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‘To Be or Not to Be. That is the Question’
Investigating Women in Politics Through Borgen

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Declaration

I, Laura Marchetti hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “‘To Be or Not to Be. That is the Question’ – Investigating Women in Politics Through Borgen”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within this text of works of other authors in any form (e.g. ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the bibliography.

I hereby also acknowledge that I was informed about the regulations pertaining to the assessment of the MA thesis Euroculture and about the general completion rules for the Master of Arts Programme Euroculture.

Groningen, 1st of August 2014

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# Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction to the Thesis  
1.1. Which ‘gender issue’?  
1.2. Fiction, Politics and Gender? On the Relevance on Popular Culture  

Chapter Two: Literary Review on Gender and Media  
2.1. Gender in/and Media: Key Themes, Academic Debate and Literary Review  
2.2. Symbolic Annihilation  
2.3. Distortion and Stereotypes  
2.4. Ebb and Flow: from Second- to Third-Wave Feminism  
2.5. Where Are We Now? The ‘Post-’ of Contention  
  2.5.1. The ‘Backlasher’  
  2.5.2. The Girlie  
2.6. Conclusions  

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework on Gender, Media and Politics  
3.1. Introducing Gender  
3.2. Defining Gender: A Polarised Start  
3.3. Defining Gender: Butler’s Trouble and Practice’s Trouble  
3.4. Gender in Borgen  
3.5. Defining Gender through Labour and Politics  
3.6. ‘It’s a Man’s World’ – Women, Politics and Media  
  3.6.1. Walking on a Tightrope: Female Politicians and Their Families in Media  
  3.6.2. The Self-Representation of Female Politicians  
3.7. Losing as Women and Losing as Politicians?  

Chapter Four: Borgen – ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’  
4.1. Introducing the Analysis  
4.2. Choosing and Introducing Borgen  
4.3. Rationale and Method of the Analysis
4.4. Synopsis Episode One, Season One

4.5. ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’ – Between Integrity and Corruption

4.6. Synopsis Episode Ten, Season Two

4.7. ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’ – Mother and Wife or Prime Minister?

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Bibliography
Chapter One: Introduction to the Thesis

1.1. Which ‘gender issue’?

On the first of July 2014, Italy took the office of the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. In its official programme, *Europe: a Fresh Start*, one can read: “the gender issue will be pursued as one of the priorities in policies and the evaluation of corporate social responsibility actions and impact.”

Admittedly, the ‘gender issue’ can be considered as broad term, which may be interpreted and described in different ways. First of all, if one continues reading the programme of the Italian Presidency, it will become clear that the adjective ‘gender’ in ‘gender issue’ is being used to designate women. Nonetheless, the noun ‘issue’ would still remain very general. ‘Gender issue’ can be applied to define gender-based violence and discrimination; it can be used in reference to hate speech and bullying, or to describe the absence of women in a certain domain, etc… Regardless of which definition one may chose to apply, it is undeniable that nowadays the ‘gender issue’ is a topical site of debate in different fields in Europe. It concerns governments and institutions, for instance, over the discussion of whether or not implementing gender quotas in certain areas in order to foster equality and ensure that each gender is represented proportionately. In this case, the ‘gender issue’ is therefore understood as a question of representative substitution or proxy, namely the act of ‘standing for someone else’ or ‘acting on behalf of someone else’. At the same time, however, gender can also be considered an issue in terms of representative resemblance or portrait, thus a matter of ‘mirroring’ or ‘being the image of something or someone’. In this regard, a ‘gender issue’ can be, for example, the circulation of derogatory or sexist portrayals of women. Notwithstanding these facets, it can be claimed that a ‘gender issue’ is ultimately a representative issue, whether the latter is intended in terms of proxy or portrait, or both. As a matter of fact, given that gender “is one of the key social structures in contemporary culture,” its “hierarchies and

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inequalities are maintained, among other factors, by meanings and belief systems, and these are in turn generated through representation.\textsuperscript{4}

Bearing all of these observations in mind, this thesis will thus analyse the ‘gender issue’ in terms of representation. More specifically, it will employ a portrait approach, thus understand representation mainly in connection with visual images and resemblance. It will also inscribe the question of gender representation or, to be more precise, female representation, within the political domain. In fact, politics can be generally regarded as a male monopoly, both in terms of quantity, as the number of male politicians is usually bigger than females, but also with respect to its categorisation, as political cultures are often qualified in compliance with the perceived traits of hegemonic masculinity.\textsuperscript{5} In this sense, it certainly becomes relevant to investigate how a male-dominated environment may influence the perception of those women who decided to pursue a career in it. Along these lines, this research will therefore focus on the representation of female politicians and their portrayals as public personae. Finally, provided that mass media and communication can be considered as a “constitutive of contemporary public spheres, ingrained in the concept itself and impossible to ignore in theory and research,”\textsuperscript{6} the thesis will also intersect gender and politics with media. In fact:

The mediated representation of female leaders […] constantly contributes to (re)producing the dominant discourses about the role women (should) play in society. These representations implicitly express judgements on accepted models of femininity and masculinity, constructing ideal conceptions of what women are and should be. Both through the different discourses governing mediated representations of women and through debates discussing the role of women in politics, the media convey messages which, implicitly or explicitly, contribute to reinforcing certain understandings of women and their role in society.\textsuperscript{7}

Pertaining the media component, this thesis will thus provide an overview over the existing academic works concerning the mediated representation of women in general, but also in politics. At the same time, it will also contribute to the existing

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 9.
debate by the examination of Borgen, a political drama revolving around the first female Prime Minister in Denmark. Having said that, the analysis will ask the question: in the light of the existing scholarship and theories on gender, media and politics, how does Borgen articulate and represent the discourses surrounding female politicians?

With regard to its structure, the thesis will open with a literary review over the existing scholarship on the mediated representation of women. This section will draw its material both from the field of media and communication studies, as well as from gender studies and feminist theory. The discussion will then continue with the presentation of the theoretical framework on gender, media and politics. The central function of this part will be to provide a deeper understanding over the theoretical and social conceptions on gender, as well as zooming in on the construction of gendered structures in society and how these influence the mediated representation of women in politics. All in all, Chapter Two and Chapter Three will serve as an academic and theoretical pre-understanding of the existing debates and discourses circulating over media representation of women in general, and female politicians in particular. Chapter Four will be dedicated to the analysis of the case study per se. In this section, the motivations underlying the choice of the media text will be explained and the method of the analysis will be outlined. Then, an introduction to Borgen will be provided, followed by its interpretation and discussion. Finally, in the last chapter, conclusions will be drawn. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this work, the next section will be consecrated to shed some light on the interrelation between media, politics and gender and the relevance of studying them in connection with each other.

1.2. Fiction, Politics and Gender? On the Relevance on Popular Culture

Employing a fictional TV series in order to investigate the nature of gendered power structure in the real world might seem inconsistent and contradictory for some. In fact, media texts and mass media in general are core elements of popular culture to the point that “much of what we think of as popular culture is media culture: television, computer games, pop music, films, and so on.” Consequently, this thesis implicitly unifies two

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8 Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer, Gender and Popular Culture, 4.
fields that are commonly considered to be antithetical to each other: popular culture and politics. Indeed:

The folkloric and oral roots of popular culture seem to be thoroughly at odds with the modern tradition of contemporary political institutions and culture, the latter distinguished by a belief in rationality, progress, and the capacity of people to take control over their own destinies. An informed citizenry that relies on facts and rational argumentation for its political sense making is considered a necessary prerequisite for modern politics and democracy. The folkloric world of popular culture ruled by coincidence, instead of control, and marked by suspicion and sensation, instead of rationality and reservation, might seem difficult to articulate with the modernity of present-day politics.9

However, despite their opposing characterisations, politics and popular culture seem to have undertaken a gradual process of reconciliation with each other as it is clearly manifested by the emergence of the so-called celebrity politics, a phenomenon “in which politics is transmuted into a spectacle that is to be performed to an audience, not of citizens, but of spectators.”10 Hence, on the one hand, it is not uncommon to see politicians employing traditional platforms and forms of entertainment to convey their messages and reach out to a broader electorate. Simultaneously, on the other hand, political issues and themes have become more and more popularised through fictionalisation to the point that:

“Popular US television series that are watched across the globe, for example, have come to offer new horizons for political imagination by portraying a black president in the widely acclaimed Fox thriller 24 and by suggesting the even odder possibility of a female president in the 2005 ABC drama series Commander in Chief, in which Mackenzie Allen (played by Geena Davis) weekly shows a US audience of some 30 million that a woman can survive the political bickering of Washington and lead the international community.”11

Hence, scepticism towards the unification of politics with popular culture aside, celebrity politics in all of its forms “is an irreversible phenomenon that is part of a more general change in political culture, which includes among other things declining party

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membership and identifications and the loss of binding ideologies.” Moreover, as politics and popular culture become more interrelated with each other, this trend can be inscribed within broader, postmodernist changes in political culture, which allows “consumerism, celebrity and cynicism (or political indifference) [to] restructure the field for political representation and good citizenship, downplaying traditional forms of ideological and party-based allegiance, and foregrounding matters of aesthetics and style.” Consequently, taking all of these considerations into account, it becomes clear why popular culture in general and fictional media texts in particular can be considered a topical and worthwhile field for the analysis of politics.

Besides the increasing connection between politics and popular culture, the latter can also be considered a relevant field for analysis since:

“Popular culture is a site where the construction of everyday life may be examined. The point of doing this is not only academic – that is, as an attempt to understand a process or practice – it is also political, to examine the power relations that constitute this form of everyday life and thus to reveal the configuration of interests its construction serves.”

Hence, since gender itself is a form of social structure “marked by power struggles and inequalities,” the purpose of studying gender and its discourses can be inscribed within the political aims of analysing popular culture as a site for the construction of social values and ideologies. Moreover, the studying gender in relation to media and communication is certainly worthwhile considering as it is through “cultural fora like television that specific representations or significations of gender get generated day in and day out and circulated as tacit and not so tacit norms to millions of viewers the world over.”

At the same time, the relevance of this examination is also academic and aims to contribute to the existing debate revolving around the concepts of gender, politics and media. In this respect, it is worth noticing that “the articulation of the links between gender, politics, and communication […] involves three highly contested and variable

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12 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 50.
social concepts and arenas that each have been theorised and researched in much
details, but whose interwoveness has received far less attention.” Hence, despite being
closely interrelated with each other, the connection between gender, politics and media
has thus far received little attention from academia. Consequently, given the lack of
extensive and detailed research intersecting all three areas of inquiry, this thesis
ultimately aims to shed light and emphasise the issues at stake in a topical yet under-
researched interdisciplinary field.

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2.1. Gender in/and Media: Key Themes, Academic Debate and Literary Review

Female representations have constantly varied over the decades, being shaped by the historical and cultural transformations that have characterised the flows of gender identity and politics. Moreover, in addition to the internal changes occurred at the micro level within feminist discourses, it must also be taken into account that mediated images of women are formed and positioned in broader socioeconomic contexts. Hence, developments and variations in the macro structure have an impact also in the construction and understanding of representations. Consequently, for instance, “images of the ‘new woman’ as an independent consumer whose femininity remains intact, or as a hard-headed individualist, whose feminine side must be sacrificed, illustrate changing social and economic demands on women.”18 As a matter of fact, it could be stated that, within its mutable disposition, alteration seems to be the only permanent feature of female representation. Along these lines, “the term of ‘new woman’ seems to reappear with every generation – from the ‘new woman’ in the late nineteenth century, who so shocked society with her ‘independence,’ to that of the present day, who so preoccupies the theorists of ‘post-feminism.’”19 In this endless and dynamic process of formation, negotiation, interpretation and deconstruction of female images, media have certainly played a pivotal role, seeing that they “urged women to leave behind their ‘old’ self and change into the ‘new woman.’”20 Accordingly, as leading feminist theorist Angela McRobbie notes, “the media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgement and establishes the rules of play.”21

Naturally, mediated representations of women has not only been a subject exclusively circumscribed to the field of popular culture and media studies, but also feminist academic spheres have persistently been attentive and reactive to the topic. In this chapter, key themes and trends of feminist media studies will be presented and

explored in relation with each other. Specifically, following the established periodization of feminism, it will start shedding light on the debate raised by second-wave feminism, to then proceed with an examination of the developments brought through the third wave and finally ending with a scrutiny of current, postfeminist interpretations and discussions.

2.2. Symbolic Annihilation

With the advent of second-wave feminism in the 1970s, more and more attention has been paid to media and gender, thus the academic debate and scholarship concerning these topics is certainly abundant and diverse. The primary preoccupation of this novel field of inquiry was the examination and evaluation of the representation of women in popular culture and, since then, it can be asserted that “representation has always been an important battleground for contemporary feminism.”22 In fact, there is a kind of logic operating behind it. As Hollows and Moseley have noted “apart from women actively involved in the second-wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, most people’s initial knowledge and understanding of feminism has been formed within the popular and through representation.”23

Consequently, in mirroring its civil society counterpart, feminist theory rapidly came to develop its position around the general argument that the media contributed to foster women’s second-class status in society by providing a stereotypical and unequal portrayal that complied with the traditional, hegemonic and patriarchal norms of sex roles distinction – based on the assumption that men and women are innately different. More specifically, television and cinema have been generally regarded in academic literature as a prominent contributor “in acculturating men and women into separate gender roles based on their sex.”24 This line of reasoning is based on the assumption that media play a key (if not even dominant) role in the socialisation of individuals.

The term socialisation is used here as the process through which individuals learn to internalise the values, beliefs and norms of the culture to which they belong, as well

as their social roles. This process has a particular vital function in social life and interactions as “the internalisation of the lessons of socialisation means that our culture becomes taken for granted. We learn to hold ‘appropriate’ values and beliefs. We learn to behave in socially acceptable ways.”25 In other words, socialisation describes “the various ways in which individuals become social subjects.”26 Many social institutions play a contributing role in triggering and shaping individuals’ socialisation, whether it is family or peer groups, religion or language, economic or legal systems. Media are commonly regarded as falling within these social structures as it is often posited that “audiences learn and internalise some of the [dominant culture’s] values, beliefs and norms presented in media products.”27 As a result, “media also affect how we learn about our world and interact with one another. That is, mass media are bound up with the process of social relations” (emphasis in original).28

Deriving from this concept, a pioneering contribution to the field came in 1978 with the essay The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media by the U.S. sociologist Gaye Tuchman. Writing in the heyday of social transformations, Tuchman probed whether the changes occurring in women’s lives and society in general where also being mirrored in the media and, overall, whether media(ted) representations influence individuals’ behaviours in gendered terms. In order to fashion her argument, the author draws upon the concepts of ‘reflection hypothesis’, ‘symbolic representation’ and ‘symbolic annihilation’. The first is understood as the key role that mass media have in reflecting dominant values of a given society, both because of the commercial motive of attracting large audiences by offering programmes compatible with their beliefs, but also because dominant values are also taken for granted by the media industry itself.29 The second and the third notions further explore the normative function of mass media and are based on the work of the U.S. communication scholar George Gerbner. As he theorised, media representation symbolises or “signifies social existence,” inasmuch as it discloses to the audience approved and valued lines of conduct, and, by contrast, he also claimed “absence means symbolic annihilation.”30

26 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 34.
28 Ibid, 16.
30 George Gerbner, “Violence in television drama: Trends and symbolic functions,” in Television and
Drawing from these concepts, Tuchman concluded that, despite constituting fifty-one per cent of the population and over forty per cent of the labour force at the time, the fact that women were underrepresented in the media was symptomatic of their subjection to symbolic annihilation.\footnote{Gaye Tuchman, “The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media,” 8.}

Naturally, one could easily argue that the numerical underrepresentation of women does not necessarily imply a negative representation of those few female figures portrayed, for it does not investigate the quality of the images available. In fact, equality in terms of numbers is not always automatically associated with equality in attitudes and perceptions. Conversely, a positive role model, even if it is a singular case, can reach out to large audiences and set the example for many. These issues are also addressed by Tuchman, who continues her argument stating “the paucity of women on American television tells viewers that women don’t matter much in American society. That message is reinforced by the treatment of those women who do appear on the television screen.”\footnote{Ibid, 11.} In fact, by collecting different research data, the author suggests that women are either trivialised in the comparison with male characters or condemned because of their behaviour and characteristics, which are perceived as a diversion from the patriarchal norm. Taking into account the gathered evidence, Tuchman eventually draws her main conclusions by affirming that:

The mass media perform two tasks at once. First, with some culture lag, they reflect dominant values and attitudes in the society. Second, they act as agents of socialization, teaching youngsters in particular, how to behave. Watching lots of television leads children and adolescents to believe in traditional sex roles: Boys should work; girls should not. The same sex-role stereotypes are found in the media designed especially for women. They teach that women should direct their hearts towards hearth and home.\footnote{Ibid, 37.}

Since its publication, Tuchman’s work has been remarkably influential and extensively cited, with its core argument concerning women’s invisibility in the media being employed as the foundation for further research even at the present time. Already in 1978, in their research, Lang on the one hand and Sprafkin and Liebert on the other confirmed Tuchman’s speculations by concluding that, in order to be newsworthy,
women had to be “mothered, married, or been sired by a man of achievement.”

