.

## Appropriating the Investigatorial Gaze

Since Mulvey’s seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) the concept of the gaze, particularly the spectatorial male gaze, has been central to the analysis of the representation of women in visual culture. Mulvey’s division of ‘woman as image, man as the bearer of the look,’ suggests a ‘split between active/male and passive/female’ pleasure in looking and that, traditionally, women may be perceived as inherently exhibitionist, ‘coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*’ (p837).

 In *Ways of Seeing* Berger describes women as being ‘born within an allotted and confined space,’ within which they must be constantly both surveyor and surveilled: ‘her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another’ (2008: p46). In this way, Berger argues, ‘[the woman] turns herself into an object — and most particularly an object of vision: a sight’ (2008: p47).

 In both cases there is a clear distinction between the active, male bearer of the gaze and its passive female object: ‘*men act* and *women appear*’ (Berger 2008: p47, original emphasis). Despite criticisms of both Mulvey and Berger’s assumption of a universal heterosexual, white, middle-class male spectator, the concept of an active and desirous male spectatorial gaze remains extremely relevant to the analysis of contemporary film and television discourses.[[22]](#footnote-22)

 The concept of the gaze is important in *Bletchley*, because it functions generically as both a detective series, in which traditionally the central character (or characters) would be a male detective in possession of an active interrogative gaze, and a female ensemble drama, which traditionally foreground female subjectivity and feature a central cast of female characters whose experiences drive the narrative. As a result, the traditional generic formulation of the detective genre is subverted as the active interrogative gaze is appropriated by women. By its very nature and narrative function the detective character is predicated on their ability to look and to be ‘the character who sees what others miss and even sees what’s missing’ (Mizejewski 2004: p7). Therefore, as women are traditionally the objects, rather than the bearers of the look, ‘to some extent, the woman investigator will always be a rebuke to traditional and even physical ways of imagining both women and detectives’ (Mizejewski 2004: p13).

 As the first series of *Bletchley* follows Susan, Millie, Lucy and Jean as they investigate, identify and confront a sexually sadistic serial killer of women, the idea of a malicious and dangerous deviant male gaze is also important. A constant negotiation between looker and looked at is at work in *Bletchley* as the members of the Circle contend with their post-war invisibility in the masculine public sphere, the disapproving gaze of their husbands and the danger of making themselves visible to a sadistic killer. As an ensemble drama, this negotiation of looker/looked at in *Bletchley* takes place, to some extent, across the group of women, however it is primarily focused on the interaction between Susan and Crowley.

 In the first episode of series one, ‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ (2012) Susan must navigate her relegation from active participation in the war effort to being a largely invisible housewife.[[23]](#footnote-23) This invisibility is most keenly felt when she observes a pattern in a series of murders that she hears reported on the radio and can do nothing directly about it. At Bletchley Park, which is seen in a flashback at the start of the episode, her intuition about a repeated name in intercepted German transmissions is taken seriously by her male superiors and leads her and the Circle to decipher the deployment schedules of German troops. However, her post-war status as a housewife causes her insight to be dismissed as unreliable women’s intuition by both her husband and the police Deputy Commissioner to whom she reports it. Despite this setback, the Circle remains convinced that they possess the unique skills and experience necessary to trace this killer. As well as revealing the series’ central conceit, this demonstrates the ways in which *Bletchley* subverts traditional crime drama formats by predicating the solving of the crime and apprehension of the killer not on the rational, logical deductions of men, but of a group of women working together, ‘displaying greater, if […] unrecognised, mastery of their profession as well as the ambition necessary to succeed’ (Luckett 2017: p16).

 However, their investigation leads the Circle into danger (as discussed in Chapter Two) when they move outside of the safety of the traditional feminine domestic sphere. The sight of the raped and strangled body of one of Crowley’s young victims is a deeply traumatic experience for all of the women. Horrified that they were unable to save her, Lucy demands, ‘Why did we have to come and see her like that if we couldn't help her? What was the point of it?’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part one,’ 2012). The series’ implicit answer to this question is that to successfully operate as investigators they must look and see awful things. This has particular significance for Lucy who, because of her eidetic memory, is asked by the other women to memorise every detail of the crime scene. Thereby demonstrating the emotional danger attendant to an investigation of this kind.

 Lucy is also placed in physical danger when the Circle attempt to use her as bait to draw out and trap Crowley. Placing herself on the appropriate train and putting on ‘the right clothes, right lipstick, make up,’ the Circle’s intention is for Lucy to, ‘catch his eye’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012). Here, the women are attempting to make Lucy as visible as possible to Crowley, explicitly stating that they are transforming her to appeal to his gaze. To achieve this, Lucy must physically transform herself and in the following scene she is depicted wearing a tight fitting, low-cut floral dress, with her hair styled into victory rolls as her face is made up by Millie. In an extreme close up, Millie is shown applying bright red lipstick to Lucy’s lips (the same lipstick she used to mark out the train routes). Through this visual transformation, Lucy is remade into a visual erotic spectacle, designed specifically to appeal to Crowley’s gaze. The use of whole body shots followed by close ups on her face and torso anatomise and break up her body for the audience and mirror the killer’s gaze. The visual signifiers of the low-cut dress and red lipstick and the camera work that emphasises them are suggestive of a different type of femininity to Lucy’s usual modest, somewhat mousey appearance.

 The precise function of this scene comes into focus sharply if it is viewed in comparison to the contemporary postfeminist narrative of female transformation: the makeover paradigm. Rachel Moseley acknowledges that the transformation, or ‘Cinderella narrative’ is a significant mode of address aimed towards a female audience (Moseley 2002: p134). Moseley argues that, in such narratives, the process of transformation is less one of fundamental change than of revelation:

Cinderella has basic beauty […] excellent taste in clothes, and is thus naturally deserving of a happy ending […] The transformation she undergoes simply reveals what is already present and merely hidden (Moseley 2002: pp134-135).

This narrative of transformation is also present in the slew of contemporary postfeminist makeover television programmes such as *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2001 - 2007), *How to Look Good Naked* (Channel 4 2006 - 2008) and *Snog, Marry, Avoid?* (BBC3 2008 - 2013). In such programmes, members of the public, the vast majority of whom are women, are encouraged to submit to a makeover to reveal what is purported to be a better, more authentic self. Discussing *What Not to Wear,* Winch sums the concept up in the following way: ‘rather than being an enforced victim of the Patriarchy, the makeover participant is coerced through a rhetoric of entitlement —*she is worth it*’ (2011: p361). In this way, the participant’s victimhood is not constructed as the inevitable outcome of an oppressive patriarchal system, but rather as a result of her failure to navigate that system successfully through the demonstration of her discerning postfeminist subjectivity.

 In programmes of this type, the post-makeover ‘more authentic self is the postfeminist, consumer orientated self where sexual attractiveness is sold as a source of power over patriarchy’ (Winch 2011: p361). In *Bletchley,* the purpose of the makeover is explicitly not to reveal Lucy’s authentic self, but rather to conceal it. In attempting to become more like Crowley’s previous victims, the Circle’s primary aim is to increase her availability as a victim of the patriarchy. Rather than seeking empowerment and authenticity, this scene explicitly demonstrates that the result of this particular makeover will render Lucy powerless. Though making her more traditionally sexually appealing, Lucy is entirely reliant on her friends to save her from Crowley’s gaze should their plan succeed. Furthermore, the scene itself replicates none of the usual postfeminist joy in transformation. Rather than an exercise in “self-indulgence,” or even a routine exercise in neo-liberal self-regulation, this is an ordeal that must be endured. This is evidenced by the solemnity of the women, Lucy’s obvious fear, and their mutual repugnance when Millie sprays Lucy with the perfume Crowley forces his victims to wear. In this way, this scene undermines the postfeminist option of empowerment through transformation and makeover by its admission that the changes are all made to appeal to and satisfy the male gaze. Specifically a male gaze that is malicious and harmful (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012).

 Although the women are unsuccessful in attracting the attention of Crowley, Lucy does catch the eye of another man on the train who, after telling her that she ‘looks nice,’ thereby affirming the results of her makeover and masquerade, takes her to an empty baggage car and attempts to rape her. Despite successfully fighting him off, after returning to her home Lucy is savagely beaten by her husband who is suspicious over her prolonged absence and her dishevelled clothing. In a moment of apparent ideological contradiction, the series clearly endorses the postfeminist construction of increased visibility in the male dominated public sphere as dangerous whilst simultaneously underscoring its questioning of the postfeminist makeover paradigm.

 The Circle themselves acknowledge the risks associated with moving into this public space. Discussing their plan to attempt to draw out Crowley and comparing it to their time at Bletchley, Millie says emphatically: ‘we were backroom girls, we never had to make this kind of choice […] whether to put yourself at risk to save someone else’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part 2,’ 2012). Here, the women display an implicit understanding of the difference between male and female subjectivity and acknowledge that their actions move them beyond the safety of the feminine ‘back room’ and into the dangers of the male public sphere. Simultaneously, they also acknowledge the risks to women in a patriarchal cultural economy where they are still primarily constructed as being a spectacle for male consumption.

 However, this concept of the danger of visibility is best demonstrated in the series through Crowley’s growing fixation upon Susan that, in some ways, closely mirrors the relationship between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). Starling is frequently depicted framed by a window, particularly the one in Lecter’s cell that separates her from him but also isolates her as the sole object of his gaze. Susan is also frequently observed by Crowley through windows that isolate her and frame her as a visual object. Through point of view shots, the audience is invited to share this perspective. In one instance, after Susan finds herself alone with a doctor who she realises is Crowley using a false identity, she comes to understand the danger she has exposed herself to. As Susan flees the building, Crowley is shown staring down at her through a window. Lit from behind against the exterior darkness he appears menacing and his prolonged stare and promise that he will ‘be in touch,’ clearly demonstrate his sinister fascination. Susan’s obvious terror and hasty retreat demonstrate her realisation that, through her appropriation of the interrogative gaze, she has made herself visible and therefore vulnerable to Crowley’s highly dangerous gaze (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012).

 Crowley’s ability to send coded messages to Susan’s home demonstrates his awareness of her location and that of her family and his potential closeness. The danger of this closeness is acknowledged by Jean who observes:

when we first started, it was strangers in the newspapers. But every step we get closer to Crowley, he gets closer to us. He knows where you live for God’s sake! (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part three,’ 2012).

It is also emphasised again later in the same episode by a sequence at Susan’s home in which her daughter claims she can’t sleep because ‘the bogeyman’s watching me […] he’s outside in the dark.’ The following shot is of Susan, framed in the window by the light from her daughter’s room as she closes the curtains. She is seen from outside with the lens tilted upwards suggesting the perspective of someone secretly watching her. Susan is thereby again shown as the unwilling object of a hidden and sinister gaze that the viewer is encouraged to assume is Crowley’s.

 Series one reaches its climax when Susan is forced to confront Crowley alone, after he threatens to harm her family. In the ensuing scene, Crowley elaborates upon his fascination with her, suggesting that through her ability to pursue and ultimately find him she has revealed herself to share his deviant perspective. Crowley suggests that through her rejection of her post-war role as a wife and mother and desire to transcend the mundaneness of her traditional feminine role, Susan aligned herself instead with his deviant subjectivity. Through her assumption of the ‘“active investigating gaze,” she exactly reverses the look, making a spectacle of the killer and a spectacle of herself’ (Clover 1987: p219). Thus, it is Susan’s actions rather than Crowley’s deviancy that are depicted as exposing her to danger.

 Even after Crowley’s death, the disruption caused by Susan’s otherness and rejection of her domestic role remains and must be resolved. Upon returning home after her ordeal with Crowley, Susan stands outside of her house and observes her husband playing with their young children in their front room. Timothy and the children are framed by the window in the same way as Susan was previously when observed by Crowley, thereby visually aligning Susan with his deviant subjectivity. The implication is clear that if Susan chooses to remain outside of the domestic sphere and continues to reject her role as a wife and mother, she is, in fact, choosing to adopt Crowley’s deviant and destructive gaze. It is only when she opens the door and is embraced by her children who say explicitly ‘hello mummy!’ and thereby confirm her acceptance of her maternal and domestic role that the crisis of Susan’s disrupted femininity, in series one, is seemingly resolved (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012).

 Much of the tension created by the woman detective is therefore centred and worked through on the female body. Mizejewski suggests that:

The detective story is all about bodies, usually beginning with homicide, the disturbing discovery of the body, a threat to meaning and order. The goal is to restore order through the justice system [… which is] overwhelmingly filled with masculine, white, heterosexual bodies […] When she does appear in the traditional story, the woman shows up as a *body —* if not the victim, then the seductress or suspect (2004: p14, original emphasis).

This suggests that, traditionally, viewers would more readily align the female body with victimhood, as opposed to the figure of the investigator. This is particularly relevant in series such as *Bletchley* that features a male killer of women, who is then investigated by women who therefore have the potential to occupy both sides of the victim/investigator divide. There are salient parallels between the detective/serial killer narrative of *Bletchley*, and the slasher film. Slasher films frequently feature a deranged killer who targets a group of young people, working his way through them until he is thwarted by what Carol Clover defines as, ‘the Final Girl’ (1987: p201). Picking up this point, Mizejewski argues that, ‘throughout the slasher genre, the police are pudgy, middle-aged guys who show up too late,’ as opposed to the heroine investigator; ‘the final girl [who] herself becomes the police, smarter but also more vulnerable’ (2004: p145). Such a description is applicable to the women of the Circle, whose unique skills make them better placed to catch Crowley than the police, and particularly to Susan who embodies many characteristics of the Final Girl. These parallels suggest that certain aspects of horror scholarship, particularly concerning the slasher film, provide a useful framework for thinking through the depiction of gender in *Bletchley.* However, the fact that *Bletchley* is a television series, rather than a film, must be taken into account. This chapter will therefore now move to explore the specific conventions and affective potential of horror created for television. It will explore Clover’s construction of the ‘Final Girl’ and its function in relation to *Bletchley’s* deployment of the male gaze before finally considering the role of the Gothic in the series*.*

## Domestic Terror - Elements of Slasher, Horror and the Gothic in *The Bletchley Circle*

With the production of television series such as *Scream: The TV Series* (MTV 2015 – present), *Scream Queens* (VH1 2015 -2016) and *Slasher* (Super Channel 2016) horror and particularly the slasher are no longer solely the province of film.Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott (2013) and Helen Wheatley (2006) discuss the increased affect of television horror because of its location in the domestic. The horror narrative of *Bletchley* rests on the image of intrusion into the domestic space, an intrusion embodied by the television set. Jowett and Abbott therefore argue that the relationship between television and horror is particularly productive (2013: pxiii). They suggest that the fluidity of television as a genre which, ‘crosses into most other genres from children’s programming to comedy to procedural police dramas to reality television,’ results in a blurring of distinctions that ‘requir[es] us to re-think what we mean by [a genre] within a televisual context’ (Jowett and Abbott 2013: pxiii).

 Jowett and Abbott also suggest that while cinematic horror freely makes use of images of ‘the destruction of the body in graphic detail’ to generate horror, censorship regulations require television horror to rely more upon the imagination to generate terror (2013: p132). They suggest that:

From the early days of television to the present, industrial and broadcast restrictions encouraged horror creators to use stylistic excess to convey the macabre, the abject, the gothic and the uncanny, and to generate fear or unease. This excess [is] constructed through cinematography, lighting, art direction, sound, special effects and performance (Jowett and Abbott 2013: p133).

In *Bletchley,* the generation of this excess, which Jowett and Abbott define as the ‘elements [that] exceed the requirements of the narrative and generate unease and horror’ is evident in numerous sequences (2013: p135). Susan’s first meeting with Crowley takes place in an abandoned psychiatric hospital, which in itself is a fitting setting for horror. The building is dark and empty apart from Susan and the man whom she comes to realise is Crowley, when his strange behaviour reveals his unstable mental state. As Susan flees the hospital down a Gothic spiral staircase, Crowley watches her from above, his growing fixation evident in his facial expression (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012). Later, numerous point-of-view shots allow the viewer to peer through the windows of Susan’s home as she puts her children to bed. Although this is implied to show Crowley’s gaze, in a technique common to horror cinematography this is never confirmed with a reverse shot. This maintains Crowley’s presence as uncertain and inhuman (Dika 1987: p89). The first series is also interspersed with scenes that show Crowley’s victims imprisoned in his underground hiding places as they become aware of the danger they are in and must wait for their eventual fate. Ultimately the greatest excess is generated through the sexual violence and violation of female bodies, which is made explicit in the series through the reading out of an autopsy report detailing Crowley’s ‘post-mortem penetration’ of his victims (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). This is rendered more affective as the violence takes place off screen and is therefore left to the viewer’s imagination. Due to *Bletchley’s* location on television, this horrific excess is then broadcast into the domestic space of the viewer which, as noted, makes it ‘all the more frightening’ (Jowett and Abbott 2013: pxii).

 Furthermore, Mizejewski notes a particular affinity between popular television and serial killer narratives as, ‘like pop culture itself … serial killing is all about sequel, suspense, and repetition’ (2004: p144). Such stories, therefore, lend themselves well to the structure and pacing of serial television, which through repetition and expectation keep viewers engaged over multiple episodes. In tandem with the preponderance of gender-based analysis in scholarly work regarding the slasher film, this means that an investigation of the elements of slasher horror in *Bletchley* will follow.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The notion that slasher films are primarily exercises in misogyny has been robustly challenged within the field of horror studies. Clover’s (1987, 1992) assertions that through their depiction of a male serial killer’s punishment of sexually active young women these films allow audiences to glory in female suffering and death has drawn criticism from scholars in the field. While a thorough analysis of these works and their limitations within the field of Horror Studies falls outside of the remit of this thesis, a brief overview reveals an ambivalence among scholars regarding Clover’s location and understanding of female power within such films. Richard Nowell (2011), for example, outlines the extent to which popular slasher films are tailored to appeal to teenage girls in terms of both content and marketing. Maria Derose (2005) questions the equivalence of female power and violence with masculinity in slasher films. Weaver et al (2013) use content analysis to question assertions that slasher victims are predominantly female. Despite this, this section will suggest that certain aspects of Clover’s theories, namely her conception of the ‘Final Girl’ and scholarly work that stemmed from it, provide useful frameworks to think about the depiction of gender in *Bletchley*.

 As discussed, *Bletchley’s* primary affiliation with the horror genre stems from the first series’focus on the hunt for a sexually sadistic serial killer of women. The sadistic male killer is a defining feature of slasher films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974), *Halloween* (John Carpenter 1978) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven 1984). While sexually motivated murder is common across detective fiction, there are further aspects of *Bletchley*that suggest an association with the horror genre. In her 1987 article ‘Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,’ Clover outlines the following components of slasher films:

the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognisably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a terrible place; the weapon is something other than a gun (p192).

This is not to suggest that this is an exhaustive and definitive list of the essential elements of the slasher film. Rather, this chapter will argue that *Bletchley* draws on an understanding of the horror genre as one driven by misogyny, and the version of the slasher that it deploys speaks productively to Clover’s model.

 Firstly, Crowley, in keeping with Clover’s categorisation, can be identified as ‘a killer propelled by psychosexual fury’ (1987: p194). Although not presented as the product of trauma caused by a ‘sick family,’Crowley is motivated by the trauma of being buried alive during an air raid in the War. This incident, it is suggested within the series, caused Crowley to become unbalanced, obsessive and ultimately sexually sadistic as each of his murders is revealed to be an attempt to recreate this initial traumatic incident. Having worked for a branch of the Special Operations Executive that specialised in the production of pornographic propaganda, Crowley is shown to have a proclivity for images of sexual violence against women. It should also be noted that his method of killing – strangulation – also fits with Clover’s classification of slasher films as a genre in which ‘guns have no place’ (1987: p198).

 In the first episode of series one of *Bletchley*, amidst shots of the Circle going about the everyday lives, buying food in a local shop, Susan eating dinner with her family, there are interspersed shots of a young woman waking up to find herself gagged and bound to some metal piping in an abandoned underground air raid shelter. As Clover notes:

it is the conventional task of the genre to register in close detail [the] victims’ dawning understanding, as they survey the visible evidence of the human crimes and perversions that have transpired […] That perception leads directly to the perception of their own immediate peril (1987: p197).

In the scene mentioned above this is accomplished through a series of camera angles. These range from close up shots of the young woman’s face (partially obscured by a dirty gag) as she wakes up and attempts to understand where she is, to wide-angle shots that reveal the horror of the space she is in and finally further close up shots of her anguished expression as the nature of her situation becomes apparent and she begins to scream (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012).

 It is therefore evident that Crowley’s rage, as Clover suggests is typical of slashers, ‘is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are […] women, often sexually free and always young and beautiful’ (Clover 1987: p205). The construction of Crowley’s victims in the series is relevant in the way that they are repeatedly distinguished from the respectable femininity of the Circle. Firstly, by Timothy who remarks that ‘they weren’t our type at all. Out on their own at night’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). Secondly, by Susan and Jean who, upon expressing surprise that the women were being lured away by Crowley with the promise of black-market goods remark:

I know you wouldn’t Jean. I wouldn’t, but they’ve done it before. That’s how they got those things, their lipsticks and their nylons in the first place, by taking that risk (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Two,’ 2012).

In series two, it is Millie’s involvement with similar black-market trading that opens her up to victimhood. This suggests a direct link, within the series, between the transgression of societal norms and punishment through victimhood.

 This contrast between Crowley’s previous victims and the women of the Circle, particularly Susan, facilitates the conceptualisation of Susan as ‘The Final Girl.’ Clover describes the ‘Final Girl’ as:

the one who did not die: the survivor […] She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies […] and perceived the full extent of the preceding horror and her own peril (1987: p201).

Because of the ensemble nature of *Bletchley*this concept is embodied to some extent by all of the Circle, however it most closely applies to Susan, who is the only one of Crowley’s intended victims to survive.

 Although not all of the characteristics of the ‘Final Girl’ can be applied to Susan, particularly as she does not fall within the usual teen-to-early-twenties age range, there are a number of significant correlations. As well as being the only intended victim to survive, she is also the primary driving force behind the Circle’s investigation of Crowley and the one who pushes the other women into physically searching for Crowley and his latest victim. In this way Susan, ‘like her generic sisters […] is the spunky inquirer […] the one who first grasps, however dimly, the past and present danger’ (Clover 1987: p203). Furthermore, despite the ensemble nature of *Bletchley* Susan is ‘presented from the outset as the main character. The practised viewer distinguishes her from her friends’ (Clover 1987: p204). In the very first scene of series one, although all four women work together to decipher it, it is Susan who first spots and identifies the pattern in the German transmission, it is Susan who first calls the Circle together to suggest that they investigate the murders and it is Susan’s perceptiveness that leads her into the final confrontation with the killer. Although it is the perspectives of all four women who shape and drive the narrative, Susan’s is given priority and, as Clover suggests regarding the ‘Final Girl,’ hers:

is the main storyline. She is intelligent, watchful, level headed; […] the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation (1987: p207).

Despite ensuring her survival, the ‘Final Girl’s’ status as distinct from the killer’s other, more heteronormatively feminine, victims raises questions regarding her own femininity. Usually set apart by her profession, interests or activities, the femininity of the ‘Final Girl’ is undermined by her normatively masculine interests and traits (Clover 1987: p210).

 In *Bletchley*,the first shots of the Circle in their wartime occupation as code breakers align them, and particularly Susan, with the traditionally “masculine” fields of espionage and intelligence as well as logic and mathematics. The subsequent shots of Susan at home after the war seemingly fulfilling the postfeminist ideal of marriage and motherhood are then undermined by the image of the newspaper clippings regarding the murders that she hides behind the mirror on her dressing table and her obsessive following of the case on the radio. Susan’s persistence in pursuing the investigation aligns her further with the ‘Final Girl’ whose ‘unfemininity is signalled by her exercise of the “active investigating gaze” normally reserved for males and hideously punished in females when they assume it themselves’ (Clover 1987: p210). Thus from the outset, Susan, and the other members of the Circle, are marked out as embodying an unstable or questionable femininity because of their “masculine” skills and their desire to appropriate the active interrogative gaze. While initially excused or at least contained as a product of the disruption and necessity of the Second World War, Susan’s continued desire to transcend her role as a wife and mother places her in considerable emotional and physical danger, which is suggestive of the penalties for women who fail to assume traditional postfeminist roles. To achieve the necessary narrative resolution, this disruption must be addressed and resolved.

