

Narrativising the “Monster Woman:” Heroines who transgress the feminine script

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‘The monster woman is the woman who refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell—in short, a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her.’ (Moi 1985, p. 58)

Contemporary fiction, through its delineation of “feminine” and “unfeminine” women, ultimately either perpetuates or challenges the patriarchal discourse of femininity. This paper is premised on the belief that “the feminine” falls into two specific categories, each as limiting in scope as the other: namely, conformity and transgression. The novelistically reproduced codes that underpin these opposing categories of female behaviour are part of a larger patriarchal insistence that women be measured according to certain norms and limitations. Women who take part in the chimera that is femininity are valued and validated in patriarchal society. Indeed, buying into the myth of femininity ensures women are understood as “natural” and “commonsensical” (Macdonald 1995). Conversely, women who transgress the script inevitably encounter an entirely different cultural response. That is because transgressive females are “incomprehensible,” as women ‘only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility’ (Butler 1999, p. 22). Despite the cultural endorsement of conformity, this paper views the culturally sanctioned imperative of femininity as a form of patriarchal puppetry that needs to be exposed.

Ever since novels became a popular cultural medium, transgressive female characters (such as Anna Karenina, Antoinette Rochester) have appeared in fictional texts, working to destabilise the feminine script. Fictions that narrativise femininity

arguably do so in order to highlight the constructedness and fictionality of femininity itself. Such texts invite readers (and this is politically significant for women readers) to inspect, interrogate and assess the operation of gender codes of femininity, particularly the oppression of women in contemporary western society. In exposing the constructedness of gender as an outcome of this unrelentless narratorial gaze, these books employ a profound gesture—that is, the questioning of the viability of the terms “woman” and “femininity.”

As Myra Macdonald explains (1995, p. 11), it is imperative that women recognise the part they play in ‘keeping mythologies and ideologies alive.’ However, not all readers are alert to the notion that femininity is a mere masquerade—one designed to limit female diversity. It is for precisely this reason the transgressive female characters are so important in terms of literary analysis. Novels foregrounding the experiences of transgressive women have the potential to not only create awareness to alternative models of femininity, but to foster a resistance towards current limiting definitions of “the feminine.” While considerable research addressed these questions in the 1970s and 80s (see Millett 1977, Daly 1979, Brownmiller 1984), there has been something of a decline in the scholarship of popular novels in the apparently (if we are to believe media discourses) postfeminist age.

By way of redressing this lack in contemporary focus, I propose a close analysis of two post millennial novels: Kerry Hardie’s (2000) *Hannie Bennett’s Winter Marriage* and Justin Haythe’s (2004) *The Honeymoon*. Both narratives foreground the experience of women as modelled by resistant female characters, namely Hannie in Hardie’s text, and Maureen in Haythe’s novel. These texts essentially narrativise

“monster women”—those women who ‘actively revolt against cultural expectations of ‘what women should be’ (Goodman in Bonner, Goodman, Allen et al. 1992, p. 86). This paper aims to explore how such narratives fracture the current reality of femininity—exposing it as untenable and flawed. That said, readers who approach these novels with the conservative bias that still dominates western popular culture will undoubtedly view Hannie and Maureen as “bad” mothers, “bad” wives and overall “bad” women. However, in the context of this essay, Maureen and Hannie do not simply serve as symbols of the “unfeminine,” the “unnatural”—all that a woman “should not be.” Rather, I will argue that they offer a constructive opportunity to explore expectations surrounding femininity and what actually constitutes transgression.

Hannie Bennett’s Winter Marriage

In *Hannie Bennett’s Winter Marriage*, the protagonist Hannie is a fifty-two year old woman on the hunt for a husband. While this plotline would seem to map a typical and patriarchally sanctioned quest for females, the novel avoids a simplistic rehearsal of traditional feminine behaviours. Hannie meets sixty-nine year old Ned Renvyle and marries him for the financial security he offers. The novel begins at the wedding where Hannie meets Ned and proceeds to detail the subsequent challenges that Hannie encounters as a woman and wife settling in a small, parochial, Irish town. From the first page, it is made clear that Hannie is a woman who refuses to participate in gender norms and the feminine script—suggesting to the reader that her transgressions will form the focal point of the narrative.

