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POST FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE: BRIDGET JONES AND THE NEW GENDER REGIME

Introduction: complexification of backlash?

This chapter presents a series of possible conceptual frames for engaging with what, in this book, I refer to as post-feminism. Broadly I envisage this as a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined. (What exactly is meant by the words 'feminist gains' is examined throughout the book.) I propose that through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism. I then propose that this undoing, which can be perceived in the broad cultural field, is compounded, unexpectedly perhaps, in those sociological theories, including the work of Giddens and Beck, which address themselves to aspects of gender and social change, but as though feminist thought and years of women's struggles had no role to play in these transformations (and this is returned to in Chapters Two and briefly in Chapter Three). It is also suggested in the pages that follow, that by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of young women, feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant. Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must, in more public venues, stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition. I propose here a complexification of the backlash thesis (which, again, will be examined in more detail in the chapter that follows).

Faludi refers to a concerted, conservative response to challenge the achievements of feminism (Faludi 1992). Her work is important because, like that of Stacey and others, it charts anti-feminist interventions that are coterminous with feminism more or less as it happens (Stacey 1985/1986).

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My argument is rather different, which is that post-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. This was very apparent in the (UK) *Independent* newspaper column *Bridget Jones's Diary*,¹ then in the fantastically successful book and the films which followed. The infectious girlishness of Bridget Jones produces a generational logic which is distinctly post-feminist. Despite feminism, Bridget wants to pursue dreams of romance, find a suitable husband, get married and have children. What she fears most is ending up as a 'spinster'. Bridget is a girl who is 'once again' reassuringly feminine. She is not particularly career-minded, even though she knows she should be. She makes schoolgirl errors in her publishing house, not knowing that the literary critic F. R. Leavis is long dead, she delivers an incoherent speech at a book launch, her head seems to be full of frivolous thoughts, though she is clever and witty in her own feminine way. But most of all she is desperate to find the right man. The film celebrates a kind of scatterbrain and endearing femininity, as though it is something that has been lost. Thank goodness, the film seems to be saying, that old-fashioned femininity can be retrieved. Post-feminism in this context seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, in this case sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent.²

Broadly I am arguing that for feminism to be 'taken into account' it has to be understood as having already passed away. The pushing away which underpins the passing away is very much the subject of this book. This is a movement detectable across popular culture, a site where 'power ... is remade at various junctures within everyday life, (constituting) our tenuous sense of common sense' (Butler et al. 2000: 14). Some fleeting comments in Judith Butler's short book *Antigone's Claim* suggest to me that post-feminism can be explored through what I would describe as a 'double entanglement' (Butler 2000a). This comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (for example George Bush supporting the campaign to encourage chastity among young people, and in March 2004 declaring that civilisation itself depends on traditional marriage), with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (for example gay couples now able to adopt, foster or have their own children by whatever means, and in the UK at least, full rights to civil partnerships). It also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated (McRobbie 2003). The 'taken into accountness' permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal.

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Feminism dismantling itself

The impact of this double entanglement which is manifest in popular and political culture, coincides however, with feminism in the academy finding it necessary to dismantle itself. For the sake of periodisation we could say that 1990 marks a turning point, the moment of definitive self-critique in feminist theory. At this time the representational claims of second wave feminism come to be fully interrogated by post-colonialist feminists like Spivak, Trinh and Mohanty among others, and by feminist theorists like Butler and Haraway who inaugurate the radical de-naturalising of the post-feminist body (Mohanty 1985, Spivak 1988, Trinh 1989, Butler 1990, Haraway 1991). Under the prevailing influence of Foucault, there is a shift away from feminist interest in centralised power blocks, eg the State, patriarchy, law, to more dispersed sites, events and instances of power conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse, attentions. The body and also the subject come to represent a focal point for feminist interest, nowhere more so than in the work of Butler. The concept of subjectivity and the means by which cultural forms and interpellations (or dominant social processes) call women into being, produce them as subjects while ostensibly merely describing them as such, inevitably means that it is a problematic 'she', rather than an unproblematic 'we', which is indicative of a turn to what we might describe as the emerging politics of post-feminist inquiry (Butler 1990, 1993). In feminist cultural studies the early 1990s also marks a moment of feminist reflexivity. In her article 'Pedagogies of the Feminine' Brunsdon queried the (hitherto assumed) use value to feminist media scholarship of the binary opposition between femininity and feminism, or as she put it the extent to which the 'housewife' or 'ordinary woman' was conceived of as the assumed subject of attention for feminism (Brunsdon 1991). Looking back we can see how heavily utilised this dualism was, and also how particular it was to gender arrangements for largely white and relatively affluent (i.e. housewifely) heterosexual women. While at the time both categories had a kind of transparency, by the late 1980s these came under scrutiny. Not only was there a homogenising force on both sides of the equation, but it also became apparent that this binary permitted a certain kind of useful, feminist, self-definition to emerge, particularly in media and cultural studies where there was an interest in the intersections of media with everyday life, through conceptualisations of the audience. In this case the audience was understood to comprise housewives who would be studied empathetically by feminists. The concept of the housewife in effect facilitated a certain mode of feminist inquiry, but we were at the time inattentive to the partial and exclusive nature of this couplet.