 In *Philosophy of Horror* (1990) Noël Carroll argues that ‘the horror story is always a contest between the normal and the abnormal such that the normal is reinstated and, therefore, affirmed’ (Carroll 1990: p119). To this end he identifies three steps within horror narratives: ‘“normality,” to “disruption,” and the “final confrontation and defeat of the abnormal”’ (Carroll 1990: p200). When applied to *Bletchley,* this progression has a dual significance. The first and most obvious is when it is mapped onto the narrative of the killer, Crowley, in that his murders are a disruption, both to social order and to the normality of the lives of the Circle as they are compelled to investigate. This then leads to a confrontation in which he and his crimes are exposed by the Circle and he is killed. ‘Normality’ is thereby reinstated with the eradication of the deviant Crowley and the end of the Circle’s investigation. However, the members of Circle mirror this narrative progression themselves. This begins with the disruption to the lives of the Circle as a result of the Second World War and their subsequent recruitment to work at Bletchley Park. It is this disruption that is posited as the real motivation behind the Circle’s investigation, as they seek to recapture the sense of excitement, purpose and utility that their work gave them (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). Their investigation leads to the same confrontation with the killer that brings them into serious physical and psychological danger and is ultimately a confrontation of the consequences of their own investigative actions. This then results in the reinstatement of normality as their investigation ends, the women resume their previous lives and retreat back into the domestic sphere. In this way the ‘defeat of the abnormal’ is applicable both to the death of Crowley and the resolution of the Circle’s transgressive behaviour in pursuing the investigation and subjecting the fulfilment of the postfeminist domestic ideal to question (Carroll 1990: p200).

 Ryan Lizardi notes the tendency in horror films, particularly slasher films, to construct the horrific events of their narratives as ‘punishments for deviations from normality’ (2010: p117). A common method of representing this onscreen is by showing characters, knowingly or unknowingly, leaving a well-trodden path, main road or place of safety to venture into the unknown. As well as classic slasher films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, this can be observed in more recent horror films such as *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard 2012) (which explicitly plays with this convention) and *The Forrest* (Jason Zada, 2016) among others. Lizardi argues that this plot device emphasises the danger of deviation from the norm by ‘signifying the idea that safety exists in “normal” […] areas of the world’ (2010: p117).

 In the first season of *Bletchley*, as discussed, Crowley lures his victims out of train carriages with a promise to supply them with illicit black-market goods. His female victims, therefore, willingly leave a public place of relative safety, in the company of a male stranger in the hope of obtaining illegal goods. Through dialogue this behaviour is represented as both reckless and unseemly with regard to the social norms of the time. As a result of their transgression of following him, unaccompanied, from the train, Crowley is able to take his young victims away from the “normal” world to a place in which they are tortured and killed. Whist it is clear that neither the characters nor the audience are encouraged to allot blame for their fates to the victims themselves — indeed Timothy’s comment is indicative of his limited perspective at that stage of the narrative — their deaths are presented in part as a result of their reckless behaviour. This also ties in with contemporary debates around rape culture and victim blaming in which blame is apportioned to victims of sexual assault based on their clothing or the fact that they had been drinking at the time of the assault.[[25]](#footnote-25) Here again is evidence of a series ostensibly about the past that is inflected by the politics of the present.

 This highly dangerous place is also, knowingly, entered by the Circle as a result of their desire to investigate. To apprehend Crowley in the first series, the Circle must enter and observe awful crime scenes containing horrors, including the murdered and defiled bodies of young women. In the final episode of the first series, Susan, with the knowledge of ‘the full extent of the killer’s depravity,’ beholden to the ‘Final Girl’ (Lizardi 2010: p119), must offer herself up to the same fate (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012). The Circle’s knowing deviation from accepted postfeminist gender norms leads them to a place where, in common with many slasher films, terrible things happen to women. It is only through their return to normality that they escape such dangers, with the clear implication that to take up such investigations in the future would be to expose themselves to similar threats once again.

 Through her identification with the presumed male figure of the investigator (discussed earlier in this chapter), Susan is led to this highly dangerous place. Moreover, as a woman, Susan is subject to the same danger as Crowley’s other female victims and cannot fully transcend her affiliation with them. She also cannot escape the suggestion of deviancy caused by her appropriation of the interrogative gaze and this deviancy results in her alignment with Crowley within the narrative and the drawing of his gaze. While Susan is saved by her friends who arrive in time to prevent Crowley from killing her, the trauma of her experiences remains with her throughout her appearance in the second series.It is only through Susan’s willing relocation back into the domestic sphere when she agrees to accompany Timothy to India where he has been offered a job that she is granted long-term security and safety. Her disrupted femininity is thereby resolved through her submission to postfeminist norms (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part Three,’ 2012).

 This concept of the disrupted domestic ideal embodied by Susan, brings to mind concepts of Gothic horror, which Helen Wheatley identifies as sites for ‘the recognition of domestic anxiety’ (2006: p121). While acknowledging the difficulty of isolating a comprehensive definition of the Gothic as a genre of fiction, Wheatley suggests that Gothic television commonly includes features such as:

a mood of dread and/or terror inclined to evoke fear or disgust in the viewer; the presence of highly stereotyped characters and plots, often derived from Gothic literary fiction […] representations of the supernatural which are either overt (created through the use of special effects) or implied (suggested rather than fully revealed); a proclivity towards structures and images of the uncanny […] and perhaps most importantly, homes and families which are haunted, tortured or troubled in some way (2006: p3).

Although clearly not all of these features are identifiable in *Bletchley*,elements of the Gothic can be identified within the text. The setting of *Bletchley* in the ‘traditional gothic city of London,’ lends itself to this idea of the Gothic within the series (Jowett and Abbott 2013: p125). Jowett and Abbott cite Robert Mighall who argues that, to become Gothic, ‘cities need ‘a concentration of memories and historical associations’’ (2013: p57). Aside from its already rich history, *Bletchley*’s London carries the associations of the death, destruction and misery of the Second World War that, within the chronology of the first series, ended nine years previously. There is also a heavy focus on Gothic buildings within the series. The various government buildings, the library in which Jean works and the Circle plan their investigation and, particularly, the abandoned psychiatric hospital in which Susan first encounters Crowley, all provide examples of imposing Gothic architecture. These Gothic discourses supplement the generation of excess within *Bletchley* however, as this chapter will now demonstrate, many of the keystones of traditional Gothic narratives are subverted. This is because the sense of Gothic anxiety within the series stems not from malevolent masculinity, but from the Circle’s disrupted postfeminist femininity.

## Subverting the Female Gothic

In her 2006 discussion of *Gothic Television*, Wheatley argues that ‘the centrality of domestic space within the image repertoire of Gothic television’ opens up a space for the working through of ‘narratives of domestic fear and entrapment’ (Wheatley 2006: p90). In the Gothic novels and their subsequent television adaptations that Wheatley discusses, a sense of menace is frequently established when female characters are ‘trapped within a decaying home by a suspicious, and/or murderous, husband’ (2006: p92). In the examples she gives, (*Rebecca* BBC1: 1970 and Carlton: 1997, *The Woman in White* BBC1: 1997, *Northanger Abbey* BBC2: 1987 and so forth) the domestic ideal is disrupted by the threat of unstable or deviant masculinity, thus bringing into question the postfeminist imperative of heterosexual romance and domestic fulfilment for women. While this ‘implicitly critiqu[es] the representation of the domestic space as ideal home, and […] the image of the ‘perfected’ woman and/or wife,’ the domestic anxiety in *Bletchley* is generated, and therefore functions, in a different way (Wheatley 2006: p98).

 Rather than the claustrophobic presence of a controlling and/or abusive male, the domestic ideal in *Bletchley,* specifically in Susan’s case, is shown to be disrupted by her desire to transcend it. In turn, this desire is shown to be rooted in the disruption of the Second World War and the resultant mobilisation of women. For instance, after deciphering a German transmission regarding troop deployments and discussing the importance of their war work at the beginning of series one, Susan asks Millie, ‘When this is over, won’t we have to be ordinary?’ thereby distinguishing her exciting challenging life at Bletchley from what she has come to regard as a boring, ‘ordinary’ life as a post-war housewife (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012).

 Susan’s home life, in the first series, is constructed as pleasant but dull. The opening flashback which ends with Millie promising Susan that she won’t have to be ordinary after the war, cuts immediately to Susan, nine years later, knitting in an arm chair in a comfortable if nondescript living room, thereby undermining Millie’s previous assurance (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012).[[26]](#footnote-26) The following shots of Susan playing with her young children show her to be an involved and loving mother and her interaction with Timothy establishes him as inoffensive if oblivious to Susan’s dissatisfaction with her domestic role. Indeed, Timothy’s willingness to introduce Susan to an acquaintance in the police force after she confides her theory regarding the murders to him suggests that he is both supportive and respectful of her. However, the limits of his perspicacity and sensitivity are suggested when, after Susan’s theory as to where one of Crowley’s victims is buried proves wrong, he becomes angry with her desire to continue investigating and refuses to support her. Instead he offers to buy her ‘a new book of puzzles, the hardest puzzles I can find’ (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). In this way Timothy is not constructed as a menacing or controlling presence, but rather his inability to properly see and comprehend Susan’s identity is shown as contributing to her domestic discomfort. Furthermore, it is clearly demonstrated that this lack of understanding stems not from Timothy’s unwillingness, but rather from Susan’s secrecy, demonstrated by her hidden newspaper clippings and necessitated by the restrictions of the Official Secrets Act.[[27]](#footnote-27)

 Indeed, Susan’s home life stands in direct contrast to Lucy’s, who, like Wheatley’s Gothic heroines, isthe victim of a controlling and abusive husband. It is, however, not Lucy’s unhappiness that drives the narrative, but Susan’s desire to escape her relatively “ideal” domestic life. When attempting to persuade the other women to join her in her investigation, Susan suggests that they ‘could be useful again.’ To which Jean replies, ‘What do you mean, “useful again”? Are you saying we’re not useful now?’ Susan’s sarcastic and vehement response demonstrates her disdain for this idea and for the domestic role prescribed for her by post-war society (‘Cracking a Killer’s Code: Part One,’ 2012). It is therefore clear that domestic anxiety within the series stems not from Susan’s actual domestic situation, but rather her own disrupted femininity.

 In this way, the concept of “home” is a complicated one in *Bletchley*. As well as:

its connotations as reward, safe place, as point of return once the danger and upheaval of war have passed […] the home [also] functions as a neutralising/naturalising space to which women can return in order to reclaim their pre-war identities, or, alternatively, to contrast and confirm newly realised identities against pre-war conceptions of themselves (Mahoney 2015: no pagination).

Echoing the idea of ‘the imprisoning nature of the domestic space’ which Wheatley identifies as central to the Female Gothic drama (2006: p105), Susan’s home in *Bletchley* is, at different moments, ‘both her sanctuary and her prison’ (Mahoney 2015: no pagination). As well as confirming her post-war identity as a wife and mother and providing her refuge after her confrontation with Crowley, ‘it also contains the hidden parts of herself in the newspaper clippings she keeps behind her mirror,’ emphasising her secret dissatisfaction (Mahoney 2015: no pagination). Indeed, there are pertinent parallels here with the image of ‘the shrouded room,’ which Wheatley argues, symbolises ‘the destructive secrets within the houses of the female Gothic drama’ which are almost exclusively kept by, or at the behest of, the male (2006: p108).[[28]](#footnote-28) However, in *Bletchley*, it is Susan’s secrecy that is at the root of the anxiety in her marital home. Not only her secret investigation into Crowley’s crimes, but also the Official Secret of her work at Bletchley Park that she is legally barred from sharing with her husband. This is clearly demonstrated in the second episode of series two in which, having reached a crisis point in their relationship, Timothy demands: ‘Stop keeping things from me. You always have been. Don’t think I didn’t know’ (‘Blood on Their Hands: Part Two’, 2014). Here is it clear that it is not just Susan’s recent secretive behaviour that has led to this point, but rather Timothy’s deeper awareness that there was always something about her that is unknown.

 It is therefore evident that it is not Susan’s domestic situation that is at fault. Rather, it is Susan’s own secretive behavior that has contributed to her disrupted femininity and caused the domestic anxiety depicted in the series. Moreover, whilst Susan’s initial motivation stems from her desire to rebel against her maternal role, it is largely their maternal instincts that motivate the majority of the other women. Jean is prompted to investigate Alice’s conviction for murder in series two because, ‘She was one of my girls. You all were,’ clearly indicating her perception of a maternal duty of care (‘Blood on their Hands: Part One,’ 2014). Alice, in turn, is willing to hang for a crime she did not commit because of her feelings of guilt at putting her daughter (whom Alice believes actually committed the crime) up for adoption. Even Millie, who seemingly shuns all trappings of conventional femininity in favour of a “bohemian” lifestyle, is motivated in series two by a feverish desire to protect a young victim of sex-trafficking and reunite her with her younger sister (Lockyer 2014: no pagination). In Susan’s case therefore, it is not through the fundamental reform of her domestic environment that her story is resolved as it would be in Gothic drama. Rather, it is through the reformation of herself and her willing acceptance of, and return to that domestic environment.

## Conclusion

In her 2017 chapter on ‘Women’s History and Women’s Work: popular television as feminine historiography’ Moya Luckett explores televisual representations of the history of women’s work, with *The Bletchley Circle* serving as one of her primary sites of analysis. She elaborates the appeal of such programmes as follows:

Bridging past and present, they link work to female emancipation, agency, self-fulfilment and even glamour, all characteristics that conventionally attract women audiences. Avowedly feminine skills are shown as central for even the most markedly patriarchal and traditional workplaces, with these programmes consistently presenting women as the more visually literate sex and thus more perceptive to the visual clues key to a variety of tasks, including solving crimes (Luckett 2017: p15).

Luckett suggests that *Bletchley’s* subsequent depiction of women forced to relinquish their work despite their obvious skill ‘foregrounds discontinuities, suggesting a less utopian process involving cycles of return, stasis and retreat’ (Luckett 2017: p21). The depictions of a female dominated workplace at the beginning of each series of *Bletchley* recede into scenes showing the women trapped in domesticity or unfulfilled in thankless employment. Luckett suggests that such depictions question the seamless and “completed” feminist progress towards equality assumed by many postfeminist texts and clearly ‘demonstrate the costs of these women’s removal from the workplace’ (Luckett 2017: p21). *Bletchley*’s depiction of female competence and value therefore offers some challenge to postfeminist concepts of natural sexual difference and its relegation of women to the domestic sphere.

 In some respects then, *Bletchley* seems tooffer meaningful narrative resistance to concepts that uphold and enforce the normative restrictions of postfeminism. In their relationships with each other, the women of the Circle are able to transcend both the unsatisfying lives open to them in post-war society and the enforced secrecy that prevents them from publicly celebrating their achievements. Furthermore, in common with other female detective series ‘having a woman investigator interrupts the violent male cycle of killings [and] is a satisfying female fantasy’ (Mizejewski 2004: p145).

However, this chapter has demonstrated that this resistance is illusory and indeed that this illusory nature is vital to the text’s construction of postfeminism when it is ultimately revealed. Due to their construction as temporary, unstable and unsustainable, neither the women’s friendships with each other, nor their work as investigators are depicted as offering the same fulfilment as postfeminist norms of domesticity, romance, marriage and motherhood. Rather than being the result of feminist awareness, the Circle’s desire to transcend their postfeminist roles is represented as stemming from their work during the Second World War, which destabilises their femininity. Furthermore, building on the identification of the danger depicted in *Land Girls*, transgressions of Postfeminist norms in *Bletchley* are harshly punished. The Circle’s appropriation of the active interrogative gaze, though successful, exposes them to physical and emotional danger. This leaves them traumatised and jeopardises their familial relationships. Postfeminist imperatives to matrimony and motherhood are questioned to some extent in *Bletchley* through its deployment of elements of Gothic horror. However the domestic anxiety in the series is, in fact, depicted as the result of the Circle’s disrupted subjectivity rather than their domestic situations. Excesses of horror and unease within the series are generated not only by the actions of its serial killer and sex-trafficker antagonists, but also by the “horrific” transgression of the postfeminist domestic space. This transgression is thereby aligned with criminal deviancy making adherence to postfeminist norms of femininity the only alternative. In this way, *Bletchley* clearly demonstrates the consequences of deviation from postfeminist norms.

# Chapter Four – Peggy Punches him in the Face: Peggy Carter, A New Popular Feminist Hero?

As the first Marvel live-action television series fronted by a female character, *Marvel’s Agent Carter* (ABC 2015 - 2016)(referred to henceforth as *Agent Carter*)is particularly interesting in its depiction of gender. Set shortly after the Second World War, the series follows Peggy Carter as she confronts her post-war relegation from active service in the fictional Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR) and navigates the redefinition of gendered identities in post-war society. *Agent Carter* follows on from the events of Joe Johnston’s *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) that took place during the Second World War and saw Peggy in an active combat role, and the *Marvel One Shot:* *Agent Carter* that was released after *The First Avenger*. The seriessees Peggy undertaking a largely secretarial role in the SSR, which functions along the lines of an undercover intelligence/police department, investigating and tackling unusual threats to the security of the United States.

 Narrative impetus in the series is derived from Peggy’s desire to prove her capability to her male colleagues and to challenge this re-articulation and restatement of traditional gender norms, as well as her grief over the loss of Captain America (Chris Evans) at the end of *The First Avenger.*[[29]](#footnote-29) In the first season of *Agent Carter* Peggy is recruited, without the knowledge of the SSR, by weapons designer Howard Stark (Dominic Cooper), to clear his name after he is accused of treason and selling his creations on the black-market. The second season follows Peggy’s move to Los Angeles to investigate a series of unusual deaths linked to a dangerous substance referred to as ‘Zero Matter.’

 In discussing *Agent Carter* this chapter will demonstrate that the series represents what Gill has termed ‘a resurgence of interest in feminism’ in popular media (2016: p611). This resurgence has rehabilitated the image of feminism as young, “cool,” and attractive yet devoid of political ideology or intent (Gill 2016: p611). This chapter will explore the ways in which the historical setting of *Agent Carter* as well as its location within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) facilitate this depiction of feminism which simultaneously affirms feminist discourses and yet undermines their political goals. Drawing on scholarship around female spies, female action heroes and postfeminist gender identities it will discuss the depiction of Peggy Carter as a viable feminist hero, yet one whose narrative depiction is constrained by the ideological and aesthetic ideals of postfeminism.

 To do this, this chapter will first provide a brief introduction to the character of Peggy Carter and to the MCU as a concept. It will then discuss the historical dislocation of *Agent Carter* and the effect the post-war setting of the series has on its depiction of gender. It will then move to consider the representation of postfeminist masculinity, active femininity and more problematic or deviant femininity within the series. Finally, it will look at the culmination of Peggy’s storyline within the MCU before drawing conclusions as to the feminist potential of both Peggy Carter as a character and *Agent Carter* as a series.

## Peggy Carter - A Brief Introduction

The character of Peggy Carter was first introduced to the MCU in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) as Captain America’s love interest. Her debut in the Marvel comic books, however, was in *Tales of Suspense #77* (Lee 1966) where she appeared in a flashback sequence as a belle from Captain America’s past. In *The First Avenger,* as wellas a love interest,Peggy functions asCaptain America’s primary emotional motivation. He carries a picture of her in his compass which he looks at in times of stress, which links Peggy to figures such as Vera Lynn and the concept of ‘The Forces’ Sweetheart’. Famous for both the concerts she performed for troops as well as visits to wounded soldiers in field hospitals, Lynn is remembered as providing ‘entertain[ment], consol[ation] and amuse[ment …] amid the darkest time this nation has faced’ (Telegraph View, 2014). In this way Lynn is tied in to an important aspect of British cultural mythology and held up as an ‘inspiration to anyone who wants to understand what makes Britain great’ and the visual association with Lynn tie Peggy into that mythology as well (Telegraph View, 2014).

 It is notable that in both the *One-Shot* short film and *Agent Carter* Peggy’s connection to Captain America, and thus her status as a love interest, is restated. This is achieved by replicating the same establishing sequence, in which Captain America deliberately crashes a plane into the Arctic to prevent it releasing bombs over New York City, while Peggy listens over a radio and believes that he has been killed. In this way Peggy’s connection to Captain America is re-established and its relevance to, and contextualisation of, subsequent events restated.[[30]](#footnote-30) In the first episode of season one of *Agent Carter* (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015) this opening sequence is immediately followed by shots of Peggy’s post-war life interspersed with flashbacks to her active service in the Second World War (in actuality these are shots from both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and the *Marvel One-Shot:* *Agent Carter*). The difference between her dynamic, demanding and vital role in the war effort and the mundane domesticity of her current situation is made clear when a shot of her firing a machine gun at enemy soldiers cuts to a shot of her ironing and tidying her small, shared apartment. Thus, Peggy’s grief over the loss of Captain America and over the loss of the active role she played during the war are conflated to form the emotional context of her narrative within the series. The series later reveals her past as a Bletchley Park code breaker who called off an engagement to a British army officer to join the Special Operations Executive, before being recruited to the SSR. This reference to Bletchley Park taps into the popular perception of the wartime role of Bletchley created by films such as *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tyldum, 2014), *Enigma* (Michael Apted, 2001) and television series such as *The Bletchley Circle* (ITV 2012 - 2014) (discussed in Chapter Four) and substantiates Peggy’s covert intelligence credentials. It also sets her apart, like the members of the Circle, as a woman willing to reject (at least temporarily) the traditional feminine fulfilment of marriage and children, in favour of career and duty.

 In the opening sequence of episode one of *Agent Carter,* and via the information about her past revealed throughout the series largely through flashbacks, Peggy is shown to be exceptional. She is tough, both physically and mentally. Her toughness is demonstrated by her fighting skills, weapons proficiency and her background in intelligence. Her willingness to place her career before getting married and starting a family is also marked as unusual within the narrative. For example, in the first episode of season one, Peggy’s roommate warns her: ‘you know, there’s a difference between being an independent woman and a spinster’ (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015). However, her construction as the object of (super) heterosexual male desire place her comfortably within the safety of heteronormativity, confirming her acceptably as a heroine (Brunsdon 1987: p187). This safety is further assured by the revelation in the second Captain America film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, 2014) which was released before the first series of *Agent Carter* aired, that Peggy does ultimately marry after she believes Captain America to be dead. The construction of Peggy in this way – as challenging, transgressive, yet recognisably feminine – allows her to carry out what could, on the surface, be seen as a feminist agenda, and allows the series to establish itself as discernibly feminist in tone. This feminist agenda is characterised by Peggy’s determination to carve out a place for herself in the SSR despite the reluctance and hostility of her male colleagues. For example, when Agent Jack Thompson (Chad Michael Murray) informs Peggy of ‘the natural order of the universe. You’re a woman, no man will ever consider you an equal’ (‘The Blitzkrieg Button,’ 2015). Peggy carries out solo investigations and frequently acts in defiance of her male superiors who attempt to restrict her to secretarial duties. Peggy also defends other women from the unwanted attention and sexist attitudes of the men around them.[[31]](#footnote-31) The discrepancy between Peggy’s actions and competency and the prevailing attitudes of the men around her is underscored by frequent references within the series to a radio drama which tells the story of Captain America. In the series, Captain America’s love interest, Betty Carver, is an obvious parody of Peggy. In contrast to Peggy’s self-sufficiency and skill Betty is constantly in need of rescue. In ‘Bridge and Tunnel’ (2015) Peggy is on her way to interrogate a dangerous suspect while the drama plays on her car radio. When Betty utters the line, ‘I’m so lucky to have a man as brave and strong as Captain America!’ Peggy exclaims, ‘Who writes this rubbish?’ and angrily turns off the radio.

It is this feminist tone that this chapter seeks to interrogate as it locates Peggy and *Agent Carter* within feminist and postfeminist discourses. To fully understand the ways in which these discourses are constructed within *Agent Carter* it is necessary to explore fully the production and generic context of the series. This chapter will therefore move to examine both the location of *Agent Carter* within the MCU, the historical setting of the series and the ways in which these things facilitate or limit the construction of *Agent Carter* as a feminist text and Peggy as a feminist character.

## The Marvel Cinematic Universe - Transmedia Storytelling

The MCU represents a marked departure from traditional cinematic storytelling and there are three factors that must be remembered when considering it as a generic context for *Agent Carter*: first, its construction as an expansive but cohesive and entirely separate universe; secondly, Peggy Carter’s role in that construction; thirdly, the ways in which this affects the construction of feminism within it.

 Wilson Koh succinctly describes the Marvel Cinematic Universe as follows:

This MCU, which began with *Iron Man* in mid-2008, is a string of financially successful, narratively-connected blockbuster movies that showcases the origins and subsequent adventures of Marvel Studios’ superhero characters (2014: p485).

The current MCU can be separated into three distinct phases, which are important to an understanding of its overall structure. The first phase ran from the release of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau) in 2008 up to the ensemble/crossover film *Marvel’s The Avengers* (Joss Whedon) in 2012. The second from the release of *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black) in 2013 up to *Ant Man* (Peyton Reed) in 2015 and encompassed the second ensemble/crossover film *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon), also in 2015. The current phase, phase three, began with *Captain America: Civil War* (Joe and Anthony Russo) 2016, which featured cross overs of many characters from the wider MCU, but was not an entire ensemble event like the two *Avengers* films, and will run until the release of *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden, Ryan Fleck) expected for release in 2019. Phase three will encompass the next two ensemble/crossover films: *Avengers: Infinity War Part One* (Joe and Anthony Russo, expected 2018)and *Avengers: Infinity War Part 2* (Joe and Anthony Russo, expected 2019) (Marvel 2015). As well as these filmic releases, the MCU has expanded into other media, including serial television, with *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (ABC 2013 - present) and *Agent Carter* (ABC 2015-2016), and online streaming with *Daredevil* (2015- present), *Jessica Jones* (2015- present), *Luke Cage* (2016 – present), *Iron Fist* (2017 – present) and *The Defenders* (2017 – present) all released on *Netflix.* With further individual films, television and *Netflix* series, and ensemble productions scheduled for release over the coming years the MCU represents a transmedia enterprise of unprecedented ambition and scope.