Hannie, first and foremost, debunks codes of femininity through her appearance. Surrounding femininity are countless myths, ideals, assumptions and expectations of how women “should” look. As Janice (cited in Chapkis 1988, p. 163) contends, ‘A man has value just because he is a man. A woman has to constantly prove her worth by “keeping herself up.”’ Hannie loses her motivation to appropriately maintain her appearance and this does not go unnoticed. As the housekeeper observes, ‘She was losing her looks..’ (p. 114). Bordo (2003, p. 184) claims that because of this scrutiny women’s bodies ‘are a site of struggle.’ Indeed, representations of women like Hannie reveal the impossibility of neutrality where the female form is concerned. A woman is constantly under the watchful gaze of western society, critically classified as either appropriately “feminine” or “unfeminine.” Hannie is aware of people watching her and she feels ‘her privacy violated by this meticulous, attentive observation’ (p. 116).

Refusing to don the ‘more or less elaborate disguise’ that is femininity (Chapkis 1988, p.30), Hannie makes no attempt to adorn her body, accepting herself as a ‘white-faced woman with untidy hair’ (p. 113). Hannie reasons: ‘At fifty-two she had little appetite left for pretence...’ (p. 28). Indeed, Hannie gradually comes to dress in her husband’s clothing, thereby completely effacing her femininity in terms of visual constructedness. This act demonstrates that Hannie does not subscribe to western culture’s view that women must present an adorned face, a contorted form, controlled appetite and guarded emotion (Chapkis 1988). Hannie, in fact, eats heartily and laughs ‘with her head back and her mouth open’ (p. 16). As the housekeeper admiringly observes, Hannie ‘never pretended to be anything. No airs or graces to her..’ (p. 55). Such acts work to fundamentally subvert the binary gender codes that both society and individual identity (in the broadest sense) operate upon.

Hannie's lack of artifice is perceived as transgressive predominantly by the male characters in the text. Unlike the female characters who can appreciate Hannie's disdain for pretence, the male characters seem threatened by her "deviant" body. To demonstrate the nature of feminine performance the narrative contrasts Hannie with her neighbour, Beth. Beth functions as the voice of "normal" femininity in the story and therefore it is significant that she admires Hannie's bodily "freedoms," and contrasts this behaviour to male expectations by commenting that her husband 'Tom liked more grooming: nice hair, a little make-up, something finished in the look' (p. 3). Tom, however, is not the only male character to judge Hannie's appearance and find her "lacking." A friend of Ned's scrutinises her appearance, concluding, 'Not a bad looking woman...Could do with a visit to the hairdressers, something to wear..' (p. 101). A local aristocrat's gaze is assessed by Hannie in this way: 'She knew he had come back...to size up her sexual potential, knew that already she had been dismissed as too ramshackle' (p. 107). In a positive sense, these male characters who oppose Hannie's interpretation expose how 'rational males' view such women; that is, 'as the irrational body that must be repressed and brought to order' (Colebrook 2004, p. 56). By exposing their prejudicial attitudes, the novel invites female readers to assess men who make such assessments as shallow and undesirable. In this way, the plot sets up a discursive space in which readers are invited to inspect the typically unstated expectations of patriarchy. Moreover, the narrative setting in an old-fashioned, even backward small town, works as a way to foreground how regressive these values are, and how undesirable they should be to people (men and women) living in contemporary, cosmopolitan societies. This is not to say that such attitudes do not exist in major cities, but the narrative frames such attitudes as though they should be

mocked as part of an old-world rapidly being left behind in current moves toward globalised society.

Hannie's transgressions extend from physical appearance into speech. "Femininity" has been accused of being a regulatory term which prescribes behaviour; and in relation to speech it is said to prescribe how 'women *ought* to talk' (Coates 1993, p. 21). Women's language "should be," 'more polite, more refined—in a word, more ladylike' (Coates 1993, p. 20-21). Such social codes, however, mean little to Hannie: 'She didn't care what she said...had no thought for consequences, all the subtleties, the allusions, the necessary ways of sidling up to things' (p. 375).

