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“Sex, Power, Murder, Amen’: Examining Post-Feminism, Sexuality and Historical Authenticity in *The Borgias*

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines *The Borgias*, a 2011 historical drama based on the lives of the Borgia family in the late medieval period, and questions the extent to which it bears the imprints of the post-feminist discursive context of its production in terms of assertive female sexuality. The position of female sexuality in post-feminism, is highly contentious in the academic community, which is why the paper focuses on its presence in popular culture in terms of the liberal stance of ‘do-me’ feminism and ‘girl power’; foregrounding sexual freedom and exploration as a method for obtaining liberation. *The Borgias* navigates the tension between these contemporary concerns and popular conceptions of historical authenticity by foregrounding the complexity and oft performed nature of female sexuality. Thus, this study shows the potential for discovering how our contemporary context imprints on our collective cultural knowledge and horizon of expectations surrounding the past, and how this in turn may inform the way in which we consider the present.*

KEYWORDS

post-feminism
history
television
authenticity
sexuality
mediation

INTRODUCTION

The Borgias (Jordan, 2011–2013) centres on the historical House of Borgia, the head of which (Rodrigo Borgia) rose to become the licentious and controversial Pope Alexander VI. Running for three seasons on the Showtime network, the program focused on themes of power, family, lust and religion, with each successive season becoming more fraught with conspiracy and betrayals. While there have been numerous portrayals of the Borgia dynasty, this retelling focuses more centrally on female characters than previous incarnations, as well

as privileging their desires, experiences and actions. In contrast to previous televisual incarnations of the Borgia family scandals, such as the BBC version *The Borgias* (Farnham, 1981), in which the Pope's illegitimate daughter Lucrezia has been subject to moral condemnation for her perceived sexual depravity, here she is presented in a more positive and sympathetic light. In addition, Vanozza (the Pope's former mistress and mother of his children) and Guilia (his current, younger mistress), at least in the first two seasons, are prominent within *The Borgias*, whereas former adaptations minimize or entirely remove their characters. I argue that, as this version of the Borgia dynasty is produced in the wake of post-feminism, it bears the imprints of the context in which it was produced, and thus engages in a process of artistic historical mediation. This is most evident in the representation of an assertive female sexuality in the series, as well as women alone having the ability to not only transcend, but use and perform patriarchal tropes for their own personal gain. In addition, I argue that the post-feminist imprint allows for the espousal of a non-threatening, assertive female sexuality that foster independence while remaining historically authentic.

ARTISTIC MEDIATION AND POST-FEMINIST IMPRINTING

The audience's immersion in the represented historical era has less to do with the presentation of that era as a perfect simulation of current historical knowledge of the past, and more with it as a construction of world that recalls the essence or heart of what is known of the era, while at the same time incorporating contemporary concerns, heretofore referred to as 'authenticity'. Authenticity is constructed by the general community, from sources ranging from the academic to the popular, from book to screen. Thus, rather than having women unshaved and men unwashed (as would be the case in a materially accurate historical portrayal), *The Borgias* revels in the drama, licentiousness and velvet-covered treachery of the popularly authentic Renaissance.

I posit that any series risks alienating the viewer and disrupting the immersive process if it relies too heavily on representations of actuality as purported by scholars and ignores ideological shifts in our culture. Due in part to the rise in scholarship written by and about historical women, as well as the rise in prominence of screen media created by and focusing on female characters, it has become clear that to diminish the role of the historical female character, or (worse) to eschew them altogether, would disrupt the immersive process and appear, for all intents and purposes, inauthentic. Thus, series such as *The Borgias* have the unenviable task of artistic mediation between the authentic and the popular, creating

empowered, strong women without, as they say, jumping the shark. This process is eased, however, by the imprinting of the post-feminist discursive context, as it is not the anachronistic masculine female warrior (i.e Xena) that represents the powerful woman, but something altogether more feminine, but no less influential.

THE POST-FEMINIST DISCURSIVE CONTEXT AND SEXUALITY

Rather than attempting to identify an 'authentic' model of post-feminism that serves as a point of reference, this paper explores the methods through which 'popular culture functions as one of the sites on, through, and against which the meanings of [post-] feminism are produced and understood' (Moseley and Read 2002: 235). Feminist scholars Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read argue that the discursive context is significant 'precisely because it is here, in popular discourse, rather than in academic/theoretical ones, that informs both the construction and reading of popular texts' (2002: 234). Joanne Hollows and Moseley also make the argument that, aside from those directly involved in feminist activism, the majority of people's understanding of feminism has been formed through interaction with the popular, in term of film, television and new media in particular. (2006: 2).