In more recent years, the Global Media Monitoring Project used a longitudinal and transnational approach to examine the representation of women and men in the news worldwide. Conducted in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010 (and again scheduled for 2015), these reports have consistently illustrated that women tend to be less present than men both as newscasters as well as news subjects. Besides newscast, similar findings can be observed in other studies focusing on other forms of media, such as television series, cinema and magazines.

The notion of symbolic annihilation functioned also a prompter for other types of research within the media industry since it was conceived as a rather strong framework for investigation. In point of fact, one of the initial areas that started to be explored was the presence of women in media professions and the production side of the media industry. One of the first and most prominent works was Julia d’Acci study of Cagney and Lacey, a 1980s American series revolving around the working and personal lives of two policewomen. In her research, d’Acci analysed various aspects of the TV series’ production and how the different stakeholders (writers, producers, network, actors, etc...) coped and negotiated with each other in the construction of the media text. Attention was also paid to the distribution of professions and positions in gendered terms and how this may or may not have influenced the final outcome.

The logic behind this and other similar research can be easily explained by the fact that the examination of media production combined with the advocacy for women’s entrance in the sector was seen as the ultimate possibility of re-shaping the media content in the name of equality, a strategy based on the “presumption that becoming a greater part of this particular workforce would help to expand both the amount and the quality of

35 Nonetheless, it shall be noted that, within the 15-year period, an increase of visibility from 17 per cent to 24 per cent has been found. For more information, see “WMTN,” Who Makes the News?, accessed April 9, 2014, http://whomakesthenews.org, where all the reports and information on the project can be found. The reports are also available divided by region. Turning the attention to Europe, the picture is slightly better than its worldwide counterpart, with an increase of female representation from 16 per cent to 26 per cent within the 15-year period. For the 2010 report on Europe, see “Europe. Global Media Monitoring Project 2010. Regional Report,” Who Makes the News?, accessed April 9, 2014, http://cdn.agilitycms.com/whomakesthenews.org/Imported/reports_2010/regional/Europe.pdf.
visibility for women.” This line of reasoning is still employed today and does not merely concern the sphere of media representation. An example can be found in the topical legislative discussion over the possibility of implementing gender quotas in certain domains (usually in politics, technology and business – company boards specifically). Advocates of the quota would usually support their stand by invoking the principle of democracy as well as the one of an equal representation that better reflects the number of women in societies – and thus, once again, overcoming the culture lag.

Notwithstanding, despite being a leading model in early feminist theory and serving as a formative framework for further researches, the principle of symbolic annihilation started to be challenged since the beginning of the 1980s. In fact, studies and concerns addressing to female invisibility and underrepresentation were founded on the postulation that media have a substantial impact on audiences and their socialisation process. However, supplementary researches indicated that there are many other elements influencing and intervening in socialisation through media, such as age, class, education and also the gender of the individual. These new findings started therefore to undermine the unquestioned and straightforward correlation between the power of what was presented in media messages and the individual internalisation of socially appropriate values and beliefs. Likewise, studies on children and media control suggested that, “the causal relation between media exposure and sexist attitudes is unclear since it appears that even at a very early age children have considerable knowledge of ‘appropriate’ gender behaviour.”

Furthermore, research strongly anchored on socialisation and the content-based evaluations of the quality of media representation have also been questioned for not considering the audiences. As a matter of fact, these studies implied a rather passive role of the receiver of the media text, which was often understood as being a

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39 Discussing the rather contentious subject of implementing gender quota regulations would go well behind the scope of this thesis, therefore the topic will not be explored into details (for references and data, see “Quota Database,” Quota Project: Global Database of Quotas for Women, accessed April 17, 2014, http://www.quotaproject.org and also European Commission’s Network to Promote Women in Decision-making Politics and Economy, European Commission, The Quota-instrument: Different Approaches across Europe, Working Paper, Brussels, 2011). Notwithstanding, in the light of the current postfeminist debate that will be presented later, it is worth mentioning this example in order to show that, despite deemed as out-dated in certain instances, some of the key concepts of early feminist theory are still employed today. Regardless of one’s standpoint on the matter, this is noteworthy as it demonstrate one of the many and diverse shapes that feminism can take today.

40 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 35.

41 Ibid, 34.
dichotomous selection: the distorted message could be either accepted and internalised as a whole or rejected. However, once analysis of the audiences’ consumption of media started to be carried out, a new body of conclusions led to the reconsideration of the preliminary hypotheses. Particularly relevant in this sense are the researches over soap opera audiences and romance novel readerships.\(^{42}\) Through interviews and focus groups, researchers noticed that individuals were not simply inertly taking for granted media messages, but they interpreted them according to their own experience, discussed them with their peers and families, and construct meanings. For instance, in analysing female readers of romantic novels, Radway noticed how these products had also the function of providing women with the gratification of escape and relaxation from everyday life, but also served as means of instruction. As she points out:

> Reading in this sense connotes a free space where [women] feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own. At the same time, by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, the escape figuratively into the fairy tale where a heroine’s similar needs are adequately met. As a result, they vicariously attend to their own requirements as independent individuals who require emotional sustenance and solicitude.\(^{43}\)

### 2.3. Distortion and Stereotypes

The anxiety over female underrepresentation and concerns for the socialisation process have often led feminist critique to demur that media provided a distorted picture of reality. Just as much as the notion of symbolic annihilation, even the concept of distortion has been a recurring leitmotif in feminist theory with regard to media and communication studies. For instance, as Cantor notes, media texts “are not representative of women’s position in our highly differentiated and complex society.”\(^{44}\)

This issue was also addressed by Tuchman herself who, after calling attention to the fact

\(^{42}\) Naturally, many are the studies focusing on these media texts and their receivers. Here I will only mention Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, (London: Methuen, 1985) and Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).


that economy is more and more based on women’s employment, the ‘culture lag’
perpetuated by media would eventually result in “an anachronism we can ill afford.”

However, as the scholarship started to be expanded in the 1980s, new perspectives
came to the fore, some of which embarked in challenging the foundational basis of early
feminist theory. If distortion can be summarily defined as an unrealistic depiction of
reality that tend to encourage the dissemination of stereotypes, scholars started to
interrogate the very negative nature of stereotypes themselves. As Van Zoonen noted:

Stereotypes are not images in themselves but radicalised expressions of a
common social practice of identifying and categorising events, experiences,
object or persons. Stereotypes often have social counterparts which appear
to support and legitimise the stereotype. A common response to the feminist
claim that media distort reality by showing women in stereotypical roles of
housewife and mother, is that in reality many women are mother and
housewives too, ‘and what is so problematic about showing that?’

Moreover, if a more speculative angle is taken, it can be remarked that
categorising an image as distorted and demanding a more realistic representation of
women assumes that there is de facto a universal, constant and shared understanding of
‘reality’ itself. This sort of postulation is rather problematic, not just in gender and
media studies, but in the whole field of academia in general. As a matter of fact, it
unfolds the ultimate ontological dilemma of inquiring ‘what is reality?’ and ‘how do
human beings understand it?’, questions that have been asked and unanswered albeit
very differently since the dawn of philosophy. Along these lines, feminist scholars have
not yet – and probably never will – come to a collective and univocal understanding or
definition of what the reality of women is, especially since the advent of post-
structuralism, which makes the attempt of answering these questions a rather daunting
and futile endeavour.

Zooming back onto the critique towards the traditional stereotype theory, it is
certainly worth presenting the work of Tessa Perkins, who proposes an alternative
academic understanding to the notion of stereotypes and questions some of the
underlying (and growingly normative) assumptions on them. Firstly, she debates,
stereotypes are not always negative – the pejorative connotation has increasingly
become embedded into the term, however the concept of stereotype per se has a neutral

45 Gaye Tuchman, “The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media,” 38.
46 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 30-31.
47 The academic debate over the very definition of ‘gender’ will be addressed more in depth in Chapter 3.
meaning. Moreover, in order for negative stereotypes to exist there must be a positive counterpart, which is also important “because other stereotypes are partially defined in terms of, or in opposition to, them. […] Positive stereotypes are an important part of the ideology and are important in the socialisation of both dominant and oppressed groups.”

Secondly, despite being more numerous, stereotypes are not only formed about minority groups or the less powerful, but also pertain dominant groups. As a matter of fact, the latter are as significant as the former since they will contribute “to confirm that the goods of society and ‘good’ as it is for others to continue to see them as good (if unattainable).”

Along these lines, Perkins continued, stereotypes are also held about one’s own group, where ‘held’ can both be interpreted as the act of believing in a certain stereotype or simply being aware of its existence. In this sense, stereotypes are collectively distributed, a characteristic that, along with their simplicity and immediate recognisability, buttresses their communicative role and “makes them available for use in interpreting the world.” Proceeding with her argument, Perkins then claims that stereotypes cannot be necessarily and permanently considered as unconditionally rigid or unchanging, but it needs to be recognised that alternatives may emerge as a result of changes in the structural position or saliency of the stigmatised group. In this case, Perkins argues, mass media may play an assisting role as “one of the ways in which [they] operate to support the ruling ideology is in this re-defining process and in the circulation of new definitions or a range of new definitions.”

Hence, even if in a moderately contained fashion, a more nuanced and possibly constructive interpretation of the social role of media is advanced: rather than understanding them as sole producers and promoters of a distorted image of reality, media should be regarded as adherent to a specific prevailing ideology. The implication of this reasoning would be therefore that mass media should not be seen as monolithic despots imposing their representations to passive crowds – as early feminist theory had come to gradually suggest. On the contrary, media are better understood as doers operating within given social systems and ideologies and as such, they have the potential of influence as well as being influenced by the latter.

49 Ibid, 158.
50 Ibid, 145.
51 Ibid, 149.
Continuing with her argument, Perkins then concludes by stating that stereotypes cannot always be deemed as false, but should be considered as ‘structurally reinforced’. On one hand, in fact, they are integrated with social practices and institutions, which provide them with the validity needed to confirm the legitimacy of very nature of the stereotype in question. On the other, they are usually constructed based on what is perceived to be a factual and valid characteristic of a certain group. By way of explanation, they are based on the selectivity of pinpointing, from some members of a specific group, one or more particular, distinctive features, which are perceived as significant or problematic vis-à-vis social norms, and then render them salient and generalise them to the whole group as innate traits, whereas other attributes are discarded or overlooked.

Certainly contentious at the time (and still today), Perkins’ critique to the traditional view of stereotype theory provided a new method of analysis and interpretation concerning the sphere of representation. As it has been noted, “rather than perceive stereotypes as de facto ‘bad’, a more protean, open approach has emerged, allowing a nuanced understanding of the various forms and functions stereotypes can take” (emphasis in original). Thus, to conclude with Perkins’ words, “we must look at the social relationship to which [stereotypes] refer, and at their conceptual status, and ask under what conditions are stereotypes more or less resistant to modification” for their construction, maintenance and alteration is the expression of ideology.

2.4. Ebb and Flow: from Second- to Third-Wave Feminism

1980s researches on the reception of media text along with the development of counter-theories fervently called into question the body of knowledge and interpretation provided by feminist media studies until that moment. What was ultimately at stake in the academic discussions were early feminists’ attitudes towards both the power of the production side and the effectiveness of media messages, as well as receiver’s ability of making choices and constructing meaning. Instead of merely diving into investigations inquiring ‘how is gender represented in media and how does this affect society’,

52 Alison Griffiths, “Gender and Stereotyping,” in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 95.
53 Tessa E. Perkins, “Rethinking Stereotypes,” 141.
audience research provided a new framework for interpretation based on a more dynamic role of media message receivers and started to investigate different points at stake, such as ‘what do audiences do with media?’ As it has been pointed out, “if we are concerned with the meaning and significance of popular culture in contemporary society, with how cultural forms work ideologically or politically, then we need to understand cultural products (or ‘texts’) as they are understood by audiences” (emphasis in original).54

The development of new approaches in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with the raise of the third-wave feminism that pervaded the whole area of academia as well as civil society. In fact, early, second-wave feminist media studies was mainly circumscribed to the Anglo-American context and based on radical, liberal and socialist feminist theory. Likewise, research in the field was mostly grounded on a binary understanding of gender, based on the man/woman and masculinity/femininity dichotomy, in which the latter components were commonly regarded as normatively fixed in society.55 Now, even the precise notion of ‘masculinity’ started to be questioned and investigated as a fluid dimension of gender identity.56 Moreover the expansion of the scholarship to diverse academic circles shed light to other possible interpretations of femininity in particular and gender in general. In fact, scholars started to note how the majority of the studies up to that moment had been focusing on white, heterosexual, middle-class women, leaving out a whole spectrum of the realities of gender (and sexualities), such as older, minority women and queerness.57 Postmodern, postcolonial, transnational feminism and queer studies began thus to “place more emphasis on comparing women’s experience to those of other women and to the productive interrogation of differences between women” rather than purely concentrating on the commonalities of their oppression as a homogeneous entity.58

Third-wave feminist theory thus presented itself as a response against what it was perceived to be a series of limiting approaches in research methodologies, focuses and hypotheses. Early media studies had in fact based its work on transmission models of communication, which created a linear ‘sender-message-receiver’ paradigm based on

56 For references, see John Beynon, Masculinities and Culture (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2002) and also Steve Craig, Men, Masculinity, and the Media (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992).
58 Ibid, 373.
the assumption that the sender has a semi-total control over the message, while the receiver is partially, if not completely, passive. This had also led to the productive employment of content analysis, thus favouring quantitative descriptions of media representation that would usually be investigated applying the aforementioned notions, namely socialisation, symbolic annihilation and distortion. As noted by Van Zoonen:

The feminist transmission models of communication [...] assume a rather straightforward relation between media and society, accusing the mass media of conveying a distorted picture of women's lives and experiences and demanding a more realistic reflection instead. Mass media are thought to produce symbols of reality, expressing in an abbreviated form the nature of a particular reality [...]. However, symbols have another capacity as well that is often overlooked in transmission models of communication. They function as symbols for reality, (re)constructing reality while simultaneously representing it.59

Consequently, third-wave feminism thus proposes a poststructuralist angle in which reality is understood “as the product of the social and sense making activities of human being.”60 This shift can be explained by the fact that the two movements were in effect grounding their stances on two different understandings of how ideologies of power are communicated. Second-wave feminist scholars were highly influenced by the Gramscian concept of hegemony according to which media have the purpose of transmitting the dominant, and in this case patriarchal, ideology in order to naturalise it into ‘common sense’ and acceptance.61 Following this view, society was therefore seen as divided between oppressors and oppressed, with power held by the former. Conversely, third-wave feminism adopted a Foucauldian perspective, in which “power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.”62 In other words, power ceases to be held and starts to be discursively performed according to the context and the specific interaction. Society is therefore not seen as a stable, dualistic division between oppressors (men) and oppressed (women), but as a “multiplicity of relations of subordination” and at stake is the analysis of “how

59 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 68.
60 Ibid.
in these relations of subordination individual and collective identities, such as gender and ethnicity, are being constituted.”