In this context, transmedia storytelling can be understood as:

a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a united and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins 2007: no pagination).

While transmedia storytelling itself is not a new phenomenon, the MCU ‘is the first filmmaking endeavour of its kind: multiple separate superhero films taking place within a single diegetic world’ (Hadas 2012: no pagination). Through its use of transmedia storytelling Marvel has produced a vast and complicated universe that fans can engage with in numerous ways and across numerous media platforms. As a result ‘there is no one single source […to which] one can turn to gain all of the information needed to comprehend the MCU in its entirety’ (Jenkins 2007: no pagination).

 To provide a sense of continuity to the MCU there are what Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, describes as ‘connective tissues’ which are plot points, characters and timelines that crossover between films, television and Netflix series (in Philbrick 2010: no pagination). These connections allow viewers to follow character arcs and storylines across different films, series and media platforms and understand that all of them exist within one overarching and coherent universe. Peggy Carter is one of the most prominent of these “connective tissues,” with her appearances in four films subsequent to her introduction in *Captain America: The First Avenger,* and in *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, in addition to the television series and *One Shot* short film of which she is the specific feature. These appearances not only attest to the importance of Peggy’s character within the MCU but also her popularity with audiences.

 As well as providing points of recognition and continuity, there is an added dimension to Peggy’s function within the MCU that results from its complicated timeline. Alongside the production chronology of the MCU films, beginning with *Iron Man* (2008) and ending with the most recent production at the time of writing, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts 2017)*,* there is another timeline that reflects the diegetic chronology of events within the MCU. This chronology runs from *Captain America: The First Avenger* that was released in 2011 but was actually setin the years 1941- 1945, up to the events of *Spider-Man: Homecoming*,which wasreleased in 2017 and set in the present day.

Due to Peggy’s narrative beginning much earlier than other crossover characters such as Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg), she is the only character who experiences almost the entirety of the current diegetic timeline of the MCU. Peggy’s timeline can be followed right from *Captain America: The First Avenger,* to her death in *Captain America: Civil War.* Her appearances therefore provide a sense of temporal progression in the MCU, evidence that time is passing as it does in the real world. In this way, Peggy contributes to the creation of realism within the MCU. She is a point of continuity that can be traced throughout, allowing audiences to locate individual films within the diegetic timeline and understand the MCU as a coherent and functioning universe that is separate to our own.

 The cohesion and separateness of the MCU creates an immersive experience for fans that facilitates the generation of realism in stories that would seem fantastic and unbelievable were they to take place in the “real world.” However, it also distances Peggy’s feminist struggle from the real world of the audience. Her inclusion in a universe which features individuals who do things far beyond the capacity of ordinary people place it in the context of something exceptional, that only an exceptional individual could achieve. While this does not necessarily undermine the series as a feminist text, *Agent Carter* does ‘move us outside the realm of the pedestrian order, implicitly, to preserve it’ (Barnes 2007: p59). Peggy is clearly exceptional, which reads as a qualification necessary to challenge the gendered status quo as she does, which in turn places her ability to do so similarly outside the realm of possibility for women without her extraordinary skills. Thus, a degree of separation is created, which acts as a buffer between Peggy’s reality in which sexism is a real and pressing problem and the reality of the audience. As a result such concerns therefore seem less urgent. In the same way as in Chapters One and Two, this illusion of distance is further bolstered by the historical setting of the series that will now be discussed.

## Historical Dislocation in *Agent Carter*

The historical dislocation of *Agent Carter,* is another factor in the series’ ability to present and engage with discernibly feminist issues in a relatively safe and non-threatening way. In her 2012 discussion of AMC’s *Mad Men* (2007 - 2015) Katixa Agirre points out the utility of the series’ historical setting in mobilising a postfeminist vision of what is, in fact, a pre-feminist time in the sense that the organised feminist movement of the 1960s had yet to take place. This is achieved, Agirre argues, because in this depiction of the past ‘feminist awakening can be simultaneously viewed as urgent in the 1960s and as a victory already achieved’ (Agirre 2012: p155). This allows the series to present a “safe” or “neutralised” version of feminism in which its necessity is simultaneously acknowledged and historically distanced. As a result, problems such as misogyny and sexual discrimination are shown to belong to the past and, specifically, a period before they were addressed and “solved” by second wave feminism. In this way, *Agent Carter’s* historical setting renders Peggy’s challenging and confrontational response to the depicted sexism of her diegetic era acceptable and indeed necessary because it is represented as a pre-feminist time. It is precisely this dislocation in history which bothaccommodates her feminism, because the second wave is yet to occur, and neutralises it, through the assumed knowledge that the second wave *did* occur, meaning that in the modern-day feminism such as Peggy’s would no longer be necessary. Agirre argues that this process of historical distancing facilitates a:

nostalgic view of [the past] as well as a self-indulgent sentiment toward our current situation, which, compared to the unjust world of *Mad Men* seems a much better time to live in (2012: p156).

 The historic setting of both *Mad Men* and *Agent Carter* thus encourages a direct comparison between then and now. Therefore, thanks to the perceived dramatic difference between women’s role in the workplace and wider society and recognition of the overt sexism of Sterling Cooper in *Mad Man* and the SSR in *Agent Carter*, it is suggested that there has been progression from, and even resolution to, such problems. Feminism, it is implicitly suggested, has done its work and, while once vital and urgent, is no longer required.

 Hannah Hamad discusses similar ideas in her 2014 article on *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC 2008 - 2010) as ‘an early example of recession television’ which utilised a time-shift paradigm to reassert and recuperate formerly outmoded ‘recidivist masculinity’ (p201). Hamad discusses the links between postfeminist conceptions of femininity and the idea of temporal crisis and the ways in which temporal dislocation of female characters within narratives often seeks to address perceived problems inherent to postfeminist femininity by relocating them to a pre-feminist time. In *Ashes to Ashes* the displacement of main character Alex (Keeley Hawes) back in time to the 1980s facilitates an ironic representation and recuperation of the sexism of that period embodied primarily in the character of Gene Hunt (Philip Glenister). Hamad argues that, as a direct response to the 2008 financial crisis, which heavily inflected *Ashes to Ashes’* later series, Hunt’s ‘formerly outmoded model of manhood … characterized by brash, retro-sexist masculinism is renegotiated as a viable model of masculinity’ (2014: p201). This reflects a desire for a more “stable”, essentialist construction of masculinity in response to the instability of the financial crisis, one which is made acceptable by ‘mediating and distancing discourses of irony and nostalgia’ (Hamad 2014: p201). In *Agent Carter*, although certainly not depicted as a misogynist, Captain America fulfils this desire for a restatement of masculine protectionism. As a result, Peggy’s own agency is always subject to his overarching narrative. Her heroism is therefore construed as an extension or imitation of his acceptable male protectionism rather than anything uniquely and dangerously feminine.

 This ironic presentation yet distancing of sexist and misogynist attitudes mirrors trends within postfeminism. Through their ironic presentation, problematic and objectifying images of and attitudes towards women, are recuperated and recirculated having been rendered “safe” because of the success of feminism.[[32]](#footnote-32) Indeed, Agirre argues that this knowledge and self-awareness on the part of the audience, which recognises the contrast between past and present, ‘is at the inception of the postfeminist sensibility’ that characterises *Mad Men, Ashes to Ashes* and *Agent Carter* (2012: p157).

 By extension of this idea, the construction of the past – through costume, set design, music, dialogue and so forth – serves ‘not only to recreate the historical context but most notably ‘to act as [a] marke[r] of differentiation between then (the diegetic era of the drama) and now (the time of production/reception of the show)’ (Agirre 2012: p158). Agirre argues that ‘these markers of differentiation […] make the problem of sexism a far removed one [that leaves] little space for the consideration of current sexism problems’ (2012: p159). This effect, of creating a sealed off, removed space in which feminist discourses can be engaged with “safely,” in connection with the setting of *Agent Carter* within the fantasy space of the MCU further confirms that the events and problematic attitudes of its characters are separate and distinct from that of the real world.

 Therefore, while there are some distinctions between the depiction of misogyny and sexism in *Mad Men* and *Agent Carter* that form salient points of comparison, both series present historicised visions of both issues that locate them firmly in the past. In *Mad Men,* the sexism of the male characters is seen as expected, as part of the status quo - an unchanging aspect of the diegetic world of the series that, as such, is not a variable or point of development within the characters’ narratives. Indeed, Agirre argues that the historical distancing of *Mad Men* creates a safe space in which these attitudes can be vicariously enjoyed. In the sealed off world of *Mad Men* ‘negligent parenting, sexism, homophobia and other vices of the time become liberating jokes’ (Agirre 2012: p159). While this is not necessarily the case in *Agent Carter,* which explicitly presents these attitudes and behaviours as problematic, the historical dislocation and humorous tone of the series (which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter) still allows assumptions on the part of the audience that these are relatively trivial matters that will be tackled by the oncoming feminist awakening. These issues are not their concern and, crucially, require no action on their part. The buffer zone conjured by the historical distance removes the problems of sexism, misogyny etc, from the immediate experience of the audience. It neutralises any implicit or explicit presence of feminism as an active and urgent force in both series, because it allows audiences to be reassured of their enlightened, neoliberal present, which has moved beyond the racist, sexist, homophobic past depicted in the series. This concept of historical dislocation could, of course, be applied to all of the series considered in this thesis, all of which are set in the past. However, it is in *Agent Carter*, which has the most discernibly feminist ideological tone, that the utility of this dislocation in undermining challenges to postfeminist discourses is most apparent. The historical setting of the series, as with *The Bletchley Circle*, also places it in a historical context of gender instability after the trauma of the Second World War, which further accounts for and thereby neutralises its challenges to the gendered status quo.

## Gender Instability and the aftermath of the Second World War

It can therefore be seen that as well as establishing historical distance the setting of the series in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War facilitates *Agent Carter*’s discernibly feminist tone. This is because it places the narrative and characters in the pre-existing contexts of both the exceptional circumstances of war that required the mobilisation of female labour, and of the post-war gender instability that resulted from that mobilisation. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, while Peggy is never given a formal military rank (being addressed only as “Agent” and wearing no identifiable rank insignia on her uniform), she performs a role similar to that of an adjutant to Colonel Phillips played by Tommy Lee Jones. Peggy is depicted overseeing the training of a group of SSR recruits whom she informs that she ‘supervises all operations for this division’ (*Captain America: The First Avenger 2011*). This implies that she has a position of authority made possible by the exceptional circumstances of the war and Colonel Phillips’s willingness to ‘take a chance’ on her (*Captain America: The First Avenger* 2011). However this cannot be integrated into the enduring structuring device of military rank and therefore remains an anomaly. Later in the film Peggy is depicted in active combat with the ‘Howling Commandos’ – Captain America’s own crack squadron of soldiers – who she teams up with again in the fifth episode of the first season of *Agent Carter*, ‘The Iron Ceiling,’ (2015). In this way, the upheaval of the Second World War provides narrative, and to some extent historical, justification for Peggy’s presence in an active combat role which may otherwise be seen as unusual or unnatural. In his discussion of female spies (picked up later in this chapter) Toby Miller argues that always ‘there is a question of legitimacy hanging over the female agent,’ and the same could be said of female soldiers, action heroes and detectives (as discussed in Chapter Four) (2003: p155). This ‘questionable legitimacy’ stems from essentialist assumptions about the “natural” passiveness of femininity (White 2007) and usually requires a narrative motivation or justification to explain a woman’s choice to take on an active, action role. In many cases this choice is justified as the response to trauma or a desire for revenge, as with the popular rape-revenge trope frequently deployed in horror films.[[33]](#footnote-33) In the case of *Agent Carter* however this justification is provided by the exceptional circumstances of war and by its location in the fantasy space of the MCU.

 The marked tension over gender roles in *Agent Carter* primarily plays out through Peggy’s relationships with her male colleagues and their reaction to her presence in the SSR once the war is over. It is also established through references to the need to accommodate returning male soldiers in the labour market and reassert male competency in the immediate post-war period. In the opening scenes of the first episode of *Agent Carter*, Peggy’s roommate Coleen (Ashley Hinshaw), returning from a night shift at a munitions factory, informs Peggy that ten women were fired and their jobs given to returning GIs. She complains: ‘I had to show a guy from Canarsie how to use a rivet gun!,’ clearly demonstrating her frustration at the prioritising of male labour over more experienced and capable female workers (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015). This referencing of the displacement of women from paid employment to accommodate returning soldiers not only contributes to the establishment of the historical setting, but also builds the political climate within which Peggy is attempting to forge a place for herself in a male dominated workplace. The SSR is depicted as an almost entirely male space, with the few women who work there performing administrative roles or working as telephone operators. Its organisation and depiction as an open plan office space divided by glass partitions recalls police procedurals such as, to use recent examples, *Life on Mars (*BBC1 2006-2007) and *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC1 2008 - 2010) which, as discussed, are similar in their deployment of a historical setting. The generic affiliation supplied by the set as well as the predominance of male characters serve to further emphasise that Peggy is a woman in a man’s world - both in the specific instance of the SSR and in the wider police procedural/spy/action genre. Peggy’s constant struggle to reconcile her wartime identity with the requirements of the postwar society and the conflict that results from her failure to conform is one of the central themes of the series. *Agent Carter*’s construction as either feminist or postfeminist in tone is as dependent on its depiction of male characters as it is on female characters (Hamad 2014). In the same way as discussed in Chapter Three, the male characters of *Agent Carter* serve as a foil through which its female characters are constructed and defined. It is therefore to an exploration of *Agent Carter*’s depiction of masculinity that this chapter will now turn.

## Postfeminist Masculinity

To fully understand the gender politics at the heart of *Agent Carter* then, it is necessary to explore its depiction of masculinity as well as femininity, the relationship between the two within the series, and the ways in which one inflects the other. Chapters Two and Three dealt with female ensemble dramas (FED) which explore the ways in which the Second World War created unique communities of women that facilitated their members’ temporary transcendence of traditional gender roles. In contrast, *Agent Carter* focuses on Peggy Carter as a woman very much on her own, forging a solitary path through post-war work and social environments dominated by men. Bonnie Dow (2006) argues that it is therefore important to understand the ways in which the construction of these male characters facilitate and inflect the representation of Peggy as a potentially feminist character. Dow argues that the tendency among feminist critics to focus solely on female characters in popular postfeminist media texts, while understandable, is symptomatic of the tendency within postfeminism to ‘[promote] the idea that women’s problems are their own responsibility’ and ‘the outcome of their “choices”’ in a way that is entirely separate from the men around them (2006: p121). This tendency further serves to negate arguments about the systemic nature of women’s oppression and places responsibility for women’s liberation from patriarchal discourses firmly within the realm of their own personal choice. Dow points to television series such as *Family Ties* (NBC 1982-89) and *Growing Pains* (ABC 1985-92) to identify the ways in which the creation of this aspect of the postfeminist sensibility, is made possible and believable through ‘the presence of sensitive, nurturing, postfeminist men’ (2006: p121).

Despite never appearing in the series, other than in photographs and a brief voiceover clip in the opening of the first episode of season one, Captain America is arguably one of the most influential male presences in *Agent Carter.* As briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Peggy’s status as a love interest, and the object of “super” heterosexual desire no less, anchor her narrative destiny safely within the bounds of postfeminist heteronormativity. Indeed, this status is one of the primary ways *Agent Carter* seeks to recoup Peggy back from the brink of being too dangerous or transgressive a woman because of her “feminist” outlook and behaviour (the significance of which will be discussed later in this chapter). Peggy’s demonstrated desire for Captain America, who epitomises ideals of white, western, heterosexual masculinity, serves to reassure the audience of her adherence to traditional norms of heterosexual romance.[[34]](#footnote-34) Charlene Tung also notes that the presence of a male figure, particularly a father figure or love interest, who is physically stronger – a better fighter, or generally more competent than the female hero – also serves to lessen challenges to traditional concepts of gendered labour (2004: p100). While Peggy is demonstrably a better fighter and more effective agent than her male SSR colleagues in *Agent Carter*,the frequent references to her relationship with Captain America ensure that he is a constant, implicit presence, again reminding the audience of the ultimate superiority of masculine protectionism (Godfrey & Hamad 2012). This, combined with the revelationthat Peggy does ultimately marry, means that Peggy’s narrative is safely top and tailed by the boundaries of heteronormativity. This heteronormativity works in service of the postfeminist sensibility as it reaffirms discourses of romance and marriage.

 These boundaries reassure audiences that Peggy is subject to conventional, heterosexual desire as well as notions of traditional feminine fulfilment through her marriage and pull her “feminist” traits back from the brink of being too radical. Tung argues that it is this retention of ‘key characteristics that maintain [female action heroes’] acceptability as […] heroines’ and limit the challenged posed by them to the masculinity of both character and viewer (2004: p100). In this way ‘the mythical norms of feminine comportment are only partially called into question,’ (Tung 2004: p100). Peggy’s identification as a beautiful, desirable woman further limit her challenge to normative femininity. Indeed, her desirability to her male colleagues is repeatedly referenced through jokes between them and their explicit acknowledgement that the other women in their lives do not look like her. This repositions Peggy back within more traditional feminine discourses of beauty and heteronormative desirability. In the second season of *Agent Carter,* Peggy becomes the centre of a love triangle storyline. This comesafter an emotional ending to season one, which saw Peggy finally accept the loss of Captain America and the need for her to move on. This indicates that her chosen singledom was a result of her grief, which, now over, has left her ready to re-adopt a more traditional feminine attitude towards heterosexual romance.[[35]](#footnote-35)

 Aside from Captain America, one of the other most prominent male presences in the series is that of Edwin Jarvis (James D’Arcy), butler to Howard Stark who acts as Peggy’s companion and sidekick. Jarvis embodies many of the domestic and traditionally feminine traits that Peggy is depicted as lacking because of her dedication to her career. After their first introduction Jarvis informs Peggy that, should she require his assistance, he would be available any time before nine o’clock each evening. Upon Peggy’s enquiry as to what happens at nine o’clock, Jarvis replies ‘My wife and I go to bed. Seven o’clock sherry, eight o’clock, Benny Goodman. Nine o’clock, bed’ (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015). This commitment to the domestic sphere and its limitations on participation in the professional, is most usually deployed in relation to postfeminist depictions of “career women” who try and fail to “have it all” and it is notable that, in this case, it is applied to a male character.[[36]](#footnote-36) However, Jarvis’s occupation, and the well-established “butler” trope, does go some way towards explaining these otherwise feminine traits.[[37]](#footnote-37) Furthermore, Jarvis’ happy domesticity is often used as a reminder to Peggy of that which she lost with the death of Captain America and which she continues to forgo with her dedication to her career. Peggy is not depicted as suffering from the traditional postfeminist dilemma of ‘miswanting’ (Negra 2009: p95) in choosing her career over her personal life and, when it is later revealed that she did marry, there is no indication that she gave up work to become a housewife and raise a family. However, the series determinedly leaves open an alternative narrative in which, had Captain America lived, Peggy’s choices and circumstances may have been different. This alternative reality of “super”- marital bliss casts its shadow over the events of the series as “what might have been.”

 As discussed, Peggy’s relationship to her male colleagues at the SSR and the ways in which she reacts to their sexist attitudes towards her is one of the main ways in which *Agent Carter* seeks to establish itself as discernibly feminist in tone.This is primarily accomplished through Peggy’s relationship with Agent Jack Thompson, who is domineering, bullish and consistently demeans Peggy’s experience and ability.

 However, despite his obvious construction as an antagonist and obstacle that Peggy must overcome, Agent Thompson’s attitude and demeanour are to some extent excused by the historical setting of the series. Their impact is also lessened by *Agent Carter*’s lightly comedic tone. As with much Marvel output, *Agent Carter* has a strong comedic element to its generic construction and is often ironic and irreverent in tone. The ironic deployment of the ‘Betty Carver’ character discussed previously is a primary example of this. As such, audiences are encouraged to laugh at the blatant sexism of the male characters and its anachronism, and find humorous Peggy’s inevitable triumph over them. For instance, when Thompson asks Peggy to do some filing rather than assist with the ongoing investigation because ‘you’re really so much better at that kind of thing’, Peggy replies ‘What kind of thing is that Agent Thompson? The Alphabet? I could teach you. Let’s start with words beginning with A’ (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015). In this way, Thompson’s sexism is constructed as laughable and vaguely pathetic. However, while this goes some way to establishing the series’ feminist credentials in that Peggy confronts and challenges the sexist attitudes she encounters, the comedic tone cushions any active challenge to traditional gender norms. Sexism becomes a joke to be laughed at, rather than a form of systematic discrimination to be contested and overcome.

 In discussing television series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-77) and *Maude* (CBS 1972-78) Dow identifies female characters which she terms, ‘“superwo[men …] with children who also had a professional career and yet seemed to effortlessly combine the two’ (2006: p121). Dow discusses the aptness of the comedy genre, in which these series can be located, for negotiating feminist discourse on television. She suggests that the sitcom format allows television to, ‘[dip] its toes in the waters of feminism’ without offering too strident a challenge to dominant patriarchal values’ (2006 p116). While *Agent Carter* does not function as a sitcom, its comedic elements serve a similar purpose. Furthermore, while Agent Thompson cannot be described as one of the benign, well intentioned male characters Dow identifies as central to the nascent feminism of the series listed above, he is not the terminally misogynist Don Draper (John Hamm) of *Mad Men* either.

 As the series progresses, Thompson’s undeniably problematic attitude towards Peggy is first suggested to be the result of his ‘little crush on Carter’ (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015). Later it is shown to be a result of his experiences during the Second World War, which convinced him of the need to embody a certain type of bullish, hypermasculinity. For Jack, regardless of whether it was representative of his true feelings, this hypermasculine persona was necessary in order to survive and navigate postwar society (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015). Drawing on both the idea that much male hostility towards women is the result of an inability to express feelings of attraction (encapsulated by the idea of schoolyard bullying) and that Thompson is ‘capable of being enlightened’ (Dow 2006: p116), the series presents his misogyny as a product of the times in which he lives and, while certainly reproachable, ultimately redeemable.

 Returning again to Dow, in her discussion of critical responses to *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes 1975) she identifies a reluctance on the part of many critics to accept the idea that ‘men as a group, oppress women, as a group, because they can, because it benefits them’ (2006: p119). Here, Dow clearly identifies an unwillingness to accept the systemic nature of the patriarchy. She argues rather that dominant discourses reduce women’s oppression down to individual cases and circumstances of one particular man, oppressing one particular woman for reasons entirely his own and germane to those specific circumstances (Dow 2006: p119). While *Agent Carter* does go some way towards recognising the systemic nature of women’s oppression, the safety conjured by the historical distance, the comedic tone and the redeemability of even the main male antagonists negates some of its critical force. Indeed, in the final episode of *Agent Carter* Thompson’s rehabilitation is made complete when Peggy acknowledges ‘You’re a good man Jack. I know that’ (‘Hollywood Ending,’ 2016). As a result, the sexism of the period that Jack embodies is also symbolically rehabilitated and excused.

 In contrast to Agent Thompson the audience is offered Agent Daniel Sousa, a wounded war veteran who is identified from the start as more sensitive than his SSR colleagues.[[38]](#footnote-38) Dow discusses the proliferation in postfeminist television drama series in the 1980s - 90s of:

sensitive new age guys (SNAGS for short), often the love interests of postfeminist female characters, who not only love and respect these alpha women for who they are, but are deferent to and supportive of their ambitions (2006: p122).

Sousa’s respectful attitude towards Peggy, acknowledgement of her expertise and ability, and obvious romantic feelings for her identify him as a SNAG. Indeed, at the end of the second season of *Agent Carter,*after he has broken off an engagement because of his feelings for Peggy, Sousa is rewarded when Peggy decides to remain in Los Angeles to pursue a relationship with him, rather than returning to her life in New York (‘Hollywood Ending,’ 2016). In this way Sousa is not cast as the hero required to rescue Peggy (in fact Peggy saves his life in the final episode). Rather, Sousa becomes ‘the *prize*,’ the reward for Peggy’s acceptance of heteronormativity (Dow 2006: p126 original emphasis).