When Ned's "appropriately" feminine neighbour, Niamh, takes up with a new man, he is appalled when Hannie refers to the relationship as a 'three-night stand'. He struggles to accept such coarseness from a woman: 'It was those words Hannie'd used – *a three-night stand* – she'd said them like a quotation. Yet he couldn't imagine sweet...Niamh saying anything so crude' (p. 152). As well as the coarseness of her words, Hannie does not hedge in her manner of speaking. When asked what she does for a living, Hannie candidly replies, 'Marry'. The people around her subsequently look 'startled' (p. 5). Her candour is further evidenced when Ned proposes and Hannie replies, 'I'm not much of a catch' (p. 29). This is significant because women are, Coates (1993, p. 116) suggests, 'socialised to believe that asserting themselves strongly isn't nice or ladylike, or even feminine.' That Hannie does not dissemble not only calls this myth into question, but works towards constellating and affirming female assertiveness.

That said, this novel addresses the censure that such behaviour draws from the less enlightened community into which Hannie has had to interpolate herself. There are significant repercussions for Hannie's transgression relating to her speech. Specifically, Hannie is feared at social events, the townsfolk concerned that she may say something "improper" or "impolite." These sentiments bolster Hannie's role as a disruptive figure—a figure of excess, transgressing all sense of "normal" feminine identity. As one local maintains, taking her out to social events 'was a risk all right. She might or might not behave herself' (p. 132). That such sentiments are expressed predominantly by the male characters unveils conservative, moral Irish (male) mentalities as old-fashioned attitudes which are anomalous in the new millennium.

As an individual who is moving toward new and optimistic assessments of femininity, Ned starts to respect that Hannie 'didn't care what she said...had no thought for consequences, all the subtleties, the allusions, the necessary way of sidling up to things..' (p. 375). He admits, her 'directness eased things for him' (p. 1). Similarly, the housekeeper appreciates Hannie's brutal honesty affirming, 'You knew where you were with her' (p. 56). Ned and Mrs Coady are cast in a positive light for looking favourably upon Hannie given that the reader is invited to focalize the events from Hannie's perspective and to enjoy her company on the narrative journey. Conversely, those characters that criticise Hannie's outspokenness and honesty are represented as narrow-minded. Hannie expresses obvious disdain for their bigotry: '*Make an effort* you said, so I'm making an effort, but I still don't like them. Why would I? They've been looking through the same window at the same few fields for hundreds and hundreds of years, they've forgotten long ago there might be other windows, other views and other ways of being' (p. 135). The reader is positioned to side with

Hannie's view and, as a result, the text invites readers to assess this limited world view in terms of gender norms.

Through the depiction of Hannie's social infractions, the text offers an insight into what western culture considers transgressive. Some of the notable criticisms aimed at Hannie include, 'Any fool could see she was trouble..' (p. 3), she is 'not decent' (p. 23), she 'was untrustworthy, unsound...If pushed he'd have said she was a woman with loose morals and bad habits..' (p. 16), and perhaps most critically, 'She was...an aberration..' (p. 231). What is important about these criticisms however, is the manner in which they are presented in the text; that is, as not only restrictive but cruel. In that sense they reflect badly on the individuals who hold such views, rather than being aligned with the readerly subject position built into the narrative.

Indeed, when detailed in the novel, Ned's ideas about women seem absurd. When Hannie smokes in public, Ned throws her a look: 'Ladies don't smoke in public outside good hotels, even closed ones, the look said' (p. 139). Such sentiments foreground prescriptive ideas about women's behaviour, and expose them as so outdated as to be laughable. Despite his obvious censure, Hannie continues to smoke, reasoning: 'Too bad. She wasn't a lady' (p. 139). The reader is prompted to sympathise with Hannie and her explicit rejection of femininity and to share in the pleasure Hannie takes in her rebellion:

She wanted to live as life took her and to hell with the consequences, to hell with anyone who didn't like it, she wanted to laugh at them as she'd always done, to despise their cowardly, safe self-righteousness.. (p. 187)