2.5. Where Are We Now? The ‘Post-’ of Contention

The first part of this chapter touched upon some of the key concepts and authors of the first stages of feminist media studies, which corresponded to the periods of second- and third-wave feminism. That being said, it shall be observed that, even if these periods can be considered as formally ended in terms of time, their themes and concepts transcend chronology and are still employed today – as outlined by some of the examples made earlier. Hence, despite having entered now into the era of postfeminism, it cannot be denied that second- and third-wave movements still influence modern societies as well as the academic debate on gender. Moreover, as it will be more evident in the following pages, some of the second- and third-wave feminism core themes are situated within the postfeminist discourse, both as a source of guidance as well as conflict.

With regards to media studies, postfeminism can be seen as characterised by the rise of the so-called ‘chick literature’ and ‘chick fiction’, namely genres typified by the representation of womanhood in a humorous and carefree fashion. With regards to cinema and television, popular media texts included in this category are films like Bridget Jones’ Diary, The Devil Wears Prada and I Don’t Know How She Does It, as well as TV series such as Sex & The City and Ally McBeal. Other authors also noted that postfeminist popular culture witnessed the advent of a prolific teen fiction subgenre, both in cinema and television, symbolised by products like Charmed, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, The Princess Diaries, Mean Girls and What a Girl Wants. By and large, these and other visual media texts are generally regarded by various academics as emblematic of the ultimate postfeminist quintessence, which McRobbie defines as the “undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even

63 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 4.
well-intended response to feminism.”\textsuperscript{66} In fact, as Janet Lee has earlier noted, “we can call ourselves ‘girls’, wear sexy underwear and short skirt; because feminism taught us that we’re equal to men, we don’t need to prove it any more. Which seems to mean something not so very different from earlier, sexist, encodings of women’s sexual availability.”\textsuperscript{67} Along these lines, Tasker and Negra describe postfeminism as the “valorisation of female achievement within traditionally male working environments and the celebration of surgical and other disciplinary techniques that ‘enable’ (i.e., require) women to maintain a youthful appearance and attitude in later life.”\textsuperscript{68}

These quotes impeccably embody and articulate a whole series of postfeminist themes and concerns, while also conveying the fervent body of criticisms that over the years have addressed female representation. In fact, among the diverse currents of feminism, postfeminism can be considered the one with the most various (and even contradictory) array of definitions and interpretations, with the postfeminist woman being depicted “as an antifeminist backlasher, a sexually assertive ‘do-me feminist,’ a prowoman pseudo-feminist and a feminine Girlie feminist.”\textsuperscript{69} Given these premises, it might be unproductive and jeopardising for the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed and comprehensive look into all the abovementioned nuances of postfeminism, thus the attention shall be drawn only to the analysis of a few instances, namely the backlash phenomenon and the Girlie rhetoric. In the following two subparagraphs, I will focus on the academic analysis of these two types of postfeminist representation, in view of the fact that they are usually regarded as diametrically opposed to each other and representative of two antithetical types of womanhood, while also having collected various criticisms from feminist scholars and being considered to be antifeminist at times.

2.5.1. The ‘Backlasher’

Postfeminist backlash is generally understood as the neoconservative, hegemonic tendency of rejecting feminist doctrines and “a marker of time as well as space,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 255.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Janet Lee, “Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango? Postmodernism and the ‘New Woman’,” 168-169.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” 1-2.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Stéphanie Genz, “Singled Out: Postfeminism’s ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All,” 98.
\end{itemize}
implying a temporal sequence in which feminism has been transcended, occluded, overcome.”

Within this perspective, early feminist teachings and achievements are to be blamed as the reason behind modern women’s doubts, issues and lack of control over their lives. As a matter of fact, in a backlash view, early feminists are constructed as the ‘other’, the extreme bra-burning spinster that has emancipated women at the expense of their happiness and satisfaction. By way of explanation, “the backlash assumes that working women are too feminist to be feminine and, in their search for professional success on male terms, they are bound to end up single, unloved, and fraught with neuroses.”

In her critique to this phenomenon, the best-selling book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Susan Faludi argues that the media encourages the diffusion of this antifeminist backlash. According to the author, it is in fact headlines like ‘When Feminism Failed’ or ‘The Awful Truth About Women’s Lib’ and movies like *Fatal Attraction* and *Baby Boom* that perpetuate “a steady stream of indictments against the women's movement” on the one hand, and leave women “paying for their liberty with an empty bed, a barren womb,” on the other. Likewise, media texts are thus considered to disseminate the idea that:

The struggle for women's rights is won, another message flashes. You may be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable. […] It must be all that equality that's causing all that pain. Women are unhappy precisely because they are free. Women are enslaved by their own liberation. They have grabbed at the gold ring of independence, only to miss the one ring that really matters. They have gained control of their fertility, only to destroy it. They have pursued their own professional dreams – and lost out on the greatest female adventure [of being a wife and a mother]. The women's movement, as we are told time and again, has proved women's own worst enemy.

Moreover, Faludi continues, despite being widely spread, backlash attitudes remain generally individually-based and lack of collective organisation. This particular feature has subsequently created an even stronger antifeminist sentiment, which “is most powerful when it goes private, when it lodges inside a woman's mind and turns her

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73 Ibid., 1-2.
vision inward, until she imagines the pressure is all in her head, until she begins to enforce the backlash, too – on herself.”

Despite presenting a rather pessimistic outlook on postfeminism, Faludi’s argument and strong body of evidence proved to be a convincing framework of analysis for feminist media studies in the 1990s. Over a decade later, scholar Angela McRobbie further developed the backlash theory by proposing a less rigidly antifeminist interpretation of postfeminism. In her view, postfeminist representations are not necessarily a fully conservative response to early feminism and do not automatically reject its principles. On the contrary, McRobbie suggests, postfeminism can be better understood as a process through which feminism is, at first, positively and consciously invoked and then, “through an array of machinations [and] elements of contemporary popular culture,” ultimately dismissed as a thing of the past that does not always adequately fit modern societies.

To demonstrate her argument, McRobbie analyses the media archetype of the postfeminist woman in current times: Bridget Jones. In her case study, McRobbie describes Bridget as:

Aged 30, living and working in London, Bridget is a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars and restaurants, she is the product of modernity in that she has benefited from those institutions (education) which have loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to be ‘disembedded’ and re-located to the city to earn an independent living without shame or danger. However, this also gives rise to new anxieties. There is the fear of loneliness, for example, the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband.

In order to analyse Bridget’s character and explore postfeminism in general, McRobbie introduces the notion of ‘double entanglement’: the fluctuation between the gratification of independence stemming from feminist teachings, and the fear of not being able to comply with a more traditional female image. Hence, at a first glance, Bridget, with her ambivalent ideals, might seem to perfectly fit within the ‘backlash’ paradigm proposed by Faludi. However, in McRobbie’s terms, the misery and blame towards feminism are absent. In fact, McRobbie understands Bridget through Anthony

74 Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, 14.
75 Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 255.
76 Ibid., 261.
Giddens’ lens of ‘late modernity’ and reads current female representations as the product of this phenomenon. Reflexive and self-monitoring, the modern postfeminist is aware of her emancipated position and enjoys its perks. However, she is also aware of the risks arising from individual choices and the fact that “now there is only the self to blame.”\textsuperscript{77} Feminism is not openly rejected, but acts as a reminder and constraint of conventional desires, which can only be peacefully fulfilled through fantasies and daydreaming – a trope in postfeminist media text, present not only in \textit{Bridget Jones’ Diary} but also in other fictive texts, such as \textit{Ally McBeal}. Consequently, postfeminism “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 [feminism and its crusade are] no longer needed [because already accomplished].”\textsuperscript{78} However, McRobbie does not interpret this trend as symptomatic of ardent anti-feminist traits or backlash, but rather as an expression of a ‘double entanglement’ in which women have now to manage “the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life […] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations.”\textsuperscript{79}

Drawing from these interpretations, Stéphanie Genz proposes a different and more nuanced construal of postfeminism. In her analysis of \textit{Bridget Jones’ Diary}, Genz both discards backlash and double entanglement theories to introduce a ‘having-it-all’ interpretation of the postfeminist woman, who “is unwilling to compromise on her job and relationship ambitions and, despite discouraging setbacks, perseveres in her attempt to realise her utopian project.”\textsuperscript{80} As a result, Genz questions the perception of postfeminist representations as reflective of an antifeminist backlash as she posits that the binary division between private aspirations and public success is implicitly reinforced by the very concept of backlash itself. In fact, as already noted, the backlash rhetoric implies a sheer division between work and family life, between being feminist and feminine, and it suggests that, “in their search for professional success on male terms, [women] are bound to end up single, unloved, and fraught with neuroses.”\textsuperscript{81} However, Genz argues, this view cannot be applied to current postfeminism since, as

\textsuperscript{77} Angela McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 262.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 255-256.
\textsuperscript{80} Stéphanie Genz, “Singled Out: Postfeminism’s ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All,” 108.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 104.
characters like Bridget Jones exemplify, the issues at stake are not purely a question of choosing between the two domains (private vs. public, love vs. career, feminine vs. feminist), but rather a constant negotiation of the coexistence of the two spheres with the ultimate purpose of eventually unifying them.

That being said, Genz also acknowledges the presence of a backlash in *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, only to direct it not to Bridget herself, but to her mother, who “condenses and summarises the novel’s backlash element by stating that the modern woman is ‘just so picky’ and has ‘simply too much choice’.”82 In this way, the presence of a backlash in postfeminism is not denied. On the contrary, it is recognised as a component of the individual struggle. However, rather than being employed as the sole key of interpretation, Genz understands the backlash element as a part of a broader array of facets that characterised postfeminist representations. Along these lines, even reading postfeminism as a form of double entanglement would be reductive in Genz’s examination, as this would still imply an ‘either/or’ choice, whereas “Bridget’s struggle is not to choose between feminism and femininity, job and relationship, but it is associated with her determination to ‘have it all’.”83 Thus, in conclusion:

The postfeminist singleton occupies a multivalent and paradoxical space between dualities as she creates a new subjective stance that complicates female identity rather than defining it. For the twenty-first-century woman, ‘having it all’ is a distinct possibility and reality but, simultaneously, an unavoidable dilemma that the [postfeminist woman] has to confront and struggle with.84

2.5.2. The Girlie

Antithetical to the ‘backlash’ and ‘double entanglement’ readings of postfeminism, the ‘Girlie’ can be seen as yet a different reaction to the problematized position of modern women and postfeminism. Its rhetoric incorporates “the tabooed symbols of women’s feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, make-up, fashion magazines” along with other stereotypical elements of girlhood, while asserting that “what [women] loved as girls was good and, because of feminism, [they] know how to make girl stuff work for

83 Ibid., 113-114.
84 Ibid., 115-116.
[them].” Hence, in this perspective, feminism starts to be seen as a device to “women’s ‘freedom’ to adopt a sexualised image and exploit her feminine wiles. The feminist message of female agency and independence is restyled by the Girlie stance that conceptualises a new woman who is self-assured and comfortable with her femininity and sexual difference.” Notwithstanding, despite the blunt employment of feminist teachings and the lack of an evident backlash, Girlie representations have still received criticisms for being overall antifeminist and still perpetuating the objectification of female sexuality for the male gaze, whilst falling within the hegemonic, patriarchal agenda. An illustration of these tensions can be seen in the recent debate over the twerking phenomenon. Echoing a second-wave form of critique, some feminists have condemned this trend as a denigration of the female body, with, for instance, celebrity feminists reacting by claiming that “real empowerment of yourself as a woman would be to in future refuse to exploit your body or your sexuality in order for men to make money from you.” On the opposite side, the Girlie rhetoric would claim that physical appearance can be exercised today to “achieve personal and professional objectives and gain control over [one’s own] life.” Hence, through the Girlie lens, postfeminism becomes the “link between individual and economic concerns” as it enables women to “exert their consumer agency to achieve empowerment by using their bodies as political tools within the parameters of a capitalist economy.”

Focusing the attention more on media texts, the spread of Girlie feminism can be certainly seen in the aforementioned advent of the so-called teen fiction. This subgenre is typically targeted at a female teen audience and usually has positive and playful young women as leading characters. Examples of this category are, for instance, the

87 Ibid.
88 The expression ‘twerking’ defines a provocative way of dancing in which a person, usually a woman, thrust the hips in a low squatting position. Already a part of the African dance tradition, this dance move became notoriously famous through the extensive media and social attention that received in the Western world in summer 2013, when pop-singer Miley Cyrus performed it live during a worldwide event. In this particular context, the dance was performed explicitly mimicking sexual movements during the singing of a song, Blurred Lines, which had highly been criticised as sexist, thus leading to the reinforcement of criticisms about something that was perceived by some as a submissive act for women.
characters of frisky and bubbly Jenna in the film *13 Going on 30* or the worldly and magical Halliwell sisters in *Charmed* – all presenting attributes that are, in some ways, opposed to the character of the neurotic singleton embodied by Bridget Jones or Ally McBeal. Scholars like Tasker and Negra have speculated that the vitality embedded in Girlie representations has the aim of negotiating “the failure of contemporary institutions and the prospect of social death.”^92^ Likewise, through the Girlie perspective, postfeminism has constructed “femininity as a state of vitality in opposition to the symbolically deathly social and economic fields of contemporary Western cultures, and the highest-profile forms of postfeminist femininity are empowered to recharge a culture defined by exhaustion, uncertainty, and moral ambiguity.”^93^ Furthermore, it has also been observed that the centrality of youthfulness in Girlie images can be considered as a denotative sign of postfeminist preoccupations over the temporal and the inner ‘biological clock’.^94^ As previously noted, these anxieties are also present in the backlash stance and are depicted as giving raise to personal doubts and reconsiderations of past choices. However, the basis on which Girlie rhetoric is founded provide “an idealised, essentialised femininity that symbolically evades or transcends institutional and social problem spots.”^95^ In fact, as Tasker and Negra continue:

> The ‘girling’ of femininity itself is evident in both the celebration of the young woman as a marker of postfeminist liberation and the continuing tendency to either explicitly term or simply treat women of a variety of ages as girls. To some extent, girlhood is imagined within postfeminist culture as being for everyone; that is, girlhood offers a fantasy of transcendence and evasion, a respite from other areas of experience.^96^

In this case, the problematized position of modern women does not create a backlash towards feminism nor a freeze into the double entanglement. On the contrary, through the celebration of youth, Girlie postfeminism offers a scenario in which ‘having it all’ is not only contemplated, but also achieved. For instance, in the analysis of the TV series *Charmed*, Hannah Sanders notices how the main characters, albeit with different aspirations and experiences, eventually manage to overcome every issue and

^93^ Ibid., 9.
^94^ Ibid., 10.
^95^ Ibid.
^96^ Ibid., 18.
succeed in every aspect of their lives. In fact, throughout the series, the Halliwell sisters are able to combine their private (magical) sphere with a satisfying working career, develop a fruitful love life and enjoy more traditionally feminine pursuits (i.e. fashion and gossip). As Sanders concludes, “these are women who can kick ass when needed, dump men, and banish evil while cooking, looking good, and misunderstanding each other.” 97 Once again, this rather positive outcome can be seen as consistent with the general optimistic perspective characterising Girlie postfeminism and, at the same time, it is rather divergent, if not even in stark opposition, with the conventional ‘backlasher’ image.