 Another particularly relevant depiction of masculinity within *Agent Carter* is that of the ‘Howling Commandos,’ Captain America’s former squadron of soldiers who appear in the fifth episode of the first season, entitled ‘The Iron Ceiling’ (2015). The title of the episode bears scrutiny in and of itself because of its dual reference. The title references both the ‘iron curtain,’ a term used by Winston Churchill to describe the divided state of Europe during the cold war (*Sinews of Peace (Iron Curtain Speech* 1946) and the ‘glass ceiling’, a term used to describe ‘the unseen, yet unbreachable barrier that keeps minorities and women from rising to the upper rungs of the corporate ladder, regardless of qualifications or achievements’ (Washington 1995). This places the episode in the context of both Cold War political instability and gender tension over women’s role in the workplace.

 The episode centres on a covert mission to Belarus to gather information about a covert agency named Leviathan, after Peggy utilises her skill as a code breaker to intercept and translate a coded message. Despite her extensive experience in the European theatre during the war, her superiors, and particularly Agent Thompson who commands the mission, are unwilling to allow her to participate. To demonstrate her valuable experience Peggy asks Agent Thompson whether he knows what it would mean to be able to smell Herring in the air during a Belarusian summer, to which he glibly replies ‘Mmm someone’s having a fish fry.’ Peggy then replies:

It means there is wind blowing from the Baltic. It means a snow storm in July, and if you can smell the wind it means you have thirty minutes to find shelter and build a fire before you die of hypothermia in the morning. I know all of this because I’ve been there (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015).

Despite her obvious suitability for the mission, it is only her ability to secure the services of the Howling Commandos that ultimately earns her a place. While audiences are clearly intended to despair of the short-sighted sexism of the SSR agents, it is ultimately Peggy’s ready acceptance among the Howling Commandos that both earns her the respect of her SSR colleagues and signifies her competency as a soldier to the audience. It is their male acknowledgement of her skills that ultimately validates them and wins her acceptance among the male SSR agents. For instance, when one SSR agent asks commando “Dum Dum” Dugan (Neal P. McDonough) whether he fought alongside Captain America in a tone of awe, he replies ‘Yeah, but not as long as she did’ (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015). While the necessity of male validation is problematic, Peggy’s skills and competence are repeatedly foregrounded within the series and, it is made clear, are the result of her own hard work, dedication and talent. Indeed, after proving herself the better soldier by saving Agent Thompson’s life after he freezes in the face of enemy fire, Peggy is finally accepted as “one of the boys” by the rest of the SSR agents. Upon their return home, they invite her out for a celebratory drink with them, something from which she had always previously been excluded.

 In this way, Peggy is again marked out as exceptional. It is her unique ability to transcend the perceived limitations of women in combat roles that gains her acceptance, rather than any acknowledgement that women in general make as capable soldiers as men. It is also notable that when the Howling Commandos further confirm her acceptance among them by deciding that Peggy must have a nickname as the rest of them do, they choose ‘Miss U’, short for ‘Miss Union Jack.’ Despite Peggy’s sarcastic dismissal of this suggestion when she tells Dugan to ‘never speak again,’ this serves to highlight Peggy’s hyperfeminine characteristics. It likens her to a beauty queen and is again suggestive of the concept of the traditionally feminine “Forces’ Sweetheart” through its idolising of feminine beauty (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015).

 This is not to suggest that for *Agent Carter* to be “successfully” feminist its male characters would have to be entirely without hope of redemption from their sexism. However, the reaffirmation of traditional codes of beauty and femininity, as well as the reduction of sexism back into individual experience and the reprioritisation of heterosexual romance and fulfilment, is symptomatic of the apolitical nature of the current postfeminist moment. This moment, Gill argues, can be identified by ‘a multiplicity of (new and old) feminisms which co-exist with revitalised forms of anti-feminism and popular misogyny’ (2016: p612). She argues that, while ‘feminism has a new luminosity in popular culture’ as emphasised by the existence of series such as *Agent Carter*, its representation in the media is inherently uneven, and contentless (2016: p614). This is due to its equation of feminism with the mere fact of being a woman rather than any discernible politics or activism (2016: p615) For Gill, the continued emphasis on management of the self through self-regulation, “wellness” and personal choice means that despite feminism being reclaimed as a positive label, it is in a form that poses no direct challenge to hegemonic social structures (2016: p619). These kind of “feminisms,” Gill argues, therefore remain complicit with neoliberal capitalism and may stave off activist feminist movements that seek to challenge it. In this way, feminism is taken into account but it entails no call to action or demand for change and as such is rendered inert, in a way that is consistent with much popular postfeminist discourse.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The range of visible femininities offered by contemporary media as “acceptable” remains narrowly defined and the parameters of this new feminism bear striking similarity to the aesthetic and ideological requirements of 1990s and millennial postfeminism. While there is arguably an increased willingness to challenge historically enduring and restrictive gender norms in series such as *Agent Carter*, it is a challenge carried out only with words and signified by attitude rather than political actions. Furthermore, these transgressions must be balanced out.Postfeminist parameters such as self-discipline, regulation and adherence to heteronormative beauty, love and relationships still delineate a “safe space” within which otherwise transgressive “feminist” femininities can operate, buffered from accusations of failure, incorrectness or deviancy. With the aim of exploring this space further, it is to the various depictions of femininity in *Agent Carter* that this chapter will now turn.

## Femininity in *Agent Carter*– action heroes, spies and dangerous women

From her first appearance in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier,* Peggy is generically affiliated with various tropes of active femininity: most notably the female spy and female action hero. Her association with these well-established tropes, connected with the wartime setting discussed above, lends credibility to her exceptional skill, strength and resultant transgression beyond normative femininity. Indeed, Peggy’s very embodied strength allows her to, quite literally, fight her oppressors. This includes, on occasion, her colleagues in the SSR. In her discussion of “new” heroines for women in the spy and action genres, Charlene Tung argues that ‘one of the hallmarks of the new heroine is her ability to utilise her body to effectively kick, punch, maim and kill others, particularly men’ (2004: p100). Tung argues that through the depiction of women physically overpowering and outfighting men:

women are given the possibility of a new embodiment, one that speaks against the dominant media imagery of women as inherently weak as objects of male desire and in need of male protection (Tung 2004: p106).

 In some ways, this embodied concept of strength affirms postfeminist discourses of individual empowerment through bodily discipline and performance. However, there are feminist undertones to Peggy’s willingness to use her body to protect the lives and rights of other women rather than to secure the approval of her colleagues by submitting to their male gaze. For instance, when Peggy’s friend Angie (Lyndsy Fonseca) is harassed at her place of work, Peggy approaches the man and, pressing a fork into his arm, informs him:

Just so we're clear, this is pressed into your brachial artery. It may be dull, but I'm determined. Keep smiling. Once you start to bleed, you'll lose consciousness in fifteen seconds. You'll die in ninety unless someone comes to your aid. Now, given your recent behaviour, how likely do you think that is to happen? To prevent this not entirely unfortunate event from occurring, I suggest you find a new place to eat. Do we understand each other? (‘Now is Not the End,’ 2015).

Yvonne Tasker suggests that ‘at one level the action heroine represents a response of some kind to feminism, emerging from a changing political context in which images of gendered identity have been increasingly called into question through popular cultural forms’ (2014: p15). Furthermore, as well as rendering Peggy’s fight against patriarchal attitudes in literal terms, this physicality also strengthens Peggy’s affiliation with other famous examples of tough women, the long-established context of female spies on screen, and the challenge they offer to traditional concepts of gender labour. Rosie White argues that ‘women spies in fiction, film and television are licensed to be violent agents and, thus, confound the western binary understanding of gender that aligned femininity with objectified passivity’ (2007: p1). Discussing *Alias* (ABC 2001 - 2006) Abbott and Brown argue that the placing of a female agent as the main character in both a genre and occupation that has traditionally been dominated by men allows that character to ‘undermine the patriarchy on its own terrain’ (2007: p6). All of which boosts *Agent Carter*’s affiliation with discernibly feminist ideas and themes.

 However, one of the most famous female spies to appear on British television screens, Emma Peel, played by Diana Rigg in *The Avengers* (ITV 1961 - 1969), could arguably be seen as the ultimate *post*feminist icon. Sexy, intelligent and exceptionally tough, Emma Peel is empowered in and of herself, while clearly subordinate to her male superior, Steed (Patrick McNee). Aesthetic nods to Emma Peel’s distinctive style is evident in many subsequent iterations of female spies, with her skintight black leather catsuit and long, straight red hair referenced by characters such as Sydney Bristow played by Jennifer Garner in *Alias* and Natasha Romanov played by Scarlett Johansson in the MCU. These references evoke and appropriate the image of the sexually appealing femme fatale conjured up by Peel and suggest common traits attributed to all female spies. As with Peggy, all of the above examples of female spies operate within patriarchal hierarchies. The CIA/SD-6 in *Alias*, “The Organisation” or “The Ministry” in *The Avengers* and the SSR in *Agent Carter,* are all places where individual female agents work to forge a place and gain acceptance for themselves rather than to reform or reject the patriarchal basis of these organisations entirely.

 The hierarchical relationship between Emma Peel and Steed is subverted in *Agent Carter,* inthe relationship between Peggy and Jarvis*.* As well as the obvious aesthetic and stylistic links between Steed and Jarvis through both characters’ eccentrically foppish style and strict observance of politeness and etiquette, further references can be identified, for instance in Jarvis’ suggestion that a cane with a sword concealed inside it would be a suitable weapon (‘Life of the Party,’ 2016). Yet, unlike Peel and Steed, Jarvis is clearly subordinate to Peggy both in terms of skill and his status as an amateur. In this way, the co-dependence and necessity of the male/female relationship is maintained but the power dynamic is reversed by giving authority to the female.

 As to further comparisons between Peggy and Emma Peel, Peggy’s sexuality is arguably more understated, with her clothing tending to be more practical than a leather catsuit, though still stylish. Peggy is rarely shown as anything other than fully clothed: her attractiveness is bound up in her display of fashionable clothes and immaculate hair and makeup rather than skintight clothing or the display of skin. Indeed, the few times Peggy is seen in any state of undress is when she is tending to wounds received in the line of duty. Despite this, Peggy is undeniably sexualized by male characters in the series. For example, in the first series Peggy is forced to use a male changing room as it is the only one available in the SSR. In response to the outcry of its male occupants when she enters, Peggy asks, ‘such fuss. Do none of you have sisters?’ to which a male agent replies in awe, ‘They don’t look like you!’ (‘The Iron Ceiling,’ 2015) In the second series, she disguises herself as a secretary, wearing a red wig and pencil skirt to gain entry into the office of suspect Hugh Jones (Ray Wise), who she is forced to repeatedly stun. Each time he regains consciousness, having forgotten what just happened, Jones makes a lascivious comment or innuendo such as, ‘I think your work will need some “special attention,”’ and ‘I heard a rumour about red-headed women’ (‘The Atomic Job,’ 2016). While Peggy’s clothes are less obviously fetishistic than some of the costumes traditionally worn by female spies, there are overtones of burlesque glamour to her 1940s style red lips and pin curls. It is notable that her beauty is most frequently pointed out by those around her and usually to her irritation, simultaneously signifying her nominal rejection of such heteronormative codes of beauty, yet placing her safely within their bounds.

 As Mulvey (1975) posited, there is visual pleasure for the spectator in the display of the body. Although not displayed in an overtly sexualised manner, Peggy’s body, specifically her bodily strength and fighting skill, are one of the key aspects of her character and central themes of the series. This is most clear in the series’ frequent fight scenes, which feature close up shots of various parts of her body and face as she uses her body to defend herself or attack her enemies. Unlike Emma Peel, whose fighting style has been described as ‘balletic kung-fu’ (Speirs 2015: p273), Peggy’s fighting style is visceral and aggressive, utilising nearby objects such as pipes, bags of heavy coins and even a stapler to cause maximum damage. She frequently draws blood and knocks her opponents unconscious.[[40]](#footnote-40) There are numerous scenes in which Peggy is almost overpowered by her opponents. Frequently grabbed from behind and almost strangled, it is through ingenuity and intelligence, as well as skill, that she is able to overpower much larger, stronger and usually male opponents. There are instances in which Peggy is rescued from both unwinnable fights and her own stubborn tendency to go it alone by the timely intervention of Jarvis. However, *Agent Carter* moves away from tendencies in series such as *The Avengers* to use shooting methods that ‘trop[e] conventional horror-film methods of demeaning women, such as the evocation of panic and point of view shooting from the perspective of the assailant’ (Miller 2003: p158). Through a focus on Peggy’s actions, moves and reactions, she is almost always shown to be in control.

 It is notable that on one of the few occasions that Peggy is completely bested, and when she sustains her most serious injury, she is fighting a woman. During season two episode ‘The Atomic Job’ (2015) Peggy is overpowered by Whitney Frost’s (Wynn Everett) supernatural strength. To escape her, Peggy must drop from a dangerously high ledge which results in her landing and being impaled on a metal bar. In both seasons it is a female opponent who ultimately overcomes Peggy — in the first season Dottie Underwood (Bridget Regan) knocks Peggy unconscious by kissing her whilst wearing anaesthetic lipstick (‘A Sin to Err,’ 2015). This suggests that Peggy’s most dangerous enemies are not male representatives of the patriarchy but women who, like her, have sought to escape. In this way, *Agent Carter* moves away from the depiction of women as the perpetual victims of men. This could be seem to bolster the series’ feminist credentials, however the construction of Peggy’s female antagonists calls this into question (this will be discussed in detail later in the chapter).

 *Agent Carter’*slocation within the action/spy genre ‘legitimates […] and provides a narrative justification for such physical display’ (Tasker 2014: p2). In fight scenes, Peggy’s skilful and spectacular use of her body provides both justification and invitation to look at her body. For the viewer, visual pleasure can be drawn from both the spectacle of this skill and the display of her disciplined and beautiful body. As Brown and Abbott argue in relation to the physicality and styling of Sydney Bristow in *Alias*, ‘the pleasure comes both from watching her in a blue rubber dress and knowing she can kick ass in it,’ (2007: p7). In the same way, pleasure can be found in *Agent Carter* in Peggy’s ability to outfight a roomful of male enemies whilst maintaining her beautiful, stylish appearance.

The culmination of the scene mentioned above, with Peggy, despite her strength and skill, impaled on a metal bar, re-emphasises the feminine vulnerability of her body. In this scene Peggy’s ‘weakness [and] vulnerability is expressed through the mobilization of traits associated with femininity, most particularly a softness or lack of definition which might allow the body to be fatally penetrated’ (Tasker 2014: p17). As well as denoting Whitney’s superhuman strength and establishing her as a dangerous enemy, this image of penetration of the female body also raises the spectre of the threat of rape and sexual violence. This is touched on again in a later episode in the first season when Peggy is arrested by the SSR on suspicion of treason for her assistance of Howard Stark. During an interrogation she is handcuffed to a table, at which point she indicates her handcuffs and informs Agent Thompson, ‘If you want to hit me, now’s your chance’ (‘SNAFU,’ 2015). Ostensibly, this is a taunting reference to Agent Thompson’s usual interrogation technique of male suspects and Peggy’s frequent besting of him in fights. However, his response that ‘Chief Dooley’s going to make me do something to you that I don’t want to’ carries connotations of sexual threat. This is underpinned by the power dynamic between the free, active and powerful male and the restrained, passive and vulnerable female. Furthermore, as Tasker points out, women such as Peggy who take on action roles within film and television narratives are ‘constantly subject to physical violence. For women this physical vulnerability is easily mapped onto the sexualised violence of rape’ (Tasker 2014: p151).

 Therefore, Peggy’s ‘to be lookedatness’ (Mulvey 1975: p11) and the re-emphasising of vulnerability associated with femininity could again be seen to problematise *Agent Carter’s* construction of Peggy as a viable feminist hero. However, Inness argues that although depictions of heroic femininity ‘can be rooted in stereotyped female roles [they] can simultaneously challenge such images’ (Inness 2004: p7). In challenging gender norms Peggy ‘creat[es] a new gender system in which she can enact ‘woman’ in nontraditional ways’ (Inness 2004: p8). However it is the restatement of the more traditional aspects of Peggy’s womanhood that serves as an anchor to heteronormativity and allows her to transgress so far without straying into deviancy. In both series of *Agent Carter*, it is the contrast of Peggy’s challenging, yet moral and largely unproblematic, femininity with the obviously deviant and immoral femininities of Dottie Underwood and Whitney Frost, that reaffirm Peggy’s acceptability and recoup her back from the brink of being too transgressive as a result of her “masculine” skill set and “feminist” attitude. To explore this further, this chapter will now turn to examine the characterisation of both Dottie and Whitney and the ways in which *Agent Carter* seeks to construct unacceptable or dangerous femininity.

## Dangerous women

As has previously been noted, in both seasons of *Agent Carter*,Peggy’s principle adversary has not been a male – a representative of the patriarchy – but a woman, who represents the danger of unchecked femininity. Both Dottie and Whitney are shown to be devious, murderous and in possession of skills (in the case of the latter supernatural powers) which make them a danger to those around them and clearly mark them out as transgressive. Peggy is discursively linked to both Dottie and Whitney throughout both seasons: similarities between the three women are established through flashbacks to their respective pasts, comments made by other characters, and their shared status as “outsiders.” In this way the suggestion is implicit within the narrative that Whitney and Dottie represent what Peggy could become were she allowed to stray too far beyond the norms of postfeminist femininity.

 In the first season, Dottie poses as an enthusiastic if slightly scatterbrained young woman who moves into the same building as Peggy to explore New York City (‘Time and Tide,’ 2015). In her assumption of accepted hyperfeminine and overtly girlish traits, such as childish naivety and helplessness, Dottie conceals her true identity as a highly trained agent of Leviathan. In ‘The Iron Ceiling’ (2015) details of her training and conditioning are revealed when Peggy and the Howling Commandos discover the facility in which Dottie was trained and flashbacks show Dottie’s experiences there. In the opening sequence of the episode, a young Dottie is shown sharing bread with a girl who she is subsequently paired with in a training fight. The fight culminates in Dottie snapping the other girl’s neck. The dormitories of the facility are shown to contain beds to which the girls are shackled each night (a practice that Dottie is shown to continue in the present day). This is combined with the use of fairy tales to teach the girls English and the pigtails in which the girls wear their hair. The juxtaposition of traits associated with childish or girlish femininity with images of violence, assassination and bondage serves as a marker of corrupted and deviant femininity. Indeed, the facility is shown to be overseen entirely by women and all the trainees to be young girls; it is later explained that Leviathan exclusively trains female assassins because women are frequently overlooked and rarely perceived to pose a threat.

 As similarities between the two are identified repeatedly within the narrative, Dottie is established as a kind of distorted mirror image of Peggy suggesting that Dottie is what Peggy could have been or could yet become. In ‘The Iron Ceiling’ (2015) Dottie breaks into Peggy’s room and imitates her whilst sitting at her dressing table. While in ‘The Lady in the Lake’ (2016) Dottie dresses up as Peggy, wearing her distinctive red hat and blue suit from the first episode of season one to rob a bank. There is also a demonstrated affinity between the characters, with each one being both fascinated and appalled by the other. Indeed, in ‘The Life of the Party’ (2016) when Peggy is injured and unable to infiltrate a charity fundraiser to obtain evidence regarding Whitney Frost, she suggests Dottie as a viable substitute. In discussing the type of person required, Agent Sousa says to Peggy:

What you need is a highly skilled, unknown face, who can blend in with the glamour and throw down in the gutter. I don’t know anyone besides you who can pull that off (‘The Life of the Party’ 2015).

Here Sousa identities that both women share the ability to move through various identities, or versions of femininity, as their situation requires.[[41]](#footnote-41) In a similar manner to Dottie’s masquerade as an “ordinary” girl, Peggy is frequently seen in disguises that draw on tropes of “conventional” femininity. For example, in ‘Now is Not the End’ (2015) Peggy dons a long blonde wig and a floor length silver evening dress to infiltrate a glamorous cocktail party and in ‘The Atomic Job’ (2016) Peggy uses a red wig and a tight, red pencil skirt to pose as a secretary to enable her to search a suspect’s office. In both instances, Peggy mobilises accepted feminine traits such as glamour, beauty and girlishness to disarm her opponents and make herself appear as less of a threat. Her frequent rolling of her eyes when her male targets are disarmed and distracted by her femininity signifies Peggy’s disdain for the effectiveness of these disguises. This emphasises her alienation from these traditional versions of femininity. Furthermore, in demonstrating that she is exceptional, the series aligns her more closely with Dottie and Whitney’s transgressive identities.

 Whitney also adopts the trappings of traditional femininity by posing as a loving wife to a respected US Congressman to masque her true intentions. Flashbacks to Whitney’s childhood in Oklahoma show her to be a uniquely gifted child, living with her single mother who relies on her lover - Uncle Bud (Chris Mulkey) - to provide for them. In the first of these flashbacks Whitney is seen aged around six or seven years old, repairing a radio. In a later flashback she is a teenager, poring over complicated equations and drawings. Her intelligence is marked as freakish, with Bud labelling her ‘a real strange kid’ when she refuses to smile for him because she is ‘thinking’ (‘Smoke and Mirrors,’ 2016). Later, Whitney and her mother are kicked out by Bud because he has begun a relationship with a younger woman. Whitney also discovers she has been rejected from a university science programme because she is a woman. In response, he mother grabs Whitney’s face and referring to her beauty, tells her:

No one cares what’s in your head. If you were half as smart as you think you are you’d fix on this. This is the only thing that’s going to get you anywhere in this world (‘Smoke and Mirrors,’ 2016).

Whitney’s subsequent career as a model and actress and her marriage to a powerful US senator can therefore be seen as her turning that advice to her advantage. By successfully performing aspects of conventional femininity, Whitney is able to gain power and influence. Through her husband’s industrial and criminal connections, Whitney is able to carry out research and experiments into a substance (Zero Matter) that she believes will make her invincible and enable her to remake the patriarchal world ‘in her image’ (A Little Song and Dance,’ 2016). The performativity and deceptive purpose of Whitney’s femininity is emphasised when the comment of the talent scout who initially discovered her, ‘That’s the beauty of Hollywood, you can be whatever you want,’ is repeated at the end of the episode. After Whitney uses Zero Matter to absorb another human being, her husband asks, ‘What are you?!’ to which Whitney replies, ‘Whatever I want’ (‘Smoke and Mirrors,’ 2016).

 In this way, Whitney’s utilisation of her beauty and manipulation of patriarchal power relations to her own advantage is made clear, as is her belief that her newly acquired supernatural powers will allow her to transcend them completely. Whitney is therefore shown to completely reject the established gendered hierarchy and normative role of women within society in a way that Peggy does not. Through Whitney’s association with destruction, murder and the supernatural, this rejection is clearly coded as deviant. This is represented visually by the black scar that spreads across Whitney’s face each time she uses her power. Whitney’s costume also changes over the course of the series. At the beginning of series two, Whitney is seen wearing tailored suits and dresses in light, pastel colours, befitting her status as a Hollywood star and glamorous wife. However, as the series progresses her wardrobe changes until in the final episode she is seen wearing a black dress with a heavy black lace veil, visually signifying her transformation into what McRobbie termes, ‘a contemporary witch’ (2008: p35). The scar mars her physical beauty, thereby preventing her from successfully performing conventional femininity as her disfigurement ‘tak[es] away [her] principal currency in a patriarchal economy’ (Miller 2003: p158).

 Indeed, there are frequent suggestions within the second season of *Agent Carter* that Whitney is the product of a warped and distorted version of feminism. This stems from her complete rejection and attempted destruction of the established racist, misogynist and heteronormative patriarchal world. For instance in ‘Monsters’ (2016), when trying to persuade Dr. Wilkes (Reggie Austin) – a black scientist working for her husband’s company (Isodine) – to help her, she explains that she is trying to change the world. When he replies that it is ‘fine just as it is,’ Whitney continues:

Is it?! Do you really think that Isodine recruited you because they valued your brilliant mind? [...] A woman and a coloured man. We’re people so marginalised, so desperate for approval we’ll do anything to hold on to what little respect we can get. Easily manipulated and completely expendable (‘Monsters,’ 2016).

Another example comes during a confrontation with Peggy when Whitney laments, ‘Such a pity that two accomplished women should be standing on opposite sides.’ Peggy replies, ‘Yes, because you’re such a staunch defender of the sisterhood. I can tell by the way you shot an unarmed, innocent woman!’ and Whitney retorts, ‘Occasionally sacrifices must be made’ (‘The Edge of Mystery’ 2016). Here, Peggy’s quip about ‘the sisterhood’ links Whitney to second wave discourses of female solidarity and collective action. This once again depicts her as too radical and extreme for civilised society and in fact dangerous to women. This closely mirrors charges levelled at the second wave by postfeminism outlined in Chapter One.

 Furthermore, both Dottie and Peggy also frame their transgressive femininities as products of the patriarchy. Dottie is effective as an assassin because every aspect of her femininity has been weaponised to make her particularly dangerous to those who would interact with her along patriarchal lines: being lured by her beauty or choosing to ignore and dismiss her as “just a woman” and so forth. When accused of treason for assisting Howard Stark by her SSR colleagues in the first season, Peggy responds by saying:

You think you know me, but I’ve never been more than what each of you created. To you I’m a stray kitten left on your doorstep to be protected. The secretary turned damsel in distress, the girl on the pedestal transformed into some daft whore (‘SNAFU,’ 2015).

