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GENDER IN POST-9/11 AMERICAN APOCALYPTIC TV

Representations of Masculinity and Femininity at the End of the World

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Eve Bennett
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Apocalyptic television and the post-9/11 gender backlash

A major explosion hits the middle of an American city. Afterwards, a survivor, a white man in a suit (Jack Coleman), wakes up amid the rubble and wanders around dazedly. As he does so, we hear snatches of radio or television broadcasts commenting on the incident, most recommending violent retaliation against the perpetrators: ‘We have got to go and attack the enemy’, ‘tyrant and terrorist with strength not weakness’, ‘A serious threat to our way of life’, ‘We will hunt down and punish those responsible’, ‘Kill them, kill them all’ (‘Brave New World’, 1.1). Later, a video appears in which the apparent leader of a group of ‘terrorists’, as the media calls them, a non-Western man (Sendhil Ramamurthy), claims responsibility for the attack, which he says was a suicide bombing carried out by his ‘brothers and sisters’ (‘June 13th–Part Two’, 1.8).

The scenes I have just described are from Heroes Reborn, a 2015 miniseries sequel to the NBC series Heroes (2006–2010). Although I began the research for this book in 2011, and it focuses on programmes that debuted between 2002 and 2012 – including the original Heroes – Heroes Reborn shows that American television has not yet entirely got over its preoccupation with the horrific events of September the 11th, 2001. This preoccupation forms part of a wider interest in catastrophic destruction or apocalypse that has been manifest since roughly the turn of the millennium. While world destruction and the annihilation of the human race have habitually existed as threats in the science fiction and fantasy genres, on television as well as in other media, in the past they typically remained as such: threats, posed by villains whose plans would be thwarted by the heroes at the end of the episode or season. In the early twenty-first-century wave of American apocalyptic programmes, however, the threat is far more concrete. In many the apocalypse actually occurs, often in the first episode
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(e.g. Battlestar Galactica (BSG; 2003–2009), Jericho (2006–2008), The Walking Dead (TWD; 2010–)) or even before the show begins (Firefly (2002–2003), Falling Skies (2011–2015)), though, of course, it does not entirely wipe out the human race or there would be no show; some survivors remain to battle it out in the harsh new world. In others the apocalypse remains a threat for most or all of the show’s duration, but one that is graphically illustrated through devices such as time travel and/or parallel universes (Heroes, Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles (T:TSCC; 2008–2009), Fringe (2008–2013)); flashforwards (Dollhouse (2009–2010)); characters’ dreams or visions (Miracles (2003), Carnivàle (2003–2005), The 4400 (2004–2007), Point Pleasant (2005–2006), Threshold (2005–2006), The Event (2010–2011)); or smaller-scale disasters that seem to prefigure a larger one (Lost (2004–2010), Surface (2005–2006), Invasion (2005–2006), FlashForward (2009–2010)).

My interest in this ongoing cycle of American apocalyptic television was the primary motivation for starting work on this project, but a second very important inspiration was Susan Faludi’s book The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed about America (2008). In it, Faludi provides a detailed picture of the way that the American media’s representation of gender shifted after 9/11. Largely concentrating on print journalism, with some reference to television news and talk shows, she analyses the way that many media commentators’ portrayal of gender roles abruptly became more essentialist and traditional. This, she argues, was true of the depiction of the people connected to the tragedies in a concrete way, for instance, the group of men who supposedly prevented the hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 from reaching its target and also of the portrayal of President George W. Bush and his male colleagues. All of these men were repeatedly compared to ‘superheroes’ (Faludi 2008, p. 47) and ‘frontiersmen’ (ibid., p. 148) in both media and government rhetoric. Women affected by the attacks, on the other hand, were portrayed ‘largely as vulnerable maidens’, despite the fact ‘that the fatalities [on 9/11] were three-to-one male-to-female’ (ibid., p. 5), while lifestyle columnists circulated rumours (never substantiated with any hard data) that American women in general had suddenly begun prioritizing marriage and motherhood over their careers (ibid., pp. 116–145).

Faludi’s explanation for this phenomenon is that at times of crisis, nations tend to ‘recapitulate in quick time the centuries-long evolution of [their] character as a society and of the mythologies [they] live by’ (2008, p. 13). Hence, she reads the regressive gender representations spread by the American media in the wake of 9/11 as the ‘involuntary revisiting’ (ibid.) of a set of myths created to
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quell a much earlier American cultural trauma: the capture of hundreds of New England settlers by Native American tribes during the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries. This resulted in a pervasive sense of shame that ‘was largely a male burden … in which the captivity of women and children served to spotlight male protective failures’ (ibid., p. 211). The ultimate consequence of this trauma, Faludi argues, was that ‘[t]he specter of the white maiden taken against her will by dark “savages” became [the nation’s] recurring trope … That maiden’s rescue, fantasized or real, became [the] reigning redemption tale’ (ibid., p. 212), reappearing throughout history every time social or political events created feelings of shame or insufficiency on the part of American men.

The 9/11 attacks, Faludi contends, were just such events, disconcertingly similar on a basic level to the ‘foundational drama’ of the Indian wars (‘murderous homeland incursions by dark-skinned, non-Christians’) (2008, p. 208) and raising similar ‘apprehensions that America was lacking in masculine fortitude’ (ibid., p. 8). Thus, in the aftermath, the media took upon itself the task of ‘restor[ing] the image of an America invulnerable to attack … [by] conjur[ing] a dreamscape populated by John Wayne protectors guarding little captive Debbies [the niece Wayne’s character rescues in the film The Searchers (John Ford, 1956)], a reverie in which women were needed to play the helpless and dependent foil’ (ibid., p. 115). Those women who did not fit this role, particularly feminists, were widely vilified by the right-wing press and even blamed for having “feminized” [America’s] men and, in so doing, left the nation vulnerable to attack’ (ibid., p. 23).

Faludi states that ‘the cultural troika of media, entertainment, and advertising’ was responsible for ‘declar[ing] the post-9/11 age an era of neofifties nuclear family “togetherness”, redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold Warrior manhood’ (2008, pp. 3–4). Yet, despite this claim, The Terror Dream’s focus is very much on the first element in the ‘troika’; as mentioned above, the vast majority of Faludi’s case studies come from newspapers, magazines and TV news programmes or talk shows. Her discussion of any kind of ‘entertainment’ is brief, her conclusions about it summarized in her comment that ‘[t]he post-9/11 fixation on male protectors at work and mommies at home maintained in pop culture’ (ibid., p. 139). About fiction TV, she merely remarks on some broad trends in programming, such as the appearance of several series that ‘featured a return to nesting’ (ibid., p. 138) and of numerous ‘tough guy shows’ (2008, p. 139), including Lost, 24 (2001–2010), and various ‘all-male protection fantasies with firemen or cops’ (ibid., p. 138).
Furthermore, the scholars whose work anticipates *The Terror Dream* in likewise highlighting the shift in representations of gender following 9/11 also tend to do so in relation to factual media. For instance, Lyn Spigel cites Jayne Rodgers’s observation that after 9/11, ‘journalists tended to frame news stories in “myths of gender”’ (Rodgers cited in Spigel 2004, para. 23) and goes on to note that ‘[b]oth daytime talkshows and nighttime news were filled with melodramatic tales of women’s suffering that depicted women as the moral victims of Islamic extremism’ (Spigel 2004, para. 24). Meanwhile, Julie Drew analyses ‘media coverage, citizen commentary, and presidential speech immediately following 9/11’ to reveal a ‘less-than-subtle movement toward a … national identity … significantly polarized along gender lines, highlighting physical strength and violently punitive responses to conflict as both desirable and necessary, as well as paternalistic attitudes toward injury and trauma, both of which are assumed to be predicated on weakness, and which are read as feminine’ (2004, p. 71). In a similar vein, Stephen Ducat conducts a book-length investigation of the psychological causes of what he calls ‘the wimp factor’ (2004, p. 7; also the title of the book): ‘the anxious preoccupation with affirming manhood’ (ibid., p. 9) found, he believes, in both ‘right-wing politicians and pundits’ (ibid.) and religious fundamentalists. Though Ducat aims to consider ‘the cultural, historical, developmental origins of an insecure sense of masculinity’ (ibid.), his principal focus is ‘the rhetoric and diplomatic posturing’ (ibid.) surrounding the Iraq War.

This shared critical focus on non-fiction media and other forms of public discourse left me wondering whether Faludi was perhaps too hasty in extending her meticulously proven conclusions to television fiction, a form which, in its American manifestation especially, is typically long running, likely to contain internal contradictions and often ideologically ambivalent. At the least, I felt this was an issue that was worth investigating in more depth. Although, since *The Terror Dream*, numerous articles and book chapters by other authors have appeared that examine the impact of 9/11 on the representation of gender in individual (or groups of two or three) American drama series (some examples which focus on apocalyptic programmes include Takacs (2009), Nilges (2010), Godfrey and Hamad (2012) and Lykissas (2016)), no one has yet taken on a larger body of television texts as the present work aims to do.

The contemporary wave of apocalyptic programmes seemed an appropriate point of focus in an investigation of gender in post-9/11 American television fiction for a number of reasons. First, there is the obvious possibility of drawing
connections between many of the apocalyptic programmes, and even the wave as a whole, and 9/11. The usefulness of such a venture is, of course, debatable, but it is nevertheless something numerous critics have attempted (e.g. Dunn (2006), Froula (2011), Himsel Burcon (2012), Ames (2014), Brown (2016)). Moreover, it cannot be denied that many of the programmes do reference the events of 9/11 or their aftermath, whether explicitly or through visual cues, such as smoking skyscrapers (seen, for example, in *Heroes* and *FlashForward*) or walls of photographs of the dead (*BSG*, *Dollhouse*).

Like 9/11 itself, fictional scenarios centred on extreme crises clearly present plenty of opportunity for narratives of tough male rescuers and helpless damsels-in-distress. Indeed, earlier cycles of apocalyptic texts (largely in the form of films) have been criticized for their ‘reaffirm[ation of] traditional gender stereotypes’ (Inness 1999, p. 123). For instance, Alexis de Coning describes the original *Mad Max* trilogy (*Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981), *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (George Miller and George Ogilvie, 1985)) as ‘a fantasy of masculine power, geared primarily for male consumption’ (2016, p. 175).

On the other hand, several of the most notable American science fiction and fantasy television series that directly preceded the apocalyptic cycle on which I am focusing, some of which were themselves apocalyptic, were widely lauded for their portrayal of what Kathleen Kennedy and Frances H. Early call ‘the new woman warrior’ (2003, p. 3). Referring to the likes of the eponymous heroines of *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *La Femme Nikita* (1997–2001), Kennedy and Early explain, ‘The accolades and positive press coverage have made the new woman warrior into a North American phenomenon by crowning her a “girl power” hero – a young, hip and alluring portrayal of female autonomy’ (ibid.). This does not mean, of course, that these 1990s ‘women warriors’ and the programmes in which they appear are entirely free of problematic attributes (I delve into some of the charges levelled against them by feminist critics in Chapter 4), but they are nonetheless usually seen as representing a distinct progression in terms of gender roles when compared to earlier American telefantasy (Helford 2000, pp. 2–5; Early and Kennedy 2003, pp. 4–5). I was therefore interested to investigate whether this trend continued into the new millennium, or whether it may have been impacted or even reversed by the post-9/11 anti-feminist backlash described by Faludi.

As a final important piece of background, it should be noted that the television programmes on which I have chosen to focus form part of a wider
cycle of apocalyptic texts across American (and, to a lesser extent, international) media. This includes films (e.g. *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), *Land of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2005), *The Book of Eli* (The Hughes Brothers, 2010)), novels (*The Road* (Cormac McCarthy, 2006), *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (Max Brooks, 2013 (2006)), *The Passage* (Justin Cronin, 2010)), graphic novels (*Y: The Last Man* (Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra, 2002–2008), *The Walking Dead* (Robert Kirkman et al., 2003–), *Crossed* (Garth Ennis et al., 2008–2010)) and videogames (*Gears of War* (2006), *Fallout 3* (2008), *Left 4 Dead* (2008)). Furthermore, as might be expected in our age of ‘transmedia storytelling’ (Jenkins 2008, p. 93), many of the TV programmes form part of franchises which exist across multiple media. The most obvious example is probably *T:TSCC* which is, of course, part of the *Terminator* franchise. This comprises not only the hugely successful films and the television series but also videogames, novels, graphic novels and a machinima series. While it is beyond the scope of the present study to analyse non-televisual apocalyptic fiction, I shall refer to other kinds of texts wherever it seems relevant – for instance, where a particular trope or character type exists across numerous media.

**Aim and scope**

The aim of this book is to explore a number of interrelated questions, which are as follows: How are gender roles and the power-inflected relationships between men and women portrayed in post-9/11 American apocalyptic television series? What recurring character types and narrative configurations related to gender can be found in them? Is it possible to draw any links between the representation of gender in these texts and both specific historical events, in particular 9/11, and the wider sociopolitical context at the beginning of the twenty-first century, from the ‘war on terror’ to postfeminism? And, finally, to what extent do the texts uphold the views of the many commentators, including Faludi, who see 9/11 and its aftermath as the catalyst for a retrenchment into traditionalism in the discourse surrounding gender in contemporary American media and culture?

As these questions hopefully indicate, while the possible impact of 9/11 on my focal texts is an important theme of this book, it is not the only one; other factors which I believe may have affected the representation of gender in the
shows are also examined (e.g. their postfeminist cultural context), especially in later chapters. Furthermore, I should make it clear right away that I do not believe that the programmes I examine (or any other cultural texts, for that matter) ‘reflect’ contemporary events in any simplistic way, whether that be 9/11 or any of the early twenty-first-century natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina or the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, which may also seem to have had a bearing upon them. I try to avoid what Will Brooker describes as the critical ‘tendency to view popular narrative as a willing, receptive medium, a cultural Silly Putty onto which real-world events transfer themselves’ (2011, p. 146). (I shall return to this point in Chapter 1.) Nevertheless, as mentioned above, many of the programmes within the remit of this book, even the later ones such as *FlashForward*, *Dollhouse* and *The Event*, do at the very least visually reference 9/11, sometimes alongside other disasters, implying that, as Homay King suggests about film, television fiction may ‘condense images and affects from multiple historical traumas into aggregate, globally resonant visual forms’ (2011, p. 124).

In conducting my research, I focused on twenty-five series; these are listed at the start of the teleography. To explain how I selected these programmes, I should start by defining what I mean by ‘apocalyptic’. I am not using the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* first definition of the word ‘apocalypse’, which is: ‘The complete final destruction of the world’ (*Oxford Dictionaries* n.d.), but rather the second: ‘An event involving destruction or damage on a catastrophic scale’ (ibid.). Hence, I consider a programme to be ‘apocalyptic’ if one or more events occur or are threatened that cause or would cause large-scale destruction and/or harm to the human race. An important caveat, however, is that I excluded all series that do not primarily belong to a non-realist genre, that is, science fiction, fantasy or horror. The main reason for this is simply to keep the scope of the project limited. If I did include programmes from other genres, then I could potentially have found myself analysing the likes of *Rescue Me* (2004–2011) and *Homeland* (2011–), shows which are literally ‘about’ 9/11 or the ‘war on terror’ and therefore deal with these subjects in a quite different way to the allegorical depictions found in telefantasy.

1 Total destruction of the planet is rare in films and almost unheard-of in serial TV, since it is not only obviously an extremely downbeat ending, to say the least, but renders a sequel or further series impossible (as Laurie Shulze points out, it is more common in apocalyptic made-for-TV movies because their writers do not have to worry about continuing the narrative (cited in Herbert 2007, p. 88)). In some of the programmes analysed here, however, when apocalypse is threatened, total destruction of the planet may be what is implied; it is usually not made clear.
To further limit the scope of my studies to a manageable number of programmes, I decided to focus on those that were first broadcast on American television during the ten-year period between September 2002 and August 2012. (I chose to start with the 2002 television season since shows aired during 2001 were likely made prior to 9/11.) Even within this limited range, the earliest programme I include, *Firefly*, debuted just over nine years before the latest, *Terra Nova* (2011), and indeed, the first episode of *Supernatural* (2005–), the most long running of the twenty-five series, aired more than twelve years before the most recent episode to date. This naturally means that the sociopolitical and industrial contexts in which the various seasons of the various shows appeared are, in some cases, quite different from one another.

Furthermore, long-running shows evidently have the potential to change considerably over time, sometimes as a result of fans’ or critics’ reactions, or in response to contemporary events. For instance, there have been frequent reports that *Supernatural*’s writers ‘killed off’ certain characters, usually female ones, in response to poor fan reaction (see, e.g., Williams (2008a, b), Felschow (2010)), while the show’s seventh season, which aired in 2011–2012 and has a monster masquerading as a CEO as its main antagonist, has been interpreted as a response to contemporary anti-corporate sentiment and the Occupy Wall Street movement (Giannini 2014). All that being said, however, there do seem to be a number of recurrent preoccupations and motifs found within this corpus, even across texts quite far apart in date, which, I believe, justify grouping them together. For instance, Chapter 4 explores the trope of the ‘weaponized’ woman, which is found in programmes ranging from *Firefly* (not to mention shows too early to be included in my discussion such as *Dark Angel* (2000–2002)) to *Dollhouse, Caprica* (2009–2010) and beyond.

In addition to limiting the shows I looked at by date, I also limited my studies to full-length, live-action series aimed at adults that were first shown on broadcast or cable TV channels; I therefore excluded miniseries (with fewer than eight episodes), TV movies, web-series, children’s programmes and animated series. Finally, the shows I included are all ‘American’ in the loose sense of being at least co-produced by an American network or company.

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2 It probably goes without saying that the wave of apocalyptic television programmes did not suddenly begin just after 9/11. In fact, it is hard to say precisely when it did begin since many slightly earlier American series feature at least one potentially apocalyptic threat; *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel* (1999–2004), *Earth: Final Conflict* (1997–2002), *Crusade* (1999) and the post-apocalyptic *Dark Angel* (2000–2002) are just a few examples of late 1990s/early 2000s shows that could be seen as early members of the cycle.
Introduction

Structure

While I viewed twenty-five series in the course of my research, I evidently do not have space here to analyse all of them in detail, especially since some of them were or are extremely long running (TWD and Supernatural are both still airing as of this writing, the former having been renewed for its ninth season (Goldberg 2018) and the latter for its fourteenth (Otterson 2018a)). Hence, as described in more detail below, each chapter focuses on two main case studies, apart from Chapter 4, which examines individual characters in five series. The structure of the book developed organically, with each chapter suggesting the next to form a kind of narrative that links the typical gender roles found within my focal texts together in a network of relationships. As we shall see, many of these relationships are familial, either literally or metaphorically, thus corroborating the observations of critics such as James Aston (2013), Stacy Takacs (2009) and Hannah Hamad (2014), who all note the centrality of the family in recent apocalyptic texts.

I begin Chapter 1 by examining how the post-9/11 media discourse surrounding gender – in particular, the motifs of the cowboy and the superhero as idealized masculinities – fed into apocalyptic TV shows. Here, my case studies are TWD, a series that draws on the Western genre and therefore invokes the figure of the cowboy, and Heroes, which, as the name implies, centres on a group of superheroes. The chapter investigates whether the foundational American ‘redemption tale’ – so prevalent in media accounts of 9/11 – of the virile (white) man rescuing or protecting the vulnerable (white) girl from harm plays out in the expected manner in these programmes. It also introduces a theme that is important in Chapter 2: the idea that several of the shows under discussion, including TWD, are examples of male melodrama.

Chapter 2 stays with the theme of masculinity but, inspired by the protagonist of TWD (Andrew Lincoln) and his son (Chandler Riggs), looks at the relationships between fathers and sons in a number of programmes, including Jericho and Falling Skies, but with a particular focus on BSG and Supernatural. I suggest that these relationships can all be said to follow a roughly similar trajectory, which I have termed the ‘Prince Hal narrative’ after the young Henry V character in Shakespeare’s Henry tetralogy. This narrative sees a warrior/leader father pressurize his rebellious son/s to follow in his footsteps, against the backdrop of an apocalyptic scenario. As we shall see, how the sons respond to this pressure varies from programme to programme. Although in the majority of cases, they accede to their fathers’ desires, in my two main case studies, this is done reluctantly, and the series
place a melodramatic emphasis on the suffering that the sons undergo as a result. Consequently, these programmes do not serve as the unambiguous propaganda for ‘strong’ male leadership in times of crisis that they might initially appear to be.

While Chapter 2 considers fathers and sons, Chapters 3 and 4, taken together, explore the relationships between fathers and daughters (mothers, as we shall see, are largely absent). In this case, the relationships may be symbolic rather than literal. The ‘fathers’ who interest me here are the key players in patriarchal conspiracies which, either intentionally or unintentionally, cause apocalypses; the ‘daughters’ are the young women who are often represented as those conspiracies’ primary victims. Chapter 3 focuses on the conspiracies themselves, using *Jericho* and *Dollhouse* as case studies to investigate the gendered dynamics between the perpetrators, their victims and the heroes who attempt to thwart their plans. We shall see that although both programmes feature male-dominated conspiracies as their antagonists and women as those conspiracies’ victims, the ideological use to which this trope is put is very different in each. In *Jericho*, it helps support a call, reminiscent of post-9/11 media and government discourse, for ‘manly’ men to act as the protectors of women and children, while in *Dollhouse* it functions as a part of a Gothic critique of patriarchal corporate capitalism.