While post-feminism is hardly simplistic in nature, I argue that the key aims of the post-feminist discursive context are to combine feminism and femininity through valorization of all it stereotypically means to be female. The post-feminist discursive context makes heroes of feminine women, those who both 'enjoy' their womanhood (most explicitly through sexual assertiveness and pleasure taken in material opulence), and know how to use it to their advantage in the personal and public sphere. Feminist scholars Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon argue that:

Post-feminism is not 'new feminism' in the sense that it represents something radically revolutionary and pioneering that transcends the feminist past; instead, the 'post-ing' of feminism involves a process of resignification (Brabon and Genz 2009 :65)

Within the contemporary post-feminist context, femininity is resignified: what second wave-feminism critiqued as a site of oppression and submission is remade as a potent source of empowerment for (primarily white, middle class) women, especially within popular culture. Moseley and Read's analysis of post-feminism on television shows evidence that the 18-34 female market represents a generation that is embracing traditional forms of femininity in the wake of backlash against the second-wave, and attempting to reconcile them with feminist

desires without appearing to be the archetypal ‘bra-burner’ (2002: 238). An attempt at reconciliation between feminism and femininity is shown in the media coverage of ‘new feminism’ and the ‘girl power’ espoused by the *Spice Girls* since the mid- 1990s, as well as the rising popularity of the domestic sphere, as exemplified through polarising television chef Nigella Lawson. These discourses focus on empowering femininity itself rather than attempting to challenge patriarchy from the outside and assume a masculine role. *The Borgias* explores the potential of this notion, as the Vatican setting, arguably the most patriarchal institution in Western history, constrains what actions female characters can take, making their only viable option an attempt to work within the hierarchy to achieve their freedom and/or life goals.

The post-feminist discursive context takes a liberal stance towards female sexuality, foregrounding sexual freedom and exploration as a method for obtaining liberation. Genz and Brabon define do-me feminism (a popular subgenre of post-feminism) as a largely sexualized version of feminism which addresses women as ‘active and heterosexually desiring subjects’ who enjoy sexual relations as a form of empowerment (2009: 91). Best represented in popular culture by the popularity of the brazen, sexually adventurous women of *Sex and the City* (Star, 1998–2004), the do-me post-feminist ‘knows that feminism is safe for women who love men and bubble baths and kittenish outfits; that the right ideology and the best sex are not mutually exclusive’ (Brabon and Genz 2009: 28). In addition to this focus on the display of assertive female sexuality, the post-feminist discursive context emphasises the value of the performed nature of feminine traits. Feminist media theorist Charlotte Brunsdon argues that the do-me woman is ‘neither trapped in femininity (pre-feminist) nor rejecting it (feminist), she can use it’ (2006: 85). Thus, the process of artistic mediation in *The Borgias* is made simpler, as the series need not anachronistically incorporate masculinised female characters in order to show empowered women, rather they can work within established binaries to achieve their goals.

TRANSCENDING PATRIARCHAL TROPES

The most prominent binary within *The Borgias* is that of the Virgin and the Whore, a categorisation that defines and separates women based on patriarchal perceptions of female sexual assertiveness. In their dissection of *Bram Stoker’s Dracula* (Ford Coppola, 1992), Leah Wyman and George Dionisopolous state ‘female sexuality is often depicted within the boundaries of two opposing categories: one encompassing characters who are moralistic,

nurturing and asexual, and the other consisting of those who are unethical, dangerous and erotic,' in other words, the Virgin and the Whore (2000: 209). These categories are initially 'played straight' within *The Borgias*, but are steadily subverted throughout the run of the series. The Pope's illegitimate daughter, Lucrezia is the blonde-haired, blue eyed innocent that has an endearing but, eventually, entirely unfortunate, naivete of the ways of the world. By contrast, minor noblewoman Guilia Farnese, wearing heavy, dark eye colour and crimson velvet, seduces the Pope himself in the confessional booth to manoeuvre herself into a powerful position. However, as the series progresses, the female characters undergo significant development from these two dimensional characterisations, as well as showing a high degree of mobility and transcendence in regards to these tropes. Lucrezia's loss of innocence during after her unhappy and violent marriage to Giovanni Sforza is in part signified by her more restrained hairstyle and darker dress tones, while Guilia's ascendance to the role of pseudo-wife and advisor is enhanced by her more sedate make-up and mauve toned costuming.