2.6. Conclusions

The academic debate over media and gender began in the 1970s and was generally positioned around two major concerns: the politics of representation through media messages on the one hand, and the politics of representation within the media industry and its power structure on the other. In both cases, early feminist critique centred its discourse on the hypothesis that media were contributing and fostering discrimination against women in society by means of distortion and symbolic annihilation. Correspondingly, research was based on content analysis examined through the transmission model of communication.

As the body of scholarship developed, so did its themes, which gradually took an ‘ethnographic turn’ and started to include a more complex comprehension of gender, representation and, most of all, power relations. Audience research became more salient, paving the way for the appreciation of diverse and compound interpretations in feminist media studies. The dichotomous notion of gender started to be called into question, with its definition not only being understood in opposition to its traditional ‘others’, namely men and masculinity, but also in relation to it, as well as in relation and in opposition to other forms of female identity (i.e. in terms of class, age, race, sexuality, religion and nationality). Consequently, gender became better appreciated as a multifaceted spectrum composed by a plurality of identities rather than a mere binary paradigm ‘man-woman’.

With the turn of the century, the debate over gender and media became even more

complex, with the entrance into the postmodernist era having seemingly bewildered the discussions both in academia and popular culture. As Janet Lee observed:

For some, postmodernism is the catch-phrase for a contemporary malaise, a term used to define a society characterised by fragmentation, eclecticism and nihilism, whose cultural form include pastiche and parody; one in which life is played out on a surface without depth or meaning, in an eternal present where images are no longer merely representation, but are themselves reality. In Western society, postmodernist argue, meaning has collapsed, and with it political certainties.\textsuperscript{98}

The collapse of meaning embedded in postmodernism is also a feature of postfeminism. In fact, unrelatedly to which stance one may subscribe, it is indeed undeniable that postfeminism, with its polysemic voices and representations, reflects the fragmentation, eclecticism and nihilism typical of postmodern, Western societies. Hence, whether through the rejection of early feminist teaching, reflexivity leading to a double entanglement or the celebration of youth and vitality, postfeminism offers different keys of interpretations and management of Gidden’s ‘late modernity’. As Genz fittingly remarks:

Postfeminism allows for the plurality and contradictions of contemporary female experience in Western cultures [...]. It taps into a variety of often competing discourses, seeking to combine the supposed freedoms of neoliberalism with the demands of a capitalist economy, the female agency celebrated by the feminist movement with a patriarchal interest in heterosexual femininity. Postfeminist individualism plays an important part in this attempt to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable as it questions the possibility of a singular female/feminist identity [...]. Postfeminism’s solipsistic trend declares ‘Woman’ to be an indeterminate and open category by undermining the a priori assumption that there is a continuous field of experience shared by all.\textsuperscript{99}

As a result, postfeminism introduces the possibility of the existence of multiple and complex identities within women. Consequently, the postfeminist woman can thus portrayed as assertively ambitious and tenderly graceful, embody the bra-burning feminist and the caring feminine angel, working hard to develop a successful career and wishing to realise a romantic love life. In conclusion, postfeminism is the “incarnation

\textsuperscript{98} Janet Lee, “Care to Join Me in an Upwardly Mobile Tango? Postmodernism and the ‘New Woman’,” 166.

of the ‘new woman’ [who] epitomizes the polysemy and divergent understandings of postfeminism as her struggles/achievements allow her to take up paradoxical subject positions along a multifocal postfeminist spectrum.\textsuperscript{100} With this in mind, as it moves “from the exclusionary logic of either/or to the inclusionary logic of both/and,”\textsuperscript{101} this approach to postfeminism proves to be a comprehensive and multi-faceted tool for the scope and aim of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{100} Stéphanie Genz, “Singled Out: Postfeminism’s ‘New Woman’ and the Dilemma of Having It All,” 102-103.

3.1. Introducing Gender

Thus far, the discussion has been mainly concentrated on female representation in the media and their interpretation through the lens of feminism in general, and feminist theory in particular. By and large, the examination in the previous chapter was therefore mainly focused on the notion of ‘woman’ and how this concept has been portrayed as well as construed in media and in academia. That being said, the discussion will now turn to the theoretical understanding of the notion of gender. As a matter of fact, being considered as a form of its expression, the conception of ‘woman’ is intrinsically perceived as connected with the broader category of gender. Likewise, understanding how gender has been socially constructed, both in denotative as well as in connotative terms, would certainly be beneficial for a greater appreciation of the social perception of ‘woman’ and all of its articulations. All in all, gender can be considered as “a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category.”¹⁰² By way of explanation, gender has often been employed as a tool in the process of understanding societies and creating meanings within the latter. It served as a scaffold for interpretation and its perception has routinely been connected with other notions, such as the idea of (social) role and (personal and collective) identity, but also the construction of femininity and masculinity along with a series of social expectations and norms stemming from their reading.

In consequence, this chapter will provide a theoretical pre-understanding of the social discourses that have been created around the notion of gender. It will discuss how the latter can be appreciated in various forms, which are reflective and representative of the environment in which they have been constructed. Subsequently, the discussion will then shed light on the usage of gender and gendered norms as means to understand and organise societies. One of the many instances in which this usage can be observed is the division of tasks and labour between men and women. In this sense, it will be examined how certain environments, such as the political field and its culture, have often been constructed and interpreted as an exclusive prerogative of men, while implicitly

suggesting their incompatibility with women. Finally, the examination will then zoom in on the mediated and self-representation of women in politics and how this is often framed within gendered discourses. Overall, the discussion and social discourses presented in this chapter will serve as a conceptual framework for both the selection and the analysis of the case study, which will be the focus of the following chapter.

3.2. Defining Gender: A Polarised Start

With its decades of scholarship and theories, the field of gender studies presents itself as a vast body of knowledge from which collect, investigate and challenge norms and perceptions. Oddly enough, one of the first and still debated topics of discussion is the very definition of ‘gender’, in all of its nuances and usages. Initially, this notion was defined in terms of the nature/nurture debate, which considered biology and culture as independent entities and positioned them as diametrically opposed to one another. As Candace West and Don Zimmerman recall:

In the beginning, there was sex and there was gender. Those of us who taught courses in the area in the late 1960s and early 1970s were careful to distinguish one from the other. Sex, we told students, was what was ascribed by biology: anatomy, hormones, and physiology. Gender, we said was an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means.  

In this view, sex is understood to be a biological classification constituted by two separate sexual categories, male and female, and “stands for an understanding of what is ‘natural’, what cannot be changed.” Conversely, gender is assumed to be “the cultural meanings or representations assigned to biologically sexed bodies, with the terms ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ usually referring to culturally produced gender, and ‘male and ‘female’ to biologically produced sex” (emphasis in original). In this scenario, it is thus evident that the dichotomisation of fields of inquiry, biology and culture, and classifications, sex and gender, encompassed not only its sheer denotation, but also a series of connotative implications and connections all based on a binary

approach (male and female, masculine and feminine, and, it shall also be noted, within the early feminist thinking, feminine and feminist). Taking into account what previously introduced, these interpretations can be regarded as inscribed within and consistent to the second-wave feminist thought, which was founded upon a clear-cut man/woman divide implying that ‘male-masculine’ and ‘female-feminine’ were inherently homogeneous within their own entities. Yet, this twofold division was not only present in academic circles, but also deeply rooted in societies, in which it provided one of the first steering principles around which communities had managed their organisation since primitive times, where men were nourishment providers through hunting and women caretakers of progeny and households. In this way, “sexual opposition thus became opposition of time and space separately experienced by men and women, it became a socio-economic opposition” (emphasis in original).  

However, as already discussed in Chapter Two, through the ethnographic turn, a new body of knowledge came to challenge and erode this distinction, with some questioning its necessity in the first place. Biology and culture gradually ceased to be seen as profoundly separated and antithetical, but increasingly interlinked with each other, whereas initial divisions and categorisations started to be understood not as intrinsically natural, but as an expedient of “ideology [that had] sought in physiology the evidence of its own truth” (emphasis in original). As West and Zimmerman continue to recall:

Sex hardly seemed a ‘given’ in the context of research that illustrated the sometimes ambiguous and often conflicting criteria for its ascription. And gender seemed much less an ‘achievement’ in the context of the anthropological, psychological, and social imperatives we studied — the division of labour, the formation of gender identities, and the social subordination of women by men.

As a matter of fact, developments in the ‘hard sciences’ started to examine more closely all those instances left out by the dual categorisation of male/female (i.e. intersex, transsexualism, etc…) and innovations in procreative technologies begun to

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defy the need of having opposed sexes for the purpose of procreation. On the other hand, within the field of social sciences, the advent of new perspectives took a similar direction. Drawing from a more ethnographic and constructivist viewpoint, gender scholars in the 1980s started to question the biology/culture and masculine/feminine division, as well as the homogeneity of womanhood. Framing women through a series of antagonisms in comparison to men had certainly served to form a sense of collectivity among early feminists, based on female commonalities and struggles against a hegemonic system. Nonetheless, at the same time, it had also failed to consider a series of idiosyncrasies embedded in females and based on cultural, social and political differences. In fact, as previously noted, women formed a substantially diversified multiplicity, characterised by a variety of female identities based on other meaningful traits (i.e. ethnicity, social class, age, etc…). Along these lines, transgender and queer theories also came to contend the traditional dualistic approach. Hence, it was argued:

Categorisation imposes a false binary on the sexes while at the same time ignoring those who do not fit the binary (those who are sexually bimorphist, for instance). Our linguistic categorisation of the sexes shapes how we understand sexual differences and how they are represented and, as such, there is a need to acknowledge how language delimits the ways in which we are able to talk about biology, human nature, and so on, which we have historically tended to essentialise.\textsuperscript{110}

Following this line of reasoning, other authors started to theorise the centrality and restrictions of language in gender definitions and interpretations. For instance, by applying Lacan’s speculations over language acquisition, Van Zoonen proposes to regard gender as a cultural and discursive construct, based on continuous negotiations and struggles, in which “language and its historically and culturally specific semantic and thematic combinations in discourses set limits to our experience of ourselves, other and our surroundings.”\textsuperscript{111} Concurrently, following a Foucauldian approach, Teresa de Laurentis claims:

A subject [is] constituted in language, to be sure, though not by sexual difference alone, but rather across languages and cultural representations; a subject en-gendered in the experiencing of race and class, as well as sexual


\textsuperscript{111} Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 32.
relations; a subject is therefore not unified but rather multiple, and not so much divided as contradicted.\(^{112}\)

### 3.3. Defining Gender: Butler’s Trouble and Practice’s Trouble

The problematization over the notion of gender served as a conceptual background for Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, which, in the 1990s, provided a breakthrough insight on the understanding of gender and sex. Given the biology-is-destiny argument and its interpretation of sex as biological and gender as a cultural construct, then, Butler debated, the latter is “neither the casual result of sex nor a seemingly fixed as sex.”\(^{113}\) In fact, according to this view, gender can be seen as separate from sex, “as radically independent of sex, […] a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (emphasis in original).\(^{114}\) Butler then continues in her argument by analysing the notion of sex and suggesting that rather than being merely “natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal,” it is also “discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests.”\(^{115}\) Thus, given these premises, sex itself can be interpreted as a gendered category, no less a cultural construct than the very concept of gender itself. As a result, the dichotomy sex/gender, along with the view of the latter as a cultural interpretation of the former, makes no sense at all and “the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.”\(^{116}\) In Butler’s examination, gender and sex should then be construed as a *performance*, something that individuals *do* and *enact* in everyday life, confirming it through repetition. In her words:

> [T]he action of gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimisation. […] There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential; indeed, the

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\(^{114}\) Ibid.

\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
performance is effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame. (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{117}

By way of explanation, gender is here understood as an articulatory and performative practice revealing and maintaining a particular structure of (gendered) power relations. Nonetheless, it is indeed the preservation of the above-mentioned binary frame that Butler finds most problematic. In fact, as it is debated throughout the \textit{Gender Trouble}, heteronormative gender boundaries and the ensuing expectations over gender appropriate behaviours are constantly crossed in everyday life through instances of sexuality that do not fit within any polarised perceptions. Transgenderism, sexual dimorphism, hormone displacement and secondary sex characteristic (i.e. body hairs and muscle mass) are just few examples of sexual expressions that occur both in nature and society, offering enough evidence to call into question the binary division of gender. As Butler herself would later indicate in the 1999 preface of her book:

The point of this text is not to celebrate drag as the expression of a true and model gender […], but to show that the naturalised knowledge of gender operates as a pre-emptive and violent circumscription of reality. To the extent that gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, […]) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be ‘real’, they establish the ontological field in which bodies may be given legitimate expression.\textsuperscript{118}

Drawing from all the theories presented so far, gender can be thus better understood not as an immutable and bi-dimensional category, but rather as a fluid, heterogeneous, discursive and often normative performance, acted and negotiated through everyday interactions within specific social structures. It is an on-going process, “a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference.”\textsuperscript{119} It entails diversity and fragmentation that go beyond strict dichotomies. It includes complexity and plurality of identities, not merely in relation to the traditional ‘other’, either ‘men’ or ‘women’ depending on the subject, but also among the members of the gender group and, most importantly, within the subject itself. Hence, theoretically speaking, the application of constructivist and poststructuralist perspectives encouraging the notion of a discursive paradigm allows

\textsuperscript{117} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, chap. 3, section IV.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., preface (1999).
\textsuperscript{119} Liesbet van Zoonen, \textit{Feminist Media Studies}, 40.
for a less rigid understanding of gender. Additionally, it would also promote equality while acknowledging difference, and comply with “women’s more mundane experience of being different than men in some contexts and other times, being the same as men in other contexts and other times, and being totally unconnected to gender issues in yet other contexts.”