According to Nancy Lesko, reactions to Hannie's transgression reveal the negative sanctions which 'await those who deviate from the norms. When women violate

social dictates regarding what is feminine...deviance is imputed to them' (in Roman et al. 1988, p. 126). It is this deviant pathway that the story travels along. At the beginning of her marriage Hannie tries to adopt the mask of femininity: 'She'd begun on the house because it was what he wanted..' (p. 92). However, she soon discards the endeavour, accepting that such efforts are incongruous with her "real" self. She tells Ned: 'I knew a long time ago that I was an outsider, would always be an outsider, would perish if I tried to be anything but what I was..' (p. 370). She comes to feel defiant and determined to act in a way which 'he would certainly not approve' (p. 68). These lines arguably work to distance women readers who do not wish to open themselves to the kind of censure regularly faced by Hannie. This makes her Moi's "monster" despite her deliberate adoption of a transgressive role. Hannie reaches the point where she feels that Ned would just 'have to get used to the way she was' (p. 59), but she has paid for her choices in the way the novel maps.

In a pivotal episode in the novel, when Hannie fails to tell Ned the truth about her unruly son, she is once again criticised. She tells another neighbour, Danno: 'Don't look so dismayed...you can keep a pile of stones handy, lob them at me when you can't stand the thought of me, drive me off. I understand, really I do...Besides, it's only right for people like you to throw stones at women like me...' (p. 198). The contrast here between those who conform and "deviants" like Hannie is stark and resonates with Helene Cixous' (1975) theory of the opposition which defines sexual difference: activity/passivity. That is, men occupy the privileged position of active on the axis whilst women are subsequently positioned as inactive and passive (Cixous in Rivkin & Ryan 2001). In order to sustain their privileged position and maintain neat social and sexual divisions, the binary must be preserved. In effect, "deviant" women

like Hannie must be brought into line, to prevent them from disrupting the hierarchical opposition. Hannie's underlying sarcasm in her comment to Danno alludes to her resentment towards the criticism levelled at her and significantly calls into question the very active/passive axis. She grows increasingly 'sick of being patronised, of being the problem, the one always in the wrong. She was a problem...but the lives all around her weren't so perfect either, they were just better camouflaged...' (p. 203). Such sentiments not only expose to scrutiny how preposterous social dictates surrounding the feminine script actually are, but they also position Hannie as part of the contemporary world of individualism, thereby exposing these older notions of conformity as outdated. Again, however, Hannie's suffering is likely to make her activism appear undesirable to women readers who lack her sense of determination about gender performances.

That said, the narrative is not simply about Hannie and her ever-increasing rejection of feminine norms; Ned is also changing and his transformation is promoted as the way forward for their mutual happiness. In the early stages of the narrative he is persistently hopeful that Hannie might conform: 'That evening she told Ned she thought she might try her hand at poultry...He approved, it was traditional for the farm wife to rear poultry, it fell into his scheme of things' (p. 99). Ned, up until the very end of the novel, hopes that Hannie will conform. In accordance with Cixous' binary of activity/passivity and the need for "deviants" to be brought into line, Kate Millet contends, 'femininity cannot be simply shrugged off for, in a patriarchal society, women who resist the 'feminine' role are met with force in order to reproduce the status quo' (cited in Hollows 2000, p. 14). The text very poignantly details how this 'force' that Millett speaks of affects the supposedly transgressive woman:

She hadn't anticipated so closed a life, nor that Ned's expectations would weigh so heavily upon her...She felt this life bearing down on her like a pillow pressed over her face and her panic and suffocation unbalanced her. (p. 71)

Deeper into the plot, Ned wavers; at times he is intolerant, but he is also often sympathetic: 'He saw that she was utterly discouraged and slowed his pace. Then he remembered her flirting with James and Vere, ignoring him, ignoring their wives...A stubborn self-righteousness possessed him. He stuck his chin out and pushed on over the freezing mud' (p. 104). The greatest triumph for the gender politics asserted by the novel is that Ned eventually recognises that he 'should be supporting her...not trying to convert her into something appropriate' (p. 134). Although he intellectually realises that this is what he must do, Ned finds it challenging to actually put such support into practice. Ned struggles to reconcile his preconceived ideas about what women "should be" with the reality of Hannie. By the end of the novel, Ned is appreciative of Hannie's fight to stay true to herself. He has 'a new respect for Hannie, for her courage and single-mindedness and endurance..' (p. 375).