Chapter 4, on the other hand, concentrates on the conspiracies’ victims, young women who, in many cases, have been turned, through scientific intervention, into human ‘weapons’. I look in detail at five such young women: River Tam (Summer Glau) from *Firefly*, Jaime Sommers (Michelle Ryan) from *Bionic Woman* (2007), Olivia Dunham (Anna Torv) from *Fringe*, Allison/Cameron (Summer Glau) from *T:TSCC* and Zoe Graystone (Alessandra Torresani) from *Caprica*. Among the questions I consider in relation to these characters are whether they are primarily portrayed as victims rather than (super-)heroines, whether they exhibit the characteristics that other critics have identified as limiting the power of earlier tough women in American popular culture, such as subservience to a male boss, and to what extent they can be seen as products of their postfeminist cultural context. As Cameron, Jaime and Zoe are all cyborgs, I also look at how far these three characters reproduce the typical science fiction image of the female cyborg as a ‘sexy tool’ (Sofia 1999, p. 60).

Lastly, in the conclusion, I comment on the ongoing popularity of apocalypse as a theme in American telefantasy and the direction in which the cycle appears to be headed. Then I recap the conclusions of each chapter, before attempting to draw some more general ones. Finally, I suggest a few of the many possible avenues for further work in what I hope this book will have shown to be an extremely rich field.
Introduction: Cowboys and superheroes versus 9/11

As I described in the Introduction, according to Susan Faludi, two main archetypes of masculinity were widely invoked by the American media in the aftermath of 9/11 in relation to the men who had helped (or were believed to have helped) deal with the disaster: the superhero and the Western hero (Faludi 2008, esp. pp. 4–5, and Chapter 2). Her argument is supported by several other commentators, who discuss the use of these archetypes and the imagery associated with them in a variety of journalistic works, documentaries and other miscellaneous cultural artefacts (e.g. Mead (2010), Hassler-Forrest (2011b)).

As Ryan Malphurs observes, there are a number of basic similarities between the mythic cowboy figure and the superhero: ‘The cowboy’s character and actions are more akin to superhuman figures as he arrives on the narrative scene from vague origins with pure motives and extraordinary powers to save the community he has been called to rescue’ (2008, p. 187). Of course, this is a hyperbolic and generalized statement; few fictional Western heroes, or indeed superheroes, actually conform to such a clear-cut description. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Malphurs’s observation captures the clichéd image of these figures routinely invoked in the American cultural imagination following 9/11. The aim of this chapter is to ascertain to what extent this kind of image, and the discourses of masculinity underlying it, is reproduced in apocalyptic television series that appeared after the disaster.

While superheroes are often to be found attempting to prevent the end of the world, cowboys are not such obvious inhabitants of apocalyptic settings. Yet, as Steve Neale notes, ‘frontier mythology is by no means confined to westerns’ (2000, p. 136). Thus, while Westerns, in the strict sense of being set in the nineteenth-century American West, have been rare on television since the turn of the millennium (I have counted around five, of which Deadwood (2004–2006)
and *Hell on Wheels* (2011–2016) are probably the most well known), there have been several series with an apocalyptic theme or post-apocalyptic setting that borrow elements from the Western genre. These include *Jericho, Supernatural, Firefly, Falling Skies* and *TWD*. I have chosen *TWD* as a case study because, while it is an enormously popular show – the season five premiere garnered a record-breaking 17.3 million viewers (Patten 2014) – it has also attracted widespread criticism for its depiction of gender roles, especially during its early seasons.\(^1\) It is worth reiterating here that *TWD* is still running at my time of writing, so its representation of gender, like all aspects of its characterization and narrative, is in an ongoing state of flux. There has certainly been some development in this regard in recent seasons, and there will doubtless be further developments in future ones. Nonetheless, as we shall see, certain themes and tropes persist or recur at regular intervals.

The presence of superheroes in recent American television has been more blatant than that of cowboys. Many live-action shows aimed at teenagers or adults that focus on them have appeared since the beginning of the century, including *Smallville* (2001–2011), *Arrow* (2012–), *The Flash* (2014–), *Supergirl* (2015–), *Inhumans* (2017) and *Heroes*, to name just a few. The latter will be my focus here because it is the only one which comes within the remit of this book in that it premiered between September 2002 and August 2012 and features an impending apocalypse—actually more than one. It also, as we shall see, draws numerous narrative and iconographic links between these apocalypses and the events and aftermath of 9/11.

The series mentioned above form part of a wider prevalence and popularity of superhero narratives in early twenty-first-century American culture, which extends to the cinema as well. As Gray and Kaklamanidou note, more than thirty Hollywood superhero films were released between 2000 and 2010, three of which entered the top-five list of highest opening weekend grosses in film history (2011b, p. 1). Some critics, including Gray and Kaklamanidou, relate this trend directly to 9/11, positing that it is responding to a public ‘need for superheroes’ (2011a, p. vi). However, others give such assumptions short shrift, notably David Bordwell, who is always sceptical of what he calls ‘zeitgeist readings’ (2008) of popular film. While Bordwell does not deny that Hollywood films may refer to contemporary events, or even on occasion carry a particular ‘message’ relating to them, he argues that it is far more common for ‘filmmakers [to] pluck out bits of

\(^1\) Whenever I give viewing figures, they are for the United States (first broadcast) only.
cultural flotsam opportunistically, stirring it all together and offering it up to see if we like the taste’ (ibid.). If the result is not ideologically coherent then so much the better: ‘Hollywood movies are usually strategically ambiguous about politics’ (ibid. original emphasis); they are open to a variety of interpretations in order to appeal to the widest possible audience. Nevertheless, even if we accept Bordwell’s argument, this does not, as Dan Hassler-Forest points out, prevent us from viewing popular films (and television programmes) as ‘vehicles for metaphorical representations of contemporary conflicts and debates’ (2011b, p. 135). From this point of view, the texts are interesting because of the contradictory nature of the discourses they embody and their consequent capacity to engender ‘political battles of reading’ (Evans cited in Brooker 2011, p. 147).

An alternative way of looking at the revival of particular genres in times of crisis is to see them as expressions of long-standing national myths. ‘The sources of myth-making’, Richard Slotkin explains in the introduction to the final volume of his comprehensive history of the American ‘Frontier Myth’, ‘lie in our capacity to … interpret a new and surprising experience or phenomenon by noting its resemblance to some remembered thing or happening’ (1998, p. 6). This is certainly the way in which several critics, including Faludi, interpreted the prevalence of Western imagery in American media, culture and political rhetoric during the turbulent early years of the twenty-first century. For example, Liz Powell writes, ‘It is perhaps unsurprising that this genre … should be employed at a time of intense national crisis; the familiar heroic characters and themes of victory and triumph typical of the western provided traumatized citizens with a means to make sense of, and find comfort in, the aftermath of 9/11’ (2011, p. 164).

Powell’s statement could be accused of patronizing generalization in that it makes sweeping assumptions about both Westerns (e.g. that the characters necessarily behave in a ‘heroic’ manner) and viewers’ reactions to them (not only that they will find Westerns comforting but that they will identify with the ‘familiar heroic characters’). Indeed, Slotkin cautions against ‘underemphasizing the complex and various ways in which different audiences receive the production of the culture industries’ (1998, p. 10). Furthermore, he makes the crucial point that ‘no myth/ideological system … is proof against all historical contingencies’ (ibid., p. 6). Sometimes particularly shocking events or fundamental social changes occur which ‘cannot be fully explained or controlled by invoking the received wisdom embodied in myth’ (ibid.). The result is that myths, as they are expressed in popular culture, gradually alter over time,
‘blending old formulas with new ideas or concerns’ (ibid.). Thus, they should not be viewed as ‘inflexibly prescriptive. Rather they are the practical result of a continuous process of revision, and they permit a range of interpretation[s]’ (ibid., p. 351). The Western genre, Slotkin argues, is an ‘attractive’ ‘mythic space … precisely because a wide range of beliefs and agendas can be entertained there’ (ibid.). Once again, we are encouraged to view popular cultural texts as polysemic entities with a complex, not necessarily internally coherent, relationship to contemporary sociopolitical events. The wisdom of adopting such a perspective will, I think, be proven during the following close analysis of my two case studies.

The Good, the Bad and The Walking Dead

That Western heroes and their associated generic trappings are often to be found in post-apocalyptic settings is a common observation (e.g. Strick (1985), Broderick (1993a), Combs (1993), Mitchell (2001), Rees (2012)) and a phenomenon that can be traced back at least as far as the original Mad Max trilogy and its many imitators. A major reason for the existence and recurrence of this generic hybrid is surely that the Western and the post-apocalyptic text share the same basic ‘formula’. The structuralist paradigm that ‘the Western is set on the frontier at a time when the forces of social order and anarchy are still in tension’ (Pye 1996a, p. 10) equally applies to the post-apocalyptic film or programme, except that in the latter social order and anarchy are once again in tension. Society is breaking down rather than being built up, or sometimes being built up again following an earlier breakdown. Typical similarities between the two genres include both semantic elements (such as desert settings, ‘savage’ antagonists and small, embattled communities) and syntactic ones (a dialectic between civilization and wilderness, a tendency towards moral absolutism and other Manichean dichotomies such as that between the sexes).

As the promotional image shown in Figure 1.1 makes clear, TWD vaunts its relationship with the Western quite explicitly. Indeed, panoramic views of desolate landscapes and/or hero Rick Grimes wearing his sheriff’s deputy’s uniform or other cowboy-style attire, usually brandishing a gun, are used to advertise the show far more often than images that give any indication of its other, ostensibly more important, generic affiliation, the zombie film. (Figure 1.2 is another example.)
Images like these are doubtless designed to showcase the programme’s high production values and filmic visual style, which also recalls Westerns in its frequent use of wide, high-angle shots. Indeed, in an interview, Andrew Lincoln, who plays Rick, said of the cast and crew, ‘We’ve always seen Western elements’, pointing in particular to the influence of one of the series’ regular directors, Ernest Dickerson, who, according to Lincoln, ‘has a big love of the John Ford Westerns and certain shot types – the low-slung, three-quarter hip, big-sky Western shots’ (cited in McCabe 2014, p. 57). And this aspect of the show’s generic heritage has evidently been noted by at least some of its audience, as the fan-made poster (Figure 1.3) and T-shirt design (Figure 1.4) below indicate.²

² As both Jeffrey A. Sartain (2013) and Dan Hassler-Forest (2011) have discussed, the series’ thematic, iconographic and stylistic affinity with the Western follows that of the graphic novels on which it is based.
Rejecting the female sphere

One of the key functions of the Western is, as Robert Murray Davis puts it, to ‘examine what it means to be a man and how one arrives at that point’ (1992, p. xxi). Jane Tompkins goes as far as to suggest that the genre ‘doesn’t have anything to do with the West as such … It is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents’ (1992, p. 45). The way that it does this, she suggests, is to place its male hero in a location or situation (typically the West) ‘where the harsh conditions of life force his manhood into being’ (ibid., p. 49). Tompkins’s position is somewhat controversial; for instance, Douglas Pye maintains that her desire to ‘make the Western monolithically about gender pushes a brilliant argument to a polemical extreme’ (1996a, p. 12). However, an apocalypse, by definition, creates the harshest conditions imaginable for those who survive it; hence numerous critics have suggested that post-apocalyptic settings may have a similar appeal.
to that proposed by Tompkins (e.g. Broderick (1993b), Nilges (2010), Glasgow (2012), Sartain (2013), Gurr (2015)).

Adryan Glasgow’s article on this theme is about _TWD_ specifically and she opens with a quote from the back cover of the graphic novels on which the series is based: ‘The world of commerce and frivolous necessity has been replaced by a world of survival and responsibility’ (cited in Glasgow 2012). She comments on it as follows: ‘This zombie narrative is about the competition among possible masculinities in a state of nature. The apocalypse is a playground for (blue-collar, white) men’s fantasies of masculinity in its most authentic form (read “survival” + “responsibility”’) (Glasgow 2012). Many other critics, bloggers and online forum contributors join Glasgow in condemning the fact that _TWD_ portrays a post-apocalyptic world in which (white) men automatically take charge (see, e.g., Donald (2011), Kearns (2012), Collins (2013)). In the early seasons especially, men make all the important decisions and are, as A. Lynn points out, ‘the gatekeepers of all the important knowledge’ (2011) relating to defence and survival. The women, meanwhile, take responsibility for domestic tasks such as cooking and laundry. While, as Lavin and Lowe point out, in later seasons, gender roles become, in some ways, more flexible, with ‘a proliferation of women in combat’ (2015, Section Five: Intersections), men continue to dominate leadership positions. As we shall see, when women do take charge, their authority is presented as fragile, flawed and temporary.

Tompkins believes that the Western, a genre preoccupied with ‘the importance of manhood as an ideal’ (1992, p. 17), came into being as a reaction against the ‘cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture’ (ibid., p. 39). It seeks to repudiate ‘the discourse of Christian domesticity – of Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the heart, the home’ (ibid., p. 42) and consequently ‘to marginalize and suppress the figure who stood for those ideals’: the woman (1992, p. 39). Tompkins goes on to argue that the genre tends to reject or devalue things associated with the ‘female’ sphere, including ‘language, … religion, and culture’ (ibid., p. 55). This is, of course, a huge generalization about a genre encompassing thousands of books, films and TV series, but it is nevertheless a tendency to be found in _TWD_.

The very first conversation heard in the show, between Rick and his friend and partner Shane Walsh (Jon Bernthal), concerns gender difference, thereby establishing that this will be an important theme. It opens with the latter’s question, ‘What’s the difference between men and women?’ and develops into a discussion of their
respective complaints about the women in their lives (‘Days Gone Bye’, 1.1). Shane tells tales of petty domestic squabbling with numerous girlfriends over what he believes is an innate female inability to switch off lights, while Rick feels that his wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) is ‘pissed at me all the time and I don’t know why’. Supporting Tompkins’s claim that ‘Westerns distrust language’ (1992, p. 49), both men specifically complain about women’s use of it against them. Shane refers to being told, in the Exorcist voice, that ‘[y]ou sound just like my damn father’, while the more serious Rick confides that Lori continuously goads him to ‘speak, speak’ but that ‘[e]verything [he] say[s] makes her impatient’.

This conversation takes place shortly before a virus turns the majority of the population into zombies (referred to by the central group as ‘Walkers’). One of its main functions seems to be, therefore, to establish the nature of the world, and implicitly of the ‘problem’ (men’s oppression by domesticity and particularly by women and their words), which the apocalypse is about to overturn. Of course, whether or not we, the audience, are meant to sympathize with Rick and Shane’s point of view is another question. In the case of Shane, who (jokingly) refers to women in this conversation as ‘pair[s] of boobs’ and ‘bitch[es]’, certainly not, but in Rick’s, who seems genuinely hurt by his wife’s comments (and amusedly incredulous at Shane’s overtly sexist ones), maybe so.

Initially at least, the post-apocalyptic world is indeed, as Glasgow suggests, portrayed as a ‘playground’ for Shane, the archetypal macho, white, blue-collar man. With Rick missing, believed dead, he is able to assume a patriarchal position not only at the head of a group of survivors but in Rick’s family, becoming lover to Lori (tellingly, given the conversation described above, he puts his hand over her mouth just before they have sex in ‘Guts’ (1.2)) and surrogate father to Rick and Lori’s son Carl. Early episodes show Shane teaching Carl survival skills such as tying knots (‘Guts’) and catching frogs (‘Tell It to the Frogs’, 1.3) and having a lot of fun while doing so.

It is worth noting here that Shane’s actions in these first few episodes make it clear that his name is, as Shelley S. Rees (2012, p. 87) and Paul Cantor (2013, p. 33, note 2) both point out, a reference to the eponymous protagonist

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3 The numbers I have given after episode titles refer to the season and episode number, in that order; for example, in this instance, 1.1 means season one, episode one. If only one number is given, it is an episode number and means that the programme in question only had one season.

4 TWD’s women, meanwhile, are, in these early episodes, associated with the ‘world of commerce and frivolous necessity’ (Glasgow 2012) that is no more. For example, while doing the laundry in ‘Tell It to the Frogs’, Andrea (Laurie Holden), Amy (Emma Bell), Carol (Melissa McBride) and Jacqui (Jeryl Prescott) discuss which consumer items they miss the most, a list including washing machines, SatNav and Jacqui’s ‘coffeemaker with that dual-drip filter and built-in grinder’.
of *Shane* (George Stevens 1953), a character whom Robert Warshow identifies as the archetypal ‘Westerner’ in his seminal 1954 essay (2004, p. 45). In the film, Shane (Alan Ladd) is a sharpshooter who comes to stay with a homesteader, Joe Starrett (Van Heflin), and his family, offering to teach Joe's young son (Brandon De Wilde) to shoot and displaying an attraction (which, however, he never acts upon) to Joe's wife (Jean Arthur). In the early part of *TWD* at least, Shane and Rick seem to embody roughly similar masculinities to Shane and Joe (though Bernthal's character is cruder and more jocular than Ladd's): the ‘tough’ bachelor and the more sensitive family man, respectively. But as we shall see, these positions shift as the series wears on.

**A protection fantasy?**

Although *TWD* premiered some nine years after 9/11, it could on first appearances easily be classified as one of the ‘protection fantasies’, which Faludi identifies as one of the most popular types of programme on American television in the years following the tragedy (2008, p. 138). Throughout the show, the ability to protect women and children is the main marker against which masculinity is judged. These are the terms on which, in season one, Shane continuously vies with the returned Rick for leadership of the focal group of survivors, as well as for ‘ownership’ of Lori, Carl and Lori's unborn baby. And a somewhat similar situation arises in season five, when Rick attempts to assume control of another man’s, Pete (Corey Brill), wife and children because, he insists, he can keep them ‘safe’, not only from the Walkers but from Pete himself, who is abusive (‘Try’, 5.15).

What is interesting, however, is that the women actually seem perfectly capable of protecting themselves. This becomes especially apparent in later seasons, when characters such as Sasha Williams (Sonequa Martin-Green), Maggie Greene (Lauren Cohan), Carol Peletier (Melissa McBride) and Michonne (Danai Gurira) have become some of the central group's most accomplished fighters. Yet, even in seasons one and two, most of the women seem capable of defending themselves in emergencies; for instance, Lori efficiently shoots several Walkers during a large battle in ‘Beside the Dying Fire’ (2.13). We should therefore question the extent to which the text actually supports the belief – held by many of its characters of both sexes – that women need male protection.

As a result of this belief, during the second season, the *failure* to protect a little girl takes on great significance. Carol’s daughter Sophia (Madison Lintz)
disappears during a Walker attack in ‘What Lies Ahead’ (2.1), and the group spends many hours over the course of numerous episodes searching for her. When she is eventually found in a barn as a Walker and is shot by Rick in ‘Pretty Much Dead Already’ (2.7), several of the male characters chastise themselves for allowing such a fate to befall her (‘I went after her, protected her, killed those Walkers, but she still got bit’, laments Rick (‘Nebraska’, 2.8)). The most strongly affected is Daryl Dixon (Norman Reedus), who had devoted an especially large amount of time and energy to the search; he isolates himself from the group and shouts defensively at Carol, ‘Sophia wasn’t mine. All you’d gotta do was keep an eye on her’ (‘Triggerfinger’, 2.9).

Sophia herself is a minor character in the series but, as Rees notes (2012, p. 89), attains symbolic importance through her disappearance and death. Glenn (Steven Yuen) explains to Maggie that ‘[i]t meant so much to everyone. Finding her, you know … I mean, we’ve lost others … This one was different’, while Hershel (Scott Wilson) tells Rick he knows there is ‘no hope and when that little girl came out of the barn, I knew you knew it too’ (‘Nebraska’). As Slotkin and Rees explain, it is common in Frontier mythology for ‘the triumph of civilization over savagery [to be] symbolized by the hunter/warrior’s rescue of the White woman held captive by savages’ (Slotkin 1998, p. 15). Indeed, as I mentioned in the Introduction, this is the very narrative which Faludi suggests that the American media obsessively re-enacted in the months following 9/11 as a reaction against the ‘sense of failed protection’ (Faludi 2008, p. 10) afflicting the nation’s men. Daryl, an expert tracker who hunts both Walkers and game with a crossbow, is certainly cast as \textit{TWD’s} hunter/warrior. Consequently, his failure to rescue the little white girl Sophia from the series’ savages, the Walkers, represents a devastating deviation from the traditional and comforting narrative.\footnote{That the protection of little girls, or rather, the failure to protect them, will be a central theme of \textit{TWD} is signalled in the very first scene of the first episode. Rick encounters what seems to be a little girl in a pink dressing gown and rabbit slippers walking away from him at an abandoned petrol station (‘Days Gone Bye’). He accosts her, telling her not to be afraid, but when she turns around to face him he sees she is a Walker and shoots her in the forehead, the camera lingering on a close-up of his traumatized face for several moments. As Rees points out, this moment ‘trouble[s]’ the traditional Western trope described by Graham Greene in which a ‘straight-shooting cowboy is asked to become sheriff, refuses, sees child killed, accepts, cleans up’ (Rees 2012, p. 80), as well as foreshadowing Rick’s shooting of the Walker Sophia (ibid., p. 92).}

The Sophia incident is echoed in seasons three and four by storylines involving the Governor (David Morrissey), the despotic leader of another community, and two little girls. In season three, we discover that he is keeping his own small daughter Penny (Kyle Szymanski), a Walker, chained up in his house and
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attempting to treat her, as far as possible, as an ordinary little girl, even brushing her hair (‘Say the Word’, 3.5). His reluctance or inability to acknowledge that he has already failed to prevent her death is underlined by his reaction when Michonne uncovers his secret: trembling, he pleads, ‘Please don’t hurt my little girl.’ When Michonne stabs Penny through the head, he launches himself at her with a cry of grief and rage, and a fight ensues in which the Governor loses one of his eyes. This is a motif often symbolic of castration (Freud 2003 (1919), pp. 139–140) and therefore implies that the Governor’s failure to protect Penny has, in his own view at least, dealt a serious blow to his masculinity (‘Made to Suffer’, 3.8).