Lucrezia and Guilia's transcendence from the Virgin and the Whore is assisted by the medium through which they reach the audience, the serial television program. The larger discursive space of the television series-serial allows for a greater exploration of sexual ethics, as well as a dissembling of the stark black/white morality binary. Serial television's form of repetition and difference therefore allows for greater opportunities for character development. Once awakened, Lucrezia's sexual desire is not merely the subject of a short narrative arc; it remains present throughout the series as an integral part of her character, as a trait that deepens throughout time. While Lucrezia's principles fray and she drifts towards the darker end of the spectrum, this occurs slowly over the course of the first two series, and is sufficiently distanced from her sexual experiences so as to not imply causation. This destabilizes the virgin/whore binary for the audience, as promiscuity, or the outward seeking and enjoyment of sex and sexuality is no longer a determinant of female morality or purity, instead it is an integral part of their everyday existence.

The virgin/whore dichotomy illustrates how female sexuality is commonly defined by patriarchal needs, limiting the power of women to define and construct their own autonomous identities. However, within *The Borgias*, women utilize their place within the dichotomy to achieve their own goals. L.S Kim connects this to the concept of the masquerade, which connotes a compromise of values: 'a woman acknowledges her performance (which is for the man) . . . but she performs it nonetheless' (2001: 325). Lucrezia masquerades as The Virgin

during ‘The Art of War’ (Podeswa, 2011), the penultimate episode of the first series, as she convinces the French King to withhold sacking Rome, and instead persuades him to parley with her father the Pope. By this point in the series, Lucrezia has undergone significant character development in the form of the loss of her innocent naiveté and increasing sexual exploration as a result of her unfulfilling marriage, and has become a more guarded and, at times, manipulative person through these events. When persuading the French King to avoid attacking Rome, however, Lucrezia employs a performed version of virginal femininity that relies on exaggerated innocence in order to lead the King to renege on his decision.

LUCREZIA: ‘He thought you meant to sack Rome like the Goths and vandal hordes. I told him you were a gentleman- you had no such ideas . . . you had no such idea had you?’

FRENCH KING: ‘No such idea.’

LUCREZIA: ‘Your goal is Naples.’

FRENCH KING: ‘Naples . . . of course’

The repetition signifies the degree to which the King is being guided and persuaded by Lucrezia’s behaviour, to the extent that he is merely parroting her words. Thus, even versions of femininity that are outwardly submissive are methods of gaining and consolidating power within *The Borgias*. However, these versions of femininity and overt sexualisation can only be used for gain if they are consciously employed, meaning that behind these masquerades lie female autonomous subjects with distinct personalities beyond the employment of patriarchal tropes. These characters are exposed and the tropes transcended through a number of methods, however it is the activation of an assertive sexuality that uncovers and promotes female autonomy.

ASSERTIVE SEXUALITY AND FEMININITY

In addition to incorporating elements of the post-feminist masquerade, *The Borgias* valorizes this existence of an assertive and autonomous sexuality as a means of emotionally and spiritually transcending patriarchal gender roles, as long as it is asserted while combined with feminine traits. However, Ariel Levy, author of the controversial non-fiction best seller, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), argues that the rise of raunch culture, as a consequence of a sexually explicit feminism, has merged female sexuality with patriarchal notions of the erotic, where women perform the masculine fantasy of sensuality under the banner of post-feminism. The complex nature of post-feminism’s take on sexuality is apparent in the

juxtaposition of the aggressive, masculine sexuality of Caterina Sforza, enemy of the Borgias, and the softer, more feminine sensuality of Lucrezia. The latter's sex scenes are often punctuated by romantic images such as moonlight, trickling fountains and flickering candles. By contrast, the intimate scenes of Caterina, one-time lover of Cesare, are often punctuated with violent undertones and animalistic music throbbing with drum beats, alluding to the relationship between female sexuality and bestial carnality.