Rather than just contributing to the discussion of woman's place and femininity, *Hannie Bennett's Winter Marriage* provocatively encourages readers to consider 'what it is to be a woman and how to choose what and who to be' (Brownstein 1984, p. xix). Hardie's text ends on a hopeful note—thus depicting feminine transgression in a positive light for those women prepared to ride out the derision and rejection anti-feminine behaviour may attract in a bid to reach this conclusion. Conversely, Maureen in *The Honeymoon* meets with an unfortunate end, demonstrating that Haythe's text ultimately fails to celebrate female difference or transgression in any notable way.

Indeed, the novel is ‘studded with warnings about the dangers of behaving impurely’ (Wolf 1994, p. 122) and could be described as a manual on how women “should be”—or more specifically, “should *not* be.”

The Honeymoon

The Honeymoon is a novel about a young man called Gordon and the relationship he has with his mother, Maureen. Although Gordon is the protagonist, Maureen is a central figure in that the narrative retrospectively traces her life and experiences. Maureen is initially set up as a character who readers can admire—she is strong, independent and defiant in the face of cultural expectations of women. Maureen is (on the surface) a brave, polished and educated woman who has spent most of her life travelling around Europe with Gordon after leaving her husband, Theo. It is only when Gordon’s fiancée, Annie, comes on the scene that the reader is prompted to view Maureen in a different light. The mother-in-law, daughter-in-law contrast works to expose the outcomes of female relationships with centralized masculine principle – in this metaphor, the son/husband who assesses the situation. Annie is the appropriately “feminine” woman that western society promotes. Maureen and her lover invite Gordon and Annie to accompany them to Venice for their honeymoon, where Maureen’s transgressions take on exaggerated proportions when juxtaposed with Annie. It is in Venice that Maureen’s most transgressive action takes place—she stabs Annie on the hand with a fork. This results in Annie and Gordon fleeing back to London and Gordon avowing that he will never see his mother again.

Maureen, in contrast to Hardie's Hannie, adopts the aesthetically feminine mask in order to participate in the social order. However, she transgresses the script in the most fundamental of ways—where women are expected to be self-sacrificing and “naturally” nurturant, Maureen is self-absorbed, selfish and sometimes violent. She is a decidedly unpleasant person who readers are prompted to dislike. However, despite her cruelty and selfishness, she is a useful character in that she exposes how the feminine mask can be adopted and removed at will. Lizbeth Goodman would argue that she ‘actively revolt[s] against cultural expectations of ‘what women should be’’ (in Bonner, Goodman & Allen et al. 1992, p. 86). She explicitly rejects maternal roles and, as Gordon recalls, ‘Whenever Maureen grew tired of being a mother she would make the extravagant threat that she would throw herself under a red double-decker bus’ (p. 53). Gordon continues, ‘She made the threat whenever she felt hopeless or...overwhelmed with the responsibilities and mundane tasks’ (p. 53). According to Bordo (2003, p. 230), ‘motherhood is so universally perceived as the ultimate proof of the feminine nature and the intended purpose of female existence that few women have the courage to admit that they do not have the gift for it, or that given a choice, they would rather marshal their energies, their sensitivities and their gratifications in other directions.’ That Maureen does so, challenges the “naturalness” of the feminine script by expressly destabilising the myth of ‘motherhood as the one true destiny for women’ (Bordo 2003, p. 95).

Being a “good” mother in western society is synonymous with self-abnegation (Douglas & Michaels 2004). Not so for Maureen. When Gordon moves to study in London, she leaves for Europe in pursuit of her own dreams, despite his desire to have her close. She tells him, ‘You feel abandoned, is that it? I cant stop in London

just now...I'll try to arrange it so that I have enough work here to spend some time soon' (p. 76). Despite this promise to return, Maureen actually leaves for 'a more extended tour of the continent' (p. 76). Because of such behaviour, Maureen is characterised as "a cold, selfish mother"—an archetype which Bordo (2003, p. 79) claims 'lurks in the imaginations' of many. Thus the novel explicitly engages with discourses around the maternal feminine.