In season four, after the Governor’s community has collapsed and he is alone on the road, he encounters a family, the Chamblers, made up of two sisters, one of whom has a small daughter, and their elderly father (‘Live Bait’, 4.6). Apparently reformed, the Governor helps the Chamblers with various tasks and becomes especially attached to the little girl, Meghan (Meyrick Murphy). When the old man (Danny Vinson) dies, the Governor effectively takes his place in the family, a fitting successor to a man who likewise defines his masculinity in terms of his ability to protect ‘his girls’. He tells the Governor before he dies: ‘My girls were born, that’s when I finally figured out what it was to be a man. You know, a real man. You protect ’em, you keep ’em safe, you just try to make ’em stronger until they can look out for themselves’ (‘Live Bait’).

The Governor’s protective instincts, however, soon take a dark turn once again. His obsessive desire to keep the women and especially Meghan safe leads him to kill first the leader of a group they have joined and then his successor because he believes they are not up to the job of protecting the camp (‘Dead Weight’, 4.7). Taking control himself, he decrees that the group attack the prison occupied by Rick and his companions because he thinks it will be a safer place for them to live. Meghan’s mother Lilly (Audrey Marie Anderson), with whom the Governor has started a relationship, does not approve of the plan but he insists, ‘I’m gonna keep you alive. I’m gonna keep Meghan alive. The only judgement on me I care about is whether you two are still breathing’ (‘Too Far Gone’, 4.8). But not only is the attack on the prison a failure, leading to the Governor’s own death, Meghan dies too, bitten by a Walker, an event that might not have occurred had she and her mother not been left alone at the camp while the attack took place (‘Too Far Gone’). It could not, therefore, be made clearer that the Governor’s protectionist impulse is not a healthy one, particularly since its growth is accompanied by an obvious deterioration in his sanity: after he has killed Martinez (Jose Pablo Cantillo), the first leader of the group, he begins crying, shaking and muttering to himself (‘Dead Weight’).
In the case of Shane too, the same impulse is thoroughly pathologized. Despite his constant insistence that he is the person who does the most to keep Rick's group, and especially Lori and Carl, 'safe', Shane's actions in the name of this cause become increasingly erratic and violent, including the murder of two innocent people.\(^6\) That his motivation is really, at bottom, a craving for power is betrayed not only by Shane's desire to usurp Rick's position as group leader but by his sexual assault on Lori when she rejects his drunken declaration of love in 'TS-19' (1.6).

Finally, in 'Better Angels' (2.12), Shane leads Rick out onto an open plain under the moonlight and tries to force him into a Western-style gunfight for possession of Lori and Carl. Rick calms Shane, suggesting they lay down their guns and walk home together, but then suddenly stabs him in the chest. This scene makes for an interesting comparison with Shane since, in the film, Shane and Joe also fight (also by moonlight, though with fists rather than guns and knives), but in this case because both wish to be the one to confront an unscrupulous rancher (Emile Meyer). Thus, Rick and Shane's confrontation makes clear something that was always implied by Shane's name. Namely, Ladd's character represents the ideal of masculinity to which Bernthal's aspires or even believes he already embodies: the honourable cowboy who is willing to die to defend his community. This belief is clearly undermined, however, by his appearance and behaviour at this point: his face smeared with blood (from a self-inflicted wound designed to cover up an earlier murder) as he rants at Rick, slurring his words slightly, 'I thought you weren't the good guy anymore, Rick ... Even right here, right now, you ain't gonna fight for 'em? I'm a better father than you, Rick. I'm better for Lori than you, man. It's 'cause I'm a better man than you, Rick.'

A fundamental difference between Ladd's Shane and Bernthal's, which this scene reveals, is that the former knows, as do most 'Westerners' in classical Hollywood (see Warshow 2004, p. 38), that he does not belong in the homesteader's settlement. The type of masculinity he represents is not appropriate in a 'civilized' community. After he has killed the rancher and two of his henchmen, he tells Joe's son, '[T]here's no living with a killing ... Right or wrong, the brand sticks. There's no going back' and immediately leaves town.

\(^6\) A third example of a male character whose protection impulse is pathologized is Abraham (Michael Cudlitz). Flashbacks in the episode 'Self Help' (5.5) show him savagely beating a man to death and then telling his wife and children, who are visibly terrified of him, 'You're safe now'. His wife subsequently runs away with the children, leaving Abraham a note that reads, 'Don't try to find us', but he later finds their bodies, eaten by Walkers. As with the Governor and Meghan, it is Abraham's very obsessive desire to keep his family safe that leads to their deaths.
Bernthal’s Shane, on the other hand, does not acknowledge this fact – he firmly believes that his version of masculinity is exactly what his community requires in a leader – and he must therefore be forcibly removed by someone else: Rick. However, in doing so, Rick effectively ‘brands’ himself as Shane’s double, a point to which we shall return later.

Heroes or savages?

The extreme behaviour of both Shane and the Governor leads one to wonder whether the series aims ‘to caricature or criticize regressive paternalistic desires’, as Mathias Nilges suggests is the case with shows such as *Lost* and *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) (2010, p. 30). Nor are these two the only male characters in *TWD* who assert their authority (or try to) in a deplorable way. There are also the domestic abuse perpetrators Ed (Adam Minarovich) and Pete, the violently racist Merle (Michael Rooker) and the sadistic Negan (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), who is both the show’s most powerful antagonist to date and its most overtly patriarchal.

Negan not only has a very large group of followers, the Saviors, and a harem of ‘wives’ – women he has taken from other men – but he is intent on making the (mostly male) leaders of every other group in the vicinity subservient to him through a combination of humiliation, threats and violence (we learn in ‘Swear’ (7.6) that the Saviors killed all the men in a community that tried to rebel).

All these examples combine to indicate the potential pitfalls of a society in which power is arbitrarily granted to whichever man is most authoritarian or forceful. A revealing moment comes early on, in ‘Bloodletting’ (2.2), when T-Dog (IronE Singleton), wounded and feverish, confides in Dale (Jeffrey DeMunn) his suspicions that the ‘two good old boy cowboy sheriffs’ (Rick and Shane) and the ‘redneck’ (Daryl) have not let them join the search for Sophia because they are black and old, respectively, and therefore perceived as the ‘weakest’. He even worries that, as ‘the one black guy’ in the group, he is in danger of being ‘lynched’. T-Dog’s fears do not appear to be founded, but they do serve to underline the problems inherent in a social structure in which ‘cowboys’ – with the narrow definition of white masculinity that word implies – are automatically in charge. T-Dog’s comment also makes it clear that, in *TWD*, the cowboy is far from the idealized figure he was in much post-9/11 media discourse.

As in many Western narratives, there is an increasingly thin boundary separating the ‘heroes’ of *TWD* from the ‘savages’, the Walkers, a development
symbolized by the fact that by the end of the second season people no longer need to be bitten or scratched by a Walker to become one when they die. According to Slotkin, the quintessential hero of the Frontier Myth is the ‘man who knows Indians’ (1998, p. 16). ‘[T]he border between savagery and civilization runs through [the] … moral center’ of such figures, and they must typically undergo ‘a spiritual or psychological struggle … to … suppress the savage or “dark” side of their own human nature’ (ibid., p. 14). Shane and the Governor are the most obvious examples of this kind of character in TWD: the former is shown struggling with ‘dark’ impulses as early as the fifth episode, ‘Wildfire’, when he contemplates shooting Rick in the back. The Governor too, although predominantly a ‘bad’ character, is also seen struggling – ultimately unsuccessfully, of course – to suppress that side of himself after he meets the Chamblers, burning an old photograph of himself and adopting a new name (‘Live Bait’).

However, even the series’ ostensible hero, Rick, ultimately follows a similar path to that of his former colleague, Shane. As the casting of Andrew Lincoln, whose star persona prior to TWD carried associations of ‘sweet blandness’ (Rosenberg 2010), implies, Rick is initially a kind and sensitive character. He is willing to risk his life to rescue Merle, a man who had earlier attacked him and his companions (‘Tell It to the Frogs’), while in ‘Bloodletting’, after Carl has been accidentally shot during the search for Sophia, Rick cries and blames himself for having allowed the boy to accompany him, earning him a pep talk from Shane about how he needs to be stronger.

Gradually, though, Rick’s compassionate nature is eroded, a trajectory which can be mapped in terms of his relationship to Western imagery. The first episode of the show visually establishes Rick as a cowboy by having him ride into a deserted Atlanta on a horse, wearing his ten-gallon hat and with a pack of guns slung across his back (see Figure 1.1) (‘Days Gone Bye’). However, this impression is quickly undercut when he encounters a large group of Walkers who pull down his horse and eat it, forcing Rick to scramble into a tank for safety, losing his hat and guns in the process. His cowboy image is further debunked by Glenn, who, after rescuing Rick from the tank, ironically remarks, ‘Nice moves there, Clint Eastwood. You the new sheriff, come riding in to clean up the town?’ (‘Guts’).

Yet, by the end of the second season, though Rick no longer wears his deputy’s uniform, his behaviour has become much closer to that of a hard-bitten Westerner. In ‘Nebraska’, he shoots dead two strangers in an old-fashioned bar,
reminiscent of the archetypal Western saloon, by being quickest on the ‘draw’ (a low-angle shot of Rick’s hand on his holster underlines the scene’s affinity with the classic Western shoot-out) and afterwards has to be prevented by Glenn from shooting their unsuspecting companions (‘Triggerfinger’). Another key moment in Rick’s transformation is, of course, his murder of Shane in their Western-style confrontation described above; after this, Rick’s behaviour becomes evermore ruthless, to the point where, in season six, he is willing to murder dozens of Saviors while they sleep (‘Not Tomorrow Yet’, 6.12).

As was the case with both Shane and the Governor, Rick’s motivation for violence is the protection of his community. The strangers in the saloon were insisting menacingly on being allowed to join the group, Shane had become an unstable and dangerous element within it and Rick sees his decision to murder the Saviors not only as the fulfilment of a deal his group has struck with another community, The Magnificent Seven-style (John Sturges, 1960), to defend them but as a pre-emptive strike to protect his own (‘Sooner or later, [the Saviors] would have found us’, he declares (‘Not Tomorrow Yet’)). In this way, as Hassler-Forest observes about the graphic novels on which the series is based, TWD ‘follows the model of the archetypal American western’ in that it features a ‘settlement … on the frontier between civilization and savagery’ whose ‘state of harmony’ is preserved through ‘purifying violence’ on the part of the hero, who thereby simultaneously reinforces his own ‘patriarchal power’ (2011a, p. 346).

In the case of the comics, Hassler-Forest believes that the authors go out of their way to draw attention to ‘the violence of patriarchal power that underlies [Rick’s] position as the group leader’ (ibid., p. 348). He analyses a sequence in issue seventeen in which Rick attacks a murderer, ‘pound[ing] away at his face with his fists’ with a ‘violence [that] … is unusually intense’ even within the context of the zombie genre and then declares to the rest of the group, ‘You kill, you die’ (ibid., p. 349). Reading this pronouncement in Lacanian terms, Hassler-Forest argues that it ‘perpetuates the figure of the father as symbolic Law-Giver, his power over others sustained by the threat of violence, which is often implied, but which is in this case quite explicit’ (ibid., p. 352). Although this incident does not take place in the television series, after his murder of Shane, Rick makes a speech to the group which serves to ‘inscribe … his symbolic authority’ (ibid.) over them in a similar way to that described by Hassler-Forest:

I’m keeping this group together, alive. I’ve been doing that all along, no matter what. I didn’t ask for this. I killed my best friend for you people, for Christ’s sake … Maybe you people are better off without me … Go on! You can do better? Let’s see
how far you get. No takers? Fine, but let’s get one thing straight: you’re staying, this isn’t a democracy anymore. (‘Beside the Dying Fire’, 2.13)

The relationship between Rick and Shane is in itself reminiscent of many classic Westerns (besides Shane), about which Pye observes, ‘the hero and villain [may be] constructed as versions of each other … : two sides of the same coin’ (1996b, p. 170). For example, in the films of Anthony Mann, they are often ‘linked by blood and/or background’ (ibid.), as are Rick and Shane: former colleagues and best friends since high school. Furthermore, ‘in the film’s symbolic structure, the villain can become a projection of forces within but repressed by the hero’ (ibid.). The paradox that emerges here, of course, is that if the villain represents the hero’s ‘dark’ side, the savage masculinity within, by killing him, the hero only further ‘identifies himself with the man he kills’ (ibid., p. 172).

Thus, the line dividing Rick from Shane grows ever thinner, while the line dividing Shane from the Walkers is already so thin that he turns into one as soon as he dies, even though he has not been bitten: the first character to whom we see this happen (‘Better Angels’). A clear demarcation between ‘the Good [Rick], the Bad [Shane] and the Undead,’ as set out in the T-shirt design in Figure 1.4, does not actually exist. In this way TWD follows the path of many post–Second World War Westerns, which increasingly turned away from the ‘straightforward’ representation of morality and identity found in their predecessors, where (metaphorically if not always literally) ‘heroes wore white hats and villains wore black’ (Pye 1996a, p. 16).

Prisoners of masculinity

In many of these later Westerns, Pye argues, the strain of having to make impossible choices – such as being obliged to kill a relative or former friend for the good of the community – takes its psychological toll on the protagonists. They are ‘prisoners of a masculinity coded in hopelessly contradictory ways’ (1996b, p. 173), expected to be both independent rangers of the wilderness, loyal only to their male comrades, and civilized protectors of a settlement. From the late ‘forties onwards, Pye believes, these ‘[c]onflicts always present in the Western hero are recast in much more problematic terms, as psychic division, neurosis, flawed moral identity’ (1996a, pp. 15–16).

As David Lusted notes, some Westerns focus so strongly on their heroes’ ‘emotional conflicts’ (1996, p. 66) – usually caused by crises in masculine identity
and reflected in moments of ‘spectacle and … visual excess’ (ibid., p. 65) – that they can be categorized as ‘male melodramas’. TWD could well be viewed in this light: it contains an abundance of spectacular and/or visually excessive moments, often provided by the teeming, gory Walkers, as well as numerous instances of ‘exces[ses] … of drama [and] emotion’ (Lusted 1996, p. 65). One of these is Rick’s lengthy rant in ‘Beside the Dying Fire’ (only a small part of which is cited above), which makes explicit that he is suffering from the ‘emotional damage’ typical of the late Western hero (Pye 1996a, p. 18). His mental disturbance had, however, already been visually signalled some while earlier in an extreme (‘excessive’) canted angle shot of him pointing his gun at the men he had just shot in ‘Triggerfinger’.

In season three, which takes place eight months after Shane’s murder, Rick is still wracked with guilt about it and has become estranged from Lori. Rick never explains to his wife why he is acting coldly towards her, but she voices her suspicions to Hershel: ‘He hates me. He’s too good a man to say it but I know. I put him and Shane at odds. I put that knife into his hand’ (‘Seed’, 3.1). Thus, Rick’s behaviour corresponds with an observation made by Pumphrey, Tompkins and others that the Western hero ‘frequently forms a bond with another man – sometimes his rival, more often a comrade – a bond that is more important than any relationship he has with a woman’ (Tompkins 1992, p. 39), and that consequently the female characters may be represented as a hindrance or threat to that bond (Pumphrey 1996, p. 53).

Rick and Lori do not reconcile before the latter’s death in ‘Killer Within’ (3.4), which occurs, ironically, in childbirth and therefore is not caused by any outside threat from which Shane or Rick might have protected her. Her loss pushes Rick into outright insanity. In a sequence which combines both emotional and visual excess, he embarks on a frantic Walker-killing spree (‘Say the Word’) and then imagines a series of telephone conversations with various members of the group who have died, including Lori. Crying, he tells ‘Lori’ that he loved her but that he ‘couldn’t put it back together’ because he was too busy trying to keep her, Carl and the baby alive (‘Hounded’, 3.6). Although he has already become

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8 There is also a link here with TWD’s status as horror. Linda Williams famously suggests that horror, along with the other ‘body genre’ (1991, p. 3), pornography, can be included ‘under the extended rubric of melodrama, considered as a filmic mode of stylistic and/or emotional excess that stands in contrast to more “dominant” modes of realistic, goal-oriented narrative’ (ibid.). Furthermore, Stacey Abbott makes the point, in relation to TWD, that horror can be used to accentuate emotional impact, powerfully capturing ‘the horror of grief’ (2012). This observation is also applicable to numerous moments in Supernatural, another series that blends horror and melodrama, which will be discussed in the next chapter.
a less-than-sympathetic character by this point, Rick’s extreme suffering and deteriorating mental state show that the power and responsibility that were foisted upon him have had harmful consequences for him too.

Rick’s erratic behaviour continues throughout the third season. He imagines he sees Lori everywhere, causing him to roam around outside the prison where the group now lives (a fitting setting, given Rick’s status as a ‘prisoner of masculinity’), ‘wandering in crazy town’, as Glenn puts it (‘Home’, 3.10). He also starts to explicitly reject the responsibility he feels to keep the group safe. In ‘The Suicide King’ (3.9), he tells two newcomers they can’t stay at the prison, citing the names of other late arrivals who have been killed and declaring, ‘I can’t be responsible.’ Hershel tries to change his mind, but Rick imagines he sees Lori, symbol of failed protection, again and begins shouting crazily (whether to Lori or the newcomers is unclear, perhaps both), ‘I can’t help you! Get out!’

Hershel tries to pressurize Rick into maintaining his position of authority on several occasions, shouting at him in ‘I Ain’t a Judas’ (3.11) that he has to ‘own up’ to his pronouncement that the group is not a democracy because he, Hershel, has put his family’s life into Rick’s hands. Nevertheless, after having to grapple with yet another impossible decision – whether or not to hand Michonne over to the Governor in exchange for the rest of the group’s safety – Rick revokes his claim to sole authority in the penultimate episode of season three: ‘What I said last year, … it can’t be like that … What we do, what we’re willing to do, who we are: that’s not my call … This is life and death. How you live, how you die, it isn’t up to me. I’m not your Governor … We stick together. We vote’ (‘This Sorrowful Life’, 3.15). This decision has an immediate beneficial effect on his mental health as, in the final episode of the season, he welcomes a group of refugees from the Governor’s community to the prison. As they arrive, Rick casts an anxious look up to the gantry where his imaginary Lori has often stood, but she is no longer there (‘Welcome to the Tombs’, 3.16).

However, this respite is only temporary, as, in later seasons, most other characters continue to treat Rick as a leader, and he continues to swing back and forth between disavowing his leader status, insisting decisions should be put to a vote instead and acting in an extremely authoritarian way, sometimes psychotically so, but always motivated by a desire to keep others safe. For instance, in ‘Try’, after a fight with Pete (caused by Rick’s desire to protect Pete’s family), Rick, covered in blood and waving his gun, shouts at the citizens of the town where his group are staying, Alexandria, that they need to become more aggressive in order to survive. ‘Your way is … gonna get people killed … And I’m
not gonna stand by and just let it happen', he rants, finally obliging Michonne to punch him in the head to silence him.9

On one hand, then, _TWD_ is concerned with exploring the potential negative psychological effects on men of having to conform to received models of masculinity. It also deals with the question of how these models are perpetuated, largely through the character of Carl. As Carl grows up – he is around ten in the first season and, although the amount of time that passes within the show's diegesis is never entirely clear, he seems to have reached his mid-to-late teens by the time of his death in season eight – he struggles with similar concerns to his father about protecting people and the acceptable use of violence but with the added worry of whether he is living up to what Rick expects of him.

Carl starts copying the behaviour of his father and that of his surrogate father Shane early on in the show: in 'Secrets' (2.6), Carl (wearing Rick's ten-gallon hat, signifier of cowboy masculinity) pleads with his parents to allow Shane to teach him to use a gun because 'I want to look for Sophia and I want to defend our camp.' Though Lori is reluctant, the men acquiesce to Carl's requests and he becomes not only a crack shot but also, for a time, harder hearted than Rick: in the final episode of season three, he shoots dead a terrified young boy who was lowering his weapon ('Welcome to the Tombs'). His mother blames her son having become a 'cold person' on Rick's not spending enough time with him ('Nebraska'), whereas in fact it seems to be in a large part due to his having _too much_ influence. In 'Better Angels' Rick positively pressurizes Carl to share his responsibilities, giving him a gun and telling him, 'I need you. No more kids' stuff', and, accordingly, the boy thereafter becomes the leader of the group when his father is away.