For all three women, their marginalisation and invisibility in patriarchal society facilitated their subversion of it, as Peggy informs her colleagues:

I conducted my own investigation because no one listens to me. I got away with it because no one looks at me, because unless I have your reports, your coffee or your lunch, I’m invisible (‘SNAFU,’ 2015).

The depictions of all three women could therefore be seen as criticisms of the patriarchy and an affirmation of a feminist tone within the series. However, the representation of Dottie and Whitney as deviant, deranged and eventually insane, renders their criticisms somewhat redundant. They are the product of their insanity and deviance rather than a genuine comment on their oppression. Peggy, on the other hand, is recouped back from the brink of deviancy by her demonstrated adherence to aspects of heteronormativity and therefore her challenge bears more critical weight. However, by placing her in direct comparison to Dottie and Whitney, the series stops Peggy short of a complete rejection of the heteronormative, patriarchal order. Dottie and Whitney’s rejection is framed within *Agent Carter* in much the same way as McRobbie (2004) conceptualises postfeminism. That is as the translation of second wave feminism into something unattractive and damaging to women in its hostility to men and outright rejection of “natural” sexual difference*.* Where their attempts to challenge the patriarchy are depicted as too radical, too extreme and too dangerous, Peggy’s willingness to operate within the confines of heteronormativity marks her critical and challenging interactions with the patriarchy as safe by comparison. Dottie and Whitney, therefore, represent second wave feminism as it is perceived by postfeminism. Peggy, alternatively, is more aligned with postfeminist visions of female emancipation and liberation as a lifestyle rather than a political project, movement or mission. That Peggy’s is the only viable method of transgression and liberation for women is confirmed in that she alone is depicted as achieving fulfilment. Whereas Whitney is ultimately defeated, driven insane and confined to an asylum and Dottie is forced to become a fugitive, Peggy achieves the ultimate postfeminist goal in finding heterosexual love with Agent Sousa (‘Hollywood Ending,’ 2016) and ultimately marrying. In this way, her acceptance of heteronormative gender roles is confirmed and her transgressiveness limited to a critique of the way heteronormative patriarchy operates, rather than of its very existence. Indeed, she becomes the defender of an imagined “good” patriarchy from these crazed “radical feminist” anti-heroines.

 Peggy’s narrative, whilst ostensibly feminist in tone, remains complicit with the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal order and lacks political impetus to enact systematic social change (Gill 2016: pp 623 & 671). Furthermore, the conclusion of Peggy’s narrative, which will now be explored, completes her recuperation from deviant feminist to acceptable heteronormative heroine. Although it falls outside of the television series that is the focus of this chapter, the interconnectedness of the MCU renders it directly relevant to Peggy’s narrative arc and therefore to the analysis carried out in this thesis.

## Avenging Peggy - The fate of difficult women

Another effect of Peggy’s dislocation in history is that audiences are privy to her timeline almost in its entirety, from early adulthood to death. As discussed, these glimpses into Peggy’s future provide a sense of continuity in the MCU as she ties together disparate storylines helping to facilitate their convergence in the big, ensemble films such as *Age of Ultron* (2015). As a result of these glimpses, viewers are able to see Peggy age on screen and gain a more comprehensive understanding of her life trajectory than is usual in film and television which usually focus on specific instances or periods of characters’ lives. In her cameo in *Ant Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015) Peggy appears to be around sixty years old and still working for S.H.I.E.L.D, showing viewers that she had a long and successful career and dedicated her life to S.H.I.E.L.D, the organisation she helped to found. This narrative culminates in the revelation of her death in *Civil War* (2016)when Captain America receives a text message informing him that Peggy has died peacefully in her sleep and the film immediately cuts to show her funeral. Hayley Atwell only appears in a photograph of her as Peggy that is placed on top of the coffin. Peggy has no voice, other than when a quote attributed to her is read out by her niece, Sharon Carter (Emily VanCamp):

I asked [Peggy] once how she managed to master diplomacy and espionage a time when no one wanted to see a woman succeed at either. And she said, “compromise where you can. Where you can’t, don’t. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say, “No, youmove” (*Civil War*, 2016).

This is particularly suggestive as it references a famous line spoken by Captain America in *Amazing Spiderman #537*, which is seen as somewhat definitive of his character:

When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree by the river of truth, and tell the whole world “No, you move” (Straczynski 2007).

This issue of *The Amazing Spiderman* forms part of the ‘Civil War’ story arc, on which the film *Civil War* (2016) is based. Both the film and the comics deal with Captain America’s decision to fight legislation requiring superheroes to be registered and accountable to the American government. In attributing the quote to Peggy and altering its context to refer to feminism and the struggle of women in the workplace, the film seems to recognise and legitimise Peggy’s feminist struggle. However, as in the comics, the quote’s primary purpose is to galvanise Captain America into action. The primary purpose of Peggy’s death, in fact, is to provide Captain America with the necessary motivation to take a difficult and morally ambiguous course of action. Thus, Peggy is stripped of her own motivation and agency to become a plot point and catalyst for the male storyline.

 The prevalence of female characters being utilised in this way in comic books is such that Gail Simone, a writer for DC Comics, created a blog dedicated to women who have been thusly ‘stuffed into the refrigerator’ to provide emotional motivation for a male character (Simone 1999).[[42]](#footnote-42) While this does also happen to male characters, the frequency with which it happens to females is such that Simone was compelled to highlight the treatment of female characters in comics. She created a blog dedicated to ‘superheroines who have either been de-powered, raped or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator’ (Simone, 1999).

 This is also an identifiable trope in television (S*tuffed into the Fridge*, no date) and one which Yvonne Tasker discusses in action films when female characters are killed in order to become ‘a lost object to be avenged’ (Tasker 2014: p26). In all cases the result of this process is the reduction of a female character to an object, negating any purpose her storyline/character/narrative may have had save that which directly pertains to a dominant male narrative. Peggy’s off-screen death serves no other purpose than to further Captain America’s narrative. Once she has provided the necessary emotional prompt for Captain America to take the course of action demanded in his storyline, Peggy is quickly replaced in his affections by her niece, Sharon.

 This resolution of Peggy’s storyline undermines much of the work *Agent Carter* does to flesh out Peggy’s character and move her beyond the status of love interest. In giving her agency and control and ultimately storylines that are about her rather than just her and Captain America, *Agent Carter* goes some way towards affirming the notion that female narratives can exist and generate meaning independently of male stories. However, Peggy’s death in *Civil War* counteracts this by reducing her once more to an emotional prompt, effectively disposed of once she is no longer useful to the overarching, male dominated cinematic arc. Furthermore, in installing Sharon so quickly in her place, the film implies that, rather than existing as an important character in her own right, Peggy was merely filling the vacancy of girlfriend/sidekick, a trope required to provide emotional depth and validation to male action heroes.

 It must be noted that Peggy did not suffer a violent or traumatic death. She was not raped or traumatised and in fact lived a full life, in which her achievements were noted and celebrated, before she died peacefully of natural causes. However, this does not alter the fact that, with the cancellation of *Agent Carter*, audiences are now unlikely to see any more of that life. This suggests that Peggy’s story is no longer relevant as the character has fulfilled her ultimate purpose and reached the end of her usefulness in furthering Captain America’s narrative. It undermines the idea of Peggy as an autonomous, fully realised feminist character and further contains her challenge to traditional gender norms to a narrative that is now closed.

## Conclusions - is Peggy Feminist?

When thinking about the feminist potential of Peggy Carter as a character and *Agent Carter* as a series it is useful to consider the approaches and intentions of the people who created the character. This indicates whether the character was ever intended to be read as feminist (despite the possibility of reading against the grain). In discussing the *Marvel One-Shot* *Agent Carter* short film, which he directed, Louis D’Esposito said this about the character of Peggy:

I particularly liked when Peggy looks into her compact at a bad guy. She’s using it as a periscope device, then she takes a moment to look at herself. I think that’s the essence of what she’s about and what the film’s about. Not only is she – especially in that time – a woman in a man’s world, she still maintains her femininity, and I think that’s what’s cool about her (quoted in Strom, 2013).

This instance of Peggy utilising her compact mirror in this way is, again, reminiscent of Emma Peel and, for D’Esposito, represents Peggy’s ability to retain her femininity despite her dangerous and violent occupation. This is problematic in a number of ways. Not only does it reaffirm traditional concepts of gender via Peggy’s need to retain her femininity, it also links that femininity to her vanity. For D’Esposito, Peggy’s overriding desire to check her appearance at a moment when she is in danger, and on a mission she has waited for as a chance to prove herself, marks her out as authentically feminine. This suggests that beauty, and the maintenance of an attractive and disciplined appearance is the most important indicator of successfully performed femininity. The implication being that “authentic femininity” is both superficial and shallow in D’Esposito’s view. This is reflected in *Agent Carter*’s depiction of self-regulation and bodily discipline as the route to empowerment when in fact it represents a harmful internalisation of the male gaze. What is referred to in postfeminist discourse as “empowerment” is in fact a submission to oppressive heteronormative regimes of beauty (Gill 2007).

 Hayley Atwell said the following when discussing the impact she hoped the character would have on female viewers;

I would hope that young girls can see that they don’t have to sacrifice their femininity to be taken seriously in the workplace, but also they don’t have to rely on their physicality or their appearance. That it’s just as important if not more so to be able to use their intelligence, their wit, their humour, and their warmth, to be able to get where they want to and achieve their goals in life (*Access Hollywood*, 2015).

In an interview with the *Radio Times*, Atwell also described Peggy as ‘a kind of early feminist,’ and clearly has an understanding of the potential power of her role to speak to and empower other women (Walker-Arnott 2015, no pagination). Indeed, Peggy’s determination to combat and ultimately overcome the sexism of her colleagues is undeniably one of the central themes of the series, encapsulated clearly in this exchange:

Jarvis: These men you call your colleagues They don't respect you. They don't even see you. Do you honestly expect they'll change their minds?

Peggy: I expect I will make them (‘The Iron Ceiling’ 2015).

Combined with the ostensibly feminist themes and tone of the series, this could suggest that *Agent Carter* goes some way towards addressing the inadequacies of both *Land Girls* and *Bletchley*, which the previous chapters have discussed. However, whilst this is a clear acknowledgement of feminist discourses, it once again reduces feminist struggle down to an ‘individual rather than structural or systematic issu[e], let alone as connected to other inequalities or located in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism’ (Gill 2016: p616).

 The supposed “adulation” of feminism in the current moment perhaps goes some way towards undoing the disarticulation of feminism identified by McRobbie (2009: p26). The terms “feminism” and “feminist” have been rebranded and reclaimed as something positive with which women should want to be associated. However, as Gill argues, ‘this rebranded version [of feminism] is notable for both its affect policing […] and its *contentlessness’* which renders it largely ineffectual (2016: p618, original emphasis).

 Sarah Myles described *Agent Carter* as ‘The Marvel version of feminism’ which ‘concedes one relatively well constructed female character, while cementing sexism elsewhere’ (Myles 2016 no pagination). To substantiate her claim she points to the fact that, despite having two female show runners, the direction for both series was almost exclusively male, and to the severe lack of representation of racial diversity. While there is a black male scientist in the second series, the absence of women of colour ‘reinforces the idea that the heroine must be white,’ as does Peggy’s own clearly privileged, white, middle class background (Tung 2004: p116). This is symptomatic of what Gill identifies as the unevenness of visibility given to different types of feminism (2016: p616). Furthermore Peggy represents a ‘“comfortable” feminist campaign for Western/Northern audiences steeped in racist and Colonial discourse’ (Gill 2016: p616). An effective exploration of racial and gendered discrimination would present too great a challenge to the racial and gendered Western status quo.

 The historical and generic dislocation of *Agent Carter* from the everyday experiences of its audience similarly dislocates its challenge to concepts of normative gender. Its reaffirmation of heteronormative ideals of beauty and romance, as well as its tendency to render sexism as both trivial and personal, undermine feminism while appearing to grant it visibility (Gill 2016: p615). Therefore, whilst Peggy represents a welcome return to more overt and positive framing of feminist discourses in the popular media, it is feminism ‘signified in […] a distinctly postfeminist fashion’ (Gill 2016: p623). As a result, *Agent Carter* leaves the oppressive and discriminatory structures of the patriarchal society it reflects intact and unchallenged. Sadly, Peggy is not feminist. *Agent Carter* is therefore indicative of the ability of the postfeminist sensibility to masquerade as if it is in attendance of feminism’s political demands whilst simultaneously erasing and undermining them.

# Chapter Five – (Wo)Manning the Home Front: negotiating the ‘Home’ and the Postfeminist Domestic Ideal in *Home Fires*.

*Home Fires* (ITV 2015-2016) is based on Julie Summers’ factual history of the Women’s Institute (WI) *Jambusters* (2015). It follows the activities of the fictional Great Paxford WI from the months immediately preceding the outbreak of war in 1939, to the culmination of the Battle of Britain in 1940. This chapter will argue that *Home Fires* can be read as a postfeminist text because postfeminist norms, such as domesticity, the privileging of heterosexual marriage and motherhood, and the terror of the single woman are all identifiable in the series despite its setting in a pre-second wave feminist time. It will suggest that here again, depictions of masculinity and fatherhood are central to the series’ construction of postfeminist femininity. *Home Fires* is a further example of Female Ensemble Drama (FED). This chapter will, therefore build on the work carried out in Chapters Two and Three in discussing FED as a setting for the exploration of female communities and the limitations imposed upon this space by the needs of the postfeminist sensibility. In its depiction of an apparent “pre-feminist” idyll, this chapter will argue that *Home Fires* is a postfeminist text that mobilises nostalgia to establish a ‘teleology for postfeminism’ (Spigel 2013: p273). Consequently, the series suggests the possibility of a journey from pre-feminism to postfeminism without the need for the disruption of second wave feminism in between. To achieve this, this chapter will discuss the way in which historical dislocation is at work in *Home Fires* and the ways in which this differs from its use in the other series considered in this thesis. It will then explore depictions of gendered labour and the concept of active domesticity within the series, before discussing its privileging of the home as a woman’s natural place. This chapter will move to explore ideas of the threat of the single woman depicted in *Home Fires* and the series’ utilisation of constructions of postfeminist fatherhood. Finally, it will draw conclusions as to the implications of *Home Fires’* attempted circumvention of second wave feminism.

## Production Context

*Home Fires* ran for two series, it was broadcast on Wednesday nights and incorporated into ITV studio’s output of original dramas (ITVPLC, 2017). The seriesexplores the impact of the Second World War on the lives of the inhabitants of the fictional Great Paxford as men are called away to war and women take on a more active role in village life. In the introduction to *Jambusters* Summers describes her book and the subsequent series as:

the bottom up story [of] the ordinary country women in rural Britain during the war. Unpaid, unsung, to a large extent uncomplaining, these women quietly and often with humour, made the countryside tick (2015: pXXII).

Through collaboration with writer Simon Block and ITV development producer Catherine Oldfield, the history and individual stories that constituted *Jambusters* were used as inspiration for the six episodes that made up the first series of *Home Fires.* Although the individual women and stories that feature in *Jambusters* do not directly cross over to appear in the series, the overarching themes of Summers’ book are apparent and it is recognisable as the source of some of the series’ storylines and characters.

 Summers’ role in the process of translating the story of *Home Fires* from book to screen was ‘as a historical consultant. Not just facts, but tone, mood and detail about the WI as well as some history of Cheshire [… where] the drama was to be set’ (Summers 2015: pxii). She recounts an urgent phone call from the set of *Home Fires* asking her how much a pot of jam would have cost at the time (1s 3d) to ensure that the set for the afternoon’s shooting could be accurately dressed (Summers 2015: pxiv). On the choice of Cheshire as the setting for the series, as well as it being her own home county, Summers argues that it lent the series scope:

with Liverpool and Manchester as its (then) two major cities, the Battle of the Atlantic, the war’s longest running battle, and the huge number of camps — army, air force, German and Italian prisoner of war and Polish Resettlement — plus the Wirral and the neighbouring counties […] there would be no shortage of material or incidents to draw upon (Summers 2015: pxii).

 *Home Fires,* although not a fictional adaptation of a specific set of real-life stories or experiences, clearly aimed for a certain degree of historical accuracy in tone, aesthetic and narrative. Indeed, in recreating wartime Britain, Summers noted the difficulty in capturing:

the mood of the country in the first weeks and months of the war, and most especially in the early summer of 1940 when the most likely outcome was an invasion of Britain. We know the way the war ended, but at that stage it was far from clear (2015: pxiii).

In fact, this is something *Home Fires* executes remarkably well. For instance, each episode begins with the month and year in which each episode is set placing the events of each episode in direct historical context for viewers familiar with the chronology of the Second World War. This is particularly effective in the second season that charts the progression and increasing tension of the Battle of Britain. This clear marking of the passage of time linking with established events and changing home front conditions of the Second World War emphasises the heightened tension, increased danger and deprivation as the War progresses. In series two particularly, this imbues the narrative with a sense of the ever-present threat of air raids and invasion. As well as generating narrative tension, this further demonstrates the series’ commitment to authenticity in recreating a specific historic moment.

 In common with the other texts considered in previous chapters, the Second World Warprovides the historical context for events depicted in *Home Fires*, as well as motivation or justification for the characters’ actions. However,the historical dislocation (a concept discussed in detail in Chapters Three, Four and Five) of the narrative and resulting sense of nostalgia are deployed to a slightly different end in *Home Fires*, as this chapter will demonstrate. The series considered in earlier chapters dramatise a sense of great societal change and upheaval (particularly with regard to gender roles), whether or not these changes were seen as either beneficial or lasting. For example, the required relocation of the land girls in Chapter Two, Susan’s shift from vital work at Bletchley Park to a purely domestic role as a housewife and mother in Chapter Three, and Peggy Carter’s promotion to and subsequent demotion from active service in Chapter Four are all indicative of considerable changes in the characters’ circumstances. *Home Fires*, on the other hand,deals much more in a sense of stability and constancy. In this way, itstands somewhat in contrast to previous texts, however as this chapter will demonstrate, it embodies and re-affirms the same postfeminist discourses and traditional gender roles.

 Its setting on the home front – a location celebrated in popular memory as a site of triumph for traditional British values – encourages a nostalgia for the social structures, hierarchies and gender roles that are popularly perceived to have contributed to that victory. Rather than offering a comparison with the past in which the values of the present are affirmed by viewers’ knowledge of the history and problems of the period setting, *Home Fires* offers a past in which British society functions successfully and ultimately prevails against external physical and ideological threats. It is easy to see how, in the current moment in which British values are once again perceived by some to be under threat from external forces such as terrorism and immigration, this image and its associated norms and ideals offer a welcome and comforting image of security.[[43]](#footnote-43)

 With this celebratory tone in mind, this chapter will seek to examine the construction of gender within the series. It will suggest that, despite its setting in a pre- second wave feminist time, *Home Fires* offers a depiction of femininity and masculinity that on the surface appears unreconstructed and yet is already imbued with modern postfeminist ideals. As a result, reconstruction is, by implication, unnecessary. This chapter will begin by further exploring the differing function of historical dislocation in *Home Fires* and its effect on the series’ depiction of gender. It will then move to explore the representation of “active domesticity” in the series in the context of historical perspectives on women’s work and with particular reference to the Women’s Institute and their contribution to the national war effort.

## Historical Dislocation

The previous chapter discussed the utility of historical dislocation in *Marvel’s* *Agent Carter* (ABC 2015 - 2016) to mobilise problematic attitudes and behaviours in a way that can be dismissed as ironic. As Gill notes, this is an ‘important way of suggesting that the sexism is safely sealed in the past whilst constructing scenarios that would garner criticism if they were represented as contemporary’ (2007: no pagination). This chapter will deal with a different implementation of this distancing effect. Specifically, it will discuss the mobilisation of nostalgia and tradition to depict a pre-second wave feminist time that was, in comparison to constructions of the present moment in the news and entertainment media, relatively idyllic and secure.[[44]](#footnote-44) In her discussion of *Mad Men* (AMC 2007 - 2015),Spigel suggests that the series circumvents second wave feminism by evoking a ‘vision of nascent feminist consciousness, suggesting an era when middle class women wanted more from life […] but did not yet want feminism’ (2013: p271). In this way through their projection of the present onto the past, series such as *Mad Men* and *Home Fires* paradoxically construct ‘considerable nostalgia for postfeminism’ (Spigel 2013: p271).This is even more the case in *Home Fires,* which, it will be demonstrated, depicts women as liberated by their submission to postfeminist ideals and willing participation in postfeminist gender roles. Applying Spigel's argument about *Mad Men* to *Home Fires,* it becomes clear that the series’ ‘postfeminist nostalgia appeals to many contemporary women because it validates the present by giving postfeminism a heritage’ (2013: p273). Like *Mad Men*, *Home Fires* allows the imagining of ‘a future where feminism never happened’ yet in which its ends were ‘somehow miraculously [achieved], without political struggle’ (Spigel 2013: p275).

  However, the crucial difference between the two series is that *Mad Men* offers a contrast between the past and present in which the ideology of the present is depicted favourably in comparison to the past.[[45]](#footnote-45) *Home Fires*, conversely, mobilises a historical fantasy in which British values are conflated with family values, tradition and stable gender relationships to offer a more secure and harmonious image of society in both the depicted historical moment and its imagined future. *Home Fires*, therefore stands in contrast to *Mad Men* and *Agent Carter* which utilise portrayals of the past ‘as a condescending reminder of how things have improved after the ‘big awakening’ of the second wave of feminism,’ (Agirre 2012: pp158-159). The women of Great Paxford are happy, respected and empowered within their traditional roles as sweethearts, housewives and mothers. The WI further facilitates this empowerment by offering an outlet through which their domestic skills can be celebrated and put to practical use to assist the war effort.[[46]](#footnote-46)

 As well as traditional gender roles, *Home Fires* depicts a village in which traditional class hierarchies are still very much in place. Leadership roles, within the WI and the village in general, are undertaken by the two most affluent, upper-middle class women: Frances Barden (Samantha Bond) and Joyce Cameron (Francesca Annis). This structure is never critiqued within the series, suggesting it to be entirely natural. Thus, rather than an ironic nostalgia for problematic attitudes and behaviours that bolsters the enlightened credentials of the present, *Home Fires* utilises nostalgia to create a sense of loss and longing for a past which does not seem to be in need of change.

 Unlike *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* considered in Chapters Two and Three, liberation, for the women of *Home Fires,* is not depicted as a temporary result of the exceptional circumstances of war. Instead it is more a stable and lasting outcome of their successful enactment of postfeminist feminine ideals. In previous examples, female characters are ultimately repositioned back into more traditional gender roles, often through choice, thereby reasserting the hegemonic force of those roles. In *Home Fires*, they are depicted as having little need of liberation in the first place. The way these characters are written suggests that the women in this series are already fulfilled and empowered through their postfeminist domesticity. In part, this is a product of the way in which the Second World War is experienced as a rupture in the landscape of gendered labour in a different sense in *Home Fires*. In *Land Girls* and *The Bletchley Circle* the Second World War served to relocate women from labour in the private sphere into labour in the public sphere: women are therefore depicted as being forced out of the domestic space into new and unfamiliar contexts that are also the sites of (limited) empowerment and emancipation. The maintenance of a discernible boundary between public and private paves the way for the undoing of this emancipation; as the women willingly “retreat” back into the space of the domestic, the gains for gender equality recede from the texts. In *Home Fires*, however, private feminine labour is brought enduringly into the sphere of the public: with domestic labour reconceptualised as a fundamental part of the public space of the war effort. The degree of empowerment that these protagonists enjoy (or achieve) is measured not by their distance from the space of the private and domestic but by their ability to embrace and enact postfeminist gender ideals in a way that positions feminised domesticity as public service. As a result, this emancipatory space is not closed down with the end of the war and the return to the domestic, but remains open so long as these protagonists are able to adhere to this post-feminist discourse.

## Understanding Gendered Labour

The historic depiction of feminine labour, therefore, occupies a central role in the construction of a postfeminist sensibility in *Home Fires*. As Press (2009) notes, representations of women in work, and women’s work, have changed drastically over time, responding to changing perceptions of women’s work in society. Press observes that, while in the early days of television women were shown exclusively as housewives and mothers, ‘the increase in working women in the 1960s and 1970s was reflected in television’s images of women working and living nontraditional family lives’ (2009: p139). With the development of a postfeminist media climate in the 1990s, Press argues that these images and the ‘ideals of liberal feminism’ that they represented began to be ‘undercut by a sense of nostalgic yearning for the love and family life that they were seen to have displaced’ (2009: p139).