That being said, despite the presence of a solid scholarship invoking an understanding of gender on the basis of multiple subjectivities and eroding dualistic structures, the interpretation of gender in most of its expressions still remains ascribed to a binary approach in a large amount of everyday interactions and contexts. In point of fact, as indicated by Butler, performing gender also implies the preservation of a conventional, twofold framework to the extent that even today it is still significantly employed by individuals in order to comprehend societies and one’s role in them. By and large, there is therefore an incongruity between theory and practice, between the speculations and developments done within academia and everyday conducts. Consequently, “girls and boys, women and men are more alike than they are different, but […] societies impose a ‘sameness taboo’ on them. Together with race, ethnicity, and social class, gender categories are institutionalised cultural and social statuses. These statuses or social locations shape every individual’s life from birth” (emphasis in original). In this way, from childhood, individuals start to acquire a series of information regarding gender-appropriate (or not) behaviours and develop their identity against this background. An example of how gender role training might be routinely performed is through the assignation of daily tasks to boys and girls, which in many communities, researches suggest, still follow the traditional, dualistic distinction between men and women. Gender role training is of course not merely ascribed to the early stages of life, but occurs regularly through cultural institutions and socialisation. Thus, for instance, in her work, de Laurentis introduces the notion of ‘technologies of gender’, which she defines as media forms, narratives and theories that have the “power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and ‘implant’ [heteronormative] representations of gender.” In this view, media are considered to play an informative and normative role in the maintenance of the gendered binary

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123 Teresa de Laurentis, Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction, 18.
frame, by way of reproducing and disseminating socially accepted definitions of gender roles and attributes. In fact, as it has been speculated, “the mediated representation of gender is the result of multiple discursive negotiations involving the gender performativity of represented individuals, discourses circulating in society, and the journalistic gaze.”\(^{124}\)

In this manner, whether it is through gender role training, socialisation or any other social institution, it should be evident that:

In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being […] with distinctive psychological and behavioural propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions, competent adult members of these societies see differences between the two as fundamental and enduring and these differences are seemingly supported by the division of labour into women’s and men’s work and an often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviours that are prominent features of social organisation. Things are the way they are by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women – a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioural, and social consequences. The structural arrangements of a society are presumed to be responsive to these differences.\(^{125}\)

3.4. Gender in Borgen

Before progressing with the presentation of the other theoretical concepts that will be employed in the analysis of the case study, it is necessary to briefly digress and explore how gender is represented in Borgen. As it has already been noted, there is indeed a clear mismatch between how gender is generally understood and discussed within academic circles and how the same concept is perceived in lay societies. In the first case, gender is approached as a range of multiple subjectivities, whereas, in the second instance, the same notion is interpreted in conformity with the hegemonic view of a ‘man/woman’ and ‘masculine/feminine’ dichotomy. Confirming De Laurentis’ theory over media’s normative function, it can be argued that Borgen implicitly contributes in the maintenance of the dualistic distinction embedded in social practices, inasmuch as Butler’s understanding of gender and sex as a spectrum is not depicted nor tackled. As a

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\(^{125}\) Candace West and Don Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” 15.
matter of fact, by means of not presenting or addressing any alternative to conventional heterosexuality, the portrayal of gender in *Borgen* discreetly adheres to the fixed heteronormative standards. As a result, even if female characters are represented in a progressive fashion (i.e. holding positions of power in typically male-dominated environments), they are exclusively rendered in opposition or complementary to men, thus preserving a binary frame as the ontological field for gender expression.

Interestingly, it has been observed that this return to a more conservative understanding of gender is a characteristic trait of postfeminism. In fact, “postfeminism displaces older forms of trivialisation, generating a sense of newness, yet it also refreshes long familiar themes of gendered representation.”\(^{126}\) In this regards, scholars have observed that, even when displayed, queerness in postfeminist media texts tends to subscribe to the principles of heteronormativity and to be depicted through the lens of the heterosexual norm. Accordingly, for instance, in its account of the reality television series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, Steven Cohan notices “how some formulation of postfeminism have so readily absorbed the impact of queer theory but left out the queerness. […] In addressing the woman now seemingly liberated by feminism, consumer culture and the mass media have transformed the visible gay male into […] ‘the trendy accessory for straight women’, namely, the ‘postfeminist’ female’s best friend and confidante, and the inspiration for her ideal consort, that hip, het ‘metrosexual’.\(^{127}\) Likewise, other academics have stated that “postfeminism absolutely rejects lesbianism in all but its most guy-friendly forms, that is, divested of potentially feminist associations and invested with sexualised glamour. […] Lesbian lives are simultaneously fetishized and celebrated, mediated through a curious heterosexual gaze that is marked as both male and female.”\(^{128}\)

That being said, it is therefore clear that employing Butler’s theories to analyse *Borgen* might be counter-productive and leave little or no room for discussions. For these reasons, a more useful analytical point for the series will still have to be based on a more traditional heterosexual paradigm, which will nonetheless provide a significant insight on the problematized position of women in modern societies. Furthermore,


taking a postfeminist approach to the reading of *Borgen* will certainly prove to be an effective and constructive analytical tool. In fact, despite not bringing any new or progressive representation of sexuality to the fore, postfeminism, with its acknowledgement of polysemy and ambiguity within women, allows to explore the different facets embodied within *Borgen*’s female characters.

3.5. Defining Gender through Labour and Politics

Retrieving the discussion over the gendered organisation of society, one of the many instances where the aforementioned ‘sameness taboo’ can be observed is the division of labour. In fact, as already noted, since primitive times, sexual differences have always been articulated also through the division of *space*, where certain environments and activities have been allocated to one of the two genders and constructed as its distinctive prerogative ever since. Thus, for instance, echoing the men-hunters and women-homemaker arrangement of ancient societies, jobs that require a fairly developed ability of empathy and sensitivity are still perceived as more feminine than those who entail toughness and physical strength. At the same time, jobs related to the household and its care are still generally seen as more appropriate to women.

The division of tasks becomes even stronger in those environments that are traditionally associated with the idea of power and leadership. A clear example would be politics, in which its setting is still commonly perceived as being more of a male prerogative. In this regards, “underlying the [construction] of women and politics as each other’s antithesis is, of course, the modern Western divide between the public and the private domain with its binary gender discourse that constructs men, masculinity, and the public domain as an inviolable trio that profoundly differs from its contrasted trio of women, femininity, and the private domain.” At the same time, this approach is also an indicative manifestation of the presence of patriarchal attitudes in a given society and can be explained by the fact that “in virtually all cultures whatever is defined as manly is more highly valued than whatever is thought of as womanly.”

Hence, by reversing this argument, it can also be stated that what is highly valued in a

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130 Sandra Harding quoted in Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*, 34.
certain culture (i.e. power and governance) is also seen as more manly than womanly. All in all, it is thus evident how, despite the increasing entrance of women into politics, this environment still carries some degree of gendered qualifications stemming from the fact that, for centuries, “women were actively excluded from achieving [political] fame not only because of their discursive and social position as private persons, but also because of vigorous restrictions on their speech.”

Furthermore, the division of labour, along with different standards based on the traditional gender divide, becomes also heightened by the mediated nature of the politics and “the role played by the media ‘as a dominant space of politics today’.”132 In point of fact, “as core intermediaries in contemporary politics, the media are deeply implicated in the process of definition and framing because they represent and reconstruct the contrast between femininity and politics, in popular culture as well as in serious political reporting.”133 These kind representations can be elucidated in the light of the fact that media, with their function of ‘technologies of gender’, “constantly contribute to (re)producing the dominant discourses about the role women (should) play in society. These representations implicitly express judgements on accepted models of femininity and masculinity, constructing ideal conceptions of what women are and should be.”134 As a result:

It is not uncommon to see politics and femininity constructed as each other’s antithesis. In popular genres such as the romantic novel but also in Hollywood movies, television series, and various forms of popular journalism, politics is represented as a cesspit of dishonesty in which everyone is after his (sic) own interest and does not shy away from blackmail, bribery, or corruption. Women as traditional symbols of innocence and virtue often figure to demarcate the opposition of corrupt politics with humanity and decency, not only in expressions of popular culture but also in the self-conception of women active in politics and in serious political reporting.135

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The role of media in portraying women in politics has possibly become even more relevant and intense in the past years. In fact, as research suggests, media coverage over female politicians has steadily increased in the past two decades, concomitant with the growing number of women in positions of political importance in their communities. Hence, for instance, countries like Norway, Latvia, Denmark and Germany currently have a female figure as a Prime Minister, a position that, if not only because of its high status, places its holder at the centre of the media spotlight. However, along with other physical and attitudinal characteristics, gender is still employed as a representational device, especially when it comes to the portrayal of women. In point of fact, contingent to the rise of women in politics, modern political cultures have also become more exposed to mediated attention by means of popularisation and personalisation. Thus, on the one hand, visual, fictional texts have contributed to the mainstreamed commercialisation of politics in Western societies via, for instance, TV series such as *The West Wing*, *Borgen* and, more recently, *House of Cards*. On the other hand, many politicians have also started to “increasingly [turn] to popular culture genres to communicate with the electorate” and employ more personal modes of connections, such as social media like Facebook and Twitter. Consequently, popular culture in general and media in particular have thus started to construct political figures as “human being[s] with her or his individual peculiarities, rather than as the representative[s] of particular policies or ideologies.” That being said, it becomes therefore evident that the advent of a more popularised and personalised political culture, also described as ‘celebrity politics’, certainly pays more attention to individual attributes of politicians. Accordingly, “with the personality of politicians coming to the fore, visible personal characteristics will gain even more importance, gender being the most obvious one.” In addition, as it is becoming more popularised, the political arena is also gradually shifting from being a privilege of few to be more accessible and appealing to large, lay audiences. Hence, “popular culture – and especially the genres that focus on personal lives, like gossip and celebrity journalism and talk shows – will gain even more relevance for political communication in the future.”

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136 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 54.
137 Ibid., 49.
138 Ibid., 49-50.
139 Ibid., 50.
140 Ibid.
With this in mind, the ensuing paragraph will explore the gendered articulation of politics though media and delineate the key concepts recurring in the representation of female politicians. As a matter of fact, although nowadays it is not uncommon to have women in politics, it is also undeniable that the “deeply rooted, taken-for-granted understanding of politics as an essentially masculine activity” influences, even if unintentionally, a series of gender-specific frames in mediated representations. However, it shall also be noted that the gendered mediation of politics might not necessary be negative or deleterious for the career of female politicians. As it will be elucidated in the next section, what is at stake in the representation of women in this field is that it still differs from the discourses commonly ascribing their male counterparts and underlines the presence of different frames based on gender.

3.6. ‘It’s a Man’s World’ – Women, Politics and the Media

In the last section, the focal point of the discussion was centred on how labour, for centuries, has been organised in gendered terms and how politics have often been perceived as a male prerogative. By and large, underlying the idea that women are unsuitable for the political field is the spatial construction of a private/public distinction, according to which women are intended to be homemakers, whilst men engage in activities within the public sphere. This kind of framework has also resulted in the formation of a series of characteristics that the ‘ideal’ woman and the ‘ideal’ man should possess. Thus, following a heteronormative understanding of gender, women are supposed to be nurturing, caring and warm, whereas men should be strong, resolute and more emotionally detached.

One of the many ways in which these discourses have been articulated is through the association of the concepts of ‘male’ and ‘female’ with the functions of some parts of the human body. As a result:

Throughout history, women have been identified as bodies not minds, wombs not brains. The distinction is captured in the clichés of our culture. Where men think, women feel. The man is the head of the family, the

woman the heart. […] In ways that defy logic, women are treated as if they
are governed by their bodies and men as if they are ruled by their minds.\textsuperscript{142}

By way of explanation, this line of reasoning clearly suggests that women are the
suitable managers of the private sphere and family life. At the same time, however,
more than in any other setting, it also constructs the idea that females are particularly
inadequate for the political arena. As a matter of fact, Western societies have often
connected the notion of politics with the “belief in rationality, progress, and the capacity
of people to take control over their own destinies.”\textsuperscript{143} In other words, the brain and not
the womb. Hence, women, because of their perceived sensitivity and compassion, have
long been considered to have innate characteristics that made them unfitted to become
politicians and leaders. Even now, albeit the access to politics is no more formally and
legally blocked to women in modern Western countries, these convictions are still
subtly present in societies.\textsuperscript{144} One of the many instances in which they can be found is
in the media, which incubate and disseminate legitimised ideas and beliefs, and whose
“particular discursive and cultural styles […] are firmly rooted in the white male
bourgeois ethos, and act as informal impediments.”\textsuperscript{145} That being said, as it will be
outlined below, the mediated representation of female politicians is characterised by the
recurrence of certain themes and discourses that frame women in gendered terms and
depict them “as women first, and then, maybe, as politicians.”\textsuperscript{146}

Taking into account the social understanding of politics as a masculine activity,
researchers have observed that “women entering the political arena provide the news
media with a problem. As women they embody a challenge to masculine authority. As
active, powerful women they defy easy categorisation.”\textsuperscript{147} In other words, their gender
casts on them a series of social expectations and stereotypes that are incoherent (if not
even in stark opposition) with the attributes of the ideal politician. At the same time,
their jobs come with a series of quintessential attributes that are commonly perceived as
undesirable for a woman. As a result, women in politics “may be portrayed as ‘iron

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{142} Kathleen Hall Jamieson, \textit{Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership} (Oxford: Oxford
University Press, 1995), 53.
\bibitem{143} Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular
Culture,” 49.
\bibitem{144} Annabelle Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen, “Gender, Politics and Communication: An
Introduction,” 7.
\bibitem{145} Ibid.
\bibitem{146} Iñaki Garcia-Blanco and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “The Discursive Construction of Women Politicians
\bibitem{147} Margaret Gallagher, “Feminist Media Perspectives,” 28.
\end{thebibliography}
women,' aggressive or belligerent,” all characteristics that, if embodied in female individuals and because they do not comply with the ideals of femininity, carry with them a negative connotation that is not present in the case of men.\(^\text{148}\)

A similar reasoning has been applied to explain the prominent attention that media pay to the physical appearance and sartorial style of the female politicians. On the one hand, this trend can be interpreted as in line with the phenomenon of ‘celebrity politics’, which “makes [both male and female] political leaders appear on the platforms of entertainment, sports, music and other pop cultural venues where dress and look are key measurement of success.”\(^\text{149}\) However, contrary to their male counterparts, when reporting on women’s appearance, media tend to either mock their way of dressing as inelegant and unappealing or portray them as sex objects for the male gaze.\(^\text{150}\) Scholars have speculated that these approaches are a form of ‘othering’ the female politician and reinforce the “symbolic distance […] between hegemonic ideas of femininity and the political sphere.”\(^\text{151}\) In fact, as challenges to the feminine mainstream, the latter being usually portrayed in connection to “fashion, sexuality, glamour and consumption,” women in politics become, through derision, “‘others’ to dominant images of femininity while remaining ‘others’ in the political sphere,” due to the objectification of their persona.\(^\text{152}\)

Another leitmotif in the representation of female politicians is the singularity of their position. In an examination of the European press coverage that followed the appointment of the first majority female government in Spain, researchers observed how the material analysed highlighted the exceptionality and novelty of the new cabinet. Simultaneously, it was also noted that 65% of the news stories under scrutiny referred to the gender of the female politicians, not their political abilities or political matters in general.\(^\text{153}\) Regardless of whether the coverage had a celebratory or critical content over the appointment, the fact that it mainly focused on gender clearly implies


\(^{152}\) Ibid.

the singularity of having women in such high positions and it frames the event as exceptional rather than normal. In this way, researchers concluded, journalists and newspapers “contribute to the definition of issues of public interest within certain (preferred) terms, while rejecting primary definitions or other possible alternative framings.”\textsuperscript{154}

Contrasts between being a politician and being a woman, physical appearance, exceptionality of the role: these are only few examples of the discourses embedded in the mediated representation of women in politics. In essence, all of these illustrations can be ultimately attributed to the presence and persistence of an understanding of society through a gendered public/private division. This construction becomes even more salient and significant when the relationship between the public figure, namely the politician, and his/her private life, that is his/her family, is portrayed.