As with Rick, Carl's growing sense of responsibility for his family and the rest of the group is the impetus for him to carry out actions that he finds traumatic. Most notably, in 'Killer Within' he insists that it should be he who shoots his dead mother in the head to prevent her from becoming a Walker, remembering

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9 The fact that here it is a woman who stems a man's overabundance of words, and in such a violent way, is interesting to consider in the light of my earlier comments about the presentation of _TWD_’s post-apocalyptic world as a place in which men may find respite from women and their words. Michonne's action is certainly not out of character – she has been one of the show's toughest female characters since her introduction at the end of season two, her uncompromising attitude towards men signalled by her keeping of her dead boyfriend and his friend as captive, mutilated Walkers because they were responsible for the death of her son – and may be seen as further evidence of _TWD_’s gradually improving gender politics. However, it should also be noted that the punch is not indicative of any kind of rebellion against Rick on Michonne's part. On the contrary, she explicitly states in the following episode, 'Conquer' (5.16), that she did it for his own good and thereafter continues to be a loyal member of his group, later becoming his lover.
(in voice-over/flashback) his father’s lecture about ‘no more kids’ stuff’ just before he does so. Eventually, in season four, the pressure that Carl feels to emulate Rick and be a ‘man’ rather than a ‘kid’ becomes too much and, in ‘After’ (4.9), he has something of a breakdown. Finding himself alone with Rick after a battle, at first Carl aggressively tries to outdo his father in terms of the number of Walkers he kills and the amount of food he collects. Then, when the injured Rick falls unconscious, Carl boasts, ‘I can take care of myself. You probably can’t even protect me anyways.’ But later, when Carl believes Rick has died and turned into a Walker, his confidence crumbles (the hat tellingly no longer on his head) and he can’t bring himself to shoot his father. ‘I can’t. I was wrong. Just do it [i.e. kill him],’ Carl sobs, as mournful strings music heightens the melodrama of the scene.

From this point on, Carl becomes more compassionate and merciful, a change perhaps linked to his comment to Michonne in ‘A’ (4.16) that he believes Rick wants him to be ‘a good man’. However, it is made clear that he continues to bear a strong sense of responsibility to protect others; for example, in ‘Conquer’ (5.16), he implores his father to convince the people of Alexandria that they need Rick and his group to protect them. Furthermore, although Carl is, in these later seasons, less prone to resort to violence than Rick, in the final episode of season six, ‘Last Day on Earth’ (6.16), he shows that, like his father, he is capable of acting in a very authoritarian manner in the interests of keeping others (specifically women) safe. He refuses to let Enid (Katelyn Nacon), a girl of around his own age with whom he has had a flirtation, accompany him and a group of adults on an expedition to another community because of the threat posed by the Saviors. When Enid, who has frequently ventured outside Alexandria alone, insists, Carl (wearing Rick’s hat again, as he usually does) pretends to give in but then shuts her in a cupboard.

Female complicity and failed leadership

Although Enid is frustrated by Carl’s actions, banging on the door of the cupboard and shouting, ‘Carl! Damn it!’ she does not seem to resent him for them, as she subsequently asks, ‘What happens if you don’t come back? How am I supposed to live with that? What the hell am I supposed to do?’ This kind of female willingness to submit to male authority is found throughout TWD but especially in its first few seasons. In fact, the scene between Enid and Carl just described is
somewhat reminiscent of a scene in the first episode in which Shane forbids Lori from leaving their camp alone. At first she sulkily mutters, ‘Yes, sir’, and storms off, but Shane follows and lectures her about her duty as a mother and she is soon mollified, mumbling, ‘I’m a good mom’ before pulling Shane in for a kiss.

Lori is probably TWD’s most extreme example of female passivity. Although, as mentioned above, she is perfectly capable of defending herself in an emergency, she continually promotes traditional gender roles and encourages the men in their patriarchal behaviour. For example, in ‘18 Miles Out’ (2.10), she reprimands Andrea (Laurie Holden) for standing watch over the camp instead of helping with domestic tasks, telling her, ‘The men can handle this on their own. They don’t need your help’, while a flashback to before the apocalypse in ‘Bloodletting’ sees her complain to a friend that Rick is too ‘reasonable’ and never ‘yell[s] at [her]’. However, in the early seasons, most of the other female characters in the central group are also at least willing, if not keen, to conform to the essentialist status quo. For instance, in ‘Judge, Jury and Executioner’, when the group is debating whether or not to execute a prisoner, none of the women express a strong opinion – not even the feisty Andrea, who used to be a civil rights attorney – apart from Carol who protests, ‘You can’t ask us to decide something like this. Please decide, either of you [Dale and Rick], both of you, but leave me out.’

In later seasons, as noted earlier, the surviving women of the central group become more adept at fighting and less passive. Carol in particular becomes one of the group’s most capable and ruthless warriors (her transformation, in some respects, forms a parallel with Rick’s), and new tough female characters, such as Michonne, Sasha and Rosita (Christian Serratos), are gradually introduced. One might even be tempted to speculate that this was a deliberate strategy on the part of the writers to staunch the deluge of feminist criticisms aimed at the show’s early seasons. Nonetheless, there are still problems to be found in the representation of some of its tough women (and, indeed, while the flow of blogs and articles denouncing the programme’s sexism has certainly slowed, it has not stopped altogether; some later examples include Century (2015), Cole (2015), VanDerWerff (2015), Hayes (2016), ‘Laura’ (2017)). Even Carol, while certainly a nuanced and fascinating character, does not perhaps fully deserve the accolades recently heaped upon her by some feminist critics and bloggers (see, e.g., Cohen (2016), Eddy (2016), G. (2016)), since she conforms to the common media stereotype of violent woman characterized by Sjoberg and Gentry as the ‘mother’. According to Sjoberg and Gentry, the ‘mother’ is a woman whose violence springs from
'a need to nurture … ; motherhood gone awry' (2007, p. 13). It becomes especially obvious that this description is applicable to Carol – who, like many of Sjoberg and Gentry’s ‘mothers’, has lost her actual child, Sophia – towards the end of season six, when she exiles herself from Alexandria, leaving a note that reads: ‘I love you all here … and I’d have to kill for you. And I can’t. I won’t’ (‘Twice as Far’, 6.14) (her boyfriend Tobin (Jason Douglas) has already described her as ‘a mom to most of the people here’ in a previous episode (‘Not Tomorrow Yet’)).10

Another issue that continues to cast doubt on the show’s feminist credentials, and one that is central to my argument here, is that women very seldom hold leadership positions and, when they do, they do not hold onto them for long. During seasons one to six, around fifteen groups or communities of survivors are introduced, but of these only two have female leaders: the Atlanta hospital controlled by police lieutenant Dawn Lerner (Christine Woods) and Alexandria, which is initially headed by former congresswoman Deanna Monroe (Tovah Feldshuh).11 In Dawn’s case, it is immediately established that her grip on power is tenuous: soon after a young girl from Rick’s group, Beth (Emily Kinney), is brought to the hospital, a boy who works there (Tyler James Williams) informs her that Dawn is ‘in charge, but just barely’ (‘Slabtown’, 5.4). Dawn turns a blind eye to the brutal behaviour of the mostly male police officers nominally beneath her because she fears they might overthrow her, as they did their previous leader (‘You don’t know how fragile this thing is’, Dawn herself tells Beth in a later episode (‘Crossed’, 5.7)). That the hospital is really under emphatically male domination is made clear by the strong implication that one of the male officers, Gorman (Cullen Moss), rapes female patients, and Dawn, as Beth puts, ‘let[s] it happen’ (‘Slabtown’).12 Dawn’s ‘fragile’ leadership (and life) comes to an end just

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10 Sure enough, Carol is drawn back into the fight with the Saviors at the end of season seven, after learning that they have killed several Alexandrians (‘Bury Me Here’, 7.13).

11 Two further female-led groups appear in season seven, Oceanside and the Scavengers (although the Saviors have killed all the men in Oceanside, so it is possible that they had a male head before this occurred). These two leaders turn out to be cowardly and treacherous, respectively: the former, Ntania (Deborah May), refuses to let her people help the Alexandrians fight the Saviors, while the latter, Jadis (Pollyanna McIntosh), agrees to help but then double-crosses them, siding with Negan. At the end of the season, Maggie, formerly a central member of Rick’s group, becomes a leader when she takes control of the Hilltop Colony, its former head Gregory (Xander Berkely) having defected to the Saviors (‘Something They Need’, 7.15). She retains this position in season eight, providing a more positive model of female leadership than we have previously seen. However, her status as a leader is qualified by the fact that the Hilltop, along with Alexandria’s other ally, the Kingdom, which has a black male head, Ezekiel (Khary Payton), remain under Rick’s overall authority.

12 These rapes are not shown on screen or explicitly referred to as such (Beth calls them ‘attacks’), but, as Melissa Leon (2014) notes, the implication is unmistakable, especially when Gorman forces a lollipop into Beth’s mouth (‘Slabtown’).
four episodes after she is introduced when, having accidentally shot Beth, she is shot by Daryl (‘Coda’, 5.8).  

While Dawn is a weak leader, Deanna is shown to be a naïve and ineffective one. She wants to create a ‘civilization’ and, to this end, forbids guns and killing people (‘Forget’, 5.13; ‘Try’). This pacific way of life is presented as extremely foolish; Rick twice warns the Alexandrians against it – once frenziedly, as described above, in ‘Try’, and once more calmly in ‘Conquer’ – and his warnings later prove to be justified, as Alexandria is invaded first by a gang in ‘JSS’ (6.2) and then by Walkers in ‘Heads Up’ (6.7). At the end of ‘Conquer’, Deanna implicitly accepts the validity of Rick’s argument when she orders him to kill Pete, who has just murdered her husband. This moment, which occurs shortly after Maggie has made a speech in Rick’s favour in which she describes him as a ‘father’ and all the residents of Alexandria as a ‘family’, marks the symbolic transfer of power to the patriarchal figure of Rick (this presumably being one of the ‘conquests’ to which the episode title refers).

After these events, Deanna seems to lose faith in her own judgement, deferring to Rick’s opinions and asking his advice on how to make Alexandria safer (‘First Time Again’, 6.1) before finally declaring, ‘They [the townspeople] don’t need me, Rick. What they need is you’ (‘Now’, 6.5). Furthermore, when crises occur, she refuses or fails to get involved in them, her helplessness and disconnection from reality vividly conveyed by a sequence in ‘Now’ in which a track-in to her stunned face as she stands on top of a watchtower is accompanied by menacing, slowly pulsating music. This is intercut with a shot of the road outside Alexandria, from Deanna’s point of view, on which a huge herd of Walkers is staggering into view. A second cut, to a closer shot of the road, shows Rick running ahead of the Walkers in slow motion, shouting, ‘Open the gate now!’ but his words are muffled and distorted as the music becomes louder and faster. Deanna turns her head to watch Michonne and Maggie open the gate to let Rick in, then, having descended to the foot of the tower, continues to watch passively as they close it again. Further intercutting between her shocked face and slow-motion shots of the Walkers outside, their growling muffled and distorted, emphasizes that she is still in a daze.

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13 Daryl’s shooting Dawn can be seen as a reaction to his having failed to rescue a second young girl; he had been searching for the missing Beth for some time, just as he did for Sophia.

14 Deanna is in fact willing, like Dawn, to turn a blind eye to male violence as long as it happens behind closed doors: she tolerates Pete’s beating his wife and sons because he is a surgeon and therefore useful to the community (‘Try’).
Only just before her death does Deanna become more proactive: during the Walker invasion, she shoots several of them, including one that is advancing on Rick, but then gets bitten. Later, dying, she holds a gun up to her own chin, before changing her mind and shooting several more Walkers instead (‘Start to Finish’, 6.8), apparently finally having learnt from Rick how to be aggressive rather than passive. After Deanna’s death, Rick tells Carl he wants to build the ‘new world’ she envisaged (‘No Way Out’, 6.9), but the threat posed by the Saviors distracts him and he is soon concocting new battle plans instead (‘Not Tomorrow Yet’).

Ultimately, Deanna’s purpose in *TWD* seems to be to function as an embodiment of all the things which, according to Tompkins, are typically associated with women in Westerns: language (Deanna insists on interviewing all of Rick’s group when they first arrive in Alexandria (‘Remember’)), culture (she writes a quote from Ovid on her plans for the town (‘Start to Finish’)), civilization (suggested by not only her hopes for the future but her pre-apocalypse job) and peace (her prohibition of guns and killing). Tompkins comments that the position evoked by all of these things ‘is allowed to appear in Westerns and is accorded a certain plausibility and value’ (1992, p. 55); hence, Maggie, Michonne and Rick all earnestly assure Deanna that her plans to build ‘civilization’ are not ‘pie in the sky’ (‘Forget’), and Rick later tells Carl that he wants to ‘make [them] a reality’ (‘No Way Out’). ‘But in the end’, Tompkins continues, ‘that position is deliberately proven wrong … with … thudding guns, blood and death’ (1992, p. 55); Rick’s group’s attempts to settle down are always thwarted by yet another threat that only violence can vanquish.15

Furthermore, as Tompkins concludes, the ‘not-language’ (i.e. violent action) that the Western ‘equates with power’ is also ‘equate[d] with being male’ (ibid.). The ineffectiveness of both Dawn and Deanna helps strengthen the implication that only men are capable of successfully acting as leaders in a society of this kind, in which violence is unavoidable. Rick may have deeply questionable morals and, at times, behave in a manner that is borderline unhinged, but his warning to the people of Alexandria in ‘Conquer’ that they need him to teach

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15 Rick himself temporarily adopts a passive stance in the first half of season seven when he gives in to the Saviors’ decree that Alexandria, like the other neighbouring communities, must regularly hand over a large portion of its supplies. However, he changes his mind in ‘Heart Still Beating’ (7.8), after Negan has come into his house and held his son and baby daughter hostage, deciding to fight the Saviors instead. It is significant that at the end of the same episode, Rick reacquires a gun (they had previously all been taken by the Saviors) and that, in the following episode, there is a seemingly random Western-style close-up of this gun on his hip as he tries to recruit other groups to join the fight (‘Rock in the Road’, 7.9): after a temporary lapse, Rick has regained his cowboy masculinity.
them how to fight because they will never be safe from ‘the dead or the living’ is ultimately proved to be correct.

A melodramatic structure

About *The Walking Dead* comic, Hassler-Forest suggests that it is ‘rife with internal contradictions’ (2011a, p. 353) because, while ‘[i]ts ongoing articulation of patriarchal power … remains a cornerstone of the narrative, [it] simultaneously reveals the arbitrary and violent nature of this kind of power, thereby emphasizing its unsustainability’ (ibid.). There is a similar contradiction at work in the television series, which continually flags up the problematic nature of a world where cowboy masculinity rules – problematic both for the ‘cowboys’ themselves and for those over whom they rule – yet seems unable to envisage any solutions or alternatives.

This issue is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the final four episodes of season four. In ‘Alone’ (4.13), Daryl, who has become separated from the other members of Rick’s group, joins an all-male gang. Though they seem to have lost their motorcycles, their appearance (bandanas, beards, denim waistcoats and rose and skull motifs) marks them out as bikers, a figure whom Strick (1985) identifies as a descendent of the cowboy that is commonly found in post-apocalyptic cinema. Unbeknownst to Daryl, Rick has already encountered this gang in an earlier episode (‘Claimed’, 4.11), having overheard them fighting and torturing each other and planning to rape Michonne.

The gang leader, Joe (Jeff Kober), thinks he has found a kindred spirit in Daryl, and, when the latter makes a comment about the world having ‘f[a]ll[en] apart’, replies, ‘Fell apart? I never looked at it like that. Seems to me like things are finally starting to fall together, at least for guys like us. Living like this, surviving’ (‘Us’, 4.15). Daryl does not dispute this statement, but in the following episode, the season finale (‘A’, 4.16), he discovers the gang’s true nature when they attempt to kill Rick and rape Carl and Michonne. A bloody fight ensues which is arguably one of the series’ most extreme examples of visual excess to date. Rick, Daryl and Michonne finally triumph but only after Rick kills Joe by biting a chunk out of his neck and repeatedly, for far longer than necessary, stabs the man who was about to rape Carl, as Carl looks on in horror.

This storyline encapsulates the wider ambivalence at the heart of *TWD*, wherein, while the kind of unreconstructed, violent masculinity represented by
the bikers is condemned by the narrative, it is also implied that it is the only viable kind in the circumstances. This implication is reinforced by a series of flashbacks throughout ‘A’ to the prison where Rick’s group lived before the Governor’s attack meant they had to flee. In one, which occurs just after the fight with the bikers, Hershel encourages Rick to teach Carl to grow crops because he thinks the boy should learn another ‘way’ apart from shooting people. In another, Carl’s cowboy hat falls off as he turns over soil and Rick says, ‘Gonna have to get you a farming hat.’ These flashbacks drive home the point that for all Rick and Hershel’s hopes to the contrary, ‘cowboy’ is the most useful identity a boy can have in the world in which they live.

This sense of the characters, especially the men, being trapped in traditional, intractable social roles, despite the fact that society has ostensibly fallen apart, is another facet of TWD that marks it out as melodrama.16 Or rather, it marks it out as having a ‘melodramatic structure’ in the sense described by Deborah Thomas. She views the ‘melodramatic’ (she uses this word to differentiate it from ‘melodrama’, which is often viewed as a genre, so I will follow suit) as ‘a category which cuts across genres’ (2000, p. 29) but which is defined by its ‘reproduction of the hierarchies of power and status which structure our own world outside the films’ (ibid., p. 25). According to Thomas, ‘the vast majority of broadly melodramatic films are centred upon men’ (ibid., p. 60) and tend to mobilize ‘fantasies of … succeeding as a man in traditional terms’ (ibid., p. 46). Many focus on men who feel trapped, like Rick and Shane at the beginning of TWD, by domesticity and who fantasize about escaping from it. ‘The wide open spaces of the Western and the battlegrounds of the war film provide landscapes which’, Thomas argues, ‘may … be seen as providing possibilities of escape from both women and home’ (ibid., p. 31). But a defining feature of the melodramatic is that escape is never really possible. TWD’s central male characters may escape domesticity but they find themselves equally trapped by the obligation to perform a traditional, ‘tough’ and yet ultimately self-destructive form of masculinity. We shall encounter characters caught in similar situations in some of the programmes discussed in the next chapter, especially Supernatural.

16 I am obviously focusing on gender roles here but, as T-Dog’s comment in ‘Bloodletting’ about rednecks and lynching implies, other social hierarchies, such as those based on race and class, seem to have likewise survived TWD’s apocalypse. Several commentators have addressed the representation of race in the series (e.g. Oyola (2012), Berry (2013), Burke (2013)), though none, as far as I know, look at class.
For the moment, though, we turn to Heroes, a programme which, although it has not attracted as much online feminist ire as TWD, is nonetheless very male centred. Jennifer K. Stuller observes that many of its female characters fall prey to ‘the Women-in-Refrigerator syndrome’ (2010, pp. 158–159), a tendency noted by feminist comic book fans for the women in them to be killed, assaulted, kidnapped or otherwise ‘humiliated and/or canonically tossed aside’ (ibid., p. 145). On a similar note, Carol A. Stabile sees Heroes’ female characters, especially cheerleader Claire Bennet (Hayden Panettiere), as emblematic of superhero texts’ tendency, ‘particularly heightened … after September 11’ (2009, p. 87), to represent women as vulnerable victims, while men are cast as their ‘protectors’ (ibid.). As will hopefully become clear, I do not entirely agree with Stabile’s assessment, at least in regard to Heroes. However, it is certainly true that the series’ female characters tend to have less narrative importance than its male ones. As Stuller explains, the latter ‘embark on journeys … to heroically heal the world as they learn about themselves and their moral characters’ (2010, p. 158). We shall return to the question of precisely what they are trying to learn about themselves in due course.

Premiering four years after 9/11, Heroes arguably deals more overtly and insistently with the disaster and its aftermath than any other series under consideration in this book. As Stabile puts it, the show ‘directly reflects the fear and paranoia following from the attacks of September 11’ (2009, p. 88). This is most explicit in the first season, which focuses on the characters’ attempts to prevent an atomic explosion from striking New York City. This explosion, which is repeatedly referred to within the show as an apocalypse, is glimpsed in the second episode ‘Don’t Look Back’ (1.2) when Hiro Nakamura (Masi Oka) travels to an alternative future. He witnesses a group of buildings suddenly collapse, engulfed in a cloud of grey smoke (Figure 1.5), in a sequence which recalls the widely circulated news and amateur footage and photographs of the fall of the Twin Towers (e.g. Figure 1.6).

As described in the Introduction, even Heroes’ sequel miniseries Heroes Reborn, which was broadcast in 2015, seems preoccupied with 9/11 and the ‘war on terror’. Interestingly, however, the true perpetrator of the ‘terrorist attack’ that occurs in the first episode turns out to be an American corporation, which frames Indian scientist Mohinder Suresh through a fake video confession. As we shall see in Chapter 3, corporations are common antagonists in recent American apocalyptic television. Several of the characters see their ‘mission’ in this season to be to ‘save the world’, whereas in fact, as Daniel Linderman (Malcolm McDowell) points out, the explosion, were it to occur, would only kill .07 per cent of the world’s population (.00005 per cent of the world’s population at the time, as an apocalypse).
Season four also centres on a threat to New York, in the form of Samuel’s (Robert Knepper) plot to use his superpowers to start a giant earthquake at his funfair in Central Park. In season three, as Torsten Caeners explains, ‘parallels to the threat of terrorism and the pervading insecurity and suspicion that took
hold of U.S. culture after the 9/11 attacks are (too) strikingly obvious’ (2011, p. 134). The government sanctions a hunt for people with superhuman abilities, whom it designates as ‘terrorists’. Their treatment when captured ‘is clearly modeled after the treatment of enemy combatants in Guantanamo, complete with the prisoners’ orange outfits and the accompanying loss of all their civil rights’ (ibid., p. 135). Even season two, which concerns the threat of a global pandemic, uses New York to illustrate the potential devastating effects of the virus when Peter Petrelli (Milo Ventimiglia) and Caitlin (Katie Carr) find themselves in the deserted city in another alternative future (‘The Line’, 2.6).