From the very first page, Gordon refers to his mother as 'Maureen' rather than 'mum'. Gordon's choice to do this succeeds in establishing from the outset that she is a woman, a person, not *just* a mother. When exploring his friend Timothy's house Gordon happens across the master bedroom:

The cleaner had not yet come and the room was in luxurious disorder. Three dresses, as if she had had difficulty deciding what to wear, lay strewn across the chair...And there was an unmistakable smell of another person's mother. But, as I looked around the room again...I saw not merely a mother, but a woman, as much a woman as Maureen. I had believed in two distinct groups, mothers and women, and that Maureen had by some mistake existed as both. (p. 52)

Breaking the category boundaries that typically entrap women in the western imagination, Gordon is able to see the *woman* behind the *mother*. What makes this characterisation transgressive is that it issues a challenge to the ideology of femininity, which John Fiske (2006, p. 55) believes 'disciplines women to find themselves only in relation to other people, particularly within the family.' That is, this text offers an alternative ideal—one in which women *are* individuals and more than *just* mothers and wives.

Adjunct to Maureen's resistance to motherhood, she also refuses patriarchy's insistence on feminine domesticity. As Gordon says, the home that women traditionally aspire to create is anathema to Maureen who 'never had a home; she had an impressively practical yet glamorous set of luggage...For Maureen, a home...would have more closely resembled a cell' (p. 18). Bordo (2003, p. 42) suggests that too often we are bombarded by normalising images of 'domestic bliss, of home as a cozy, plant-filled haven of babies, warmth, and light, skilfully managed and lovingly tended by women.' *The Honeymoon* thus challenges such images by characterising the 'domestic haven' as a gilded cage.

The novel describes these classic confines for women with flashbacks to the early days of Maureen's marriage to Gordon's father, Theo. At that time she had made a distinct effort to be domesticated: 'Maureen chose the curtains, most of the furniture and a good deal of what hangs on the walls' (p. 47). According to Gordon, it was her domestic efforts which ruined her marriage: 'She made an effort there; I think that's what she didn't like about it' (p. 47). In remembering his childhood, Gordon recalls: 'That Maureen overlooked the purchasing of pots and pans is not surprising. She was never a great cook. We ate out more than the average' (p. 77). Maureen's character is protest personified; protest aroused by, what Bordo (2003, p. 156) considers is an 'anger at the limitations of the traditional female role, rejection of values associated with it.' This is contrasted strikingly with Annie who immediately makes Gordon's 'place a home' (p. 25). His assessment of these oppositionally constructed women works to express the political agenda of the narrative, as Annie's behaviour is endorsed and painted as "appropriate." Indeed, Gordon laments, the 'place became gloomy after Annie's departure' (p. 25).

Domestic virtues have tended to be classed as “natural” feminine attributes of women, but Maureen’s characterization conveys how the identification of women with domesticity, shrinks their world, deflating it and rendering it impotent (Bernard 1981).

Maureen’s rejection of the safe haven of domesticity is heightened by her other transgressive quality, which the “deviant” character of Hannie also shares: fierce independence. Brownmiller (1984) suggests that dependence constitutes a crucial element of the “feminine” mystique. She explains: ‘the feminine principle is composed of vulnerability, the need for protection, the formalities of compliance and the avoidance of conflict—in short, an appeal of dependence’ (1984, p. 16). Maureen left Theo, her husband, out of ‘boredom’ to travel around Europe with Gordon. Upon returning to New York, Maureen was triumphantly determined to ‘show her father and Theo that she and her young child had survived without them’ (p. 46). Maureen’s greatness comes from the intensity with which she pursues her independence. Strangely, her travels abroad are funded by Theo, thus undermining her fierce independence to some extent. Gordon narrates:

We had a means to money because we had my father...Maureen did not like to ask Theo for money. She put it off and when she...sat down to write one of those painful letters, she became suddenly exhausted, a woman struggling to make ends meet..(19)

Arguably, that Theo foots the bill is a logic of recompense. Having made many of the requisite sacrifices to motherhood, Maureen then takes her due. This decision debunks the myth of self-sacrifice that, as I have argued, is so pervasive in western conceptions of motherhood.