The femininity expressed by Lucrezia allows her to move unmolested throughout the world of *The Borgias*, so that she can achieve sexual gratification without demonization. Caterina's sexual aggressiveness challenges the patriarchal hierarchy explicitly, and thus she is punished. She, more than any other female character, including the few on-screen prostitutes, is penalized for her transgression, as she loses her son and her ability to move outside her city walls. Within the world of *The Borgias*, therefore, assertive female sexuality is a workable construct, but only when properly merged with traditional notions of femininity in the form of romanticism. Through this representation, *The Borgias* implicitly works-through the complex nature of post-feminism as it exists in the current discursive context, insofar as avoiding Levy's (2005) accusations of hypersexualized culture, but exposing the tendency of post-feminism to fall back on cultural stereotypes.

THE BORGIAS AND THE FEMALE GAZE

While aggressive, masculinized sexuality is not acceptable within the world of *The Borgias*, assertive sexuality is privileged by the way that a heterosexual female gaze is employed within the series both narratively and through cinematography and *mise-en-scène*. Laura Mulvey's (1975) influential work 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema,' posits that it is only men who are in possession of the gaze, that men control what is shown on screen in order to fulfill the desires of a masculine audience. However, the male subject/female object binary is not merely reversed in *The Borgias* to objectify the masculine body. Instead, the series highlights the active nature of the female gaze rather than its passive male object. *The Borgias* initially courts the female gaze through the presentation of characters such as Cesare, who wear tight fitting costumes and eyeliner-heavy makeup that allude to modern day anti-heroes, such as the male cast of popular vampire series *True Blood* (Ball, 2008–2014). In addition, Lucrezia's first romantic encounter with her groom and soon-to-be lover Paolo during 'The Borgias in Love' (Maybury, 2011) is an example of how the *The Borgias* privileges the female *sexual* gaze, as it is the desire of Lucrezia that is foregrounded, rather

than the visibility of the male body. The camera pans across a brick wall to reveal the half-naked Paolo, bathing in the courtyard. The shot-reverse-shot implies that the camera's gaze and Lucrezia's are the same, and her small smile hints at her voyeuristic enjoyment. The camera does not linger on Paolo, rather the audience views Lucrezia's appreciative reaction to what she is seeing through another close-up shot of her face. Further scenes show a slow, burgeoning relationship instigated by Lucrezia, who implores Paolo to go out riding with her and later consummate their relationship in the forest. The scene is undercut with slow, romantic music, as the two characters are backlit, giving them the appearance of having angelic halos. Thus, the sexual assertiveness and desire expressed by Lucrezia is privileged as a positive character growth that leads to a fulfilling, if short lived, relationship. Thus, it shows that the gaze in *The Borgias* is aimed at fulfilling the desires of the heterosexual female, rather than conforming to Mulvey's male centred-theory.

CONCLUSION

Through engaging in a process of artistic mediation regarding the post-feminist discursive context, *The Borgias* highlights and reiterates female sexuality as a liberating force, as well as being a method of advancement and personal gain. Thus, women transcend the virgin/whore dichotomy by exuding an autonomous sexuality divorced from patriarchal stereotypes. This is in addition to masquerading as ideal versions of The Virgin and The Whore, using patriarchal expectations of sexual deviance and also naiveté in order to manipulate male characters and to achieve the fulfilment of their ambitions. Finally, *The Borgias* also references and works-through the complicated nature of the post-feminist discursive context regarding sexuality in the contrasting treatments of female sexual assertiveness. Studies such as this have potential for discovering how our contemporary culture imprints on our collective cultural knowledge and horizon of expectations surrounding the past, and how this in turn may inform the way in which we consider the present; in this case, in terms of the complex nature of female sexuality. In addition, film scholar Leger Grindon highlights how the interpretive role of historical fiction films places them 'in a context of historiography that enables them to have an impact on the public that often exceeds that of scholarship in range and influence' (1994: 2). The televisual genre expands the discursive space of possible mediation and thus the influence of the themes and considerations at the forefront of each program has the potential for widespread impact.

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Kathryn is currently completing a Masters of Philosophy in Film and Media studies, examining the intersection between conceptions of female leadership, history, and authenticity in three historical television series: *Reign* (2013), *The White Queen* (2013), and *The Virgin Queen* (2005). Her current interests lie predominantly in the field of television and history, in particular the process of artistic mediation in historical drama, which navigates the tension between contemporary concerns and the popular horizon of expectations surrounding the past.

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