New York appears repeatedly in the series, not only as a city under threat but as the sometime home of many key characters and the site of a good deal of significant action. In particular, there are many scenes that take place on New York rooftops, often featuring either spectacular vistas of the cityscape as the characters gaze out over it or, in various nightmares, prophetic visions and alternate futures, views of the skyline ablaze or in ruins. Together they indicate that the show harbours a preoccupation with New York, its buildings and their potential destruction that belies its ostensible ‘cosmopolitism’ (Chan 2011, p. 144). Consequently, it is possible to view Heroes as a ‘trauma narrative’ (Hassler-Forest 2010, p. 35) that ‘offer[s] an indirect representation of the 9/11 attacks’ and therefore may help ‘viewers to give meaning to events that were too sudden and traumatic to be understood as they occurred’ (ibid., p. 34).

Everyday heroes

Whether one believes that the prevalence of superhero narratives in contemporary Hollywood was influenced by 9/11 or not, the superhero was certainly a figure explicitly invoked by the media and cultural industries in relation to the events of that day. Faludi recounts how the press and TV news pundits repeatedly described President Bush and the (male) members of his government in terms reminiscent of ‘action toys and superheroes’ (2008, p. 47). Similar epithets were also applied to the men believed to have thwarted the hijackers of United Flight 93 (ibid., pp. 56–63) and those who had tried to help the victims of the World Trade Center collapse, particularly the firemen.

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19 Similar events take place in the season one alternative future. In ‘Five Years Gone’ (1.20), which takes place five years after the atomic explosion, the government likewise starts imprisoning and curtailing the civil liberties of people with ‘abilities’ by designating them as ‘terrorists’.
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(ibid., pp. 65–79). The women affected by the attacks, on the other hand, were widely represented as victims or ‘damsels [in] distress’ (ibid., p. 55). Faludi summarizes the press’s habitual argument regarding the firemen thus: ‘New York City’s firemen were heroes on 9/11 and they were heroes because they had saved untold numbers of civilians – especially female civilians’ (ibid., p. 79; original emphasis). In fact, Faludi points out, this was a complete distortion of the facts: the firemen successfully rescued very few people from the Twin Towers (though many firemen died in the attempt) (ibid., p. 66) and the majority of victims and survivors were male (ibid., p. 79).

Nevertheless, the mythologizing of ‘the “extraordinary heroes” of 9/11’ (Faludi 2008, p. 50) was reinforced by numerous comic book publishers including Marvel, Dark Horse and DC Comics, all of which brought out special commemorative issues in their honour (Carroll 2011, p. 52). In them, policemen and firemen performed heroic feats of ‘derring-do’ (Faludi 2008, p. 51; see also Hassler-Forest 2011b, p. 138), while the publishers’ actual superheroes – Superman, Spider-Man – were universally depicted as powerless[,] … stand[ing] in front of the smouldering mound [at Ground Zero] with their arms dangling at their sides’ (Faludi 2008, p. 51; see also Carroll 2011, pp. 53, 55, 57).

Important in all these accounts, both ‘factual’ and fictional, is the idea that the 9/11 ‘superheroes’ were in fact ‘ordinary people’ (Faludi 2008, p. 54) prompted to extraordinary action by exceptional circumstances, or ‘everyday heroes’, as Hamilton Carroll puts it (2011, p. 49). This reassurance was necessary, Faludi suggests, to counteract the ‘widespread feelings of helplessness’ (ibid., p. 55) and underlying ‘suspicion that the nation and its men had gone “soft”’ (ibid., p. 8) that the terrorist attacks had engendered in the American people.

The influence of the discourse of the ‘everyday hero’ is clearly discernible in Heroes, whose first episode opens with the following scrolling prologue: ‘In recent days, a seemingly random group of individuals has emerged with what can only be described as “special” abilities. Although unaware of it now, these individuals will not only save the world, but change it forever’ (‘Genesis’). These individuals are presented, like the ‘extraordinary heroes of 9/11’ in the special edition comic books, as a new kind of superhero, a replacement for the likes of Superman and Spider-Man. They even have their own comic book, 9th Wonders!, a record of their adventures drawn before they happen by prophetic artist Isaac (Santiago Cabrera). 9th Wonders! fan Sam (Seth Green) encourages a self-doubt-ridden Hiro thus: ‘[Y]ou give people hope that anybody, even a lowly office drone, can
make a difference. You don’t have to be a billionaire like Batman or an alien like Superman (‘The Eclipse – Part Two’, 3.11).

Negotiating contradictory identities

Not only do many of Heroes’ characters have ‘low or everyman status in terms of employment’ (Calvert 2011b, p. 25), several of the men in particular are struggling to deal with both their work and domestic responsibilities: Hiro’s father and boss (George Takei) considers him a ‘disappointment’ (‘Four Months Later’, 2.1); D.L. Hawkins (Leonard Roberts) turned to crime when he couldn’t find a job and ended up in prison, leaving his wife Niki (Ali Larter) to support their son Micah (Noah Gray-Cabey) alone and when we first meet Matt Parkman (Greg Grunberg), his career as a police officer is stalling while his relationship with his wife Janice (Lisa Lackey) is breaking down.

All of these problems stem from the characters’ failures to fulfil traditional masculine roles: Hiro’s father is adamant that his ‘only son’ must take over the family business despite the fact that his daughter (Saemi Nakamura) is more willing and competent (‘Distractions’, 1.14); D.L. admits to Micah that he ‘never felt much like a man in [his] life’ (‘The Fix’, 1.13) and Matt’s masculinity is compromised by Janice’s affair with his more successful former partner (Rick Peters), which throws the paternity of her unborn baby into doubt. However, it is not only masculine roles with which Heroes’ male characters struggle. There are several occasions on which they try, whether by choice or otherwise, to adopt traditionally feminine ones too, a task which they find equally challenging: Peter is shunned by his father (Robert Forster) for choosing to work as a nurse (‘Villains’, 3.8); when D.L. is left to look after Micah, the boy criticizes him for ‘mak[ing] bad lunches’ (‘The Fix’) and when Matt, now divorced, becomes the temporary guardian of a little girl, Molly (Adair Tishler), she reprimands him for never cooking or feeding her vegetables (‘Four Months Later’, 2.1).

20 The discourse of the ‘everyday hero’ also appears at the end of Heroes Reborn when Quentin Frady (Henry Zebrowski) tells two FBI agents that the ‘evos’ (Heroes Reborn’s word for people with ‘special abilities’) ‘couldn’t be more ordinary. The only extraordinary thing is that they got a chance to be heroes’ (‘Project Reborn’, 1.13).

21 Matt and Janice’s relationship is already in trouble, and his masculinity compromised, before he discovers her affair. She believes that he resents her career success (‘One Giant Leap’, 1.3) and is also shown nagging him for failing to perform the traditionally masculine duty of carrying out household repairs (‘The Fix’).
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Such situations correspond with the observations of several critics who note that the heroes of recent Hollywood films of various genres, including the superhero movie, are often obliged to negotiate both traditionally ‘male’ and ‘female’ identities, thereby reflecting changing gender roles in contemporary American society. For instance, Kord and Krimmer argue that early twenty-first-century American men were expected to embody elements of the ‘he-man persona’ (ibid., p. 109) promoted by President Bush but without losing the qualities associated with the ‘sensitive feminized New Man’ (ibid., p. 38) of the 1990s. Consequently, they assert, ‘the contemporary male hero’, across all Hollywood film genres, ‘is defined by his ability to negotiate contradictory identities imposed by conflicting social roles’ (ibid., p. 3; see also Godfrey and Hamad 2012, pp. 61–62).

Amanda D. Lotz, however, points out that contemporary American television does not always portray such a balancing act as an easy task. In her discussion of male-centred drama and comedy-drama series such as *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013), *Hung* (2009–2011) and *The Shield* (2002–2008), Lotz argues that the protagonists’ ‘difficulty in “being men” indicates a masculine identity crisis that derives, at least in part, from difficulty merging newly valorized aspects of masculinity, such as paternal involvement and nonpatriarchal marital relations, with residual patriarchal masculinities that require great responsibility for familial provision’ (2014, p. 84). She goes on to show how, in a great number of these programmes, the protagonists seek to support their families, and thus manage their identity crises, through illegal means. In *Heroes*, on the other hand, a science fiction/fantasy series, the act of adopting a superhero persona becomes the potential solution: a means of establishing an apparently clear-cut and traditional gender identity. Echoing Davis’s observation that the Western ‘examine[s] what it means to be a man and how one arrives at that point’, Kord and Krimmer note that superhero films ‘are centrally concerned with concepts of masculinity … [They] offer stories of masculinization, … standing up for one’s ideals and beliefs. In doing so, they define what it means to be a man, a hero, and a leader’ (2011, p. 109).

Many of the male characters in *Heroes* are extremely concerned with the question of what it means to be a ‘hero’ – in other words, how they should behave and what kind of responsibilities they have as a result of their superhuman abilities. Even little Micah, a comics enthusiast like Hiro, has strong opinions about the correct behaviour for heroes. In Peter, Sylar (Zachary Quinto) and Hiro, considering this issue almost amounts to an obsession. The latter is the
most preoccupied of all with following pre-established models of ‘heroic’ behaviour, attempting to emulate fictional superheroes and insisting that his and his companions’ actions conform to the plots of 9th Wonders.²²

Save the cheerleader, save the world?

As Godfrey and Hamad point out, many of Heroes’ male characters are ‘preoccupied with saving vulnerable innocent females from harm’ (2012, p. 166), a task that is central to their conception of themselves as (super-)heroes. Furthermore, succeeding in this role often seems to function, as Faludi’s diagnosis of post-9/11 ‘protection fantasies’ suggests, as a kind of ‘cure’ for damaged masculinity. This is most obvious in the case of Matt who, as described above, begins the series with his status as husband, father and breadwinner under threat. However, he starts to win back his self-confidence when he rescues Molly first from serial killer Sylar (‘Don’t Look Back’) and then from his own father, Maury (Alan Blumenfeld), a model of ‘bad’ masculinity who abandoned his family when Matt was young. ‘I’m a good man! I’m a good cop! I’m a good father!’ cries Matt as he escapes with Molly (‘Out of Time’, 2.7). Sure enough, by the end of season three he is reunited with Janice and her baby, protecting them from government agents (‘I Am Sylar’, 3.24) and quickly thereafter resuming his position as husband and father (‘Orientation’, 4.1).

Nevertheless, Matt remains deeply insecure about both his manliness and his ability to protect women and children, anxieties that Sylar uses to psychologically torment him. Using his psychic powers, he makes Matt believe that Janice is being unfaithful again (‘[W]e both know what Janice needs is a real man’, Sylar taunts in ‘Orientation’) and then that he has failed to rescue a kidnapped little girl (‘Are you man enough to save her?’ asks Sylar (‘Ink’, 4.2)).²³ A similar insecurity is revealed in Hiro when he fails to save waitress Charlie (Jayma Mays) from Sylar.

²² The only female character concerned with such issues is Claire, who embarks on what her mother (Jessalyn Gilsig) describes as a ‘superhero kick’ from season three onwards because, as Claire puts it, ‘There are bad people out there. I just feel like I should help’ (‘One of Us, One of Them’, 3.3).

²³ Matt is still unsuccessfully attempting to be a ‘hero’ and thereby recuperate his damaged masculinity, in Heroes Reborn: he intends to save his wife and son from another threatened apocalypse by giving them special watches that will transport them to the future. In ‘Company Woman’ (1.12), he leaves Janice a proud voicemail saying, ‘I know I have not been the best husband and/or the best father… but… I have found a way to save us all and – and still be the hero that…’ However, he is cut off at this point because an exploding electricity pylon causes him to drive his car off the road and into a river. The special watches float away, and, as Matt screams for help and sobs in frustration, the camera cranes rapidly up and away until the car is tiny, emphasizing Matt’s impotence.
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(‘Six Months Ago’, 1.10) and believes that his superpowers are depleting as a result. That this fear is connected to anxieties about his masculinity is implied by his apparently arbitrary belief that his powers will be restored if he acquires the sword (i.e. the phallic power symbol) once owned by the samurai and renowned rescuer Takezo Kensei (David Anders).

In each series of Heroes, averting the central apocalyptic catastrophe gets bound up to a greater or lesser extent with saving a girl or woman. This is most evident in the first season, where the phrase ‘Save the cheerleader, save the world’ is repeated by many different characters throughout the series and became an official tag line, appearing in network promos and on merchandise. It refers to a belief spread by a version of Hiro from the future that saving Claire from Sylar will prevent him from stealing her invulnerability superpower, thereby allowing him to become the atomic bomb that will destroy ‘the world’ (actually New York) without risk to himself. Bizarrely, however, this convoluted scenario does not actually transpire as it turns out to be Peter rather than Sylar who becomes the ‘exploding man’ (‘How to Stop an Exploding Man’, 1.23) – but we shall return to this point later.

The ‘save the girl, save the world’ motif continues in season two where Peter’s mission to prevent the outbreak of the virus is linked with his desire to rescue Caitlin from the apocalyptic future. In season three, Matt’s motivation to stop Danko (Zeljko Ivanek), the man charged with rounding up people with abilities, largely stems from his particular wish to rescue Daphne (Brea Grant), while in season four, Peter’s prophetic dream about Sylar saving Emma (Deanne Bray) (‘Close to You’, 4.14) leads the two men to Samuel’s carnival (‘Brave New World’, 4.18).

However, in none of these instances do the men in question actually succeed in saving the woman. Emma frees herself from the carnival when Sylar fails (‘Brave New World’); Daphne is shot and captured by Danko’s men (‘Trust and Blood’, 3.15) and, although Matt does rescue her, she dies of her injuries soon afterwards (‘Cold Snap’, 3.20). Caitlin, meanwhile, simply disappears from the narrative, her fate unknown at the end of season two and never mentioned again. Even Claire, whom Peter does manage to protect from Sylar in ‘Homecoming’ (1.9), did not, it turns out, actually need saving, as we learn in ‘The Second Coming’ (3.1) that (according to Sylar, at least) she can never die. Thus, Stabile’s observation that Claire ‘is surrounded by a host of would-be male protectors’ (2009, p. 88; emphasis added) is apposite: there are many men who wish to protect her but she does not, in fact, need protection.

The reasons for these failures are, from a writing and production perspective, probably varied. For instance, Caitlin’s abrupt disappearance is almost certainly a
result of season two having been truncated by the 2007–2008 Writers’ Guild of America strike. Nevertheless, there is a consistent theme of men failing to live up to their cherished superhero ideals in certain key respects that undermines the fact that they do, of course, ultimately ‘save the world’ at the end of each season. In this way, Heroes corroborates an observation made by Kord and Krimmer (2011), Nilges (2010) and others that for all his desire to save and protect people, the post-9/11 action hero in both film and television is in fact a deeply fallible figure who ‘fails more than he succeeds’ and ‘has an alarming tendency to be fatal to those who ally themselves with him’ (Ina Rae Hark on 24’s Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), 2004, p. 133).

What is more, in Heroes, the very act of trying to be a hero is shown to be potentially destructive and/or self-destructive. Peter, for example, becomes so obsessed with saving people in season four that he completely cuts himself off from the world, causing his friends to worry and others to accuse him of ‘glory-hounding’ (‘Ink’). Hiro discovers that using his superpowers is killing him (‘An Invisible Thread’, 3.25) but refuses to stop, while Mohinder and Sylar both become ‘evil’ as a result of acquiring theirs. The latter in particular makes an interesting parallel with the other male ‘heroes’ in that his development is very similar to theirs except that in his case it is overtly pathologized. Like many of the others, he is a man whose masculinity was in crisis before the show’s narrative began. Born Gabriel Gray (a name that suggests drab unremarkability), Sylar was abandoned, like Matt, by his father (Ned Schmidtke) at a young age and brought up by an overbearing mother (Ellen Greene) who made him feel inadequate and constantly pressurized him to be ‘special’. Thus, Gabriel perceives his ‘ability’, when he discovers it, as a remedy for the problem of his supposed inadequacy and ordinariness. Like both Ando (James Kyson Lee), who, at Hiro’s urging, becomes the ‘Crimson Arc’ and Micah, who becomes ‘Rebel’, Gabriel adopts a new ‘superhero’ persona, Sylar, although the only mission he sets himself is the openly selfish one of increasing his own power. That this is also a mission to recuperate his masculinity is made explicit when he stabs his mother with the castrating pair of scissors with which she threatens him in ‘The Hard Part’ (1.21).

Heroes or villains?

In addition to the characters like Sylar who have made a choice to be ‘bad’, there are many of both sexes, as Bronwen Calvert notes, who ‘struggle with aspects of the monstrous’ (2011b, p. 22); in other words, they struggle to control their
dangerous powers. In this respect, *Heroes* conforms to what Shahriar Fouladi identifies as a fairly recent (roughly post-2000) trend in film and television superhero narratives whereby ‘[i]nstances of superhero monstrosity’, an occasional feature of superhero comics since the 1930s, have become more and more common (2011, p. 162). *Heroes* represents an extreme example of this trend in that dangerous powers are not confined to certain individuals but can be suddenly acquired, lost or passed between people in a variety of ways. Peter, for example, absorbs others’ abilities simply by being close to them.

Partly as a consequence of this, it is never clear cut in the *Heroes* universe who is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’. Several characters, including Sylar, go back and forth between the two, especially during season three. Indeed, the eighth episode of the season is entitled ‘Villains’, this word replacing ‘Heroes’ in the title card (Figures 1.7 and 1.8) and thereby reinforcing the impression that the two are interchangeable.

Just as they have a tendency to agonize about the responsibilities inherent in being a ‘hero’, many characters are deeply worried about their potential to become ‘villains’. Even Sylar, we learn in ‘Villains’, once attempted suicide as a result of his murderous impulses, while in season one both he and Peter worry about the possibility that they may become the ‘exploding man’. What is more, more often than not these worries are justified: the same men (and it is always men) who save the day in *Heroes* also pose the biggest threats. Peter, who averts

![Figure 1.7 The usual title card of Heroes...](image-url)
disaster in seasons two and four, turns out to be season one’s exploding man, only prevented from inadvertently causing the ‘apocalypse’ by his brother Nathan (Adrian Pasdar), who flies him away from the Earth at the last moment (‘How to Stop an Exploding Man’). Therefore, although Nathan does ‘save the world,’ I do not agree with Godfrey and Hamad that this is presented as a ‘fulfillment of the brothers’ heroic destiny’ (2012, p. 168) because it is not achieved by saving the cheerleader but rather by removing the danger posed by Peter. Furthermore, in his turn, Nathan, a politician, is the root of many of the problems in season three, including initiating the project to round up people with abilities.

Kord and Krimmer’s observation about recent superhero films therefore seems equally appropriate to Heroes:

Bush’s much quoted tenet that you are either ‘with us or you are with the terrorists’ … has come to define the war on terror as a Manichean enterprise. Interestingly, although superhero films embrace the war rhetoric of the Bush presidency, they are marked by a refusal to invest in simple dichotomies of good and evil … [They] blur the lines between villainy and heroism. (2011, p. 88)

Indeed, in Heroes there seems to be a deliberate project underway to undermine the specific labels and dichotomies employed by the Bush administration. As Hassler-Forest comments about the roughly contemporary films V for Vendetta (James McTeigue, 2005) and Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan, 2005), the
'primary targets for audience identification' in *Heroes* are ‘characters that are defined by the authorities within the [programme] as terrorists, thereby redefining this highly demonized term from a more nuanced perspective’ (2010, p. 40).

*Heroes* ‘nuanced perspective’ extends to both sides of its ‘war on terror’, as, unlike the fascist government in *V for Vendetta* or the mostly corrupt police force in *Batman Begins*, Nathan is certainly not a straightforward villain. He believes he is ‘protecting the American people from a very serious threat’ (‘A Clear and Present Danger’, 3.14), and when he realizes that his actions have in fact endangered a lot of innocent people, including his daughter Claire, he deeply regrets them. In ‘Into Asylum’ (3.21), a drunk and depressed Nathan admits to Claire that his having flown her to Mexico to escape Danko’s clutches was actually an ‘excuse’ to avoid dealing with the larger ‘mess’ he has created. ‘I thought you were Superman’, she sobs in response, a comment that can be viewed as a subtle debunking of the ‘superhero’ image with which the media endowed President Bush and his colleagues.24

The tendency in *Heroes* for apparently heroic men, like Peter and Nathan, to in fact themselves be the source of serious problems or threats corresponds with the explanation proposed by Nilges for the ‘general crisis of the figure of the white male action hero’ in post-9/11 film and television (2010, p. 28). Nilges suggests that the reason this character ‘is portrayed as increasingly unable to avert threats to family, community, and nation’ (ibid.) is linked to the West’s fundamentally ambivalent response to 9/11. ‘We are not only scared of new attacks’, Nilges argues, ‘more importantly, we are frightened by the realization that we cannot realistically prevent attacks without risking, for example, the breakdown of the economy as an effect of re-erecting strict regulations and protective mechanisms that would contradict the logic of global trade’ (ibid., p. 26). In other words, we are all subconsciously aware that there is ‘a logical similarity between the form of subjectivity ideally suited for global capitalism and that of the terrorist’ (ibid., p. 27), which means that hunting the latter down ‘becomes an exercise in hunting down our own dark doubling’ (ibid., p. 28). ‘It is for this reason’, Nilges contends, ‘that fights against terrorism portrayed in contemporary culture must – as a general rule – be lost’ (ibid.).