The year 1990 also marked the moment at which the concept of popular feminism found expression. Andrea Stuart considered the wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture, in particular magazines

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where quite suddenly issues which had been central to the formation of the women's movement like domestic violence, equal pay, workplace harassment, were now addressed to a vast readership (Stuart 1990). The wider dissemination of feminist issues was also a key concern in my own writing at this time, in particular the intersection of these new representations with the daily lives of young women who as subjects (called into being) of this now popular feminism, might then be expected to embody more emboldened (though also of course failed) identities. This gave rise to the idea of feminist success. It suggested that forms of popular mass media like magazines were in fact more open to change than had previously been thought, and this gave rise to a brief tide of optimism. What could have an impact inside the academy in terms of the feminist curriculum could also have some impact beyond the academy, indeed in the commercial world. Of course no sooner is the word success written than it is queried. How could this be gauged? What might be the criteria for judging degrees of feminist success?

Female success

Admittedly there is some extravagance in my claim for feminist success. It might be more accurate to remark on the keen interest across the quality and popular media, (themselves wishing to increase their female readers and audiences) in ideas of female success. As feminist values are indeed taken on board within a range of institutions, including law, education, to an extent medicine, likewise employment and the media, high profile or newsworthy achievement of women and girls in these sectors shows the institutions to be modern and abreast with social change. This is the context then within which feminism is acknowledged and this is what I mean by feminism taken into account. The kind of feminism which is taken into account in this context is liberal, equal opportunities feminism, where elsewhere what is invoked more negatively is the radical feminism concerned with social criticism rather than with progress or improvement in the position of women in an otherwise more or less unaltered social order. But across the boundaries of different forms of feminism, the idea of feminist success has, so far, only been described sporadically (for accounts of girls' achievement in education see Arnot et al 1999 and also Harris 2004). Within media and cultural studies both Brunsdon and myself have each considered how with feminism as part of the academic curriculum, (ie canonised), then it is not surprising that it might also be countered, that is feminism must face up to the consequences of its own claims to representation and power, and not be so surprised when young women students decline the invitation to identify as a 'we' with their feminist teachers and scholars (Brunsdon 1991, McRobbie 1999a). This interface between the feminist academy and the student body has also been

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discussed in US feminist journals particularly in regard to the decline of women's studies, and this is a subject I return to in the concluding chapter of this book (Brown 1997/2005). Back in the early 1990s (and following Butler) I saw this sense of contestation on the part of young women, and what I would call their distance from feminism as one of potential, where a lively dialogue about how feminism might develop would commence (Butler 1992, McRobbie 1994). Indeed it appeared to be in the very nature of feminism that it gave rise to dis-identification as a kind requirement for its existence. But it seems now, over a decade later, that this space of distance from feminism and those utterances of forceful non-identity with feminism have consolidated into something closer to repudiation rather than ambivalence, and it is this vehemently denunciatory stance which is manifest across the field of popular gender debate. This is the cultural space of post- feminism.