3.6.1. Walking on a Tightrope: Female Politicians and Their Families in Media

A particularly problematic subject for female politicians is the representation of the relationship that they have with their family, both as wives and as mothers. It has already been mentioned how the identification of women with ‘wombs’ and ‘hearts’ has often created the perception that females might be unsuitable for leadership. An emblematic example of this attitude can be found in the reactions that followed the appointment of Carme Chacón as Minister of Defence in Spain. This occurrence raised the attention of many European media sources not only because defence is usually considered a traditionally masculine ministry, but also because she took office during her seventh month of pregnancy. A number of opinion articles and editorials framed the appointment as a ‘ground-breaking achievement’, thus employed a positive tone, which nonetheless implied the singularity of the event.\textsuperscript{155} At the same time, however, many other media texts had a more critical stance and questioned the appropriateness of the choice. In fact, “some opinion articles and editorials were even more blatant in their attacks, and framed Chacón’s appointment as problematic, either for the unease that her


\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 433.
gender might generate amongst those in the higher echelons of the military, for her pregnancy, or both." In this case, Chacón’s example can certainly be considered rather delicate as well as distinctive. In fact, besides being a woman, her pregnancy also offered a visual enhancement of her gender and implicitly reminded the role that women should have in society (namely, being a mother). At the same time, the perception of her job as masculine was also heightened by the masculine characterisation carried by the ministry of defence. Uniqueness of this case aside, media exposure of private life is usually a broken ground for the female politician, as its representation is often inscribed within the gendered structure of the private/public divide.

On initial consideration, media seem to generally have understanding and compassionate attitudes towards female politicians and their difficulties in conciliating their career with their family lives – regardless of whether this struggle is openly addressed by the politician herself or inferred by the media. However, scholars have claimed that this sort of mediated compassion implicitly reinforces a gendered representation and interpretation of the political personae. In fact, while family life is hardly ever portrayed as a problem for men, the same cannot be said for their female counterparts given that “the picture of sacrificing males waiting for their wives to come home does not accord well with gender stereotypes.” This double standard in the representations of the relation that a politician has with his/her family is clearly based of a gender distinction and “lies in society’s persistence in linking a woman’s identity to a man and to the role of mother and homemaker,” whereas “a man is not defined by his relationship to a woman or by fatherhood.” Hence, these representations indirectly suggest that female politicians are not complying with their established social role (in this case, being a wife and a mother) and thus contribute in underlining their position in politics as anomalous. In point of fact, for instance, in an analysis of the Dutch gossip press, it was observed that:

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157 Ibid., 425-426.
159 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 59.
160 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership, 61.
For male politicians the fulfilment of duty (long working hours) and the personal sacrifice (no family life, health and safety hazards) as constructed by the magazines serve as important indicators of their reliability and integrity. Thus, gossip coverage of the family constructs an important stage for male politicians on which their worth as politicians can be established, which will add to other kinds of sources people may use to develop their candidate evaluations. For female politicians, it does not seem to work like that. Because the opposition between their public and private life is usually presented in a sympathetic and understanding way, gossip coverage is not likely to undermine their merit as politicians or to negate their perceived reliability and integrity. But neither does gossip coverage of family life present a positive opportunity for female politicians to show their reliability and integrity as being ‘great family women,’ like it does in the case for men. Rather, the attention for the family lives of female politicians functions as a continuous reminder of women’s odd position in politics.161

Likewise, research have also pointed out how usually families of male politicians are “constructed as heroic and in support of the man’s political career,” an image in stark contrast with the representation of the families of female politician, frequently portrayed as suffering from the woman’s ambition.162 In the latter case, the conception that combining the private and the public can only be problematic for females is based on the assumption that women can “have either career or marriage and motherhood, but not both. […] They can have both at the same time, but only at the cost of cheating one or the other.”163 Hence, while men are often depicted as able to perfectly integrate the public with the private, women are considered to arduously juggle between the two and eventually have to renounce or cheat on one of them. All in all, “male politicians are presented as having unified personalities, whereas the personalities of female politicians are constructed as split between the hard side and the soft side.”164

This ‘either/or’ logic is also often coupled with the dualistic construction of the ‘good/evil’ mother. In fact, as it has been remarked, “motherhood is still frequently constructed as the ultimate aspiration for women” and opposed to the vilification of those women who are perceived as neglecting the “nurture and care for their offspring.”165 In this manner, women that do not abandon their career or reduce their

163 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership, 54.
164 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 60.
work responsibilities for their families are often considered and portrayed as overly ambitious and uncaring. Furthermore, the good/evil mother paradigm becomes even more prominent in politics since “high-salaried women in positions of power are presumed to be working for self-satisfaction or luxuries, not to meet family needs. […] The low-wage mother, in other words, is assumed to be working for her children; the high-wage mother is presumed to be working for herself.” 166 Despite these representations might not openly question the political abilities of female politicians, it is nonetheless evident that they contribute in creating and maintaining a negative connotation in the discourses surrounding women and politics.

In conclusion, mediated representation of female politicians and their private world encompasses an implicit gendered morality and is articulated following “dichotomous schemes: self-sacrificing as opposed to self-interest; political careers in conflict with family lives; supporting wives against egocentric ones; public versus private; and so on.” 167

3.6.2. The Self-Representation of Female Politicians

Hitherto, the focus of the discussion was addressed on how politics are commonly understood as a masculine domain and on how media can be seen responsible for the maintenance of this understanding. However, without belittling their role, it would certainly be naïve to rapidly jump to the conclusion that the media are the only active agents in this matter. In fact, politicians themselves have certainly some degree of control over their own representation and can shape their political personae with the aim of suiting a specific agenda. This becomes even more factual in current times, with the personalisation of politics allowing politicians to have more direct connections and dialogues with the electorate. Hence, nowadays, it is certainly not unusual for politicians to have a personal website and social media accounts with the purpose of communicating with large audiences. Assuming that they have total control over these channels, it can thus be stated that the way in which politicians presents themselves via these devices it also corresponds to the way they wish to be interpreted by the receiver. In this regard, it would therefore definitely be interesting to shed light on how female

167 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 62.
politicians employ modern technologies to communicate with the electorate and shape their image.

In a study over Tarja Halonen and Angela Merkel, Liesbet van Zoonen analysed how these two female heads of state presented themselves during the election campaigns in their countries, Finland and Germany respectively, as well as their relation with national media. In this examination, it was remarked how both politicians opted for rather sober, formal and strictly professional websites. Hence, with regards to Halonen’s website, it was noted that “while one might have expected more informal snapshot of family life in a section called ‘private album’, one does not find photos of the president in informal settings with her family members. The pictures are all placed against a simple white background and contribute to the overall solemn and restrained character of the website.”168 Similar observations were also made for Merkel’s website. In contrast with the widespread phenomenon of the celebrity politics, it thus seems that both politicians are resistant to the personalisation of their image as “they both present a thoroughly political and professional persona to the public and rigidly conceal their private lives.”169 In order to explain these against-the-tide behaviours, Van Zoonen employs the private/public divide and suggests that:

[Halonen’s and Merkel’s] unwillingness [to publicly display their private personae] may rest on tacit knowledge that attention given to women’s private lives often signals the tension that they themselves and society experience between private and public duties. Male politicians may show their private lives to suggest that they are complete human beings combining caring and working responsibilities. [...] Private life is a potential site of trouble for female politician, not because it contains the danger of sexual scandal as it does for man, but because it is a continuous reminder of women’s odd choice of public mission instead of private fulfilment.170

In both cases, it is thus assumed that both politicians are aware of their delicate position as women in politics and, as a result, decide to minimise the exposure of their private life in order not to restrain the mismatch between the expectations stemming from their gender and their career choices. At the same time, however, the implication of their decisions can be seen as an eventual reinforcement of their political

169 Ibid., 295.
170 Ibid., 298-299.
vulnerability as women. In fact, scholars have speculated that “by accepting the public vs. private divide as the framework through which gender differences are analysed and interpreted, women help to confirm the very divisions that they seek to undermine.”\textsuperscript{171} In other words, as Van Zoonen has stated elsewhere:

The underlying frame of reference is that women belong to the family and domestic life and men to the social world of politics and work; that femininity is about care, nurturance and compassion, and that masculinity is about efficiency, rationality and individuality. And whereas women’s political activities try to undermine just that gendered distinction between public and private, it seems to remain the inevitable frame of reference to understand it.\textsuperscript{172}

In the same study, Van Zoonen also analysed the way Halonen and Merkel had been portrayed by the media during their election campaigns. In both cases, it was observed that the two women had often been subjects to constant, mediated mockery, due to their appearance and style being perceived as unfashionable and unappealing, or, otherwise stated, in discordance with the hegemonic idea of femininity.\textsuperscript{173} Even in this case, Van Zoonen advanced the hypothesis that the two unfeminine looks might have been a deliberate device employed by the politicians in order to underplay their gender. In fact, because of the masculine characterisation of politics, female politicians “need to mask their femininity and imitate men, otherwise accusations of being frivolous, coquettish and – worst of all – loose, will be their lot.”\textsuperscript{174} This line of reasoning is also confirmed by a study made over the media representation of British politicians. In this examination, Ross and Sreberny noted that some female politicians, especially the younger ones, were preoccupied by the fact that their appearance might “provoke the media interest in them as sex objects,” therefore opted to dress “in certain ways [as] a conscious strategy designed to encourage the perception of themselves as ‘serious’ politicians.”\textsuperscript{175} Yet again, female politicians seem to be clearly aware of their delicate position in society stemming from the conflicting expectations over their gender and

\textsuperscript{171} Margaret Gallagher, “Feminist Media Perspectives,” 29.
\textsuperscript{172} Annabelle Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen, “Gender, Politics and Communication: An Introduction,” 17.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 292.
their jobs. Hence, in order to contain comments and reactions that might be detrimental for their personae, they decided to comply with the hegemonic principles – in this specific case, that politics require a more ‘masculine’ look as it is considered ‘more serious’ – even at the price of being ridiculed.

These few examples clearly show that female politicians are constantly walking on an endless tightrope, precariously balancing the private life and the public sphere, the feminine side and the political one. This in-betweenness is particularly noticeable when the analysis of female politicians’ self-representation is taken into account. In fact, as these and other studies have suggested, while showing the awareness over the presence of a gendered framework in politics, female politicians seem to implicitly reproduce hegemonic discourses and reinforce the maintenance of a gender barrier. In the previous section, it was observed that media have the tendency to construct female politicians “as split between the hard side and the soft side.”176 However, considering the reflections made over self-representation, it seems that female politicians themselves have a twofold perception of their personae or at least they implicitly maintain it through their image. By and large, in a split understanding of their identity, female politicians “are confronted with an unsolvable dilemma: when they stress their political merits […], they will lose their femininity; when they stress their qualities as woman, the may be considered failing politicians.”

3.7. Losing as Women and Losing as Politicians?

Taking into account what discussed so far, it becomes indeed evident that female politicians find themselves in a rather delicate and controversial position, both in mediated as well as self-representation. As a matter of fact, “the traditionally ‘masculine’ attributes that are generally desirable in a politician and the traditionally

177 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 60.
feminine traits that would generally be valued in a woman have a difficult match. This has normally put women politicians in a constant lose-lose situation in which they fail to present themselves either as fully-fledged women or as politicians. As women, female politicians are perceived as disobeying the rules of political behaviour, while, as politicians, they are seen as disobeying the rules of feminine conduct. Consequently, as politicians, they ‘lose’ due to the expectations stemming from their gender, whether it is in reference to their physical appearance, personal abilities or the social role they are supposed to have. As the same time, as women, they ‘lose’ because of their career choices, in contrast with the hegemonic notion of femininity and the conflict between public and private lives. Interestingly, these two stances combined present female politicians all together as the perfect embodiment of the socially-required attributes that would positively allow them to be successful politicians and women at the same time. In fact, an ambitious politician is generally regarded as efficient and a caring mother is seen as ideal. However, since these adjectives are not allocated to the appropriate notion, they create an impasse for female politicians and their representation. Consequently, an ambitious mother is an image that is commonly perceived as negatively as the one of a caring politician. In conclusion, it is certainly evident that the realm of politics is still characterised by a series of gendered dynamics that are constantly maintained through representation. That being said, the discussion will now move onto the analysis of Borgen, in order to study how these discourses have been formulated in the series.

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Chapter Four: Borgen – ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’

4.1. Introducing the Analysis

After having presented the literary review and the theoretical framework as tools for understanding the issues at stake in media, politics and gender, this chapter will be dedicated to the descriptive and interpretative analysis of Borgen. More specifically, the aim of the examination will be to provide an insight on how Borgen has articulated and represented gendered structures in politics within its text. The analysis will be thus based on the appreciation of mediated representation as an active process of communication and meaning-creation, whose study can be conceived “as a way of teasing out the embedded, underlying meanings of texts.”

Given the pre-understanding of the gendered discourses circulating in societies, the analysis will explore how the latter have been formulated in Borgen and employ them as a framework for the interpretation of the text. For these reasons, the study will have a descriptive as well as interpretative nature. In fact, description will be employed to communicate what represented in the media text. In this sense, plots and contextualisation of the episodes will be central to provide a general comprehension of the series, while the reports of dialogues and extra-linguistic elements will be crucial for the examination of specific discourses. Consequently, interpretation will then be employed to unravel the meanings embedded in the text with the purpose of explaining and discussing them with regard to the theoretical issues and notions presented earlier.

The first part of this chapter will be dedicated to the explanation of the selection process that ultimately led to opt for Borgen as a case study. It will then continue with the rationalisation over the choice of the specific episodes to analyse, along with their plots and contextualisation in the series. Finally, the analysis of the media texts will be presented and each episode will be interpreted and discussed in the light of the concepts outlined in the literary review and theoretical framework.

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\textsuperscript{180} Besides being the notoriously famous quote from William Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}, this line was also the epigraph opening the tenth episode of the second season of Borgen.

As it has already been pointed out, modern political cultures are characterised by the popularisation of politics, which is expressed, in one of its many forms, by means of fictionalisation of political issues through films and TV series. The choice of selecting a TV series over a film was motivated by the fact that, because of their longer length, TV series have usually the capacity of tackling more than one issue within the same media text and thus offer the possibility for a more in-depth analysis. The second parameter for the selection of the case study was dictated by the nature of this thesis itself. As a matter of fact, being the final work of a degree in European Studies, it was important to select a series that possibly did not simply aired in Europe, but was also produced and set there, thus it could be inscribed within the broader curriculum of the Master. Finally, given the three main topics of this thesis, namely gender, politics and media, it was indeed vital to choose a series that would not merely contain them, but also employ them as main themes.

Taking all of these motivations into account, it becomes evident why *Borgen* was deemed to be the most suitable media text for analysis and was ultimately chosen. First of all, it is meets the first requirement: being a TV series on politics. Secondly it was produced and set in Denmark, while being broadcasted in many European countries.\(^{182}\) Besides extending its viewership to various European audiences, *Borgen* also received positive reviews from the critics. Thus, for instance, while obtaining 8.5 stars out of ten in the Internet Movie Database, it was also nominated and won different awards.\(^{183}\) By and large, due to its vast reach both in terms of audience and critical response, *Borgen* can be certainly deemed to be a suitable model for the popularisation of politics.