24 On a metaphorical level, Nathan’s confession could also be taken to indicate that in times of conflict, politicians’ declared intention to protect or rescue women is often used as an excuse or obfuscation to avoid acknowledging or confronting the real issues. See, for example, Iris Marion Young’s discussion of the Bush administration’s use of a ‘rhetoric of saving the women of Afghanistan to legitimate its war’ in that country (2003, p. 229).
Nilges’s argument echoes that made by Jean Baudrillard in an opinion piece in *Le Monde* shortly after the 9/11 attacks. Baudrillard also views terrorism as the dark, inevitable ‘shadow’ of globalization and believes that everyone in the world unwittingly harbours a ‘terrorist imagination’ against the United States because of its enormous power (2001, p. 11; my translation). According to Baudrillard, the supreme cunning of the 9/11 orchestrators was that they ‘used the banality of everyday American life as a mask’ so that suspicion is now thrown on everyone: ‘If they could pass unnoticed, then each of us is an unnoticed criminal … and ultimately perhaps it is true’ (ibid.).

One can certainly see the influence of this kind of ‘mental terrorism’ (ibid.) in numerous post-9/11 texts that focus on enemies who are embedded in ‘ordinary’ communities or are indistinguishable from ‘ordinary’ people: televisual examples within my purview here include *Threshold*, *BSG* and *V*. In *Heroes*, though, there are arguably no real villains as such, only ‘heroes’ struggling with the dangerous sides of their own natures or bodies. In some cases, they even worry that they may inadvertently become terrorists, as does Matt after he paints prophetic pictures of himself with explosives strapped to his body and a mushroom cloud going up over Washington, DC (‘Cold Wars’, 3.17).

Commenting, like Baudrillard, on the ‘feeling of permanent, unmitigated existential threat’ which the 9/11 attacks have created (2011b, p. 135), Gerry Canavan suggests, ‘The calculated response of the media-state apparatus has been the attempt to rechannel the raw, unpredictable trauma of September 11, 2001, into a prepackaged and premythologized “9/11”’ (ibid., p. 125). Thus, while he agrees with Faludi’s memorable claim that September 11 ushers in a public celebration of the virtues of manliness and the patriarchy (ibid., p. 127), Canavan believes that this tendency – as found in popular cultural texts such as the film *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006), which he analyses – ‘is best understood as another failed attempt to shoehorn September 11 into a safe, pre-scripted narrative’ (ibid.).

One could argue that a similar motivation is at work in *Heroes*, where, for the male characters, saving women represents not only a potential means of bolstering their battered masculinities but an apparently simpler and more achievable goal than winning the battle against their own ‘dark doubling’. This in turn might be seen to reflect a wider cultural valorization of the ‘everyday hero’ as ‘an unimpeachable figure of masculine action that cuts through any ambiguity about the meaning of September 11th’ (Carroll 2011, pp. 54–55).

From the writers’ point of view too, giving characters the definable goal of saving a woman provides an apparently straightforward narrative trajectory in
an otherwise highly complex and potentially confusing show. Indeed, the success of season one’s ‘save the cheerleader, save the world’ storyline, which became so well known that the catchphrase earned an entry in the *Urban Dictionary* (2006/2009) and was used as the title of a pop song (Oliver et al. 2009), may have encouraged the writers to introduce similar elements in later seasons.

Yet *Heroes*’ attempts to ‘shoehorn’ its apocalyptic scenarios into the ‘pre-scripted narrative’ of superhero rescue stories do, as Canavan suggests, always ultimately fail. Whether this was a conscious decision on the part of the writers or just bad plotting is debatable. I am inclined to suspect the latter and the show’s plummeting ratings suggest that many other viewers did too. Nevertheless, to be somewhat more charitable towards the writers, their apparent reluctance to allow the male characters to fulfil their much-touted intentions of saving the female ones may partly have been motivated by a recognition that such narratives appear dated and sexist in the contemporary, post-*Buffy* television era. That is certainly the conclusion I draw from the numerous moments when female characters who seemed weak and in need of protection suddenly announce and/or prove that they are not. Examples include Emma escaping from Samuel’s carnival in ‘Brave New World’ (mentioned above); Yaeko (Eriko Tamura), a woman whom Hiro believes needs saving, single-handedly fighting a group of swordsmen in ‘Lizards’ (2.2) and Sandra (Ashley Crow), Claire’s apparently ditzy adopted mother, declaring that she’s not ‘some fragile creature in need of protection’, before coming up with a resourceful plan to hide a boy with abilities from some government agents (‘Exposed’, 3.18).

Whatever the reason for it, the repeated breakdown of the male-superhero-rescues-damsel-in-distress trope in *Heroes*, and its ultimate lack of impact one way or the other on the show’s central apocalyptic threats, is itself significant in that it draws attention to the artificial imposition of similar narratives onto the events of 9/11. To me, it also suggests that Godfrey and Hamad are mistaken in their contention that the series ‘partakes in a cultural restoration of American masculinity in a context, Faludi contends, shaped by self-doubt, feelings of weakness, and desperation for fictional “bellows to pump up [the American male’s] sense of self-worth”’ (Faludi cited in Godfrey and Hamad 2012, p. 168). On the contrary, the abiding insecurities of the male ‘heroes’, whether they

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25 *Heroes*’ ratings fell from an average of 14.5 million viewers for season one to 6.5 million for season four (Rice 2010).
succeed in their rescue missions or not, imply that such feelings cannot easily be dispelled and that the superhero myth is not finally up to the task with which it is so often charged of boosting beleaguered masculinity.

**Conclusion: The failure of remasculinization**

Although they debuted four years apart and belong to different genres, I hope that this chapter has brought out some important similarities between *TWD* and *Heroes*. In both, the apocalypse – impending in *Heroes*, already accomplished in *TWD* – seems to provide an opportunity for ‘ordinary’ men, who were struggling with various masculine (and sometimes feminine) roles or feeling oppressed by the women in their lives, to recuperate a traditional and ‘authentic’ form of masculinity.

Yet, in neither programme does this strategy actually succeed. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the new roles that the apocalyptic scenarios induce the shows’ male characters to adopt prove to be far more stressful than the domestic problems that had beset them previously. In particular, many of them are obsessed with the task of protecting or saving people, especially women and girls. In both shows, carrying out such a mission is often a key element of the narrative, yet it is rarely successfully achieved and this causes the men who feel responsible for the failure a great deal of distress. Indeed, the very fact that they have taken on such a keen sense of responsibility and guilt in the first place is shown to be a negative thing both for the characters themselves and for those around them.

Thus, both *Heroes* and the later and less obviously 9/11-influenced *TWD* might be said to illustrate the ‘sense of failed protection’ which Faludi suggests was a widespread feeling awakened in American men by the attacks. However, such texts also suggest that the ‘cultural smoke machine’ which was, according to Faludi (2008, p. 115), put to work to banish this anxiety is either not always successful or is being intentionally undermined. Indeed, Faludi herself observes that ‘[e]ven in the [post-9/11] films designed to restore our virile confidence, fears about the hero’s incapacity are … often on display’ (2008, p. 10). However, whether this failure of today’s male hero, both televisual and cinematic, to ‘truly protect the nation from a threat the way the [heroes] of the 1980s still could’ (Nilges 2010, p. 28) is reflective of subconscious anxieties about men’s changing social roles and the fundamentally unwinnable nature of the ‘war on terror’ is, of
course, unknowable. The lack of definitive victories may well simply be a result of contemporary Hollywood’s insatiable hunger for sequels or, even more so in the case of television, the constant need to ensure another season is a possibility. Nevertheless, either way, it is clear that these popular cultural texts do not provide the kind of unproblematic narrative of ‘remasculinization … that was much needed after the “feminization” of America on 9/11’ (Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 2).

Furthermore, as we can see from both *TWD* and *Heroes*, they do not necessarily reflect the Manichean view of Good versus Evil, ‘Hunter/Cowboy’ (Malphurs 2008, p. 194) versus ‘Savage Enemy’ (ibid., p. 193) at the heart of the rhetoric used by the Bush administration and its supporting media to define and legitimize the ‘war on terror’. The Western and superhero genres to which the two programmes respectively owe great debts seem, on a superficial level, to provide ideal vehicles for establishing this kind of simplistic binary. However, on closer examination, these genres, especially in their later incarnations, do not provide clear-cut images of good and evil any more than they do straightforward and traditional models of masculinity.

Both *TWD* and *Heroes* begin with apparently very obvious heroes and villains: the villains in the former are the abject, literally savage Walkers and in the latter cartoonish criminals such as serial killer Sylar and Mob boss Daniel Linderman (Malcolm McDowell). Yet these demarcations quickly crumble. Male characters in particular are extremely likely to become unstable, if not downright malevolent, often, ironically, as a result of the very pressure they feel to live up to the role of hero, protector or saviour. Thus, what seems to be ultimately being fought in these shows is not an external enemy but the dark side of the characters’ own natures. Everyone (or rather, every man), however ordinary, may well have the potential to become a hero in a crisis, but they equally have the potential to become a villain, Walker or terrorist.

An important difference between the two programmes, however, is *TWD’s* melodramatic status, and this I mean primarily in Deborah Thomas’s sense outlined above. The series is deeply pessimistic in outlook, providing little, if any, hope that its characters will escape either from their bleak situation or from the repressive social hierarchies that, just like the Walkers, stubbornly refuse to die. One reason for this is that the show implies, mainly through the character of Carl, that the younger generation, due to a combination of volition and parental pressure, will imitate their parents’ behaviour. In the case of *Heroes*, on the other
hand, while I would not go so far as to describe it as ‘optimistic’ in tone, it at least has several central characters that successfully rebel against overbearing or tyrannical parents and carve out their own alternative paths. In the next chapter, I shall expand my discussion of this topic, continuing to deal with the broad theme of masculinity in post-9/11 American apocalyptic television but with a specific focus on the relationships between fathers and sons.
The Prince Hal Narrative

Introducing Prince Hal

This chapter will continue to explore a theme that we touched on in Chapter 1 in relation to TWD, namely, the way that boys and young men develop the kind of masculinity that is represented as appropriate in an apocalyptic situation. In many cases, including TWD, this development is framed primarily in terms of the young man’s relationship to his father. Many recent apocalyptic texts of all media focus on fathers and their children, particularly sons: the novel and film adaptation (John Hillcoat, 2009) of *The Road*; the films *The Day After Tomorrow*, *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009); the graphic novel series *Sweet Tooth* (Jeff Lemire, 2009–2013) and the videogame *Fallout 3* are just a few examples.¹

In terms of film at least, as Stella Bruzzi (2005) and Hannah Hamad (2014) both show, this trend stretches beyond the apocalyptic into many other genres, from the romantic comedy to the Western. Furthermore, as Bruzzi points out, Hollywood’s recent preoccupation with fathers and sons is not unprecedented; it has always shown an interest in this theme, but particularly during the 1950s, 1990s and 2000s (2005, p. xv). She argues that one of the most common types of narrative in films from all these periods is that which focuses on the ‘work[ing] through [of] … a troubled, “fragile” father-son relationship’ and suggests that this is a means by which Hollywood “work[s] through” its anxieties about masculinity’ (2005, p. 158).

¹ Recent apocalyptic videogames are actually far more likely to focus on a father–daughter relationship, wherein the player typically plays a father or father figure who has to rescue or protect his daughter; in other words, they replicate the trope discussed in Chapter 1. Examples include *Dead Rising 2* (2010), *The Last of Us* (2013), the indie game *One Chance* (2010) and, as one might guess, the first ‘season’ of the *TWD* videogame (*The Walking Dead: Season One* 2012). Even in *Fallout 3* one can choose the gender of one’s character, the son/daughter figure.
In this chapter I will examine a specific sub-category of this trope, which is quite common in recent American apocalyptic television and which I will call the ‘Prince Hal narrative’. I have chosen this name because the trajectory of the father–son relationship in these programmes resembles that at the heart of Shakespeare’s *Henry* tetralogy – *Richard II* (2003d (c. 1595)); *Henry IV, Part One* (2003a (c. 1597)); *Henry IV, Part Two* (2003b (c. 1596–1599)) and *Henry V* (2003c (c. 1599)) – between Henry IV and his son, the future Henry V, nicknamed Prince Hal. I will discuss the variations on this narrative found in four programmes, starting with *Jericho* and *Falling Skies* before moving to a more in-depth analysis of *BSG* and *Supernatural*, in both of which the theme is especially central. Finally, I will briefly mention some programmes that deviate from or subvert the Prince Hal narrative in significant ways. To be clear, I am not suggesting that referencing the *Henriad* was a conscious decision on the part of any of these programmes’ writers, but simply that they narrativize the construction of masculinity within a crisis scenario in a similar way to the plays.

The Prince Hal narrative as found in the apocalyptic series typically goes something like this: the father is some kind of leader and/or warrior (in the Shakespeare he is, of course, a king) and wants his son or sons to follow in his footsteps. At least one of the sons, the ‘Prince Hal’, is reluctant to do so; he quarrels with his father and distances himself from him, often trying to do something different with his life. This alternative path is sometimes disreputable, as in the Shakespeare, where the young Prince Hal is initially seen frittering his time away in taverns and playing practical jokes in *Henry IV, Part One*, and *Henry IV, Part Two*. However, a crisis (typically, in the series, an apocalypse or apocalyptic threat, the Earl of Worcester’s rebellion in the *Henry* tetralogy) calls the son back to his father’s side and forces him into the role he had rejected, which he eventually realizes is indeed his true calling.² Often, the father will die at some point in the narrative, as Henry IV does in *Henry IV, Part Two*, leaving the Prince Hal character to take over from him.

It should be noted here that loose variations on this narrative are not only found in programmes with an apocalyptic theme. Amanda D. Lotz draws attention to numerous recent American drama series that feature young male protagonists who ‘struggle with whether they want to be part of [the] destiny’ their fathers set out for

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² This part of the narrative is somewhat different, psychologically speaking, from Prince Hal’s trajectory since he reveals in a soliloquy early in *Henry IV, Part One*, that he is only engaging in ‘loose behaviour’ (Shakespeare 2003b (c. 1596–1599), 1.2.311) temporarily so that his reformation, when it comes, ‘[s]hall show more goodly and attract more eyes’ (ibid., 1.2.317).
them (2014, p. 113), such as the eponymous anti-hero of *Dexter* (Michael C. Hall; 2006–2013) or Jax Teller (Charlie Hunnam) in *Sons of Anarchy* (2008–2014). Lotz sees this struggle as a key part of the characters’ attempts ‘to negotiate competing aspects of masculinity’ (2014, p. 106) – a concept discussed in Chapter 1 – in that their fathers typically ‘embody previous patriarchal norms’ (ibid., p. 74). As we shall see, the same claim could be made about several apocalyptic programmes. Nevertheless, what differentiates the latter and makes them more similar to the *Henriad* than those analysed by Lotz is, of course, the backdrop of an ongoing major crisis or threat.

As many commentators on the *Henriad* have pointed out, in psychoanalytic terms, Prince Hal’s trajectory corresponds quite well to Freud’s description of the Oedipus complex. According to this theory, the young boy’s early identification with his father takes on a ‘hostile colouring’ when he begins to see him as an ‘obstacle’ to the ‘sexual wishes [he has developed] in regard to his mother’ (Freud 1962 (1923), p. 22). This specific motivation for the son’s rebellion does not actually apply to the *Henriad*. In fact, Hal’s mother does not appear in it nor, as we shall see, do many mothers in the programmes I am going to discuss. More relevant is what happens when the Oedipus complex begins to subside, or rather, is repressed as a result of the boy’s fear of castration: according to Freud, it is usually replaced with ‘an intensification of [the boy’s] identification with his father’ (ibid.). At this point, the father’s authority is ‘introjected’ into the son’s ego, where it ‘forms the nucleus of the super-ego’ (Freud 1989 (1924), p. 664) (or, in Lacan’s terms, the Symbolic Father): the internalization of cultural rules and prohibitions without which society would degenerate into ‘an ever-recurring violent succession to the solitary paternal tyrant by [his] sons’ (Atkinson cited in Freud 1990 (1913), p. 177).

Robert N. Watson argues that in the *Henriad* Shakespeare creates a parallel between Hal’s repression of his own Oedipal, patricidal instincts and the English nation as a whole, which must likewise repress its rebellious urges towards the monarchy. Thus, according to Watson, the war with France in *Henry V* provides a way for Henry V to ‘safely assimilat[e] his own ‘Oedipal and … ambitious impulses’ (Watson 1984, p. 82), since France offers both ‘a manifestly exogamous woman [the French princess Katharine] toward which he can productively express his sexual desire as well as a foreign country toward which he can express the violence of political ambition’ (ibid.). However, it also serves as a means for the new king to distract his people from ‘the endless cycle of ambitious rebellion’ (1984, p. 81) that was ravaging the nation at the time: ‘busy[ing] giddy minds/With foreign quarrels,’ as Henry’s dying father advises him in *Henry IV, Part Two* (Shakespeare 2003c (c. 1599), 4.5.3109–10).
There seems to be a similar parallel at work in the recent apocalyptic texts which incorporate a Prince Hal narrative, and indeed this may help to explain why the trope occurs so frequently. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic scenarios usually envisage a world where society has already devolved, or is on the verge of doing so, into violent, primal chaos, in other words, situations in which the superego (or Symbolic Father) is under threat. By playing out Oedipal narratives, these fictions dramatize its restoration, represented as a strong paternal authority passed down from father to son.

Thus, from one point of view, at least, the Prince Hal narrative can be seen as a further manifestation of the theme explored in Chapter 1, where an apocalypse supposedly works as the catalyst for men to become more ‘manly’. It thereby reinforces the idea promoted by the Bush administration and much of the American media in the wake of 9/11 that strong male leadership, ideally coupled with decisive, violent action, is necessary in a time of crisis (Faludi 2008, pp. 46–50).

**Spotlight on sons**

Hamad believes that the many post-9/11 films focusing on fathers have just such an ideological intent. She argues that the fact that most of these characters are or become the ‘emotionally articulate, domestically competent’ (2014, p. 2) type of father idealized in the postfeminist era functions as a means of offsetting or obfuscating ‘the recidivist gender discourse of “resurgent protective paternalism”’ (ibid., p. 27) which they simultaneously embody. Similarly, Joshua Gunn, writing on War of the Worlds, suggests that ‘[t]he film cultivates a peculiar affective response in the spectator: a longing for a strong, paternal figure to restore order, unite the community and defeat the enemy’ (2008, p. 3).

Elsewhere, Hamad, drawing on Tasker (2008), describes a common theme found in post-9/11 action films, including apocalyptic ones: a focus on the ‘recuperat[ion of] failing fatherhood’ (Hamad 2011, p. 249). In these films – Hamad’s case study is also War of the Worlds – the protagonist is established as a neglectful or otherwise ‘bad’ father at the start, a set-up which ‘primes the audience for the subsequent transformation of his fatherhood through a scenario [such as an apocalypse] that will mobilize and test his protective paternal instincts’ (ibid., p. 245). Though their discussion of it is less detailed, Kord and Krimmer make effectively the same point, adding, ‘In many films, saving the diegetic world is a cinch compared with the far greater challenge of saving the
child and becoming a good father. But of course this is a false juxtaposition: many films equate saving the world with saving the child (or more to the point, the son … ’) (2011, p. 53).

There are certainly some broad similarities between the apocalyptic films analysed by Hamad and many recent apocalyptic television series. In particular, fathers are often important, while mothers are ‘marginalized’ (Hamad 2014, p. 4), if present at all. In fact, in both films and programmes, the fathers are frequently widowed and therefore endowed with a certain amount of ‘victim status’ (ibid., p. 21). However, the majority of apocalyptic TV programmes with a father and son/s at their centre differ from the films described by Hamad in an important respect: there is usually at least as much focus on the son’s troubled progress towards taking up his father’s mantle as there is on the father struggling to become a better one. This may be partially due to the fact that it takes time for a Prince Hal narrative to run its course (it took Shakespeare three plays, after all), so it is a story more suited to the long form of the television serial than to film. It is likely often also to do with the kind of audiences that the networks which fund and broadcast these programmes aim to reach. Commercial television in general usually seeks to attract a young-adult audience; A18-49 (adults aged eighteen to forty-nine) is the preferred Nielsen demographic in the United States. Thus, it follows that American series are likely to have protagonists who also fall within this age range with whom the target audience can identify and/or will find attractive.

Looking specifically at the two series on which this chapter will mainly focus, BSG and Supernatural, the former aired in the United States on Syfy (called the Sci-Fi Channel at the time) and the latter first on the WB and then on the CW, the network that replaced it in 2006. According to Dave Howe, president of Syfy from 2008 to 2016, the channel aims to target not only the young white men who are thought of as the typical audience for science fiction but also women and ethnic minorities, though it still chiefly seeks to attract people within the eighteen to forty-nine age bracket (Karpel 2012). This is reflected in BSG’s large ensemble cast, which is quite mixed in terms of gender and race but of whom the majority of members are fairly young (in their twenties and thirties), including the Prince Hal character, Lee Adama (Jamie Bamber).3 The WB, on the other hand, primarily targeted women aged eighteen to thirty-four (Petruska 2011, p. 223),

3 There are still many more white actors than those of other ethnicities, and they tend to have more important roles. An exception is Edward James Olmos, who plays Commander Adama, the ‘Henry IV’ in the show’s Prince Hal narrative, who is Hispanic. According to Howe, Hispanics are a group that the network has been specifically targeting ‘since Battlestar Galactica’ (Karpel 2012).
a demographic that the CW continues to target (CBS Corporation 2014). Although *Supernatural’s* creator Eric Kripke originally pitched the programme as one that would appeal to young men, it actually turned out to be far more popular among the network’s target audience of young women (Strauss 2014), a fact which most commentators attribute to its pair of attractive young male protagonists and the relationship between them (we shall return to this point later).