In this context it requires both imagination and hopefulness to argue that the active, sustained and repetitive repudiation or repression of feminism also marks its (still fearful) presence or even longevity (as afterlife). What I mean by this is that there are different kinds of repudiation and different investments in such a stance. The more gentle denunciations of feminism co-exist however with the shrill championing of young women as a metaphor for social change on the pages of the right wing press in the UK, in particular the *Daily Mail*.³ This anti-feminist endorsement of female individualisation is embodied in the figure of the ambitious TV blonde (McRobbie 1999b). These so-called 'A1' girls are glamorous high-achievers destined for Oxford or Cambridge and are usually pictured clutching A-level examination certificates. We might say these are ideal girls, subjects *par excellence*, and also subjects of excellence. Nor are these notions of female success exclusive to the changing representations of young women in the countries of the affluent west (Spivak 1999, 2002a). Young women are a good investment, they can be trusted with micro-credit, they are the privileged subjects of social change. But the terms of these great expectations on the part of governments are that young women must do without more autonomous feminist politics. What is consistent is the displacement of feminism as a political movement. It is this displacement which is reflected in Butler's sorrowful account of Antigone's life after death. Her shadowy, lonely existence, suggests a modality of feminist effectivity as spectral; she has to be cast out, indeed entombed for social organisation to once again become intelligible (Butler 2000a).

Unpopular feminism

The media has become the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct. It casts judgement and establishes the rules of play. Across these many

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channels of communication feminism is routinely disparaged. Why is feminism so hated? Why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist? To count as a girl today appears to require this kind of ritualistic denunciation, which in turn suggests that one strategy in the disempowering of feminism includes it being historicised and generationalised and thus easily rendered out of date. It would be far too simplistic to trace a pattern in media from popular feminism (or 'prime-time' feminism including TV programmes like *LA Law*) in the early 1990s, to niche feminism (BBC Radio 4, *Womens Hour*, and the Women's Page of the *Guardian* newspaper), in the mid-1990s, and then to overtly unpopular feminism (from 2000 onwards), as though these charted a chronological 'great moving right show', as Stuart Hall once put it in another context (Hall 1989).

We would need a more developed conceptual schema to account for the simultaneous feminisation of popular media with this accumulation of ambivalent, fearful responses. We would certainly need to signal the seeming enfranchisement of women in the west, of all ages as audiences, active consumers of media and the many products it promotes, and by virtue of education, earning power and consumer identity, a sizeable block of target market. We would also need to be able to theorise female achievement predicated not on feminism, but on 'female individualism', on success which seems to be based on the invitation to young women by various governments that they might now consider themselves free to compete in education and in work as privileged subjects of the new meritocracy. Is this then the New Deal for New Labour's modern young women; female individualisation and the new meritocracy at the expense of feminist politics?

There are various sites within popular culture where this work of undoing feminism with some subtlety becomes visible (see also Brunson 1997, 2004). The *Wonderbra* advertisement showing the model Eva Herzigova looking down admiringly at her cleavage enhanced by the lacy pyrotechnics of the Wonderbra, was through the mid-1990s positioned in major high street locations in the UK on full size billboards. The composition of the image had such a textbook 'sexist ad' dimension (the 'male gaze' is invited and encouraged by the gaze of the model herself to look towards her breasts) that one could be forgiven for supposing some ironic familiarity with both cultural studies and with feminist critiques of advertising (Williamson 1987). It was, in a sense, taking feminism into account by showing it to be a thing of the past, by provocatively 'enacting sexism' while at the same time playing with those debates in film theory about women as the object of the gaze (Mulvey 1975/1989) and with female desire (Coward 1984, De Lauretis 1988). The picture is in *noirish* black and white and refers explicitly through its captions (from 'Hello Boys' to 'Or Are You Just Pleased To See Me?') to Hollywood and the famous lines of the actress Mae West. Here is an advertisement which plays back to its

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viewers well known aspects of feminist media studies, film theory and semiotics. Indeed, it almost offers (albeit crudely) the viewer or passing driver Laura Mulvey's theory of women as object of the gaze, projected as cityscape within the frame of the billboard. Also mobilised in this advertisement is the familiarity of the term political correctness, the efficacy of which resides in its warranting and unleashing such energetic reactions against the seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism. Everyone and especially young people can give a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, the image seems to suggest, it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women. At the same time, the advertisement also hopes to provoke feminist condemnation as a means of generating publicity. Thus generational differences are also produced, the younger female viewer, along with her male counterparts, educated in irony and visually literate, is not made angry by such a repertoire. She appreciates its layers of meaning, she gets the joke.