This logic is, however, recast towards the end of the novel when the reader learns that Maureen, after separating from her most recent lover, was penniless and had to once again turn to Theo for financial assistance. In exchange for money Theo issues an ultimatum: she must stop travelling the world and give up her dream to write a travel book. This in itself reveals how the feminine script ‘limits female possibilities’ (Bordo 2003, p. 179). Theo provides her with a house—or what Maureen terms a ‘cell’—and she lives the rest of her days settled in the one place. To some, this may read as a surrendering of power as, on the surface, the text adheres to a patriarchal discourse in that it allocates power to the male (Theo) and powerlessness to the female (Maureen). However, on a sub-textual level, by representing such an end to Maureen’s life the text achieves a mammoth feat; as Anne Cranny-Francis (1992, p. 172) contends, it reveals how ‘women are made miserable by patriarchy.’

Based on appearance alone, Maureen seems appropriately feminine and thus “commonsensical.” But her subsequent transgression in behaviour fractures this commonsensicality, thereby making her “unintelligible” to others. Not understanding her and not being able to situate her within the space “woman,” results in many of the other characters viewing her as “mad.” Theo calls Maureen ‘troubled’ (p. 253) and Annie similarly tells Gordon, ‘There’s something very wrong with...Maureen’ (p. 246). When Gordon finds out that Maureen has cancer, he tells Annie that his mother is ill. Gordon is hurt by her response: ‘Annie made a light scoffing sound, a sound that meant, *I’ll say*’ (p. 265).

Whereas Hannie’s transgression results in verbal criticisms from those around her, she is not alienated from the community. Maureen, in contrast, is not only viewed as mad

by the other characters, but she is also alienated and ultimately exiled. Sharon Lennon (in Findlen 1995) suggests women who contravene the laws of femininity inevitably experience alienation, which is a critical patriarchal power device. Lennon elaborates, 'Alienation is a key ingredient to keeping...women performing according to a plan. It's the backup system just in case the initial instructions on being female don't sink in' (in Findlen 1995, p. 125).

Whilst both women experience different outcomes of transgression, their one similarity is that they both expose the 'great courage and suffering involved in discovering and expressing a different way of being' (Heilbrun cited in Douglas 1990, p. 300). This is crucial, because if women are to take alternative models of femininity seriously it is necessary that they first hear the voice of the Other (Say 1998). M.E. Harding (cited in Douglas 1990, p. 114) agrees, affirming, 'we have to disabuse ourselves of all preconceived ideas of what woman is like or of what is "truly womanly," and approach it with an open mind.' The transgressive characters discussed in this paper thus offer readers a way in which to do this by presenting an alternative to the feminine script. Experiencing these women deemed "transgressive" and "unfeminine" essentially throws into chaos the "given" about femininity (Bordo 2003), thereby creating a space in which the very terms "woman" and "femininity" can be re-defined and re-written.

Conclusion

What these novels indicate about femininity is, firstly, that the performance of femininity is also a discursive and narrativised performance wherein strategies of

production are doubled. That is, the feminine is constructed at one level through characterisation, but at another level through the cultural situation the novel produces to house that characterisation. The novel is both the setting and the script for the performance of gender. By demonstrating the responses of other characters to a gendered performance and by demonstrating that the “life outcomes” for characters by depicting a passage of time, novels build a world which can be interrogated in multiple ways.

Secondly, the relentless foregrounding of gender politics in these post-millennial novels radically disrupts postfeminism’s claim that feminism is over—or at least at ‘a low ebb’ (Faludi 1992, p. 15). These very recent novels are part of a covert push against the pervasive myth promulgated by postfeminist discourse that feminism is no longer necessary in a climate of equality. Their very newness is what highlights that the issues around gender are still of vast significance and, pertinently, are still saleable to contemporary readers. (Clearly, the publishing houses think so by their choice to put these novels on shelves.)

Both of the texts discussed in this paper bring assumptions about women and femininity into the spotlight—if not managing to overturn them—at least exposing them to scrutiny. Clearly, despite its common categorisation as light entertainment, contemporary popular fiction has the potential to unveil and reveal the feminine script as equivocal. It can achieve this through the representation of “monster women”—transgressive female characters who foster a scepticism toward the viability of femininity. To borrow Susan Faludi’s (1992, p. 490) words, such fictional representations ‘could implant that image in many women’s minds and set up a

nagging, even tormenting dissonance.’ Arousing dissonance is beneficial on a cultural level because it can prompt women to become conscious of the ideologies at play in society. This is incredibly important, for as Bordo (2003, p. 30) declares, ‘simply becoming *more conscious* is a tremendous achievement.’

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