Finally, being a political drama revolving around the public and private life of Birgitte Nyborg, the first female Prime Minister in Denmark, *Borgen* clearly provides the opportunity to study how women in politics are represented in fictional media texts. Besides being logically inferable by the characterisation of the series, the representation of the conflicts arising from the public/private divide can also be considered to be one

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\(^{182}\) *Borgen* debuted on the Danish television channel DR1 in September 2010 and aired for a total of three seasons until March 2013. Within the European continent, in addition to Denmark, it is/was also aired in Norway, Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Greece, Estonia, Croatia, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia.

\(^{183}\) For a more comprehensive account of the audience and critical response to *Borgen*, as well as the list of its awards and nominations, see “Borgen,” IMDb, accessed July 16, 2014, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1526318/.
of the main, if not even the main, themes of the whole series. In point of fact, in its official website, the first season of Borgen is described as being “about the personal sacrifices and consequences that this fight [for political power] has for those involved on and behind the political stage.”

Likewise, the synopsis of the second season describes the series as being “about the personal costs and consequences for the players - both on and off the political stage.” In other words, it is evident how Borgen was consciously designed to revolve around the struggle within the political arena, while at the same time also portraying the consequences in the private sphere and the problematic relation between these two worlds. In an interview with The Observer, Camilla Hammerich, the producer of Borgen, reiterates: “Borgen reflects the universal dilemma: is it possible to obtain and keep power and be yourself? Are you able to have a career and take care of your family and yourself all at the same time?”

In this way, Borgen can also be inscribed within the postfeminist problematization of the modern woman outlined in Chapter Two. Caught between family and career, Birgitte represents the postfeminist woman in all of her struggles, anxieties and multiplicity of identities. Hence, as it portrays a woman seeking to unify what is seemingly incompatible – public and private, personal ambitions with social expectations, brain and heart – the series also reflects on the postfeminist dilemma: can a woman have it all? In conclusion, Borgen provides the possibility to investigate how fictional media tackle the gendered structure of politics, while, at the same time, also portraying the polysemy of identity that is the modern, postfeminist woman.

4.3. Rationale and Method of the Analysis

With regards to the concepts that will be employed, Chapter Three was consecrated to provide a framework for the analysis of gender, politics and media, but, more specifically, the representation of female politicians in different forms of media. Thus, taking what previously discussed into account, it can be stated that the representation of female politicians is generally inscribed within the major conceptual framework of

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women having an identity split between their gender and their career. More specifically, this conception is usually articulated through a private/public divide on the one hand, or through a series of expectations over the physical appearance and the attitudinal abilities of the female individual on the other. As it was outlined in the previous paragraph, the characterisation and themes of *Borgen* make it certainly worthwhile to apply these concepts to the investigation of the series and provide an insight to how they have been rendered through the leading character, Birgitte Nyborg. The analysis will therefore follow this categorisation and investigate the personality of Birgitte as a female politician, while also examining her relationship with her family, both as a wife and as a mother.

Besides functioning as a theoretical framework, the dominant discourses over the mediated representation of female politicians were also applied to select the specific episodes of *Borgen* to analyse in the study. In fact, given the limited scope of this thesis, it was decided not to examine each of the thirty episodes of *Borgen* in depth, as this would have certainly been impracticable. At the same time, investigating the series as a whole might have resulted into the risk of producing a rather general and unsubstantial study. Hence, as it was deemed to be an effective choice, it was decided to concentrate the research on few conceptual themes and thoroughly analyse how they are presented and handled in *Borgen*. After having watched the series and located when certain issues had been tackled, two episodes were regarded as relevant for the scope of this research and therefore ultimately selected for the analysis. More specifically, the two texts chosen were the first episode of the first season and the tenth episode of the second season. In the first case, the selection was dictated by the nature of the episode itself. In fact, being the pilot of the whole series, the first episode had both the function to introduce the main characters and their predominant traits, as well as set the tone and present the major themes of the series. In the second case, the episode was chosen because, out of thirty, it is undoubtedly the one that, most visibly, focused the attention on the problematization of combining private life with public sphere. In the next sections, the summary of each episode will be provided and followed by its interpretation and discussion.187 More specifically, the analysis will be divided between the interpretation and discussion of Birgitte’s portrayal and personality as it is

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187 With regard to the tenth episode of the second season, in order for the reader to better understand the analysis and locate the text within the series, it was decided to provide some supplementary information on the general storyline as an addition to the specific plot of the episode.
introduced in the pilot and the interpretation and discussion of her relationship with her family as it is represented in the tenth episode of the second season.

4.4. Synopsis Episode One, Season One

Title: “Decency in the Middle”

Epigraph: “A prince should have no other aim or thought but war and its organisation and discipline.” – Niccolò Machiavelli

The episode starts three days before the general elections in Denmark, which seem to be disputed between the Liberal Party, leaded by Lars Hesselboe, also Prime Minister in office, and the Labour Party, Michael Laugesen. In the middle, the Moderate Party and its leader, Birgitte Nyborg, stand alone. In fact, afte a reversal in its position on asylum seekers, Birgitte withdraws her party support from the Labour’s coalition. Kasper Juul, Birgitte’s spin-doctor, comes into possession of a receipt that proves that Lars Hesselboe had used public funding for private interests. Kasper shares this piece of information with Birgitte and suggests to either blackmail the Prime Minister or anonymously leak the scoop to the media. Brigitte refuses either of the possibilities and tells Kasper not to use the receipt. He nonetheless gives it to Michael Laugesen, who uses it during the pre-election debate in an attempt to gain more votes and undermine the Liberal Party. However, due to the financial scandal on the one hand and the political backstabbing on the other, both Liberals and Labours lose seats in the elections. As a result, the Moderate Party and Birgitte, who in the meantime has fired Kasper for not respecting her instructions, gain an historical victory and are now in charge to form the new government. In this episode, Birgitte’s family is also introduced. She is married to Phillip, a university lecturer, and mother of two children, Laura and Magnus. Through a conversation with her husband, it is revealed that the couple,

188 Borgen, Television Series, dir. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Rumle Hammerich, 30 episodes, DR1, 2010-2013, DVD.

Each quote from Borgen was retrieved from the UK version of the series, in which the dialogues were left in the original language, Danish, and English subtitles were added by the production. Given my lack of Danish proficiency, I will not be able to report the quotes in the original language. I will, nonetheless, employ the official English subtitles.

189 Borgen, Television Series, dir. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Rumle Hammerich, 30 episodes, DR1, 2010-2013, DVD.

Throughout the series, each episode opened with a quote or proverb related to its themes.
despite Phillip’s initial scepticism, had made a deal according to which, every five years, one of the two would put his/her career on hold so that the other could pursue hers/his. For this reason, during the past five years, Phillip has mainly been in charge of taking care of the family.

4.5. ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’ – Between Integrity and Corruption

With regards to Birgitte’s personality, she is introduced in the first episode as an honest politician, with a strong sense of morality and integrity. Thus, for instance, upon discovering the reversal of the Labour Party position on asylum seekers during a live interview, she withdraws her party from the coalition on the spot, despite the fact that this might compromise the results of the elections. Throughout the episode, her honesty is portrayed and reiterated, while also being represented as in stark opposition to what seem to be the more individualistic behaviours of the other characters in the political arena.

The antagonism of views and lines of conduct in politics clearly emerges in the dialogue between Birgitte and Kasper, when the latter proposes to employ the receipt for their own gain.

Kasper: “What will happen after the election?”
Birgitte: “I’m finished as party leader, don’t you think?”
Kasper: “What if I told you I had some information that could get you into office?”
Birgitte: “That sounds strange, but intriguing.”
Kasper: “The Prime Minister uses state funds for his private spending.”
Birgitte: “Who started that rumour?”
Kasper: “I’ve seen the evidence… I’ve seen a Mulberry receipt for 71,800 kroner charged to his official Eurocard issued by the ministry and two cancelled Visa card receipts proving that his wife tried to make the same purchase.”
Birgitte: “Where did you see them?”
Kasper: “That’s confidential.”
Birgitte: “Have you got them?”
Kasper: “I can get them… Either we tell Hesselboe we have them and ask if he’s ready to negotiate or we go to the media and join the unified Opposition’s outcry.”
Birgitte: “We’re no longer with the Opposition.”
Kasper: “Or… Or we leak it anonymously and wait for him to resign… And he will.”
Birgitte: “Maybe it’s a misunderstanding.”
Kasper: “It’s a fact. Hesselboe billed the state for an extravagant bag and coat.”
Birgitte: “It’s also a fact that his wife is unhappy.”
Kasper: “He committed fraud.”
Birgitte: “And you want me to blackmail him? The Prime Minister had just lost his best adviser. How dirty do you think I am?”
Kasper: “Don’t you understand? We stand to take a beating. This is war. We can’t let a chance like this slip away!”
Birgitte: “I’d never forgive myself if I came to power in that way.”
Kasper: “In that case, I doubt you ever will.”

Birgitte refuses to use the information about Hesselboe for her own personal gain. In this way, her moral integrity is portrayed as she would “never forgive [herself] if [she] came to power in that way.” At the same time, she also considers the possible reasons behind Hesselboe’s action – “It’s also a fact that his wife is unhappy.” Thus, while showing some degree of understanding over the problems that politicians may have in combining the private life with the public sphere, she also implicitly justifies the Prime Minister, or at least does not show any judgement over his action. Along these lines, Birgitte evidently manifests human compassion as she presumes that revealing Hesselboe’s financial wrongdoings would pile on his already delicate situation – he has “just lost his best adviser” – and taking advantage of the situation would be ruthless or ‘dirty’ for her.

Against this view, Kasper can be seen as a personification the coldblooded world of politics, a representation more in line with how media commonly frame this realm, namely “as a cesspit of dishonesty in which everyone is after his own interest and does not shy away from blackmail, bribery, or corruption.” In fact, besides proposing to use the information to undermine one of the political opponent and surprising Birgitte for thinking she would accept (“How dirty do you think I am?”), Kasper seems not to understand Birgitte’s decision of not exploiting the situation. In these terms, there is evidently an ideological clash between the two: whereas for Birgitte is a matter of fairness, for Kasper it is a question of victory. Interestingly, his word choice in defining the circumstances as ‘war’ clearly evokes a more stereotypical and belligerent idea of

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190 *Borgen*, Television Series, dir. Søren Kragh-Jacobsen and Rumle Hammerich, 30 episodes, DR1, 2010-2013, DVD.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
195 *Borgen*, 2010-2013, DVD.
politics, in which there is no space for humanity and compassion. This conception is also expressed through Kasper’s doubts over Birgitte ever coming to power, as he perceives her strong sense of morality as a weakness for the merciless world of politics. By doing so, the characterisation of politics as a masculine realm is also implied and depicted in opposition with the sense of moral virtue that is commonly perceived as a trait of femininity, but does not fit with the heartless and unscrupulous rules that are generally considered to be dominating in political cultures. In this way, Birgitte is being characterised as ‘caring’, but not enough ‘tough’ for the field, a frame of interpretation that can ultimately being reconnected with the notion of the public/private divide and the belief that “those who exercised their brains and brawn in public were thought to be tough, active, analytic, decisive, competent, and masculine; those who exercised their uteruses with the attendant responsibilities in the private sphere were identified as nurturing, passive, warm and feminine."

The conflict between integrity and opportunism in politics as well as discourses on masculinity and femininity are also echoed later on in the episode, when Laugesen attempts to convinced Birgitte to support his party:

Michael Laugesen: “The old party dinosaurs are putting pressure on me. The suburban bigots are ready to sell their votes to the Freedom Party. But I can’t let them do that, or I won’t become Prime Minister. You and the coalition have got to give me some space.”
Birgitte: “I can’t when you go back on our deal. We agreed to allow asylum seekers to work after six months.”
Michael Laugesen: [while sniggering at first] “Stop nit-picking. They come here from banana republics torn by civil war. Even though they have been through hell, they can’t even clean floors!”
Birgitte: “I’ll ignore that. [raising her voice and emphasising ‘political deal’] You broke a political deal three days before the election.”
Michael Laugesen: “Talking about emotions makes me thirsty [while pouring himself a glass of champagne] Birgitte, I need you to support my candidacy.”
Birgitte: “Your statements make it hard for me.”
Michael Laugesen: “I’ll repay you… Two more cabinet posts than your number of seats warrant. Apart from Treasury and Foreign Affairs, take your pick.”
[Birgitte doesn’t look convinced by the offer]
Michael Laugesen: “Come on… Tomorrow, we’ll hold a joint press meeting where you support me. And I promise you, we’ll find jobs for a couple of asylum seekers… As long as you don’t tell everyone.”

196 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership, 120.
Birgitte: “I understand your interest in a marriage of convenience. But I’m an old-fashioned girl, so my answer is no. [hands the glass of champagne back to Laugesen] I’ll talk to you after the election [tapping on Laugesen’s shoulder while he looks vexed. Birgitte leaves the room.]”

In this scene, Birgitte shows irritation towards Laugesen for not respecting the deal upon which they had previously agreed. Hence, once more, she displays a strong sense of fairness, although in this case is not related to the possibility of exploiting a situation for her own personal interest and gain, but it is due to the fact that a political agreement was not respected. In this way, it is evident that Birgitte does not merely behave virtuously, but also expects the same conduct from the people with whom she works and allies. On the other hand, Laugesen is irritated at Birgitte for not accepting his new offer and support his candidacy. Yet again, the conversation therefore revolves around an ideological collision, in this case between Birgitte and her will of maintaining political integrity and Laugesen and his will to win the elections. Much like Kasper, even Laugesen can be considered as a portrayal a more vicious and remorseless side of politics, as he attempts to exert his bargaining power while mocking asylum seekers in a discriminatory way. Even in this case, ruthlessness, besides being perceived as a characterisation of politics, is also personified through the male gender and counterbalanced by a female figure and her integrity.

Taking these two scenes into account, it is certainly interesting to observe how men are employed to exemplify the notion of deceitful politics and are opposed to the portrayal of a woman, Birgitte, as a symbol political honesty and human integrity. In both cases, the representation of divergent political attitudes is also reflected in a gendered structure, in which “women as traditional symbols of innocence and virtue often figure to demarcate the opposition of corrupt politics with humanity and decency.” According to this view, as a result of traits embedded in the perception of femininity, female politicians are also frequently considered “to be more caring and emotionally involved than their male colleagues.” In the case of Borgen, the ‘emotional’ component is evoked in the discussion with Laugesen, as he dismisses Birgitte’s refusal to support him with a contemptuous “talking about emotions makes

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197 Borgen, 2010-2013, DVD.
199 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 52.
me thirsty.” This reaction can be interpreted as running parallel with Kasper’s doubts about Birgitte’s possibilities to ever come to power. In point of fact, both Kasper and Laugesen implicitly frame Birgitte as a weak and emotional politician as she is not willing to renounce to her morals and values to either take advantage of the situation or compromise.