When in a TV advertisement (1998/9) supermodel Claudia Schiffer takes off her clothes as she descends a flight of stairs in a luxury mansion on her way out of the door towards her new Citroen car, a similar rhetoric is at work. This advert appears to suggest that yes, this is a self-consciously sexist ad. Feminist critiques of it are deliberately evoked. Feminism is taken into account, but only to be shown to be no longer necessary. Why? Because it now seems that there is no exploitation here, there is nothing remotely naïve about this striptease. She seems to be doing it out of choice, and for her own enjoyment. The image works on the basis of its audience knowing Claudia Schiffer to be one of the world's most famous and highly paid supermodels. Once again the shadow of disapproval is evoked (the striptease as site of female exploitation) only instantly to be dismissed as belonging to the past, to a time when feminists used to object to such imagery. To make such an objection nowadays would run the risk of ridicule. Objection is pre-empted with irony. In each of these cases a spectre of feminism is invoked so that it might be undone. For male viewers tradition is restored or as Beck puts it there is 'constructed certitude', while for the girls what is proposed is a movement beyond feminism, to a more comfortable zone where women are now free to choose for themselves (Beck 1992).

Feminism undone?

If we turn attention to some of the participatory dynamics in leisure and everyday life which see young women endorse (or else refuse to condemn) the ironic normalisation of pornography, where they indicate their approval of and desire to be pin-up girls for the centrefolds of the soft porn so-called lad's mags, where it is not at all unusual to pass young women in the street wearing T-shirts bearing phrases such as 'Porn Queen' or 'Pay To Touch' across the breasts,

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where in the UK at least young women quite happily attend lap-dancing clubs (perhaps as a test of their sophistication and 'cool'), and where *Cosmopolitan* magazine considers how empowering it is for young women to 'flash' their breasts in public, we are witness to a hyper-culture of commercial sexuality, one aspect of which is the repudiation of a feminism which is invoked only to be summarily dismissed (see also Gill 2003, 2006). As a mark of a post-feminist identity, young women journalists refuse to condemn the enormous growth of lap-dancing clubs. They know of the existence of the feminist critiques and debates (or at least this is my claim) through their education, since as Shelley Budgeon describes in her study, most girls these days are 'gender aware' (Budgeon 2001). Thus the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl. Indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely, an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past, in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics.

Female individualisation

By using the term female individualisation I am drawing on the concept of individualisation which is discussed at length by sociologists including Giddens (1991), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as well as Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2001). This work is to be distinguished from the more directly Foucauldian version found in the work of Nikolas Rose (1999a, 1999b). Although there is some shared ground between these authors, insofar as they all reflect on the expectations that individuals now avidly self-monitor and that there appears to be greater capacity on the part of individuals to plan 'a life of ones own', there are also divergences. Beck and Giddens are less concerned with the way in which power works in this new friendly guise as personal advisor, and instead emphasise the enlargement of freedom and choice, while in contrast Rose sees these modes of self government as marking out 'the shaping of being', and thus the 'inculcation of a form of life' (Rose 1999a). Bauman bewails the sheer unviability of naked individualisation as the resources of sociality (and welfare) are stripped away, leaving the individual to self-blame when success eludes him or her. (It is also possible to draw a political line between these authors, with Bauman and Rose to the left, and Giddens and Beck 'beyond left and right'.) My emphasis here is on the work of Giddens and Beck, for the very reason that it appears to speak directly to the post-feminist generation. In their writing there are only distant echoes (if