 In this way, traditional concepts of feminine pleasure and fulfilment are placed at odds with the complicated, emancipatory discourses of second wave feminism. Through constructions of a pre- second wave feminist idyll such as in *Home Fires*, ‘postfeminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re) claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique’ (Negra 2009: p2). Feminist exhortations for women to secure employment outside of the home can therefore be construed as having driven women away from their natural place in the domestic sphere, thereby propagating the ‘assumption that feminism has disturbed contemporary female subjectivity’ (Negra 2009: p5).[[47]](#footnote-47) As a result of this disturbance the home and domestic sphere, and their associated pleasures, become lost concepts which postfeminism and postfeminist media texts offer the possibility of reclaiming.

 Negra has previously elaborated on the postfeminist phenomenon of ‘miswanting’ in which ‘the heroine comes to realise that her professional aspirations are misplaced,’ thereby suggesting that second wave promises of fulfilment through emancipation and liberation from the domestic are illusionary (2009: p95). The result of this dissatisfaction with ‘the extradomestic sphere’ is a desire to retreat, back to the home, and back to more traditional maternal and matrimonial roles (Press 2009: p140).[[48]](#footnote-48)

 In this way, the pre-feminist nostalgia at work in postfeminist texts such as *Home Fires* implies a longing for a moment before the disruption of the second wave set women on a path away from traditional happiness and domesticity. In place of emancipation from the confines of the domestic sphere, *Home Fires* offers a concept of active domesticity. This concept offers fulfilment and liberation (of a kind) within the limits of traditional domestic roles. While *Home Fires* does depict this type of feminine labour as vital to the national war effort, it does not offer any scope or indeed demonstrate any need for women to be able to transcend these roles. This chapter will now move to explore this concept in further detail, as well as the centrality of feminine labour both to *Home Fires* and postfeminist discourses. It will interrogate the idea of active domesticity as a means of feminine empowerment and locate concepts of gendered work within the broader context of postfeminist discourse.

## Active Domesticity and Postfeminist Concepts of Female Labour

The concept of active and empowered domesticity is observed by several scholars who have written about the real Women’s Institute. Some, such as Andrews (1997) and Robinson (2011) have gone as far as to describe the National Federation of Women’s Institutes (NFWI) as a feminist organisation. Andrews argues that as ‘the NFWI was the largest women’s movement in the post suffrage era, to women of the period it was a natural outlet for their feminist activities’ (1997: px). She points to the number of high profile members of the suffrage movement, such as Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Robins, who became members of the NFWI (Andrews 1997: px).

 Indeed, in the July 1942 edition of *Home and Country* (the WI’s monthly publication) WI member Renee Haynes wrote an article entitled ‘The Nation’s Cinderella’ in which she championed the achievements of ‘the feminist movement, which began some hundred and fifty years ago.’ This article is useful in thinking about the specific ways in which the WI might historically have positioned itself as a feminist organisation. For Haynes, the feminist movement has:

two sides to it, two pieces of work to do. The first — that has received the most publicity up to now — is to show and prove that women are in no way “inferior” beings (Haynes 1942: p115).

This aspect of feminist struggle, she argues, had largely been successful:

shown by the fact that women, self-respecting and free, can and do now vote in elections, sit in Parliament, act as justices of the peace, run newspapers, organize businesses, enter and teach in universities, play their part as scientists, doctors and lawyers, and serve in the forces of the Crown (Haynes 1942: p115).

 Haynes acknowledges that this process had ‘not yet come to complete fruition,’ as women were still not in receipt of ‘equal pay for equal work […] and […] equal compensation for equal injuries received in the service of their neighbourhood and country during air raids’ (1942: p115). However, her primary concern is regarding the lack of recognition for women’s labour in the home. Haynes laments that:

both in her status and in her activities, the married woman working in her own house at “unpaid domestic labour” (as the census papers put it) tends to be the national Cinderella (1942: p115).

She notes that, for the housewife:

However hard she works inside her own home, she is not entitled to call a single penny her own […] Her work is in every sense vital, for it is concerned with keeping life going, caring for a live husband and love children, making and mending clothes to keep life warm in them, cooking and serving food without which life would stop, maintaining the cleanliness needed for healthy living; and it carries an enormous weight of first-hand meaning absent from the work of anyone else except farmers and creative artists (1942: p115).

Haynes envisages the problem of inequality as centring around a lack of respect and status for that work rather than the expectation that such domestic tasks be carried out exclusively by women. She offers a historical conception of feminism that is quite different to modern, and particularly second wave, understandings.

 In discussing solutions to the problems she outlines, Haynes positions the WI as having a central role in raising the status of women’s work – ‘in giving comradeship and zest in comparison in that work; in revising old skills and creating new ones,’ – one that ran alongside, and in equal importance to, efforts to improve women’s standing in law (1942: p117).

 Indeed, since its inception in Stoney Creek Canada in 1896, the purpose of the Women’s Institute was to elevate the status of women’s work within the home to that of something skilled, worthy of recognition and development. The initiative came from a common incident of domestic tragedy, when Adelaide Hoodless, wife of a local businessman living near Toronto, suffered the loss of her youngest son in 1889. The boy had died after drinking contaminated milk that had been improperly stored. Hoodless realised that her son’s death, and hundreds of others, could have been prevented had she and other housewives had a greater awareness of proper food storage and hygiene (Robinson 2011: pp12-13). Hoodless’s campaign to raise awareness and educate young women on this matter was perhaps one of the first suggestions that women’s work inside the home required skill and instruction and ‘the emphasis on raising the status of women’s work to that of men was a key part of her message’ (Summers 2013: p14).

 This idea of education, development and challenging perceptions of female labour in the home endured as one of the founding principles of the WI. As Andrews argues:

to the NFWI women were domestic workers and their work was equivalent to that of men. The Movement did not merely validate women’s work, they attempted to raise it to the level of skilled work (1997: p9).

However, through their focus on domesticity ’the WI as a movement […] neither challenged nor threatened received wisdom about women in this country’ (Robinson 2011: p11). Rather, although ‘the NFWI’s perception of womanhood may have been primarily domestic […] it was not a passive domesticity’ (Andrews 1997: p14). In this way, the NFWI orchestrated what was considered a ‘re-appropriation of domesticity,’ and a championing of women’s domestic agency (Andrews 1997: p14). This focus on honing and developing domestic skill took on a greater significance during the Second World War when responsibility for effectively and efficiently managing the home and minimising waste, all under conditions of extreme restriction and shortage, fell almost entirely to women. This can be clearly seen in ‘propaganda about food rationing [that] was aimed principally at women and above all at housewives’ (Summers 2013: p102). It was in this context that Haynes called for the elevation and recognition of women’s work inside the home.

 Responses from WI members to Haynes’ 1942 ‘Cinderella’ article were printed in the October edition of *Home and Country* in the same year. All of the responses express interest in the issues raised and sympathy with the points made. One member, who signs herself as ‘Anxious,’ suggests that ‘until every woman is the intellectual equal of her menfolk the tremendously vital work of running a home and bringing up children will never command the respect it certainly merits’ (1942: p171). She goes on to wonder whether ‘if all the women of the world had possessed a world outlook and been less perfect home-makers, the present conflagration would have happened’ (Anxious 1942: p117).[[49]](#footnote-49) Neither, Haynes nor ‘Anxious’ call for the rejection of domesticity entirely, which would later come to be associated with second wave feminist discourses. However, the existence of clear links between the early feminist movement and the WI in reality (which are erased in its postfeminist representations) speaks to the restructuring and repurposing of history to meet the needs of the postfeminist sensibility.

 Clearly, then, some members of the WI perceived their work for and involvement in the organisation as something of a feminist act. Their concept of feminism may have differed from modern discourses and been confined to elevating the status of women’s traditional roles rather than suggesting that they should be shed entirely, but it was explicitly feminist. As Andrews notes, in contemporary culture ‘at first glance nothing could be further apart than the notion of the Women’s Institute Movement […] and the popular tabloids’ perception of feminists’ (1997: pix). This is evident of a shift in perception regarding the WI that seems to have taken place after the Second World War and the period immediately following. From a view of the WI as a somewhat radical movement that campaigned for sexual education and equal pay for equal work, it has come to be seen as a traditionalist, even reactionary organisation. Perhaps this is, to some extent, the result of different conceptualisations of feminism at different historical moments, as well as shifts within feminist discourses from the second wave onwards, which rejected the idea of domestic empowerment.

 However, this suggestion of the possibility of empowerment without the need to actively engage in political feminist struggle chimes well with the norms and ideals of the contemporary postfeminist sensibility. Particularly in its relationship to concepts of female labour, and its focus on personal choice and retreatism in the reclamation of traditional feminine identities and practices. As a result, representations of the WI in television drama lend themselves to construction within the bounds of the contemporary postfeminist media climate despite the nascent feminism suggested in some women’s experiences of the WI in reality.

 Negra and Tasker, in their 2013 work on ‘chick flicks’ and corporate melodramas in recession-era Hollywood, discuss the difference in representations of gendered work. The substance of their argument is useful in the interrogation of depictions of gendered labour in *Home Fires*. Specifically, their argument that the consequences of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession are articulated differently for men and women in the popular media. This speaks to ‘fears of broad male economic and cultural obsolescence,’ ‘male diminishment,’ and worries regarding the ‘usurped male breadwinner’ (2013: p345). As a result, media productions that depict and indeed celebrate the success of more traditional divisions of labour, such as *Home Fires* offer reassurance against such anxieties.

 Despite it being apparent that the effects of the recession were equally damaging to women’s prospects of securing or maintaining stable employment, Negra and Tasker argue that such effects are frequently depicted as inflicting more damage for men in terms of their social status and emotional wellbeing. This indicates the persistence of ‘longstanding cultural assumptions about men, women, work and parenting,’ which posit the privileging of female achievement and employment outside of the home over male as disruptive of ‘gender norms and patterns of family life’ (Negra & Tasker 2013: p346).

 Not limiting this observation to Hollywood film, Negra and Tasker note that, ‘across a wide rhetorical spectrum […] the notion of men as particularly and singularly impacted by economic adversity has become culturally commonsensical and affectively potent’ (2013: p346). An important consequence of this, they argue, is a marked ambivalence or ‘backlash’ towards women in the workplace in popular culture (Tirado Gilligan in Negra & Tasker 2013: p346). Therefore, the privileging of women’s work outside of the home, regardless of motivation or necessity, over men’s are seen as a key indicator of a dysfunctional and disordered society. Combined with postfeminist discourses of domestic fulfilment and retreat, women can thus be seen as jeopardising not only their own happiness and fulfilment through ‘miswanting,’ (Negra 2009: p95) but also the happiness and fulfilment of the men in their lives.

 Negra and Tasker go on to note that cinema, and this is applicable to television drama, has ‘long been understood as revealing both cultural anxieties and the fantasised solutions which emerge in response to them’ (2013: p350). They go on to suggest that the ‘naturalising of gender hierarchies’ and ‘the restatement of traditional gender scripts forms one response to a challenging economic context’ (Negra & Tasker 2013: p350). In its adoption of this naturalisation and its rejection of disruptive concepts of gendered labour, *Home Fires* offers a fantasy resolution to modern anxieties over male competency. This offers a response to both the 2008 financial crisis and its lasting effects and recent resurgence of apparently “feminist” discourse in popular culture. *Home Fires* depicts women empowered not through second wave feminism and its disruption of stable gender identities, but their participation in the WI and traditional domestic labour. It also shows men engaged in meaningful, non-administrative or bureaucratic professions. As a result, *Home Fires* ‘gratif[ies] audiences through escapism,’ and allays some of these anxieties (Negra & Tasker 2013: p351).

 It may seem odd to propose the Second World War as a venue for escapism, however the privileged historical position of the audience means that this is a war they know will ultimately be won. Furthermore, it offers a vision of ‘idealist retreatist domestic bliss’ as well as a depiction of work that is worthy and purposeful in its contribution to the war effort and ultimate assurance the triumph of traditional British values (Negra & Tasker 2013: p357). *Home Fires* can therefore be seen to evoke ‘a more productive past,’ in which the division of male and female labour correlates directly to concepts of moral and gendered worth (Negra & Tasker 2013: p357).  The popularity of this imagined is evident in the ubiquity of ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ merchandise. Despite never having been in circulation, the posters speak to the present desire to imagine a past in which British stoicism triumphed over an external enemy and the hardship of war (Hewgill 2017). This provides further evidence of the ways in which the needs and desires of the present structure our depiction and visualisation of the past.

 As a result of this division of gendered labour, postfeminism also offers pleasure in the celebration and lauding of traditional feminine skills associated with women’s retreat back to the domestic. Homemaking, childrearing, care work and so forth are all championed as the exclusive and proper domain of female authority. In this way, ‘postfeminism fetishises female power and desire while consistently placing these within firm limits’ (Negra 2009: p4). Postfeminism can therefore be seen to delineate a clear space within which women may operate and assert unproblematic or “natural” authority. As discussed, the work undertaken by the women in *Home Fires*,despite its importance to the war effort is non-threatening to the masculinity of male characters because of its correlation with women’s pre-existing domestic roles. Negra notes the ‘high degree of ambivalence with which postfeminist culture treats women in the workforce’ and argues that ‘some of this ambivalence dissipates when such work is seen to be expressive of women’s essential femininity,’ (2009: p87). Activities such as baking and fruit preservation, billeting of refugees, and provision for the welfare of local regiments clearly align with this ideal because they correlate with essentialist constructions of women as domestic caregivers.

 *Home Fires,* therefore,offers a vision of female emancipation that does not challenge traditional patriarchal structures and does not require women to relinquish their location in the domestic sphere. This corresponds with postfeminist constructions of women’s engagement with the professional world in which ‘work is posed as a realm of competition, uncertainty, fear and corruption, in short, the antithesis of domestic safety’ (Negra 2009: p89). In *Home Fires* this is evident in the depiction of the factory owned by Frances Barden’s husband Peter and Frances’ later attempts to oversee its running after Peter’s death (series two, episode four, 2016). It is her attempt to step into her late husband’s shoes and take up his professional leadership role that moves Frances out of the safe space of feminine authority. Outside of this space Frances is exposed to the realities of her husband’s adultery, the dangers of the black-market and the undermining of her physical and emotional well-being.

 In her study of ‘chick-flicks,’ in which women are employed as waitresses, dog walkers, wedding planners and so forth, Negra notes that female characters’ ‘lack of a professionally threatening career, their symbolically or literally nurturing work […] combine to powerfully idealize these women on postfeminist terms’ (2009: p88). This stands in opposition to Frances’ attempt to harness masculine authority in taking over the factory. Again, this offers women the possibility of empowerment and emancipation only through a narrowly defined set of roles, open exclusively to women of a certain socio-economic position. This is symptomatic of ‘the postfeminist susceptibility to confusion between empowerment and role restriction’ (Negra 2009: p100). Therefore feminine power and authority is accessible only in a few locations, the primary of which is the home.

 Indeed, Joanne Hollows (2006) discusses a fetishisation of the home and its associated responsibilities and skills in contemporary postfeminist culture. She observes ‘an increasing fascination with the domestic as a forbidden pleasure’ (2006: p98). This observation indicates the construction of the “forbidden” domestic space as the consequence of the disruption caused by second wave feminism. As a result of this construction, as Judy Giles (2004) observes, where second wave concepts of liberation centre around the escape from the home, postfeminist discourses call for the freedom to return to it.

 Within postfeminist discourses then, there is a clear distinction between acceptable and unacceptable, worthy and unworthy, authentic and inauthentic female labour. Indeed the:

postfeminist mindset operates to broadly trivialize and minimize women’s work, while maintaining a perverse fascination with women workers who can be conceptualized as accessory figures to male public achievement and idealized female domesticity (Negra 2009: p116).

This concept can be closely mapped onto the depiction of women’s work in *Home Fires,* which is both rooted in the domestic and dedicated to support the male-led war effort. Furthermore, this commitment to the domestic role, supportive of and secondary to the active male role, is depicted as having been one of the key factors in winning the Second World War. As a result of this conflation of female domesticity and Britain’s victory, considerable moral and cultural weight is articulated to this essentialist view of femininity.

 This idea is central to the construction of the postfeminist sensibility in which morality is linked to, and evidenced by, successful management of the family, the household and the self. During the Second World War this concept was, in effect, sanctioned by the government in their direct addresses to housewives regarding economy, waste and productivity. As a result, in propaganda from the Second World War and in *Home Fires* (as Brunsdon observes in contemporary cookery programming),the figure of the housewife and the ‘domestic world is devoid of the boredom, repetition and frustration characterized as the housewife’s lot by 1970s feminism’ (2006b: p49). Instead, in postfeminist discourse and certainly in *Home Fires*, the housewife ‘emerges from the broad awareness that someone needs to transact on behalf of the family’ (Negra 2009: p134) and, by extension in this particular historical context, on behalf of the home and the nation. It is to an exploration of the significance of the concept of the home, in both a wartime and postfeminist context, and its function in the depiction of women in *Home Fires* that this chapter will now turn.

## Keep the Home Fires Burning: Defending the “Home” and the Home Front

As well as depicting women conducting essential labour that ensured the maintenance of the home and nation in *Home Fires*, there also takes place:

a collapsing of the wife/mother into the image of the home itself. The woman in the family is […] the “still point” in a changing world, the protector of the “true community,” the place to which the (male) labourer/traveller returns (Morely 2000: p65).

The Second World War adds considerable significance to this idea as the returning male labourer/traveller is transcribed onto the returning male soldier. The concept of home, encompassing both wife and children, consequently takes on new significance as not only his place of return, rest and safety, but also as the object, and concept, for which he is fighting.

 The work undertaken by the women of *Home Fires,* due to its importance to the male enterprise of war,is depicted as a worthy and virtuous reason for women to leave the home. Rather than choosing to work to satisfy their own interests and desires for emancipation and a life outside of the home, the labour these women perform is in service to their country and the national interest. This serves to assuage postfeminist ambivalence towards women in the workplace. As Douglas observes in her work on historic attitudes to women’s labour in America, ‘although over three-fourths of the women who worked did so because they had to, the common wisdom was that most women worked for a more frivolous reason:’ to have money to spend on clothes, jewellery, in other words on themselves (1995: p46). The years leading up to, during and immediately after the Second World War saw arguably the most rapid and seismic shifts in societal opinion regarding women’s work. As Susan Douglas points out:

In the ten-year period from 1940 to 1950, our mothers had been told, first, that they shouldn't work outside the home, especially once they were married, then that there was no job they couldn't do and that it was exciting and patriotic to work outside the home, and finally, that their real job was to wash diapers, make meatloaf, and obey their husbands no matter how brutish, dumb, or unreasonable they were (1995: p54).

*Home Fires* represents female characters whose desire to work stems from both an extension of their inherent domesticity, and rises as a response to the extreme circumstances and demands of war, rather than as an active rejection of or attempt to transgress normative bounds of domestic femininity. This is yet another example of the ways in which *Home Fires* offers a safe, non-threatening, postfeminist vision of women’s war work and empowerment.

 As Hollows points out, the struggle for feminist discourses to successfully negotiate the concept of the home and ‘the opposition between these two different femininities identified by Brunsdon — the feminist and the housewife — made it very difficult for second wave feminism to deal with domesticity’ (2006a: p101). Certainly, there are multiple possible interpretations of the domestic space and its implications for women. Second wave feminists ‘emphasized […] the manner in which the sexual division of labour produced the home as a site of leisure for the male worker but labour for the housewife’ (Brunsdon 2006a: p49).

 It could therefore be argued that if this divided concept of gendered labour with its purpose and place and:

patriarchal notions of domesticity and its practitioner, the housewife, were rejected, the domestic space of the home could operate as a site … where domestic skills and crafts might be revalued as a challenge to a male-dominated value system (Hollows 2006: p102).

This is particularly pertinent in relation to *Home Fires’* depiction of the WI, as giving access to a female space and network of women that, on a basic level, ‘provided an alternative value system to that of the men of the village’ (Curtis 2016: p13). In *Home Fires*, this idea becomes apparent in domestic abuse victim Pat’s increasing self-confidence and impassioned speech about the importance of the WI to a regional meeting (Series one, Episode Three: 2015).[[50]](#footnote-50) Played by Claire Rushbrook, Pat’s membership of the Great Paxford WI helps her to find purpose and self-worth in her new skills and the institute’s contribution to the national war effort. In this new system ‘women’s work was perceived as skilled, skills could be improved, and since their work had value, the women themselves felt they were entitled to some leisure time’ (Curtis 2016: p13).

The setting of *Home Fires* in a rural village, which is central to both its construction of historical realism and its postfeminist tone might usefully be analysed through the concept of ‘geographical monogamy.’ In postfeminist discourses this tends to be favoured over ‘geographical promiscuity’ (Negra 2009: p45). This discourse further ties in to postfeminist concepts of the home and its construction as a woman’s natural place. In its celebration of the domestic and representation of women who are happily fixed in one geographic location, *Home Fires* presents the retreatism fantasy of postfeminism as a *fait accompli*. This fantasy offers women supposedly dislocated by second wave feminism the chance to reclaim the home*.* The geographically fixed nature of the women’s lives, with the exception of Kate Campbell (Rachel Hurd-Wood) who will be discussed in detail later, raises questions regarding the necessity of mobility. Rather than depicting women who have ‘chosen home,’ after realising that the world of work offered no real happiness or fulfilment for them, *Home Fires* instead depicts women who never doubted their proper place and purpose in life. Women who never felt the need to venture beyond their own domestic spheres where their labour and skill was recognised and valued. In postfeminist discourse the concept of home is emphasised as both a symbolic and a physical place to which women are normatively bound. Negra suggests that ‘within this framework of concepts of home and stability we can begin to observe a representational schism between hometown girl (in her various guises) and her opposite,’ within which a clear value judgement is made in favour of those women chasing to remain “faithful” to their home town (2009: p34).

 In *Home Fires* this divide can perhaps best be observed in the character of Jenny (Jodie Hamblet). The majority of women in the village show no desire to alter their social or geographical position in life, other than their efforts to support the war effort through the WI. Jenny, on the other hand, is depicted as scheming and manipulative and uses her various war jobs as a means for social advancement. From her introduction to the series in the first episode of series one, Jenny is immediately established as shallow and unlikable. She is conspicuously dismissive and derisory of the WI, refusing to buy their homemade jam because it ‘looks awful […] probably riddled with bits of wasp,’ and exclaiming ‘Do I look like someone who’d join the WI?’ when invited to join (series one, episode one, 2015). In this moment, Jenny also draws attention to the physical differences between her and the rest of the women of Great Paxford, the majority of whom wear simple, utilitarian clothes and appear to wear little makeup. Jenny, on the other hand, always appears heavily made up, with dark pencilled eyebrows, red lips and peroxide blonde hair.

 In the above exchange, Jenny is placed in direct contrast and conflict with WI member Claire (Daisy Badger) by their mutual interest in local postman Spencer (Mike Noble). In contrast to Claire, Jenny is depicted as demanding, brazen, and forward in her pursuit of men. As a result, the series identifies her as a woman of less value than Claire. Claire’s worth is established for viewers earlier in the episode when she gives an impassioned speech about the importance of the WI in helping her conquer her fear of the impending war. This is confirmed by Spencer’s declaration to Claire that Jenny is not his ‘Sweetheart,’ but rather, ‘just a girl I see from time to time’ (season one, episode one, 2015). Here there is a clear moral judgement made regarding Jenny’s character and potential as a long-term love interest. Her willingness to accompany men for drinks in the pub and general forwardness mark her as undesirable and morally ambiguous within the narrative, ostensibly reflecting the social norms of the period. However, no such label is applied to Spencer despite his having dated her. Indeed he informs Claire, ‘Truth be told. I didn’t really like her all that much,’ to which she assures him, ‘Not all women are like that. I’m not like that,’ creating further distance between herself and the morally ambiguous Jenny (series one, episode two, 2015).

 In the second series of *Home Fires* Jenny applies to work behind the bar of the officer’s club of the local RAF base, Tabley Wood, and is subsequently recruited to the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). When describing her recruitment to Pat who works with her at the telephone exchange, Jenny boasts:

I’ve joined the WAAF. I say “joined,” I was more or less spotted. I say “spotted,” I was plucked Mrs Simms. From behind the bar at Tabley Wood and asked by a senior WAAF officer to consider joining. I say “asked,” she more or less begged me (series two, episode four, 2016).

As well as showing Jenny to be conceited and arrogant, Pat’s sceptical and rather sarcastic response also encourages the viewer to doubt the authenticity of Jenny’s claim. Rather than a selfless act of patriotism in support of the war effort, as the other women’s membership and work for the WI is depicted, this is shown to be a selfish exercise in personal advancement and an opportunity to flirt with pilots. Jenny later scoffs to Claire who ultimately marries Spencer, ‘After all, what girl wouldn’t rather have a pilot over a postman?’ (season two, episode two, 2016).

 Jenny’s position is further undermined when it is revealed that her male colleagues at the RAF base do not respect her. Speaking to school teacher Theresa (Leanne Best), who is engaged to Wing Commander Nick Lucas (Mark Umbers), Jenny says of her work, ‘It must be lovely to just shut yourself away with the little ones and pretend the war isn't happening. Unlike the Wing Commander and I, we have to deal with being on the front line.’ As well as being obviously rude, this illustrates Jenny’s desire to distance herself from the other women of the village, who are happy in their domestic roles, and push into the extra-domestic, male sphere occupied by the Wing Commander. In this, she is rebuffed when the Wing Commander curtly dismisses her before informing Theresa, ‘If the Germans do invade, I’m going to have her dropped behind enemy lines. With any luck, she’ll talk them to death’ (series two, episode two, 2016).