Therefore, while the programmes under discussion do sometimes elicit audience sympathy for the father characters (e.g. through their widowhood), on the whole, they more consistently and energetically seek sympathy for the sons. One of the main ways they do this is to dwell at length on how traumatic it is for them to be under so much pressure to conform to the same model of masculinity as their fathers. This is, of course, essentially a variation on the pattern discussed in Chapter 1, whereby it is repeatedly shown to be quite difficult and unpleasant for male characters to try to fulfil traditionally masculine roles. Indeed, we have already seen this particular variation at work in the case of *TWD’s* Carl, who, for all his bravado, actually finds it very stressful that he feels he has to emulate his father Rick, the leader of the series’ central group. This feeling is most clearly revealed in the episode ‘After’ when he sobs over Rick’s apparently dead body that he can’t take care of himself. Carl’s development is, in fact, a good example of the early stages of a Prince Hal narrative in that he first identifies with his father, then begins to see him as a rival – provoking the minor rebellion in ‘After’ – before finally settling into his role as Rick’s second-in-command.

**Male melodrama**

Carl crying over Rick’s unconscious body in ‘After’ is just one of *TWD’s* numerous ‘excessively’ emotional moments that mark it out, like many other Westerns, as ‘male melodrama’ (Lusted 1996; see Chapter 1). However, here, unlike in the other melodramatic scenes described in the last chapter, the audience is encouraged to feel sympathy primarily for Carl rather than his father. This is rarer in *TWD*, perhaps because Carl is below the intended age of viewer for the show (most of the DVD box sets have an 18 certificate in the UK) and therefore less of a potential figure of identification than Rick. *Supernatural*, on the other hand, is also highly melodramatic, as we shall see – in both the commonly understood sense and that defined by Deborah Thomas, which I outlined in the last chapter – but nearly always in such a way as to encourage sympathy and/or
identification with its ‘son’ characters, the two protagonists. BSG, meanwhile, is not so obviously melodramatic yet still has several emotionally charged scenes and sequences, which seem designed to create empathy with Lee Adama. That all of these programmes contain melodramatic elements is not, in itself, surprising because, as Jason Mittell points out, the melodramatic mode has become a ‘widespread facet’ (2015, p. 243) of the contemporary American television serial – or, in Mittell’s words, ‘complex TV’ (the title of his book on the subject). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the focus of the melodrama in each of these cases is the relationship between young male characters and their fathers.

Hamad is suspicious of contemporary popular cinema’s use of melodrama in relation to postfeminist fatherhood. She argues that this constitutes the co-opting of ‘a cultural form that historically has enabled the viewpoints of otherwise marginalized female subjectivities to be privileged’ (2014, p. 21) in order to ‘garner sympathy for lost male power’ (ibid., p. 26). Similarly, Mittell notes that ‘complex’ TV shows are often criticized for being ‘overwhelmingly masculine in focus and appeal’ and therefore denying ‘the traditional links between serial melodrama [i.e. soap opera] and more conventionally feminine subject matter, viewing practices, and pleasures’ (2015, p. 246). Mittell’s principal rejoinder to such critiques, which he supports with numerous examples, is that complex serials in fact tend to ‘evoke both effeminate and masculinist narrative conventions and appeals’ (ibid., p. 249). Yet, even so, he acknowledges that one of his primary examples, the apocalyptic series Lost, has a ‘central focus on male heroes coming to terms with their “daddy issues”’ (ibid.).

In the light of all this, I think it is fair to say that the programmes we are concerned with here do make an ‘affectively charged … appeal for victim status to be ascribed to … (frequently white) masculinities’ (Hamad 2014, p. 26). However, the men in question are presented as victims not because they have lost power but for precisely the opposite reason: because they want to escape the positions of power and/or responsibility passed down to them by their fathers.

As Thomas Elsaesser notes, throughout history, melodrama has functioned as a ‘way … in which popular culture has … taken note of social crises’ (1991,

4 Lost will not be discussed in this chapter because it does not contain an obvious Prince Hal narrative, though it is, as Mittell says, deeply preoccupied with the theme of fatherhood. Corroborating the point I made earlier, the majority of the central male characters are represented primarily as sons rather than fathers (Michael (Harold Perrineau) is a notable exception), for whom sympathy is indeed garnered on account of their ‘daddy issues’ (see Hassel and Chick 2011; Brookfield 2013).

5 It is outside the scope of this book to investigate the issue, but as Lotz’s work on Dexter and Sons of Anarchy, mentioned above, suggests, it is likely that this trope extends well beyond the apocalyptic into other kinds of recent American TV drama.
p. 72). For example, David Lusted argues that the late 1950s Westerns, which he sees as ‘male melodramas’, dramatize the conflicts between men of different social classes and generations at a time when ‘expectations and notions of masculine identity’ (1996, p. 66) were changing rapidly. It is possible therefore that the often-melodramatic portrayal of the father–son relationships in recent apocalyptic television series is indicative of a new crisis in masculine identity. If, as Faludi suggests, the events of 9/11 led the American media and government to pressurize the nation’s men to adopt a ‘new John Wayne masculinity’ (2008, p. 4), then these programmes imply that some younger men, at least, were reluctant to comply.

A ‘pure’ Prince Hal narrative: *Jericho*

Although I maintain that post-9/11 American apocalyptic series tend to show more of an interest in sons than fathers, there are nonetheless two which do conform fairly closely to the ‘recuperation of failing fatherhood’ model proposed by Hamad and Kord and Krimmer: *Falling Skies* and *Jericho*. Significantly, though, both also contain a Prince Hal narrative, as we shall see. As I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter, in *Jericho*, the ‘failing father’ is Robert Hawkins (Lennie James), who is impelled by a nuclear apocalypse to reconnect with his estranged family and, most importantly, take on the role of their protector.

The Prince Hal role, on the other hand, is played by the series’ protagonist Jake Green (Skeet Ulrich), thus demonstrating that this programme too places its primary focus on the ‘son’ rather than the ‘father’. His story is interesting in that it is arguably the most straightforward version of the Prince Hal narrative found in any of the programmes in my corpus because Jake does not show any discernible trauma as a result of having to take over from his father, ultimately embracing his new purpose in life with the same gusto that Henry V does the role of king.6

Again, I do not wish to talk about Jake in too much detail here, as we shall return to him and *Jericho* in general, from a different perspective, in the next chapter. However, to briefly gloss the central Prince Hal narrative, Jake starts the show as the prodigal son of the mayor of the eponymous Kansas town, who has been away in Iraq and Afghanistan for five years doing nefarious things.7 I’ll go

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6 The only thing that makes *Jericho* not entirely typical of the Prince Hal narrative is that Jake’s mother is neither dead nor otherwise absent.

7 There is a parallel here with Peter Bishop (Joshua Jackson), one of the protagonists of *Fringe*, which I will explain in the next chapter.
into exactly what in Chapter 3 but, importantly, he has not been fighting, since fighting is a major component of the ‘noble’ role he will eventually take on. To make this absolutely clear, in the pilot episode, ‘The First Seventeen Hours’ (1.1), a small boy (Mackenzie Hannigan) asks Jake if he was a soldier and he replies, ‘No, a screw-up.’

In the pilot, Jake returns home to Jericho on what he intends to be a short visit to collect an inheritance left to him by his grandfather (as we shall see, this inheritance will turn out to be symbolic as well as literal). But his father Johnston (Gerald McRaney) refuses to hand over the inheritance because he believes his son is immature and not leading a ‘productive’ life. Jake is leaving town empty-handed when nuclear attacks on more than twenty American cities force him to stay (‘The First Seventeen Hours’). Over the course of the series, Jake gradually makes amends with Johnston and, as Barbara Gurr puts it, ‘is installed at the top of the leadership hierarchy (taking his primogeniture place beside his father and brother)’ (2015, Section Five: Cowboys and Colonists). In the final episode of season one, Johnston gets shot during a battle with the neighbouring town of New Bern, causing Hawkins to remark to Jake, ‘People are going to be looking to you now.’ Johnston dies soon afterwards, but not before he has expressed regret for being so ‘hard’ on Jake and told him, ‘I’m proud of you’ (‘Why We Fight’, 1.22). In Gurr’s words: ‘[T]he fulfilment of [Jake’s] narrative of belonging not coincidentally restores patriarchal order to the town’ (2015, Section Five: Cowboys and Colonists).

The episode reinforces its emphasis on a patriarchal heritage of leadership and bravery through a series of flashbacks to Jake’s brother’s wedding six years ago. In one, Johnston tells Jake that one day he is going to become ‘the man I know you can be. The man you were born to be’, before inviting him to a male-bonding session over malt whiskey with Johnston’s own father. In another flashback, Jake’s grandfather (David Huddleston) tells a story about a general in the Second World War who replied to the Nazis’ invitation to surrender with a note reading ‘Nuts’. Back in the present day, after Johnston has been killed, Jake replies ‘Nuts’ to New Bern’s sheriff (Timothy Omundson) when he demands surrender and invokes his father’s expectation that the citizens of Jericho would ‘make a stand here to defend our home’ to rally them to fight.

Jericho’s interpretation of the Prince Hal narrative is, therefore, unambiguously triumphant. To some extent, this is probably attributable to the relatively short lifespan of the show: it only ran for one full twenty-two-episode season and a short seven-episode one. BSG, on the other hand, ran for a total of seventy-three episodes.
(not including miniseries, web-series and TV films), while *Supernatural* has run for over 250 episodes to date and is still going. Evidently, the longer-running series had more time to introduce fluctuations and ambiguities into their Hal characters’ attitudes towards assuming their fathers’ roles. Nevertheless, *Jericho*’s straightforward celebration of male military leadership, passed down from father to son, is also congruent with its generally reactionary gender politics – we shall return to this issue in the next chapter (see also Nilges (2010), Gurr (2015)).

**Falling Skies: Recuperating failing fathers and letting Hal off the hook**

The closest apocalyptic programme to Hamad’s model is, without doubt, *Falling Skies*, which is perhaps not surprising given that one of its executive producers was Steven Spielberg, the director of the film Hamad uses as her case study, *War of the Worlds*.8 *Falling Skies* establishes that parenting will be its primary focus at the beginning of the first episode, ‘Live and Learn’, which opens with a prologue narrated by many children of different ages and illustrated with children’s drawings (Figure 2.1), explaining the story of Earth’s attack by hostile aliens. ‘Now moms and dads have to fight,’ says a small boy. Indeed, in the show’s early seasons, the apocalypse is represented specifically as a threat to children because, though the aliens killed ‘grown-ups’, as a little girl says in the prologue, children are threatened with the more horrifying fate of being captured and ‘harnessed’, fitted with a spinal implant that allows the aliens to control them. ‘They say it hurts a lot’, comments another boy.

Consequently, as Paul Cantor (2012, p. 342) notes, the adult characters view the ongoing war with the aliens as primarily *about* the children: ‘We don’t want to lose any more children,’ says the vice-president (Gloria Reuben), when trying

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8 David Magill identifies a theme similar to the one described by Hamad in *Lost*, arguing that ‘becoming a better father is a signal of success and healing on the island [on which the show is set]’ (2011, p. 144). However, I would say that this statement is undermined by that fact that *Lost*’s most obvious ‘recuperation of failing fatherhood’ narrative, the initially improving relationship between Michael and his son Walt (Malcolm David Kelley), ends with the two becoming estranged once more and remaining so until Michael’s death. The dysfunctional nature of this and almost all the other father–child relationships in the show lends more credence to Nilges’s argument that while *Lost* attempts to capture a dominant structure of feeling in the aftermath of September 11: ‘… an existential anxiety that results from [the]… perceived… loss of paternalistic structures of protection and regulation, it does so in a manner that voices a strong critique of the regressive desires… to restore the lost “father”’ (2009, p. 164).
to convince an agoraphobic scientist (Robert Sean Leonard) to join the fight in ‘On Thin Ice’ (3.1/2). So, effectively, in the early seasons of *Falling Skies*, one counters the apocalypse by being a good parent, at least to the extent of protecting one’s children from harm. In season four, the emphasis shifts slightly because the alien overlords, the Espheni, begin trying to capture adults too, putting them through a painful process to turn them into alien–human hybrid slaves. However, this plan also involves a threat to children, who are rounded up and placed in ‘re-education camps’ where they are brainwashed into accepting the Espheni’s designs. Furthermore, the theme of children under threat is reiterated in the very last episode of the show, ‘Reborn’ (5.10), which opens with another montage of children’s drawings of the war, including some of those seen in the first episode.

In practice, *Falling Skies*’ focus is specifically on *male* parenting, chiefly through the protagonist Tom Mason (Noah Wyle), widowed father of three sons, but also through subplots involving other characters, such as Tom’s commanding officer, Dan Weaver (Will Patton), the widowed father of a daughter. The show’s focus on a father in his forties and his sons, particularly the eldest, who is in his late teens during the first season, makes sense in terms of its network TNT’s desire to attract male viewers aged eighteen to forty-nine (Poggi 2014). It also reflects a long-standing interest of its co-creator, Spielberg. As Hamad (2011) and Joshua Gunn (2008) both note in relation to *War of the Worlds*, he has

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**Figure 2.1** A montage of children’s drawings illustrating Earth’s invasion by aliens opens the first episode of *Falling Skies* (2011–2015).
always been preoccupied with fatherhood, particularly ‘inadequate fatherhood’ (Hamad 2011, p. 242).

In fact, the set-up of *Falling Skies* is quite similar to that of *War of the Worlds*, which is also about an alien invasion, except that the hero is middle class: an academic rather than a longshoreman like *War of the Worlds*’ Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise). Like Ray, Tom used to be a rather neglectful father, missing ‘a lot of lacrosse games’ and ‘a lot of dinners’, as he admits in ‘Be Silent and Come Out’ (3.6), before the apocalypse forces him to improve. After the death of his wife in the invasion, Tom has to learn to be an ‘emotionally articulate, domestically competent’ father to his sons and later his daughter by another woman, while also protecting them and fighting the aliens in his new role as second-in-command of the 2nd Massachusetts Militia. And, for the most part, he succeeds, playing catch with his youngest son (‘The Armory’, 1.2), attempting (albeit somewhat awkwardly) to give the eldest emotional advice (‘Grace’, 1.4), changing his daughter’s nappies (‘Badlands’, 3.3) and frequently dispensing hugs to all.

It is worth noting too that on several occasions other male characters lament – sometimes at considerable length – what bad fathers they were before the apocalypse, but that their histories are usually such that recuperation is not possible. For instance, Dingaan Botha’s (Treva Etienne) son died in an accident when Botha was talking on the phone instead of supervising him (‘A Thing with Feathers’, 4.8), while John Pope (Colin Cunningham) hadn’t seen his children for five years before the invasion because he was in prison for punching and inadvertently killing a man who nearly ran over his son while the son watched (‘Search and Recover’, 3.5). These stories serve to emphasize how important and laudable it is that Tom has seized the opportunity to become a better father that these other men were denied.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to the story of the recuperation of Tom’s fatherhood, *Falling Skies* also includes a Prince Hal narrative, though in this case it is only a kind of miniature quasi-version. It is overall a rather sentimental programme in the typical Spielberg vein and therefore doesn’t seem willing to introduce the kind of long-term tension into the close-knit Mason family that would be caused by making one of the sons carry out a true rebellion against his father. Instead, at the end of season two, Tom’s oldest son, the suggestively named Hal (Drew Roy), a loyal Scout for the ‘2nd Mass.,’ is implanted with an alien bug by his ex-girlfriend Karen (Jessy Schram), who has gone over to the side of the Espheni (‘A More Perfect Union’, 2.10). The bug makes Hal turn temporarily
‘evil’, thus keeping the threat to family cohesion firmly external, not to mention of female origin.9

At first Hal’s evilness manifests itself as dreams in which he kisses Karen, though his boots are dirty the next morning, suggesting that he really did sleepwalk out to meet her (‘On Thin Ice’). In psychoanalytic terms, this behaviour implies that Hal is acting out his unconscious desires and recalls Henry V’s description of his time spent carousing with his pleasure-loving former friend Falstaff as a ‘dream’, which he now ‘despise[s]’ (Shakespeare 2003b (c. 1596–1599), 5.5.3644) – as Watson puts it, ‘a wicked dream, in which the appetites of the id run rampant’ (1984, p. 73). Hal struggles against his ‘evil side’ and, in another moment with psychoanalytic overtones, smashes a mirror in which he seems to see him – a kind of reverse mirror stage, commonly used in film, television and theatre (including the first play in the Henriad, Richard II) to represent the fragmentation of the ego. However, Hal’s evil side wins and takes total control of his body (‘At All Costs’, 3.4). Showing once again a predilection for the pleasures of the flesh, he has sex with Hal’s girlfriend Maggie (Sarah Carter) (‘At All Costs’) and eventually takes Tom hostage (‘Be Silent and Come Out’).

Strangely, even though Tom knows that his son has been infected by an alien and that therefore it is not really Hal who has taken him hostage, he addresses him as if it is. He suggests that Hal’s current behaviour is an extension of a rebellion that has been brewing since before the invasion (though we have not seen any indication of this in the show up until this point) and that this is partially his fault for not being an attentive-enough father: ‘I should have seen this coming. I should have noticed what was going on with you. I’d love to say that it was ‘cause I was too busy with my job, but I think we both know that it started way before that. Before the invasion even. I missed a lot of lacrosse games. I missed a lot of dinners’ (‘Be Silent and Come Out’).

This speech of Tom’s, therefore, brings together the recuperation of failing fatherhood theme and the Prince Hal narrative. It also, in a way, marks the conclusion of the latter, despite the fact that we did not actually see the earlier stages – Hal’s supposed pre-invasion rebellion – occur, since Tom goes on to say that Hal’s mother always thought he would grow up to be a fighter pilot. Tom, on the other hand, echoing Henry IV’s initial lack of faith in his ‘degenerate’

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9 The majority of the most significant threats in Falling Skies are female. The head of the Espheni is ultimately revealed to be a monstrous, insect-like queen, who arrives on Earth to lay her eggs. In the final episode, she sits enthroned on the Lincoln Monument, having toppled the statue of Lincoln – an ‘evil’ matriarch attempting to replace a ‘good’ patriarch by conquering his nation – before she is destroyed by Tom’s middle son, Ben (Connor Jessup). Another significant threat is Tom’s daughter, Lexi (see note 10, below).
son (Shakespeare 2003a (c. 1597), 3.2.1952) disagreed, believing that Hal lacked the necessary ‘focus’. Now, however, Tom says, ‘After fighting next to [Hal] for the last two years, … watching [him] lead men and women into battle, [he has] realized that, as usual, [Hal’s] mom was right’ (‘Be Silent and Come Out’). This speech is thus effectively a more effusive version of Henry IV’s acknowledgement, after Hal has rescued him from the Earl of Douglas during a battle, that he has ‘redeem’d [his] lost opinion’ (Shakespeare 2003a (c. 1597), 5.4.3003).

Tom’s words are almost enough to induce Hal to overcome the bug by himself; the arm holding his gun shakes uncontrollably and later he attempts to shoot himself. Finally, though, his family and friends manage to overpower him and remove the bug. When Hal wakes up, ‘himself’ again, Tom and Maggie reassure him that he is ‘not responsible for anything Karen made [him] do’ (‘Be Silent and Come Out’). These assurances therefore contradict Tom’s earlier implication that there was an element of free will in his son’s bad behaviour, disavowing the possibility that Hal might really wish to rebel against Tom and placing all the blame squarely on Karen.10

Other apocalyptic series, however, are more willing than Falling Skies to allow the son character to rebel against or quarrel with his father of his own accord. These include the two programmes that will form the main focus of this chapter, BSG and Supernatural, to which we now turn.

God of the hunt or of healing?

Battlestar Galactica’s Lee Adama

At first glance BSG may appear to be a series that, despite its science fiction premise, is grounded in ‘gritty realism’ (Fung 2014), a quality endowed by both its dark and political subject matter and its documentary-like visual style.

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10 While Hal is quickly recuperated and exonerated from his status as a threat, the same is not true of his half-sister Alexis ‘Lexi’ Glass-Mason (Scarlett Byrne). Lexi is born in season three, but she has Espheni DNA (it is implied that Karen is to blame for this too as she held Lexi’s mother prisoner while she was pregnant) and therefore ages rapidly, becoming an adult by season four. Lexi initially sides with the aliens and kills or injures several humans including her mother, whom she nearly chokes (‘Mind Wars’, 4.5). She eventually transfers her allegiance when she discovers that the Espheni do not really want peace with the humans as they had told her (‘Drawing Straws’, 4.10). However, soon afterwards, Lexi sacrifices her life to destroy an Espheni power source (‘Shoot the Moon’, 4.12), an act which not only serves as a ‘punishment’ for her previous transgressions but prevents her from disrupting Falling Skies’ focus on the relationship between Tom and his sons in the following season. Lexi does briefly apparently return in season five, but she is quickly revealed to be a clone created by the Espheni – a development that enhances the character’s threatening connotations – and is killed by Tom (‘Reunion’, 5.9).
Yet, as I mentioned earlier, it also contains some surprisingly melodramatic moments, and by this I mean melodramatic in the literal sense of using music to underscore the drama and enhance the audience’s emotional response. Several of these moments deal with the relationship between two of the central characters, William ‘Bill’ Adama (Edward James Olmos) and his son Leland ‘Lee’ Adama. Bill is the commander of the eponymous military spaceship while Lee is a fighter pilot whose call sign, ‘Apollo’, instantly marks him out as our Prince Hal: Apollo was the name of the often rebellious son of Zeus, king of the ancient Greek gods.11 As in Falling Skies, Lee’s mother (Lucinda Jenney) dies in the initial apocalypse (Miniseries) – in this case, an attack by sentient cyborgs, the Cylons – though she was separated from Bill before that and is only ever seen in flashbacks.