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that) of the feminist struggles that were required to produce the new-found freedoms of young women in the west. There is no trace whatsoever of the battles fought, of the power struggles embarked upon, or of the enduring inequities which still mark out the relations between men and women. All of this is airbrushed out of existence on the basis that, as they claim, 'emancipatory politics' has given way instead to life politics (or in Beck's terms the sub-politics of single interest groups). Both of these authors provide a sociological account of the dynamics of social change understood as 'reflexive modernisation'. The earlier period of modernisation (first modernity) created a welfare state and a set of institutions (e.g. education) which allowed people in the second modernity to become more independent and able for example to earn their own living. Young women are as a result now dis-embedded from communities where gender roles were fixed. And, as the old structures of social class fade away, and lose their grip in the context of late or second modernity, individuals are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures. They must do this internally and individualistically, so that self-monitoring practices (the diary, the life-plan, the career pathway) replace reliance on set ways and structured pathways. Self-help guides, personal advisors, lifestyle coaches and gurus and all sorts of self-improvement TV programmes provide the cultural means by which individualisation operates as a social process. As the overwhelming force of structure fades, so also, it is claimed, does the capacity for agency increase.

Individuals must now choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a life-plan. They must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage, to taking responsibility for their own working lives and not being dependent on a job for life or on the stable and reliable operations of a large scale bureaucracy, which in the past would have allocated its employees specific, and possibly unchanging, roles. Beck and Giddens each place a different inflection on their accounts of reflexive modernisation, but overall these arguments appear to fit directly with the kinds of scenarios and dilemmas facing the young women characters in the narratives of contemporary popular culture (chick lit). There is an evasion in this writing of social and sexual divides, and of the continuing prejudice and discrimination experienced by black and Asian women. Beck and Giddens are quite inattentive to the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self improvement. Choice is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint. The individual is compelled to be the kind of subject who can make the right choices. By these means new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably. Neither Giddens nor Beck mount a substantial critique of these power relations which work so effectively at the level of embodiment. They have no grasp that these are productive of new realms of injury and injustice.

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Bridget Jones

The film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (a world-wide success) draws together many of these sociological themes. In her early 30s, 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 dis-embedded and to re-locate 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, the stigma of remaining single and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children. In the film, the opening sequence shows Bridget in her pyjamas worrying about being alone and on the shelf. The soundtrack is *All By Myself* by Jamie McNeal and the audience laughs along with her in this moment self-doubt. We immediately know that what she is thinking is 'what will it be like if I never find the right man, if I never get married?' Bridget portrays the whole spectrum of attributes associated with the self-monitoring subject, she confides in her friends, she keeps a diary, she endlessly reflects on her fluctuating weight, noting her calorie intake, she plans, plots and has projects. She is also deeply uncertain as to what the future holds for her. Despite the choices she has, there are also any number of risks of which she is regularly reminded, the risk that she might let the right man slip from under her nose, so she must always be on the lookout, prioritising this over success in the workplace, the risk that not catching a man at the right time might mean she misses the chance of having children (her biological clock is ticking), there is also the risk that, without a partner she will be isolated, marginalised from the world of happy couples.

With the burden of self-management so apparent, Bridget fantasises about very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment. Flirting with her boss during office hours, Bridget imagines herself in a white wedding dress surrounded by bridesmaids, and the audience laughs loudly because they, like Bridget, know that this is not how young women these days are meant to think. Feminism has intervened to constrain these kinds of conventional desires. But it is surely a relief to escape this censorious politics and freely enjoy that which has been disapproved of, and this is what the film not only allows but absolutely encourages and enjoys. Feminism was anti-marriage and this can now to be shown to be a great mistake. Feminism is invoked, in order to be relegated to the past. But this is not simply a return to the past, there are, of course, quite dramatic differences between the various female characters of current popular culture from *Bridget Jones* to the girls in *Sex and the City* and to *Ally McBeal*, and those found in girls' and women's magazines from a pre-feminist era. These new young women are

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confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband, they avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and they brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard. In addition they are more than capable of earning their own living, and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual self confidence.