Later on in the episode, it is however revealed that Birgitte herself is aware of her sensitivity as a politician. As Kasper is clearing his desk upon being fired, he says to Birgitte:

Kasper: “We’d have made a good pair in the long run.”
Birgitte: “Spare me the emotions. That’s my field” [Kasper smiles and nods]

The displayed awareness over her emotions, or at least the perception of her personality as more emotional than the ones of other political figures, clearly suggests that Birgitte does not find it problematic or conflicting with her career. In fact, despite being aware that her sensitive integrity might eventually lead her to resign as a party leader in case the elections are lost, she does not compromise with others to save her own position. In this way, Birgitte shows both her ‘soft’ side as a women in politics, with all the stereotypical traits that might be associated with it, as well as her ‘hard’ side as a female politician who is enough confident and strong-minded not to renounce to her own ideas and ideals (even if in contrast with the ruthlessness of politics). In this way, she clearly shows a multiplicity of identities within her own personae and she also shows awareness over this polysemy, but does not necessarily find it problematic.

As it was already stated, the connection between Birgitte’s gender and her strong integrity in humanitarian issues can be read as one of the recurrent discourses underlying the representation of women in politics, thus, in this sense, Birgitte clearly fits the stereotypical image of real female politicians. However, by the end of the episode, her integrity is eventually rewarded and she ultimately (and surprisingly) wins the election. As she is elected Prime Minister, Birgitte is morally rewarded by the Danish people for not having taken part to the public backstabbing of the two major parties. At the same time, she is also appreciated for her ethical principles and honesty, as she declared to the nation during the pre-election debate: “I became a politician

200 Borgen, 2010-2013, DVD.
201 Ibid.
because I once held strong views on how this would should be… I still do.”

Hence, by means of deconstructing the whole episode, through Birgitte’s final victory, *Borgen* manages to bypass the negative connotation of female politicians as too caring and innocent for the political arena. Although her honesty and sensitivity can be interpreted as an attribute of her gender, Birgitte is also portrayed as a politician with a strong sense of fairness, which ultimately makes her determined in her decisions. Her strength of character can be inferred, for instance, by her resolute refusal to support Laugesen or blackmail Hesselboe.

Likewise, besides offering an overall positive representation of women in politics, *Borgen* also employs the figure of Birgitte to propose a new conception of politics as a place where there can be indeed room for honesty and integrity. In her final plea to the nation, Birgitte claims: “if we’re to create a new Denmark together, we have to invent a new way of communicating and of doing politics.”

In this way, Birgitte’s character is portrayed as a possible political cleanser with her morals and ethics, opposed to the more traditional, cynical and unscrupulous idea of politics, personified by the figure of Kasper and Laugesen.

All in all, in the first episode, Birgitte is introduced as an honest female politician and a symbol of political renewal. Her strong sense of integrity can be interpreted as both weak and emotive, according to a ruthless conception of politics, or as a sign of political determination and idealism. In the end, her final victory provides a positive interpretation of her personae, both as a woman who is both strong-minded and caring, as well as a politician, who is decisive and honest. Hence, *Borgen* seem to suggest that, in the political struggle between integrity and corruption, a woman can find her place and also gain power without compromising her ideals.

4.6. Synopsis Episode Ten, Season Two

Title episode ten: “An Extraordinary Remark”

Epigraph episode ten: “To be or not to be. That is the question” – William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

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202 *Borgen*, 2010-2013, DVD.
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid.
“Birgitte Nyborg has been Denmark's Prime Minister for two years - years that have taken their toll on her private life. She must now balance her role of PM with that of divorcée and single-mother.” During the second season, Birgitte’s daughter, Laura, becomes seriously affected by her parents’ divorce and starts suffering from a series of panic attacks, which eventually lead her to be hospitalised. Laura’s condition receives a lot of media attention and coverage, which ultimately influence both Laura and her ability to recover, as well as Birgitte in her job and private life. In order to concentrate on her family, Birgitte thus decides to take leave from her position as a Prime Minister.

The tenth episode shows Birgitte during her leave: she is now completely focused on her family, spends time with her children and takes care of the house. At the same time, she is also still in contact with her staff at work, who updates her daily and urges her to come back to work, although she has no intention until Laura improves in her health. In the meantime, the Opposition takes advantage of Birgitte’s absence and, along with the extensive media coverage, questions her ability to be an adequate Prime Minister considering her private problems and her decision to take leave.

As Laura starts to get better, Birgitte returns to work, two days before the vote on the final part of the reform package that her government has drafted. Despite her return, the media’s attention does not decrease and the Opposition is already paving the ground for the next-year’s elections and drafting a tax reform to present to the Parliament after the summer break. The episode ends on the day of the vote of the reform package, which is voted in favour, thus meaning that Birgitte has managed to achieve all the objectives she had formerly set as a Prime Minister. After the vote, Birgitte takes the floor for ‘an extraordinary remark’, announces her resignation as Prime Minister and calls for general election to be held in June.

4.7. ‘To be or not to be. That is the Question’ – Mother and Wife or Prime Minister?

It has already been noted in the previous chapter how the construction of motherhood and workingwomen are usually antithetical to each other and often lead to the creation

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of a dichotomous ‘good/evil mother’ discourse. Conceptually speaking, this understanding is also echoed in the postfeminist woman and her anxieties – whether mediated through visual representations or embedded in real people. As a matter on fact, on the one hand, there is the aspiration, for a woman, to develop a career, which would however also imply the possibility of eventually being bad mother. On the other hand, there is also the desire of settling down with the right man and start a family, thus being an ‘un-feminist’ good mother. These two scenarios are often perceived as conflicting and incompatible unless one of the two is cheated on.\textsuperscript{206} However, even in this case, the possibility of ‘cheating’ on either public or private implies the construction of the figure of an ambitious working woman, but evil mother on the one hand, and good mother, but weak working woman on the other.

These dilemmas are a leitmotiv of the episode “An Extraordinary Remark” and can be deduced, for instance, in the conversation that Birgitte has with the hospital manager over Laura’s condition:

Birgitte: “I don’t want to make a big deal out of this, but Laura said something to me that I can’t stop thinking about.”
Hospital manager: “Yes?”
Birgitte: “I make her feel guilty for not being good enough and for not doing well in school. I just want her to get better.”
Hospital manager: “Look, Birgitte, Laura’s learnt a lot during her stay. She’s a very bright and strong girl. Your divorce took its toll on her. That’s natural. That’s life. Children always have a reason to blame their parents. That’s the main theme on any Greek tragedy.” [\textit{she smiles and so does Birgitte}]
Birgitte: “Nice talking to you.” [\textit{as she starts heading out of the room}]
Hospital manager: “Birgitte [\textit{puts out her cigarette}] I’m a mother, too. I have a career. I’ve made millions of mistakes. They’ve made me all the wiser. You can’t work 24 hours and be a good mother at the same time. But you can’t stop working, either. What kind of role model is that?”
Birgitte: “I don’t feel like a role model [\textit{pause}] Sometimes I’m happier working and therefore not having to deal with my family.”
Hospital manager: “Join the club. I think all workaholics feel like that. [\textit{walks towards Birgitte}] Let me make one thing clear: Laura did not get ill because you were made Prime Minister. Do you understand?”
Birgitte: [\textit{waits few seconds and then give a hint of a nod}] “Thanks.”\textsuperscript{207}

In this dialogue, Birgitte manifests her sense of guilt, as she is afraid that her dedication in the public sphere may have led her to neglect her family and ultimately be

\textsuperscript{206} Kathleen Hall Jamieson, \textit{Beyond the Double Bind: Women and Leadership}, 54.
\textsuperscript{207} Borgen, 2010-2013, DVD.
the cause of her daughter’s sickness. Her remorse is also heightened by her awareness of sometimes preferring to work rather than dealing with her family issues. In this way, she shows her vulnerable, human side as a woman divided between her career and her family. Through her doubts and anxieties, Birgitte’s character can be inscribed within the broader postfeminist problematization of modern women, as she is double entangled between the gratification of her career and the sense of duty towards her family. While Birgitte portrays herself as an evil mother, the hospital manager also reassures her that it is not her fault if Laura became ill and reminds her that, besides being a mother, she is also a role model. In this way, the hospital manager offers a viable escape from the evil/good mother dichotomy: provided that combining career and family might certainly be a demanding endeavour, Birgitte can still be seen as a role model for her daughter. Despite not looking particularly convinced when she leaves the room, the hospital manager’s words made her reflect, as it can be inferred by the conversation that Birgitte has with Phillip in the following scene:

Phillip: “So, you really are winding down? Laura said you haven’t been at work for a month.”
Birgitte: “Yes, I’ve turned into the Birgitte of your dreams.”
Phillip: “What do you mean?”
Birgitte: “I’m at home much more now, aren’t I?”
Phillip: “Right.”

[Birgitte starts tidying up the living room and looks uncomfortable]
Phillip: “Is there something we need to talk about?”
Birgitte: “Yes, Phillip. These is... [Pause] You were too quick to leave. I think... You moved too fast. You were far too quick to move on.”
Phillip: “You weren’t here. You were away all day. It just didn’t work.”
Birgitte: [raising her voice] “Of course it didn’t work! I’d just been made Prime Minister! What the hell did you expect? For us to make the transition just like that? It takes time to get the right balance. We had to find it! [someone knocks at the door] In less than a year, you were gone.”
Phillip: “After you told me to go and shag someone else!”
Birgitte: “I hoped we’d stick together! I wanted to make it work!” [starts walking towards the door]
Phillip: “But how?”
Birgitte: “I don’t know, Phillip. But you were weak and you left... You let me down.”
Phillip: “Yeah, right!”

In this scene, Birgitte’s guilt has turned into resentment towards Phillip and his decision to divorce. His behaviour can be considered in accordance with the hegemonic

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208 Borgen, 2010-2013, DVD.
notion that “the picture of sacrificing males waiting for their wives to come home does not accord well with gender stereotypes.” However, the character of Birgitte does not accord well with gender stereotypes either. After her initial doubts over her career choices, she rationalises the situation beyond gendered structures and screams: “I’d just been made Prime Minister! What the hell did you expect?”

A crucial scene in the episode is the ending, when Birgitte takes the floor before the Parliament and announces her resignation in a speech:

“Elna Munch, Helga Larsen, Karen Ankersted, Mathilde Malling Hauschultz. I hope we all know these names. These are the four women who were the first of their gender to gain a seat in Parliament in 1918. And thus ended the parliamentary debate about whether women are cut out to be politicians. To those who wish to debate whether women should enter politics on equal terms with men and ultimately become Prime Minister, I can only say: you’re hundred year behind [crowd laughs]. So many insignificant topics have been discussed. Did any of you really believe I intended to resign and become a housewife? You must not know me at all then. I very much want to end all these foolish discussions. The final part of the government reform package was passed today. We’ve shown you where we want to take Denmark. I’m very pleased and proud of that. That’s why I’m going to let Danish voters decide not what gender the Prime Minister should be, but whom they feel is the best Prime Minister for Denmark. I hereby call a general election to be held on Tuesday, 11th June.” [the episode ends with Birgitte smiling to the crowd]

Throughout the episode, both the media and the Opposition put a lot of pressure on Birgitte and question her skills as a Prime Minister. Her decision to take leave due to her daughter’s sickness is therefore framed in relation to her gender and her concerns as a mother interpreted as her unsuitability to hold the higher position in the government. These types of discourses can be seen as inscribed within the brain/womb dichotomy discussed in Chapter Three, according to which a woman’s sensitivity corresponds to her incompetence within certain working environments. At the same time, they are also related to the private/public divide as they assume that a woman’s ideal position is within the family, not in politics. Both issues are addressed in Birgitte’s final speech at the Parliament and, simultaneously, dismissed through her conduct throughout the episode. In fact, torn between the decision of prolonging the leave and going back to

209 Liesbeth van Zoonen, “‘Finally, I Have My Mother Back’: Politicians and Their Families in Popular Culture,” 59.
210 Borgen, 2010-2013, DVD.
211 Ibid.
work, Birgitte shows her ability to combine the brain and the womb, while at the same time finding a balance between public and private. In this sense, crucial to the deconstruction of gendered discourses is the end of the episode. The government reform package has passed as a whole, meaning that Birgitte has managed to accomplish all of the goals she had initially set for her mandate. Concurrently, the Opposition is working on a tax reform to present before the Parliament after the summer break with the purpose of gaining the support of the electorate in view of the coming elections. As a result, Birgitte finds herself in a delicate political position and has to act quickly and efficiently. In this sense, her decision to resign and call for general elections before the summer break can be seen as a tactical manoeuvre with the aim of anticipating and contrast the strategy of the Opposition. Faced with a difficult decision to make, Birgitte is portrayed as capable to be firm and rational, or, in other words, to use the ‘brain’, not just the ‘womb’. In fact, the passing of all of her reforms clearly means that she has been successful as a Prime Minister. At the same time, she does not want to be overthrown by the Opposition taking advantage of her delicate family situation. She thus decides to leave her office at the own terms and conditions, aware that she has achieved her goals and had an overall fruitful mandate.

By making her resign, *Borgen* ultimately presents a positive image of women in politics and suggests that female politicians do not necessarily have to renounce to their femininity in order to rise to power and use their brains. At the same time, by making her take a leave and fully concentrate on her family when it was most needed, *Borgen* also offers the image of an ambitious workingwoman that knows when it is time to step down from her political duties and put her private life first. Not without some complications, the series proposes the representation of a female politician that can indeed ‘have it all’ and thus also be a positive example for the modern postfeminist woman.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis presented an interdisciplinary insight on the representation of women in politics through media. As already stated in the Introduction, this work intersected three different fields of inquiry, namely gender, mass media and politics, whose specific areas offer a comprehensive body of scholarship, but their interwoveness remains under-researched. In this sense, this work aimed at providing a contribution for the debate over the mediated representation of female politician. In order to do so, the Danish TV series *Borgen* was chosen as a case study and analysed on the basis of the conceptual pre-understanding presented through the literary review and theoretical framework.

Pertaining the scholarship on gender and media, Chapter Two was dedicated to shed light on the literary debate over the representation of women in media texts. In this section, the discussion was presented as it chronologically developed in academia, namely following the changes from second-wave to third-wave feminism and, finally, into postfeminism. The latter, it has been argued, contemplates a polysemy of identities within women and offers different keys of interpretations for the problematized position of modern women. In this regard, postfeminism was therefore considered to be a comprehensive and multi-faceted tool for the scope of the research.

Chapter Three was divided in two macro-sections. In the first part, the notion of gender was introduced and discussed. In particular, it was noted how gender, albeit being understood by scholars as a multifaceted spectrum of sexual identities, still remains inscribed within the binary paradigm of ‘man/woman’ in lay societies. Along these lines, it was also observed how *Borgen* could be regarded as implicitly contributing to the maintenance of this binary structure inasmuch as the conception of gender and sex as a range is not depicted nor tackled. The second part of the chapter was centred on the construction and maintenance of gendered structures in society through social practices such as the division of labour. In this section, the mediated representation of female politician was analysed and it was noted how women in politics are often portrayed having a personality split between their private life and the public sphere.

With regard to the analysis of *Borgen*, after having explained the choices for the selection, each episode was described, interpreted and discussed. All in all, it was noticed how the series, while embedding the existing gendered discourses on female
politicians, positively managed to articulate the overall portrayal of Birgitte as a fully-fledged women and politician, combining all the traits that are commonly considered to be characteristic of each category, but antithetical to each other. In conclusion, it can be stated that Borgen offered a “feminine way of speaking that acknowledges subordination and yet empowers women, not necessarily to change the world, but to develop an image of [women] as powerful.”

212 Liesbet van Zoonen, Feminist Media Studies, 151.
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