 There are only two other overtly mobile women in the series. Connie Ward (Rachael Elizabeth) is a former lover of Theresa’s (the depiction of Theresa’s sexuality is discussed in detail later in the chapter) who arrives to tempt Theresa away from the security and stability of the village to accompany her to America. Helen Lakin (uncredited) is the mistress of Frances Barden’s husband Peter (Anthony Calf). Both of these women are killed in accidents shortly after their introduction to the series, emphasising the danger for women seeking geographic and symbolic mobility.

 *Home Fires* therefore mobilises ‘highly gendered and highly value laden concepts of home and stability,’ in which women form the bedrock of a geographically stable community (Negra 2009: p36). It offers a clear moral hierarchy, with those who are content to stay and find fulfilment in their roles within the village at the top and those who feel the need to push beyond these “natural” boundaries at the bottom. The desire for mobility can be seen as a rejection of the fixed notion of postfeminist fulfilment in home and marriage. The desire for the freedom of movement both geographically and figuratively beyond the delineated space of postfeminist acceptability marks the women who expresses it as dangerous and unstable. Indeed, the construction of the single woman as unstable, dangerous and essentially a problem to be solved is prevalent throughout the series. This idea will be examined closely in the following section and situated within postfeminist discourses of marriage and maternity.

## The Threat of the Single Woman: Men, Marriage and Maternity in *Home Fires*

Despite the focus on women’s relationships with other women, which is to be expected in a FED, much of the narrative impetus in *Home Fires* does come from the women’s relationships with the men around them. All of the main female characters are either married, widowed, or involved in storylines concerning their search for love. As in *Bletchley*, hetermonormative relationships are therefore the narrative destinies of *Home Fires*’ female characters.Vicar’s wife Sarah Collingborne (Ruth Gemmell) must contend both with her husband’s capture and internment as a prisoner of war and her growing feelings of attraction for Wing Commander Lucas. Pat Simms’ struggle as a victim of domestic abuse at the hands of her husband Bob (Mark Bazeley), becomes an open secret to be tackled by the network of women centred around the WI, as does her subsequent affair with billeted Czech soldier Marek (Alexandre Willaume). Claire Hillman’s life is dramatically affected by her decision to support and later marry conscientious objector Spencer, who is shunned by the rest of the village for his decision not to fight. Even self-identified lesbian Theresa’s main storyline revolves around her decision not to run away with her former female lover, choosing instead to stay in the village and accept a proposal of marriage from Wing Commander Lucas.[[51]](#footnote-51)

 In fact, *Home Fires* evokes the postfeminist spectre of the ‘time-beset single woman,’ in that singledom, for the women of Great Paxford, is constructed as something undesirable and temporary. It is depicted as a state to be endured only until an appropriate, heterosexual partner can be found, even if this is not one’s actual sexual preference. This is best illustrated by the narratives of sisters Kate and Laura Campbell (Leila Mimmack). In the second episode of the first series of *Home Fires*, the sisters meet pilot Jack Heaton (Adam Long), who brings an injured dog to their family home be treated by their father who is the local GP. Jack’s obvious interest in Kate, which leads him to ask her out for a date, causes a rift between the sisters (series one, episode two, 2015). Kate and Jack’s rapid courtship culminates in their engagement after just two weeks of knowing each other, citing the uncertainties of war as justification for their haste (series one, episode three, 2015). In this way, the wartime setting of *Home Fires* only serves to exacerbate the postfeminist concept of time pressure for single women. The loss of young men to active service and the real possibility that they may be killed places added pressure on single women to secure an appropriate match before it is too late. The logic of this situation is quickly accepted by Kate’s father, Will (Ed Stoppard), who acknowledges, ‘it’s their lives. And we only get one. All they have is this moment. Who can blame them for grabbing it with both hands?’ (series one, episode three, 2015). Even Laura overcomes her initial jealousy to offer her understanding and approval (series one, episode three, 2015).

 However, despite her ultimate happiness for her sister, Laura is still confronted by her rejection and exhibits the characteristics of what Negra describes as ‘the desperate, questing single woman’ (2009: p62). At Kate and Jack’s wedding, Laura is seduced by and begins an affair with a married man, Wing Commander Richard Bowers (Philip McGinley). Laura’s desperation not to be overlooked and willingness to consort with a married man is depicted as indicative of her fear of ‘the imminent social death for which the single woman is at risk and a sense of the centrality of her abjecthood’ (Negra 2009: p62). The two sisters therefore occupy opposing sides of the traditional virgin - whore dichotomy, with this position made absolute in the following episodes (*Madonna – Whore Complex*, 2015). Laura’s affair with Bowers escalates when they kiss in his office and later arrange to spend the night in a hotel together, while Jack is tragically killed in a training exercise just days before he and Kate were due to move into their first home.

 Laura’s affair is exposed after Laura’s mother Erica (Frances Grey) is confronted by Bowers’ wife (uncredited) who has discovered the affair (series one, episode six, 2015). As well as a dishonourable discharge from the WAAF, preventing her from joining any other branch of the women’s services, Laura must also endure scorn and alienation from many other women in the village after knowledge of her affair becomes common. This is reflective of commonplace attitudes of the time towards adultery. However, through a postfeminist reading of the text it is also indicative of her relegation to abject singledom within the narrative as a result of her failure to enact appropriate postfeminist femininity. In the second season, Laura is redeemed by the attentions of airman Tom (Rob Heaps), who is willing to overlook her past, begin a relationship, and help her regain her standing in the village. While Tom’s apparent magnanimity does highlight the unfairness of Laura’s position, it is more indicative of his postfeminist masculinity and suitability as a potential romantic partner. In a similar manner to land girl Esther (discussed in Chapter Two) who is “disgraced” after falling pregnant outside of wedlock, Tom’s attentions allow Laura to choose to ignore the admonishments of the local villagers. Thus, the patriarchal structures that underpin these attitudes are left intact.

 In comparison to Laura, Kate lives out perhaps the ultimate idealised postfeminist life cycle and offers the only example of feminine mobility that is deemed acceptable within the narrative. After the death of her husband, Kate decides to move to London to train as a nurse and is not seen again in the series. She therefore transitions from virgin, to wife, to widow, and on to dedicate her life to the care of others. While Laura is ultimately rewarded with the fulfilment of an appropriate heterosexual partner, she must first endure the pain, humiliation and isolation caused by her fear of abject singledom and transgression beyond acceptable feminine behaviour.

 The postfeminist imperative for women to participate in a productive heterosexual marriage and thereby take up one’s place in the domestic sphere is clear in *Home Fires.* As well as heterosexual romance and marriage, the series places considerable emphasis on stable, nuclear family units which centre around the mother. Indeed, as is common in postfeminist texts, motherhood is privileged within the series and given added significance in the wartime setting. The wartime setting of *Home Fires* lends an added dimension to the role of mother as women within the series are called upon to offer up their children to the dangers of war work and active service. As Negra argues, ‘mainstream popular culture … frequently equates motherhood with full womanhood,’ suggesting a failure or lack in the lives of women who do not have children (2009: p63). As well as the character of Erica Campbell, mentioned above, this idea can primarily be seen in the storylines of Miriam Brindsley (Claire Price) and Frances Barden.

 Miriam’s entire identity is bound up in her role as a mother, first to David (Will Attenborough) and later, after David is reported missing at sea, to an unexpected unborn child she is carrying. Miriam’s devotion to David is made clear from the first episode of *Home Fires* when,having been cleared of asthma by Dr Campbell, David decides to enlist in the Navy. Miriam is distraught and, attempts to secure her husband Bryn’s (Daniel Ryan) support in stopping David by reminding him of the psychological scars he suffered after serving during the First World War. Even While acknowledging the effect it had on him, Bryn insists that he would rather have served than not and is adamant that ‘young men are drawn to war like moths to flame, Mim. It’s their chance to prove themselves’ and that, ‘It’s not a choice. Not for most’ (series one episode one, 2015).

  In this exchange, Bryn and Miriam (Mim) offer traditionally accepted male and female perspectives on war. In her concern for her son, Miriam places his safety above his duty to his country. In ignoring his wishes, she claims rights to his life based on the fact that she is his mother. Bryn, on the other hand, a veteran of the First World War, places higher value on David’s desire to serve his country and prove himself in the face of danger than on the desire to keep him safe. He accepts the need to face danger as a natural part of the male psyche and the decision to go to war as something that is ‘not a choice.’ In adding the caveat that it is not a choice ‘for most’ Bryn distinguishes between normative and non-normative masculinity. While Miriam’s actions, such as her attempt to persuade Dr. Campbell to declare David medically unfit for service and omitting his name from a census form, are clearly depicted as irrational, her maternal intuition is consistently borne out through the series. Despite Bryn’s assurance that he will not be killed in action, David is declared missing presumed dead, thereby validating his mother’s fears (series one, episode six: 2015). Her subsequent refusal to accept his alleged death is validated when David miraculously returns to the village, grievously wounded, but alive (series two, episode three: 2016).

 This is a familiar trope in postfeminist media texts that often depict ‘bravura mothering in which postfeminist motherhood is equated with ultimate clarity and the will to achieve and endure’ (Negra 2009: p68). Despite the evidence to the contrary and the scepticism of those around her, particularly her husband, Miriam remains absolutely certain that her son is alive. This closely mirrors plotlines in films such as *The Forgotten*(Joseph Ruben, 2004), in which the main character, played by Julianne Moore, fights to prove the existence of her son despite overwhelming evidence that he was a figment of her imagination.[[52]](#footnote-52) In a similar way to *Home Fires’* depiction of Miriam’s conviction that her son is alive, *The Forgotten’s*:

commitment to the power of private maternal certitude is such that [the mother] will move heaven and earth to recover [her child], leading to a joyous reunion at the film’s close (Negra 2009: p69).

In this way, motherhood and maternal instinct is privileged as being able to ‘cut through postmodern ambiguity and ambivalence giving credence to female intuition as a higher order epistemology’ (Negra 2009: p69). Miriam’s uncanny knowledge of and faith in her son’s survival is acknowledged by Bryn who says, ‘I still can’t believe it. Mim, you did believe. I couldn’t, but … but you [sic] … and I’ll never understand how. But you did. Thank you’ (series two, episode three, 2016). Here, her intuition is clearly marked as female, as something only a woman, specifically a mother would be capable of — something that, as a man, was beyond Bryn’s capability and comprehension. Thereby reaffirming the apparent feminine aptitude for motherhood.

 With regard to Frances, the series approaches the issue of maternity in a different way. It is revealed in the first series that Frances and her husband Peter have been unable to have children. During an argument after David’s presumed death, Miriam accuses Frances of being unable to understand her feelings as she is not a mother. Frances tearfully replies, ‘Simply because Peter and I have been unable to have children, doesn't mean I can’t understand and empathise with how you or any mother might feel at this time’ (season one, episode five, 2015). She goes on to describe the love and joy she observed in Miriam and her husband after David’s birth. The longing undertones of her speech suggest her own desire for a child, and her regret that she has never had the opportunity to experience the feelings she describes.

 The matter is complicated by Peter’s sudden death in a road accident at the beginning of the second series and Frances’ subsequent discovery that Peter had been involved in a sustained affair throughout their marriage and had fathered a child with his mistress. Despite her reluctance, because of a clause in her late husband’s will Frances is forced to deal frequently with the boy (Noah, played by Oliver Nelson) and his family. After one such meeting, in which Frances loses her temper and leaves, her sister Sarah who had accompanied her asks, ‘weren’t you curious to see what the last fragment of Peter on this earth looked like? Weren’t you stunned to see that he’s the spit of his father?’ (series two, episode four, 2016). Sarah admonishes Frances for her hostility towards the child, suggesting that she should attempt to forge a relationship with him and implying that her unwillingness is problematic, spiteful and even unnatural.

 Later in the series, after Liverpool (Noah’s home) is subjected to a series of devastating air raids, Noah’s grandparents request that he be allowed to stay with Frances until they can secure alternative accommodation. Despite her reluctance, Frances cannot avoid forming a relationship with Noah and her former rejection of him is clearly coded as problematic within the text and as the result of pride and stubbornness, rather than any legitimate grief or anger. It is implied that Noah offers Frances the opportunity to be a mother and to reclaim a small part of her lost husband, and therefore achieve the complete postfeminist fulfilment that had previously been denied to her. It is further implied that this should, and does, override any other feelings of hurt or betrayal. Indeed, Frances’ unhappiness is presented as result of this previous lack, and her current rejection, of this maternal role, rather than being the result of the trauma of her husband’s death and the discovery of his affair. Here the postfeminist maternal imperative is clear and motherhood is again equated with ‘full womanhood,’ which was previously unavailable to the childless Frances (Negra 2009: p63). As well as these samples of the postfeminist ideal, *Home Fires* also offers depictions of postfeminist fatherhood and its central role in sustaining a postfeminist sensibility. It is to an analysis of these depictions that this chapter will now move.

## Postfeminist Fatherhood in *Home Fires*

 In her work on postfeminism and fatherhood (2009, 2010, 2013, 2014), Hannah Hamad has pointed to a rehabilitation of paternity in postfeminism. In her work on current trends in Hollywood film and broader celebrity culture, she discusses the ‘currency of fatherhood as a defining component of ideal masculinity’ (Hamad 2013: p99). Using the star personas of male celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Mel Gibson, as well as successful films such as *Taken* (Pierre Morel, 2008), *Road To Perdition* (Sam Mendes, 2002), *Apocalypto* (Mel Gibson, 2006) and *Valkyrie* (Bryan Singer, 2008), Hamad discusses the centrality of sensitive postfeminist paternity, established through ‘paternally charged (often tactile) affective displays’ to the construction of idealised masculinity (Hamad 2013: p100). This phenomenon is also observable across a broad spectrum of recent film releases – such as *Dunkirk* (Christopher Nolan, 2017) *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Gareth Edwards, 2016), and action films such as *White House Down* (Roland Emmerich, 2013) – demonstrating that the ideals of postfeminist masculinity resonate strongly in contemporary popular culture.

 Although, as a Female Ensemble Drama, *Home Fires* primarily features female relationships and interactions, the multiple examples of postfeminist fatherhood that pepper the series help to establish its discernibly postfeminist tone. Furthermore, *Home Fires,* ‘through [its] period settin[g] exemplifies the tendency in postfeminism to locate and idealize masculinities in and of the past’ (Hamad 2013: p102). Bryn Brindsley and Will Campbell are the most obvious examples in their overtly affectionate and tactile relationships with their children, but Stanley Farrow (Chris Coghill) and Adam Collingborne (Mark Bonnar) also contribute to this tone in different ways. All four will be considered in this section.

 The setting of *Home Fires*in the domestic and feminised space of a small rural village immediately inflects its representation of male labour (with the exception of service in the armed forces). Bryn’s job as a butcher, Adam’s as a reverend, Will’s as a local doctor and Stanley’s as a farmer, can all be seen as traditionally masculine occupations, however their location in the small village of Great Paxford places their labour in service of the symbolic family of the village rather than the nation as a whole. Indeed, excepting those men who join the armed forces, it could be argued that it is the women of Great Paxford, through their membership of the WI and subsequent participation in national food production drives and campaigns, whose labour directly contributes to the national war effort.

 This service of the symbolic family further bolsters the paternal characterisation of these men. For Stan, Will and Bryn, their places of work are attached to their family homes (in the literal, locational sense) and are family businesses in the sense that other members of their families also work there. Bryn, Miriam and David live above the Brindsley’s butcher shop and both Miriam and David work in the shop. Stan, Stef (Claire Calbraith) and Stanley Jnr (Brian Fletcher) live and work on the Farrow’s farm and Will and Erica Campbell live in the house adjoining his GP surgery with Erica working as his pharmacist. Sarah and Adam Collingborne do also live in the village vicarage, which is obviously connected to Adam’s profession as the local vicar, however as they do not have children the effect is somewhat different. In the case of the others, this proximity and the embededness of their work in their family lives facilitates all three men’s construction as, what Hamad terms, ‘effortlessly multitasking and breadwinning domestic hero double-shifters, simultaneously navigating the public and private spheres’ (2013: p106).

 In the case of Dr. Will Campbell, in the first episode of season one of *Home Fires*,it appears that he will abandon his paternal duties in favour of joining the armed forces. A proposal to which his wife Erica responds: ‘I suppose I was hoping that the girls and me wanting you to stay with us would be the only option you’d need’ (series one, episode one, 2015). In this way, Will’s desire to leave his family to join the armed forces is figured as a selfish desire to occupy an alternate masculine identity, rather than fulfilling his necessary role within their family. Ultimately Will does not pass the army medical as it is revealed that he has lung cancer, a condition which steadily begins to weaken him and affect his ability to perform his job as well as everyday tasks. His masculine utility is thus doubly called into question, firstly by his rejection from the armed forces and secondly by the effects of his progressing illness.[[53]](#footnote-53) When Erica suggests lightening his load of patients to reduce stress due to his condition, Will takes offence and storms out of the surgery informing her:

If you need me, me and my condition will be taking things very, very calmly in the Horse and Groom. I may not be fit for the Army, or much else as things have turned out, but I can still manage to light a pipe and lift a bloody beer glass (series one, episode two, 2015).

 It is ultimately Will’s role as a father that must provide an anchor for his masculine identity and provide him with motivation to seek treatment so that he can continue to support his family. When his daughter Laura’s relationship with Wing Commander Bowers is revealed, Will confronts him to attempt to prevent Laura’s name from being connected to his resultant divorce. Bowers refuses stating that Laura is an adult and responsible for her own decisions, flippantly informing Will, ‘I’m sorry old chap, it’s not in my gift.’ Will responds by punching him and knocking him to the ground. Leaning over the bleeding officer, Will says:

I was aiming for your mouth, but I rather think I broke your nose by mistake. I would offer to fix it, but I won’t. Sorry, old chap, it’s not in my gift (series two, episode two, 2016).

 In this way, Will’s masculinity hinges not on his ability or inability to join the armed forces but on his demonstration of the ‘hands-on, emotionally involved practice of fatherhood [which] has become a prerequisite for the attainment of mature ideal masculinity’ in the contemporary postfeminist media climate (Hamad 2009: p2).

 Bryn Brinsley’s fatherhood, as depicted in the series, is in many ways rooted in its dialogic relationship with his wife Miriam’s motherhood, which has already been discussed in detail. However, the postfeminist character of Bryn’s fatherhood is perhaps best encapsulated in his responses to both his son David’s departure for service in the Navy and his unexpected return after being declared missing and presumed dead. Upon realising that David intends to leave in the middle of the night to join up, Bryn catches him at the village bus stop. In what is a highly ‘paternally charged affective’ (Hamad 2013: p24) moment, asks him if he ‘pack[ed] warm socks?’ before embracing David, telling him how much he loves him and openly sobbing (series one, episode four, 2015). Furthermore, after David is declared missing and despite his insistence to Miriam that they must accept the situation, Bryn continues to wait at the village bus stop each day, in case David should come home (season two, episode two, 2016). When David does return, Bryn is overwhelmed with emotion, running to embrace David in the village square and visibly sobbing confirming his status as an emotionally available ‘feeling’ postfeminist father (Hamad 2013).

 This shift in perspective away from the idea of active service as a purely selfless act is also symptomatic of the postfeminist ideal of fatherhood. Instead of the soldier/warrior figure functioning alone as the indicator of idealised masculinity, here it must be ‘judiciously complemented with contemporary norms of sensitive fatherhood’ (Hamad 2013: p31). For instance, when Stan, despite his reserved occupation status as a farmer, wishes to join the army he seeks advice from Rev. Adam Collingborne. Insisting that he would be of more use to his country as a soldier than a farmer, Stan also acknowledges, ‘I can stay at home, but I want to go and fight. How does that not sound the most selfish thing I could think of?’ (series one, episode three, 2015).

 The outcomes of this conversation have far-reaching consequences for both men. In a similar way to both Stan and Will, Adam questions his role in the village compared to his potential utility on the front lines. While Adam and Sarah have no children, Adam’s role as a vicar is by its nature a paternal one. After speaking to Stan, Adam agonises over his feelings of inadequacy at being unable to help him make a decision. When Sarah attempts to reassure him by saying that telling someone what to do in that way is not his style, Adam bitterly replies:

no my style is to smile benignly while a man agonises over whether or not to enlist before sitting down with Mrs Felgate for an intense debate about floral arrangements this Christmas. […] Is that all I’m good for now? (season one, episode three, 2015).

 Here, both Stan and Adam’s desire to fight is depicted as privileging this duty above their paternal duty to their actual and symbolic families. However, Adam’s reason for wanting to fight is also framed in markedly paternal terms. Speaking to Sarah about his decision, he explains that:

There are boys from Great Paxford who will shortly find themselves screaming out for their mothers in fear or pain. But their mothers won’t be there to help them in their hour of need. I can (season one, episode three, 2015).

 Here he expresses his overtly paternal motivation in joining the army, where he believes his ‘true duty’ lies. When his wife attempts to use his paternal role as a vicar to dissuade him by asking should he not remain in his Parish, ‘at its time of greatest need?’ Adam responds by asking her, ‘If we had a son Sarah, wouldn't you want someone like me helping him to prepare for what he was about to face?’ (season one, episode three, 2015). He appeals to Sarah’s maternal instincts to allow him to transfer the postfeminist paternal duty he would have to their figurative son onto soldiers who will be in need of it on the battlefield. In this way, the series suggests that, despite not having children of her own, Sarah’s maternal responsibilities must outweigh her personal desires.

 In Stan’s case, his decision to fight and to leave the care of his son and the running of the farm in the hands of his wife Stef has keenly felt consequences. When he returns on leave, Stan is markedly different in his behaviour and attitude than before he left. His first night back at home is spent fortifying the farm against German attack. When Stef asks him to come back to bed and wait until the morning, he retorts, ‘Do you think the German High Command shut up shop when the sun goes down? […] While we sleep, they plan’ (season two, episode two, 2016). His paranoid behaviour continues when he enlists his son to help him in ‘littering the fields with old machinery to stop the Jerries being able to land,’ and later begins training him to shoot accurately and to use a bayonet (season two, episode two, 2016). When Stef protests, again Stan rebuffs her by saying, ‘They’re absolutely brutal with civilians. Just, unnecessary mouths to feed. It’s basic self defence, Stef. Kill or be killed’ (season two, episode two, 2016). His new aggression and paranoia is directed not only towards the rest of the village, whom he believes are not taking the threat of German invasion seriously leading him to berate them in the communal village shelter during an air raid, but also towards his own son. When Stef discovers that Stan Jr has been selling butter on the black-market, with the approval of his father, who believes they may need money to bribe German soldiers in the event of an invasion, Stef loses her temper and accuses her husband of putting their son in danger saying, ‘He’s not a bloody soldier […] so why are you treating him like one?’ (season two, episode three, 2016).

 The traumatic effect of war can therefore be seen to have derailed Stan’s postfeminist fatherhood causing it to ‘vee[r] off the postfeminist script according to which he should be domesticated, benignly emotionally effusive, present and available and towards a troublingly traditional patriarchal model’ (Hamad 2010: p162). Through the obvious disruption and distress caused by Stan’s reversion to ‘proprietary patriarchal power, which [is] noticeably incongruous with the preferred cultural template of postfeminist fatherhood,’ *Home Fires* further affirms its opposite as a masculine ideal (Hamad 2010: p161). Stan's behaviour is clearly marked as an aberration caused by the disruption and trauma of war. Realising this, before he returns to the front Stan removes the weapons he had hidden around the farm, clears the fields and leaves with Stef’s assurance that, ‘It’s all gonna be here when you get back. Just as it is now’ (season two, episode four, 2016).

 For Adam, the consequences of his decision to fight are made clear when a telegram is delivered to Sarah informing her that he has been taken captive and is being held as a prisoner of war. In Adam’s absence, Sarah must then take on his paternal duties during a special church service to mark the silencing of the bells for the duration of the war. In accepting this responsibility Sarah realises, in lieu of her husband, she must shoulder his paternal duty to the village and, as well as standing in to lead the service, help them to deal with his loss as she must. The sense of solidarity and mutual support between the residents of Great Paxford, particularly the members of the WI, emphasised in the episode mentioned above is another key theme of *Home Fires* across both series. It is particularly relevant because it represents a marked departure from neoliberalist discourses of individual action and empowerment that underscore much of the postfeminist sensibility that informs the rest of the series. This chapter will therefore now move to examine the depiction of community and mutual support in the series and compare it against neoliberal concepts of individual empowerment and personal choice.