With such light entertainment as this, suffused with irony and dedicated to re-inventing highly successful women's genres of film and TV, an argument about feminism being so repudiated might seem heavy handed. Indeed *Bridget Jones's Diary* is exemplary as a women's genre film, re-invented to bring back romance in a specifically post-feminist context. Neither it, nor *Ally McBeal* nor *Sex in the City* are rabid anti-feminist tracts, instead they have taken feminism into account and implicitly or explicitly ask the question what now? There is a strong sense in all three that young women somehow want to reclaim their femininity, without stating exactly why it has been taken away from them. These young woman want to be girlish and enjoy all sorts of traditional feminine pleasures without apology, although again, quite why they might feel they have to apologise is left hanging in the air. But it seems we the audience, like they the characters, are meant to know the answer to this question because it is so obvious. Feminism, it seems, robbed women of their most treasured pleasures, i.e. romance, gossip and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband, indeed as I write this I am reminded of being right back there in the land of *Jackie* magazine, where I myself implicitly scolded readers for falling into these traps especially the fantasies of romance and marriage (McRobbie 2000a). It is as though this is the vengeance of the younger generation who had to put up with being chided by feminist teachers and academics at university for wanting the wrong things. (This well-educated female demographic is factored into the narrative, littered as it is with references to Germaine Greer, Jane Austen, Salman Rushdie, post-modernism and literary theory.) The post-feminist moment of *Bridget Jones's Diary* also coincides with the new popularity once again, massively promoted by consumer culture, of weddings, including gay and lesbian weddings and all the paraphernalia that goes with them. The cultural references and the humour in this particular 'rom-com' are up-to-the moment, girls now get so drunk they tumble out of taxis, they have sex when they feel like it, without always being prepared with the best underwear and so on. But, as we know, relations of power are indeed made and re-made within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment. These young women's genres are vital to the construction of a new 'gender regime', based on the double entanglement which I have described. They endorse wholeheartedly what Rose calls 'this ethic of freedom', and young women

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have come to the fore as the pre-eminent subjects of this new ethic. These popular texts normalise post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice. Despite all of this planning and diary keeping even 'well regulated liberty' can backfire (the source of comic effect), and this in turn gives rise to demarcated pathologies (leaving it to late to have a baby, failing to find a good catch, etc.) which carefully define the parameters of what constitutes livable lives for young women without the occasion of re-invented feminism.

Bridget Jones's Diary celebrates the return of romance in a soft rather than hard post-feminist framing. Bridget is endearingly plump and reminiscent of any number of literary predecessors, but most obviously Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett. She is self-mocking, self-disparaging, and her witty observations of the social life around her create a warmth and an audience who is almost immediately on her side, as she negotiates the codes of contemporary sexual relationships. Although she constantly defines herself as a failure, and even plays dumb, messing up the chances that come her way to shine at work, and saying the wrong thing in public places, she is also aware of every wrong step she takes, scolding herself along the way. Much of the comic effect evolves around her daily attempts to become the sort of woman who she thinks will be the kind of women men want to marry, hence the crucial romantic moment in the film when Mark Darcy says he likes her just the way she is. There is of course poignancy here, since who does not want to be liked for just who one is, whoever that may be? *Bridget Jones's Diary* speaks then to female desire, and in a wholly commercialised way, to the desire for some kind of gender justice, or fairness, in the world of sex and relationships. Here too the ghost of feminism is hovering. Bridget deserves to get what she wants. The audience are wholly on her side. She ought to be able to find the right man, for the reason that she has negotiated that tricky path which requires being independent, earning her own living, standing up for herself against demeaning comments, remaining funny and good humoured throughout, without being angry or too critical of men, without foregoing her femininity, her desires for love and motherhood, her sense of humour and her appealing vulnerability.

Notes

- 1 *Bridget Jones's Diary* appeared first as a newspaper column in the UK newspaper the *Independent* in 1996, its author Helen Fielding then published the diaries as a book, and the film, *Bridget Jones's Dairy* directed by Sharon McGuire, opened in 2001. The sequel *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason* directed by Beebron Kidron opened in November 2004.
- 2 There are several moments in the film where 'feminist issues' i.e. workplace harassment, sex discrimination and equal pay, are invoked only to be wittily abandoned as Bridget self-consciously sleeps with the boss, and then later takes a job

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which requires her to be obviously sexy (thanks to Celeste Hawes for drawing attention to these moments in the narrative).

- 3 The newspaper the *Daily Mail* has the highest volume of female readers in the UK. Its post-feminist stance is unambiguous, it frequently commissions recanting feminist journalists to blame feminism for women's contemporary complaints, e.g. the famous novelist Fay Weldon wrote a piece called 'Look what We Have Done' (23 November 2003: 12–13) arguing that all feminists created was 'a new generation of women for whom sex is utterly joyless and hollow.' See also the following chapter.