## **The Original Social Network**

Robinson describes the WI as ‘the original Social Network,’ in the sense that the WI brought women together across class boundaries (2011: p1). In so doing, it ‘created a space where women could explore their own interests and abilities away from the censure of the men in their lives’ (Curtis 2016: p13). As a result of this space dedicated exclusively to female experience, women’s lives, experiences and skills were given value by others outside of their own homes and marriages. Thus, membership of the WI was, and remains, a microcosm of broader social structures as it crosses lines of social hierarchy and class, bringing women of vastly different social backgrounds together. As Curtis explains:

for working-class women, the WI provided a place where they could enjoy a leisure activity, while for middle-class women, who were largely the ones who ran the branches, it was an outlet for their organisational skills (Curtis 2016: p12).

 This sense of community, mutual support and the awareness of a broad network of skills that could be exchanged and developed to the benefit of the whole was an important aspect of the real WI. It is also a key narrative feature in *Home Fires* and is one notable way in which the series veers away from postfeminist norms of postfeminist individualism. As Gill observes, postfeminism places considerable emphasis ‘upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline [and] a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment’ (2007: no pagination). This construction require that women must be entirely autonomous, self-regulating subjects, solely responsible for their own happiness regardless of their socio-economic circumstances (Gill 2007). *Home Fires*, however,offers a vision of empowerment and liberation that relies on female relationships, friendships and the agency of community.

 Apart from the consistent theme of collective action by the WI in response to food production and waste prevention campaigns and so forth in *Home Fires,* three characters’ storylines particularly emphasise this point. In the case of Stef Farrow her membership of the WI shepherds her out of a life of isolation working on her family farm after her husband enlists. It also brings her into contact with school teacher Theresa Fenchurch who teaches Stef to read upon realising that she is illiterate. This is of particular importance when Stef is required to follow written government instructions regarding the running of the farm (season one, episode four 2015). Theresa’s assistance not only means that Stef and her son learn to read, allowing them to meet government requirements and remain on the farm, it also confirms Theresa’s place as a meaningful and important part of the local community of women. As a result, when a former (female) lover arrives in the village to ask Theresa to leave with her for America where she believes they may be together, Theresa refuses. She states that she does not want to ‘be an accessory in [her] life,’ and, referring to the village and her life there, says ‘for the time being, this quiet, little nothing in the middle of nowhere, it’s mine’ (season one, episode three, 2015).

 While in one respect Theresa’s decision reflects her desire to remain in a place in which she has found purpose, the consequences of that decision are that she must hide and even reject her sexuality. Even her landlady, and closest friend, Alison (Fenella Woolgar) who discovers her secret and agrees to keep it, cannot fully accept Theresa’s sexuality. In the fourth episode of season two, after a friendship blossoms between Theresa and Wing Commander Lucas, Alison encourages Theresa to pursue the relationship. When Theresa protests that the situation is not straightforward, Alison responds by saying, ‘It could be. If you gave it a chance. No more looking over your shoulder, wondering what people are thinking or saying about you. No more living in fear’ (series two, episode five 2016). In this way, the series could again be seen to critique postfeminist discourses of empowerment through personal choice. By suggesting that Theresa may simply opt out of the repercussions of societal homophobia by choosing to pursue a relationship with a man, Alison demonstrates her lack of awareness regarding the problematic othering of lesbian sexuality and consequent nautralisation of heterosexuality. Indeed, after accepting a proposal of marriage from Nick, Theresa has a conversation with pilot Annie with whom she obviously shares a mutual attraction. After telling Theresa that she understands her reason’s for marrying Nick, Annie says, ‘When I’m in the air, I often look down at the houses below and wonder how many of us have taken refuge in marriage and […] normality.’ In her use of the pronoun ‘us’ Annie clearly aligns herself with Theresa and signifies them both as other to the people around them. When Theresa does not acknowledge the truth of what she is saying, Annie continues:

what I’m trying to say is that, if you’re going to marry Nick, be certain that you can make him happy. Because if you can’t be certain, all you’ll achieve is to make two very lovely people extraordinarily miserable (series two, episode six, 2016).

In this instance, the series acknowledges that the pre-second wave society it depicts is in fact flawed, with certain liberties that must still be achieved through feminist struggle.

 Another example of this stems from the character of Pat Simms (Claire Rushbrook) and her relationship with her abusive husband Bob. From the first episode of series one of *Homes Fires* Bob’s physical and emotional abuse of Pat are apparent. He is resentful of the time Pat spends at WI meetings, insisting that it divides her attention and he forbids her from working to supplement his low income and subjects her to increasingly vicious mental and physical abuse. Pat’s membership of the WI offers her increased opportunity to escape his company, pursue her own interests and gain self-confidence. However, despite the other members of the WI doing what they can to intervene – with Erica helping Pat to unknowingly slip tranquillisers into Bob’s tea, Frances arranging for him to be posted to the front lines as a war correspondent and Erica later covering up Pat’s affair with Marek – Pat remains trapped in a loveless marriage with little possibility of escaping it. As their illicit relationship flourishes, Marek asks Pat to leave Bob, to which she replies:

What do I do when you get redeployed? […] I’m a woman of a certain age, Marek, with no means of supporting myself beyond a certain level of penury. […] If you changed your mind about us? Or got taken prisoner? Or […killed]? I’d be completely alone (series two, episode five, 2016).

Here the series acknowledges the limitations of the community of women created through the WI. It also acknowledges that, despite apparent contentment with pre-second wave gender roles, there are clear limitations to its construction of a pre-second wave feminist idyll. Indeed, the exposition of the extent of domestic violence perpetrated against women was one of the cornerstones of the second wave, as well as the recognition of other forms of gender-based violence and harassment (Gaspard, 2005). In certain instances then, *Home Fires* acknowledges the need for feminism. The implication, however, is that it is only in response to larger issues such as homophobia and domestic violence, rather than as a necessary intervention in women’s everyday lives.

## Conclusion

*Home Fires* offers a welcome depiction of feminine competency and skill. It showcases women working productively together in the service of the national war effort and supporting each other through the emotional tribulations of the war. In this instance, *Home Fires* challenges neoliberal discourses of individualism and competition. Furthermore, its construction as a female ensemble drama provides a large cast of female main characters, resulting in the representation of women of different ages and backgrounds.

However, *Home Fires* also undermines the goals of second wave feminism, such as female emancipation, liberation and equality. This is because these goals are presented as the result of acceptance of women’s “natural” place in the domestic sphere. This establishes a teleology for postfeminism (Spigel 2013) which suggests that the disruption and conflict caused by the political struggle of the second wave is unnecessary. The setting of the series during the Second World War lends nuance to this depiction as, through government campaigns such as ‘Dig For Victory’ (1941), ‘Make Do and Mend’ (1943) and through organisations such as the WI, women’s work in the home and on the land did take on national significance. Through its emphasis on geographical monogamy and retreatism, *Home Fires* privileges the home as the natural site of feminine authority and leaves unproblematized the limiting and oppressive nature of this concept. *Home Fires* therefore offers a strictly delineated postfeminist space, bounded by the expectations of heteronormativity and domesticity, only within which is the achievement of ostensibly feminist goals possible and sustainable. The series champions this postfeminist space as the only potential site of happiness and fulfilment for women. In this way, feminist liberation is figured as unnecessary in *Home Fires* because of the character’s existing postfeminist “empowerment.” However, the oppressive and illusory nature of that “empowerment” demonstrates this to be entirely untrue.

# Conclusion

This thesis has identified and traced the influence of a persistent postfeminist sensibility in four television dramas that imagine the impact of the Second World War on the lives of British women. It has demonstrated that this postfeminist inflection is a product of the needs and desires of the contemporary moment, specifically stemming from popular constructions of postfeminism beginning in the 1990s, rather than the past represented in these dramas. In outlining the relationship between television and cultural memory it has demonstrated the ways in which such depictions dehistoricise and naturalise postfeminist discourses to the extent that they are internalised as an aspect of ‘essential’ femininity. Furthermore, the Second World War as a setting represents a moment of heightened gender tension and instability. As a result, the ultimate reassertion of postfeminist norms which occurs in all four series carries significantly more weight.

 Through its identification of elements of the postfeminist sensibility in texts produced from 2009 – 2016, this thesis has demonstrated the persistence of the postfeminist sensibility to the present moment (Gill 2007). The texts examined mobilise postfeminist norms and ideals in different ways and to different ends. Yet, each of these drama series undermines the political aims of second wave feminism and implicitly questions the need for continued feminist activism. The structure of this thesis has charted the cumulative nature of these depictions and has mapped shifts in the postfeminist media climate. Through depictions of postfeminist regimes – of beauty, heteronormative romance, marriage, motherhood and so forth – as pleasurable, the series deny the oppressive, patriarchal structures that underpin these regimes. The depictions of female friendship and skill are pleasurable to watch, and these dramas are significant insofar as they acknowledge the vital contribution women made to the national war effort. They are also illustrative of the potential of female-centred television drama for carving out a space for women’s stories and women’s histories in a male dominated media climate – albeit a space bound and delineated by postfeminism. However, this pleasure is all the more insidious as it facilitates the series’ erasure of the oppressive nature of these postfeminist regimes.

 After establishing a theoretical framework for analysis and situating the discussion in the relevant literature in Chapter One, Chapter Two focused on the BBC series *Land Girls* (2009 – 2011). As well as thinking about the potential of female ensemble drama (FED) for telling women’s history, this chapter considered *Land Girls*’ explicit construction as a site of commemoration and further elaborated the productive relationship between television, memory and history. *Land Girls* illustrates that FEDs offer a space in which to explore women’s relationships with other women. Combined with the removal of its female characters from the restrictions of normal society, this space has potential as a site of challenge to prescribed heteronormative romantic narrative destinies by opening up new possibilities for its female characters. However, following moves in the 1980s towards retraditionalisation, FED as a whole became much more conservative (Ball 2011, 2013). This move, combined with *Land Girls’* affiliation to melodramatic soap opera, positions emotional heteronormative relationships as the series’ essential narrative driving force. As a result, *Land Girls* is primarily invested in smoothing back the path into patriarchal society for its female characters after the war. This takes clear narrative precedence over any exploration of the potentially liberating space of the Women’s Land Army. *Land Girls* is therefore illustrative of the structuring relationship between postfeminism and FED in the contemporary media climate.

 Chapters Three and Four interrogate the transgressive potential of female characters adopting traditionally male roles – investigator and spy/action hero – a phenomenon that questions traditional assumptions regarding the division of gendered labour. Both *Agent Carter* (ABC 2015 – 2016)and *The Bletchley Circle* (ITV 2012 – 2014), feature central female characters who are highly intelligent, skilled and far more competent than their professional male contemporaries, signalling their transgressive potential. However, both series take measures to recoup their heroines back from the brink of being too transgressive and to elaborate the dangers of unchecked deviation from postfeminist gender norms.

 In *Bletchley*, aspects of the crime and horror genres are used to identify main character Susan as a “Final Girl;” the one who ultimately bests, but is closely aligned with, the killer. Through this association of Susan’s investigative gaze and the deviant gaze of a sexually sadistic murderer, *Bletchley* clearly delineates between Susan’s domestic and investigative role, whilst establishing that the two cannot exist together. The transgressive spaces opened up by the female friendships in *Bletchley* fall outside of the bounds of normative postfeminist identities. These spaces allow the female characters to move beyond those boundaries and prove themselves as investigators. However, these spaces are temporary, fraught with danger and ultimately unsustainable. They are closed down with the women’s acceptance of and willing re-positioning back into more traditional postfeminist gender roles. In this way, *Bletchley* makes clear the consequences of transgression beyond postfeminist norms.

 In *Agent Carter*, on the other hand, there is a discernibly feminist tone. By positioning Peggy Carter as a strong and skilled female character who figuratively and literally fights patriarchal figures to carve out a place for herself in the public sphere, *Agent Carter* would seem to offer a challenge to patriarchal social structures. The product of a cultural moment in which the concept of feminism is, to an extent, being reclaimed by women (Gill 2016), *Agent Carter* offers, what appears to be, a viable feminist hero. However, due to its dislocation in history and its location in the fictional and closed off Marvel Cinematic Universe, this challenge is placed at least one remove from the everyday lives and experiences of its audience. Furthermore, *Agent Carter* presents a direct contrast between Peggy – who adheres to postfeminist norms of beauty, romance and individual empowerment – and Dotty Underwood and Whitney Frost – her main adversaries, who reject and subvert those norms entirely. Therefore, while *Agent Carter* seems toaddress some of the limitations identified in the previous chapters of this thesis, it in factpromotes a vision of empowerment that is discernibly more postfeminist than feminist.

 In Chapter Five, this thesis explores *Home Fires* (ITV 2015 – 2016), which depicts the impact of the Second World War on the lives of women in a village in rural Cheshire and the activities of the local Women’s Institute (WI). Celebrating the achievements of the WI as an institution as well as the skill and dedication of its members, *Home Fires* depicts rural life functioning under the stresses and demands of war. The fortitude of the village community is depicted as a result of the villagers’ adherence to traditional gender norms. *Home Fires* represents the village of Great Paxford as a pre- second wave feminist idyll in which empowerment and “equality” are realised not through feminist struggle, but through acceptance of and adherence to postfeminist norms such as active domesticity, marriage and motherhood. In this way, the disruption associated with the second wave is, by implication, unnecessary. This establishes a teleology of postfeminism (Spigel 2013) in which the path from pre- to postfeminism would appear to circumvent the need for second wave activism entirely. However the limited and oppressive nature of the depicted postfeminist “empowerment” indicates the inadequacy of this imagined transition.

 The analysis of these four texts contributes to a broader store of historical fiction that consists of accessible and pleasurable imagined pasts. These imagined pasts provide explanation and justification for the ideology and circumstances of the present moment. They form part of a general historical sensibility in which scenery, costume, language, characters and depictions of gender, form tropes of “pastness” that are recognizable to audiences accustomed to consuming historical fiction. Through its ubiquity in contemporary depictions of women, postfeminism has become a key structuring aspect of that historical sensibility. This creates comfort and reassurance in its familiarity while simultaneously reinforcing its restrictive and oppressive norms of femininity. Thus the past, especially women’s history, is envisioned consistently through a postfeminist lens that speaks to and reinforces the needs and ideologies of the present.

 The work undertaken in this thesis opens up various avenues for future research. In identifying elements of the postfeminist sensibility in depictions of the Second World War this thesis suggests that analysing female-centred drama set in different time periods would be productive. For instance, analysing the slew of programming created to coincide with the centenary of the First World War would provide a fascinating point of comparison with the work carried out here. Furthermore, the focus here has been on television drama and a timescale that excludes texts produced before 2009. An analysis of films – particularly those created during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War such as *Went the Day Well* (Cavalcanti 1942), *The Ship that Died of Shame* (Dearden 1955), *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1942), and *A Canterbury Tale* (Powell & Pressburger 1944) – in which many of the characterisations and tropes discussed were arguably shaped, falls outside of this project’s remit, but would complement its objectives. An investigation into the images of women in government wartime propaganda – such as the short film *Miss Grant Goes to the Door* (Hurst for the Ministry of Information, 1940) and poster campaigns *Keep Mum She’s Not so Dumb* (1942), and the *Careless Talk Costs Lives!* (1942) and the WLA recruitment posters mentioned in the introduction – would provide a fascinating insight into contemporary concerns and allow for detailed comparison of the two sites of construction. This would reveal much about points of consistency and change in gender norms and ideals over time. These avenues of further research would build productively on the work carried out in this thesis, which has drawn new conclusions regarding the impact of the postfeminist sensibility and opened up several possible avenues of further research.

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1. Note: for clarity, when direct quotations are used, the author’s original spelling of postfeminism/post-feminism/post feminism and so forth will be retained. Otherwise, a standard spelling of postfeminism will be used throughout this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It should be noted that hooks identifies similar issues in the writings of white feminists which she sees as ‘reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries’ (2014: p3) She argues that the philosophy of competitive individualism is so deeply engrained in feminist thought that it ‘undermines the potential radicalism of feminism struggle.’ (2014: p9) This suggests that issues stemming from neoliberal individualism are not limited to postfeminism and an understanding of some of the limitations of second wave feminist thought is important to a truly intersectional feminist ideology which recognises and accommodates ‘multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations’ (McCall 2005: p1771). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The centrality of irony to popular postfeminism will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Here Gill draws on previously existing formulations of the male gaze, particularly Joh Berger’s (1972) discussion of women as a ‘sight,’ which is discussed in detail in chapter three. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See discussion of Grey and the reassertion of natural sexual difference earlier in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See also Rothberg, M. (2009). *Multidirectional memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization*. California: Stanford University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cinema as a key part of the ‘historical apparatus’ (PMG 2011) will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.  [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For examples of this see Townsend (2017), *Mail Online* (2017) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Popular Memory Group was formed as a part of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University (1979 – 1980) and, in reassessing Marxist historical scholarship, sought to ‘expand the idea of historical production well beyond the limits of academic history writing’ (Popular Memory Group, 2011: p254) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. There are clear links here with hooks’ discussion of the domination of the means of production of feminist publications by middle class while women which is discussed earlier in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example Empiricist Historians. For further discussion see: Davies, S. (2003). *Empiricism and history*. London: Palgrave Macmillan; Stafford, W. (2004). Empiricism and History. *The English Historical Review*, *119*(481), pp.579-581.; Mazlish, B., (2003). Empiricism and History. *Historically Speaking*, *4*(3), pp.12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example *Britain’s Greatest Generation* (2015)a four part documentary series made for the BBC by Testimony Films. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For further discussion of memorial knowledge, see Lowenthal, D., (2015). *The past is a foreign country-revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John embodies many of the characteristics of what Dow identifies as a ‘Sensitive New Age Guy’(2006: p122). This construction of postfeminist masculinity is discussed in detail in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For further discussion of this point see work on the phenomenon of the ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl,’ such as Solomon, C.T., 2017. Anarcho-Feminist Melodrama and the Manic Pixie Dream Girl. *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, *19*(1), p.6.; Larsen, K. and Wizards, B., The Integrity of Luna Lovegood: How JK Rowling Subverts the ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’Trope (Kate Pasola). *THE HARRY POTTER SERIES*; Dunder, E., 2017. The Manic Pixie Dream Girls in John Green’s *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The privileging of motherhood in postfeminist discourses is discussed in detail in chapter five [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For further elaboration of postfeminist constructions of empowerment through heteronormative sexuality, see McRobbie’s (2009) discussion of Eva Herzigova’s 1994 ‘Hello Boys’ campaign for Wonder Bra and Herzigova’s comments in which she states that the campaign ‘empowered women’ (London 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The spectre of the ‘time-beset single woman’ (Negra 2009: p63) in postfeminist discourse is discussed in detail in Chapter Five. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Henry’s characterisation bears strong similarity to that of Daniel Sousa (Enver Gjokaj) in *Agent Carter* who is discussed in chapter four. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *British Movietone News* ran from 1929 – 1979 andwas the first sound newsreel to be distributed in Britain. It was produced by US company *Fox Movietone* (*News on Screen* no date). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For further discussion of postfeminist fatherhood, see chapter five of this thesis and Hamad (2009, 2010, 2013, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For examples of such criticism, see: Mainar, L. (1997). Mulvey’s Alleged Avoidance of Essentialism in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.’ Atlantis,* 19(2), 113-123; Manlove, C. T. (2007). Visual "Drive" and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey. *Cinema Journal* 46(3), 83-108. University of Texas Press ; Stacey, J. (1987) ‘Desperately Seeking Difference.’ *Screen*, Volume 28, Issue 1, 1, Pages 48–61; Richard Dyer, (1982) ‘Don't Look Now—The Male Pin-Up.’ *Screen*, v.23, n.3-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. This narrative setting is strongly reminiscent of the first series of *Marvel’s* *Agent Carter* which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For examples of this see, Clover, C.J., (1987). Her body, himself: Gender in the slasher film. *Representations*, (20), pp.187-228.; Clover, C.J., 2015. *Men, women, and chain saws: Gender in the modern horror film*. Princeton University Press.; Cowan, G. and O'Brien, M., (1990).; Gender and survival vs. death in slasher films: A content analysis. *Sex Roles*, *23*(3-4), pp.187-196.; Welsh, A., 2010. On the perils of living dangerously in the slasher horror film: Gender differences in the association between sexual activity and survival. *Sex Roles*, *62*(11-12), pp.762-773.; Welsh, A. and Brantford, L., 2009. Sex and violence in the slasher horror film: A content analysis of gender differences in the depiction of violence. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, *16*(1), pp.1-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. A salient example of this is the case of Brock Turner who was convicted of three counts of sexual assault but given only a six-month prison sentence. His victim was intoxicated and unconscious at the time of the assault. (Carroll 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This bears striking resemblance to the opening sequence of *Marvel’s Agent Carter*, which will be discussed in chapter four, and, in the same way, juxtaposes the central character’s exciting and vital wartime work with their dull and domestic post-war lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. All staff working at Bletchley Park were required to sign the Official Secrets Act and forbidden to discuss their work at the Park even with their families. Information regarding Bletchley Park was declassified in the mid-1970s (BBC News 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For an example of this, see Jane Eyre written by Charlotte Brontë (1847) in which Mr. Rochester (Jane’s love interest in the book) uses a secret room in the attic of Thornfield Hall to hide his insane wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Here there are links back to *Bletchley* in that both series feature a female main character confronting her changed post-war role and that both utilise masculinity as a foil in the construction of those main characters. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The relevance of Captain America to Peggy’s characterisation is discussed in detail later in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. All of these examples are discussed in detail later in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. For further discussion of the use of postfeminism’s use of irony, see chapter one. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ##  For further discussion of this see Mee, L., (2013). The re-rape and revenge of Jennifer Hills: Gender and genre in I Spit On Your Grave (2010). *Horror Studies*, *4*(1), pp.75-89.; Read, J., 2000. *The new avengers: feminism, feminity and the rape-revenge cycle*. Manchester University Press.; Heller-Nicholas, A., (2011). *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*. McFarland. Henry, C., 2014. *Revisionist Rape-revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*. Springer.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. This is despite suggestions of a potentially queer reading of his relationship with his best friend Bucky Barns (Sebastian Stan). For discussion of this popular fan reading of the *Captain America* franchise, see Robinson 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. There are some parallels here with Lady Ellen Hoxley’s storyline in *Land Girls* (BBC 2009 – 2011) discussed in chapter two. In both cases singledom is associated with grief and loss. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. For a detailed discussion postfeminist domesticity and the apparent conflict between personal and professional fulfilment in postfeminist discourses, see Chapter Five. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Further examples of this trope include, Alfred Pennyworth played by various actors in the Batman franchise (DC 1939), Charles Carson played by Jim Carter in *Downton Abbey* (ITV 2010 – 2015) and Jeeves played by Stephen Fry in *Jeeves and Wooster* (ITV 1990 – 1993) among many others. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See discussion of Sousa, Timothy (*Bletchley*) and Lawrence (*Land Girls*) in Chapter Two. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This concept is discussed in depth in chapter one. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For notable examples of Peggy’s aggressive fighting style see ‘Now is Not the End’ (2015) when she uses a stapler as a weapon and throws another assailant out of a window, ‘A Sin to Err’ (2016) in which she incapacitates a room full of SSR agents sent to capture her, using plates, chairs and glass bottles as weapons to knock them unconscious, ‘The Lady in the Lake’ (2016) in which she knocks Dottie Underwood unconscious using a bag of coins. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. See Ralina Joseph’s discussion of Tyra Banks’ movement through various postfeminist identities in Chapter One. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. The term ‘stuffed into the refrigerator’ comes from a story line in *Green Lantern Vol 3 #54* (Marz 1994) in which the main character’s girlfriend is killed and placed into his refrigerator for him to find (Simone 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See Pollard (2017), Mail Online ‘European Migrant and Refugee Crisis News and Pictures.’ (no date), Express ‘Terror’ (no date) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Pollard (2017), Mail Online ‘European Migrant and Refugee Crisis News and Pictures.’ (no date), Express ‘Terror’ (no date) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. This is discussed in detail in chapter four. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The concept of “empowerment” through active domesticity will be discussed later in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See discussion of natural sexual difference in Chapter One. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. This retreat is often figured as a return to a woman’s home town and will be discussed in detail later in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. For clarity, although the syntax is slightly strange the writer is questioning whether the outbreak of the Second World War could have been avoided if women had been more involved and had more input into the public sphere. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The concept of the WI as a supportive network of women within the local community in *Home Fires* will be discussed later in the chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. The term ‘lesbian’ is never used explicitly within the narrative, reflecting the homophobia and discomfort of the period. Instead, Theresa’s sexuality is indicated by the introduction of a former female lover and by the implied attraction between Theresa and pilot Annie (Jo Herbert). [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. See also *Flight Plan* (Robert Schwentke, 2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. For further discussion of the function of wounded masculinity in the series considered in this thesis, see Chapter Two (Lawrence), Chapter Three (Timothy) and Chapter Four (Sousa). As an illness rather than a wound sustained in battle, Will’s cancer diagnosis carries different connotations to the previous examples. However it offers another example of the utility of wounded masculinity in postfeminist drama. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)