At the time of BSG’s opening miniseries, Lee has hardly spoken to his father in two years. He is angry with him because Bill pushed him and his brother Zak (Tobias Mehler) to become ‘Viper’ (fighter plane) pilots, as Bill himself once was. Some of the young Bill’s (Nico Cortez/Luke Pasqualino) daring feats are shown in the prequel web-series Battlestar Galactica: Razor Flashbacks (2007) and Battlestar Galactica: Blood and Chrome (2012). According to Lee, Bill tried to indoctrinate his sons with the idea that this was the only ‘real’ or acceptable kind of masculinity, telling them, ‘A man isn’t a man until he wears the wings of a Viper pilot’ (Miniseries). Lee grudgingly entered the service temporarily to pay his way through university and was quite successful, rising to the rank of captain. Zak, on the other hand, wasn’t ‘cut out’ to be a pilot, as Lee puts it, and only got into flight school because Bill ‘pulled some strings’ (Miniseries). Consequently, Lee blames his father for Zak’s subsequent death in a flying accident.

During the time that Lee and Bill were not speaking, Bill replaced Lee in his affections with Zak’s fiancée, Kara ‘Starbuck’ Thrace (Katee Sackhoff), another Viper pilot. Not only does Bill, in his own words, ‘love … [Kara] like a daughter’ (‘Act of Contrition’, 1.4), but she is also, in a way, the ‘son’ he always wanted: the fearless flying ace. The gender-bending nature of this relationship is humorously acknowledged within the show by Kara herself in a birthday card she once made for Bill. On the front it reads, ‘You were always like a father to me.’ On the inside is a photograph of Kara, in uniform, with a false moustache and glasses like

11 In the original Battlestar Galactica (1978–1979), on which the reimagined series is based, Commander Adama (Lorne Greene) also has a son named Apollo (Richard Hatch), but he is not rebellious at all so the name suits Lee much better.
Bill’s and the caption ‘See the resemblance?’ (‘The Son Also Rises’, 3.18). To return to the Shakespearean analogy, if Lee is our Hal, then Kara is effectively our Hotspur: the rash yet brave young nobleman who plays a leading role in the rebellion against the king in *Henry IV, Part One*. Henry IV sees this ‘Mars in swathling clothes’ (Shakespeare 2003a (1597), 3.2.1936) as a more fitting successor to the throne than his own errant son because of his leadership skills and bravery on the battlefield. Just as Hal must defeat Hotspur in battle to prove himself to his father, Lee must symbolically beat, or at least equal, Kara’s prowess as a pilot to prove himself to Bill; I shall explain how this occurs in a moment.

As in *Jericho*, after the apocalypse, Lee is forced to stay aboard the *Galactica*, which he was visiting reluctantly to attend a ceremony, and fight by his father’s side. An important, and melodramatic, moment in the pair’s gradual reconciliation comes in ‘The Hand of God’ (1.10) when Lee is about to lead a difficult attack on a Cylon base. Bill finds Lee up late the night before, staring at his Viper, and says, ‘Can’t sleep? I couldn’t either before a big op.’ He then gives Lee a supposedly lucky lighter that belonged to his own father, thus creating a sense of patriarchal lineage across three generations similar to the one evoked between Jake, his father and grandfather in *Jericho*. However, Lee interprets the gesture to mean that his father is worried because he, like everyone else on the ship, ‘thinks … Starbuck would do [the mission] better’. Bill denies this and, when Lee asks him how he can be so sure, replies, ‘Cause you’re my son.’ Lee gives his father an emotion-filled stare and promises to bring the lighter back as the non-diegetic sentimental panpipe music that has been playing throughout the scene rises in volume.

As one might expect, Bill’s faith in his son proves to be well founded when, the next day during the mission, Lee performs a daring, Starbuck-style stunt, presumably partially in order to impress his father. When he arrives back on board *Galactica*, the crew clap and cheer and the panpipe music returns, swelling into a jubilant song. Kara tells Lee she ‘couldn’t have done it better [her]self’ and gives him one of the cigars that she normally smokes – from a psychoanalytic perspective, handing back the phallic symbol she had usurped. When Bill arrives

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12 This is just one example of *BSG*’s early willingness to ‘challenge gender stereotypes’ (2010, p. 10), as Jennifer Stoy puts it. Unfortunately, as Stoy notes, this waned in later seasons (ibid., p. 4). Kara, initially one of the show’s most stereotype-confounding characters, becomes more traditionally feminine in the last season (Sharp 2010, p. 76; Wimmler 2015, p. 46). Finally, in a move that arguably, in Patrick Sharp’s words, ‘dulls the critical edge of any progressive readings of… the series as a whole’, Kara, who has died and been resurrected, is revealed to be a ‘supernatural agent’ and disappears mysteriously (2010, p. 76; see also Raney and Meagher (2015)).
on deck, Lee throws him the lighter and they smile at each other, Bill raising his fist triumphantly (‘The Hand of God’). At this moment, at least, it seems that Lee is well on his way to becoming his father’s true successor.

**Stepping from his father’s shadow**

However, all this occurs relatively early in the show – towards the end of the first season of four – so it is not the triumphant conclusion to the Prince Hal narrative it could have been; Bill and Lee continue to clash throughout the rest of *BSG*. Often this occurs because Lee champions law and democracy rather than military dominance. The most striking example is when he disobeys his father’s orders to arrest the president, Laura Roslin (Mary McDonnell), and gets arrested himself for it (‘Kobol’s Last Gleaming: Part Two’, 1.13).

This kind of action foreshadows the eventual development of Lee’s character. Rekindling a childhood interested in the law prompted by his lawyer grandfather – whose name, Joseph, is Lee’s middle name – Lee goes to work for Romo Lampkin (Mark Sheppard), the attorney tasked with defending the treacherous ex-president, Gaius Baltar (James Callis). The title of the episode in which he does so, ‘The Son Also Rises’, presumably refers to Lee’s ‘step[ping] from his father’s shadow’, as Lampkin puts it. Indeed, Lampkin goads him that he is only pursuing this alternative career as a form of rebellion against Bill – ‘Stick[ing] it to the old man’ – though Lee denies it (‘Crossroads: Part One’, 3.19). Bill does disapprove of Lee’s actions at first; the two quarrel – ‘You’re a pilot and you’re my son!’ snaps Bill (‘The Son Also Rises’) – and Lee angrily resigns from the military (‘Crossroads: Part One’). However, Bill is swayed by the rousing speech Lee makes in court (‘Crossroads: Part Two’, 3.12) and doesn’t argue when, after the trial, he decides to take up a position in the government (‘He that Believeth in Me’, 4.1).

Assuming this governmental role puts Lee on the path to becoming interim president when Roslin goes missing (‘Sine Qua Non’, 4.8), a key moment in his Prince Hal narrative, especially since it occurs in tandem with Bill’s symbolic

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13 This title is also a reference either to Ecclesiastes 1.5, ‘The sun also rises, and the sun goes down, And hastens to the place where it arose’, or to the Hemingway novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1996 (1926)), or both. In either case, it suggests the passing of generations as well as recalling *BSG*’s central premise, written in the human characters’ sacred text: ‘All this has happened before, and all this will happen again.’
‘death’. Bill insists on staying behind to wait for Roslin, to whom he is very close, while the rest of the human fleet leaves the area, an action which Lee, attempting to prevent him, claims ‘sounds like suicide’ (‘Sine Qua Non’). The significance of Bill’s ‘death’ is highlighted in the following episode, ‘Revelations’ (4.10), in a scene whose main purpose seems to be to underline the way that he dominated his son’s life and the emotional impact this had on the latter. Standing in his father’s study, Lee remarks to Kara, ‘No one sits in his chair’, as the camera tracks in dramatically towards it. He continues, ‘You know, the scariest thing my mom used to tell me when I was a kid was: “Your father’s waiting for you in the study.” I’d knock on the door, make the long walk across the room to that desk.’ Lee’s voice shakes as a melancholy strings version of the same musical theme heard in earlier scenes starts up. Kara replies by recounting something a Cylon once told her: ‘We are born to replace our parents. For children to reach their full potential, the parents have to die.’ Another shot of the now-empty chair, complete with indentation where Bill used to sit, closes the scene.

Bill is not actually dead, it transpires; in fact, he returns to *Galactica* with Roslin in the same episode. But this does not impede the dissolution of Lee’s Oedipus complex since, from that point onwards, he effectively takes over the role of ‘father’ both in his relationship with Bill and as symbolic leader of the fleet.14 This is most clearly demonstrated later in ‘Revelations’ when Bill is driven into a near-hysterical state by the revelation that his trusted second-in-command, Colonel Tigh (Michael Hogan), is a Cylon. Lee finds him drunk on the bathroom floor crying about Tigh and his own failure to lead the humans to the fabled planet of Earth. Lee hugs and comforts him, promising that he, Lee, will ‘take care of it’. This he subsequently does, using Tigh as collateral to negotiate with the Cylons and eventually striking a deal with them to look for Earth together (‘Revelations’).

This trajectory can be seen as a way for *BSG*’s writers to do two opposing things with the character of Lee Adama – having their cake and eating it, as it were. On the one hand, he emphatically asserts his independence from his father by leaving the military and joining a profession associated with his grandfather, while, on the other, he shows his similarity to his father by becoming a leader in his own right.

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14 As Roslin has also returned, Lee is no longer the official president at this point. However, she is dying of cancer and therefore wants Lee, in whom she has always had great faith, to continue being acting president (‘No Exit’, 4.15). This is, therefore, another example of *BSG* sidelining a previously central female character towards the end of the show (see note 12).
However, although the type of leader Lee becomes is different to that represented by Bill, civilian rather than military, Lee never completely turns his back on his past as a soldier. Many times after he has supposedly left the military and a battle or dangerous mission arises, Lee hastens to join in, thereby demonstrating his underlying similarity to Bill (e.g. in ‘Crossroads: Part Two’, 3.20; ‘The Oath’, 4.13 and ‘Daybreak: Part One’). Furthermore, not fighting when there is fighting to be done is shown to be actively harmful for Lee, thus demonstrating that, like Jericho, Falling Skies and many other post-9/11 apocalyptic series, BSG often advocates violence as the best solution to a crisis. Over the course of the four-and-a-half months during which the Cylons are occupying a planet, New Caprica, where some of the humans have settled, Lee becomes very fat. As usual, Bill takes it upon himself to police his son’s masculinity, chiding him for being ‘weak, soft. Mentally and physically’ (‘Occupation’, 3.1). When Lee looks to his wife Dee (Kandyse McClure) for support, she takes Bill’s side, describing her husband as ‘a soldier who needs a war’ and also ‘more like [Bill] than you [that is, Lee] know’ (‘Occupation’). Her point is proven shortly afterwards when Bill embarks on a reckless mission to rescue the inhabitants of New Caprica (‘Precipice’, 3.2) and Lee embarks on an equally reckless one to rescue Bill (‘Exodus: Part Two’, 3.4).

The contradictions in Lee’s personality sometimes make him seem like a rather inconsistent, even badly written character overall. Indeed, BSG’s creator Ronald D. Moore admits in a commentary podcast that, during season three in particular, he and the other writers ‘struggled with the character of Lee in terms of exactly what [they] wanted him to do within the drama of the show’ (2009 (2007)). On the one hand, Lee is supposed to be extremely straight-up and moral (Roslin describes him as ‘hell-bent on doing the right thing’ (‘No Exit’, 4.5)), but he can also be very ruthless on occasion (for instance, in ‘A Measure of Salvation’ (3.7), he advocates committing genocide against the Cylons), and there is an especially unconvincing revelation in ‘Black Market’ (2.14) that he regularly visits a prostitute. Nevertheless, inconsistency is also a criticism that has often been levelled against Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, who is likewise sometimes moralistic, sometimes licentious, sometimes ruthless,

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15 Dee also vocalizes the idea that innate leadership ability is passed down from father to son in the Adama family: when Lee is upset because he believes his father will not make it back from a mission alive and he will have to assume responsibility for the fleet, she tries to reassure him that he will be able to lead them to Earth ‘because you’re an Adama’ (‘Exodus: Part Two’, 3.4).
sometimes fair and merciful. Ernst Kris, the first critic to propose a Freudian reading of the *Henriad*, puts these apparent inconsistencies down to the Oedipal conflict which Hal is experiencing (1952, p. 285). Perhaps more persuasive is Watson's argument that 'the unity of [Hal's] character' is in fact his very 'capacity for multiplicity': a necessary characteristic for a king (1984, pp. 74–75). This idea is recalled in a comment which provocative political leader Tom Zarek (Richard Hatch) makes to Lee in ‘Bastille Day’ (1.3) about his call sign, Apollo: ‘God of the hunt and also a god of healing. Now, a god can reconcile those two opposing forces. But a mortal has to pick one side or the other. Have you picked a side, Apollo?’

What the writers of *BSG* seem to want us to conclude about Lee is that he *has* managed to reconcile the two apparently opposing forces represented by ‘the hunt’ (fighting) and ‘healing’ (justice and good governance). This could also be seen as a way of showing that he successfully brings together two different kinds of masculinity: a more traditional, violent, military one and a democratic, ‘civilized’ kind, as embodied by Bill and Joseph, respectively. In other words, he apparently succeeds in negotiating the ‘contradictory identities’ (Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 3) that contemporary culture demands men embody.

Nevertheless, what the writers seem most keen of all to stress is that Lee possesses exceptional leadership skills, whether he uses them in a military context in his role as CAG (Commander of the Air Group) – a new CAG appointed after Lee’s arrest quickly proves to be ‘no Apollo’, as Bill puts it (‘Home: Part One’, 2.7) – or as a politician. This point is made most forcefully in ‘Sine Qua Non’ when Lampkin, helping Lee to look for an interim president during Roslin’s absence, compiles a list on a whiteboard of the qualities he believes a president should possess. He concludes, ‘We might as well just spell out one name’, before writing ‘Lee Adama’ on the board. Therefore, although Lee may represent a more ‘modern’ kind of masculinity than his father, the series still validates the tradition of patriarchal leadership of which he is the latest incumbent.

**Longing for escape**

What complicates all this, however, and makes Lee such an interesting character, is that the praise and recognition accorded him for his supposedly brilliant leadership do not make him happy. In fact, he is distinctly miserable during
most of the course of the series, thereby hampering a reading of his story as a triumphant Prince Hal narrative. His unhappiness first becomes obvious in ‘Resurrection Ship: Part Two’ (2.12) when he is left floating in space following a crash in his Viper. Rather than finding this experience distressing, Lee finds it peaceful: he imagines himself floating in a beautiful lake wearing swimming shorts and sunglasses – in other words, away from all pressure or responsibility. Later, when he has been rescued and brought back to *Galactica*, he confides in Kara that he ‘didn’t want to make it back alive’.

After and implicitly as a result of this near-death experience, Lee begins a kind of secret rebellion against his own public image as the commander’s morally upright son; this is when he starts visiting the prostitute, Shevon (Claudette Mink), and also dabbling in the fleet’s black market. However, the rebellion backfires since it just ends up proving his similarity to Bill, or at least that he is incapable of disobeying him. In the episode ‘Black Market’, Lee is tasked by Bill with investigating a murder. The investigation leads him to a confrontation with Phelan (Bill Duke), Shevon’s pimp and the ringleader of the black market, which, Lee has discovered, includes traffic in children. Phelan tries to talk Lee out of shutting down his operation by suggesting that the two of them have certain things in common. He tells him that his ‘father was in the service too. Strict as hell. Probably the same as your old man’ and then argues that neither he, Phelan, nor Lee are like their fathers because, he implies, they indulge their baser instincts. But Lee shoots Phelan, thereby symbolically disavowing the ‘dark’ or ‘wild’ side of his own nature, just as Prince Hal does when he rejects Falstaff at the end of *Henry IV, Part Two*. In Freudian terms, each of these characters symbolically represses the id in favour of the superego – represented in *BSG* by Bill, to whom Lee dutifully reports back at the end of the episode – a necessary stage in the dissolution of the Oedipus complex.¹⁶

Tellingly, Lee only seems to be truly happy right at the end of *BSG* when he is completely free of his father’s influence and the social structure he represents. The humans and their Cylon allies finally settle on a habitable planet but, on Lee’s suggestion, decide not to try to re-establish civilization (that which creates the superego) and Bill heads off to live in the wilderness. Freed from the responsibility of being a leader or a leader’s son, Lee gleefully announces

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¹⁶ It is interesting to note that some critics view Hal’s rebellion as actually serving to reinforce his similarity to his father, just as Lee’s does in ‘Black Market’ (see, e.g., Kahn (1981, p. 73)).
his intention to ‘explore[:] … climb the mountains … [and] cross the oceans’
(‘Daybreak: Part Three’, 4.22). This declaration accords with Moore’s observation
in the commentary podcast for an earlier episode that he and the other writers
always saw the character of Lee as someone who wanted to ‘run … away. In a
way, hiding from his father, his life, and the life he thought he should have had’
(2009 (2006)).

That the impulse to escape is central to Lee’s character is also implied in two
of the flashbacks that take place throughout the three-part final episode. Several
of the principal characters are given flashbacks in this episode, which seem
designed to showcase important aspects of their personality and/or backstory.
One of Lee’s flashbacks is of him, drunk, attempting to chase a pigeon out of
his flat with a broom. It flutters against the skylight and windows and he swears
at it (‘Daybreak: Part One’, 4.20; Figures 2.2 and 2.3). It is only later, just after
Lee has declared his intention to run away and explore, that we see the second
half of the pigeon scene. Lee wakes up on the sofa just in time to see the bird
fly, in significance-laden slow motion, out of the open French windows into
the sunshine (‘Daybreak: Part Three’; Figures 2.4 and 2.5). The wistful medium
close-up of Lee that follows is the last time we see him, suggesting that the happy
ending to his story is not his fulfilment of the Prince Hal narrative but rather his
escape from it.

Figure 2.2 Lee discovers a pigeon in his flat in a flashback in ‘Daybreak: Part One’.
Figure 2.3 He drunkenly attempts to chase it out with a broom. *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009).

Figure 2.4 Later, in ‘Daybreak: Part Three’, the bird flies out of the window in slow motion. *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009).
‘Carry On Wayward Son’: Supernatural’s Sam and Dean Winchester

In Supernatural the Prince Hal narrative is not as consistently central as in BSG; it is rather something that is always present in the background of this very long-running programme (its thirteenth season is airing at my time of writing and it has been renewed for a fourteenth (Otterson 2018a); hence, my remarks in the last chapter about TWD’s status as a live text that is still changing and developing also apply here), but which becomes more important and obvious from time to time. As we examine some of these key moments, we shall see that the way Supernatural deals with the theme has some notable similarities with BSG.

Although the Prince Hal narrative most clearly applies to the two protagonists, Dean and especially Sam Winchester, the show is full of other characters, mostly boys and men, with controlling fathers against whom they try, or would like, to rebel.17 These range from minor characters who only appear in one episode, such as teenager Gary (Colton James) in ‘Swap Meat’ (5.12), whose father wants him to get a scholarship to MIT and become an engineer, or Cyrus (Connor Price), the youngest son of the Styne (formerly Frankenstein) family, who is forced by

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17 As Julia M. Wright points out, domineering fathers or father figures are a typical feature of the Gothic (2016, p. 42), a tradition to which Supernatural belongs (as do several other post-9/11 apocalyptic shows). I will consider this trope specifically in relation to the Gothic in my discussion of Dollhouse in the following chapter.
his tyrannical father to carry out lethal surgery on another boy (‘The Prisoner’, 10.22), to recurring ones like the vampire Benny (Ty Olsson) whose ‘father’ (the vampire who turned him into one) would not let any of his ‘children’ leave their nest (‘Blood Brother’, 8.12).

In every case, the audience’s sympathy is firmly directed towards the son, or occasionally daughter. Even God is portrayed as a paternal tyrant towards his ‘children’, the angels. Few of them have ever seen him, yet he controls them, forcing them to do things they don’t want to do for reasons they don’t understand. Fallen angel Anna Milton (Julie McNiven) complains about this in ‘Heaven and Hell’ (4.10), while Archangel Michael (Matt Cohen) explains that he is resigned to it because he is a ‘good son’ in ‘The Song Remains the Same’ (5.13). As the title of the first episode of season five, ‘Sympathy for the Devil’, implies, we are even, on occasion, encouraged to feel some sympathy for Lucifer, the most rebellious of all the angels. Indeed, as Regina M. Hansen comments, Anna’s surname is a ‘reference to the poet [John Milton] whose sympathy with the character of Lucifer has long been noted’ (2014, p. 18). As Michael (Jake Abel) prepares to fight an apocalyptic battle with him in ‘Swan Song’ (5.22), Lucifer (possessing the body of Sam, thereby highlighting the parallel between Sam and Lucifer) says, with apparently genuine sadness, ‘We’re going to kill each other and for what? One of Dad’s tests. We don’t even know the answer. We’re brothers. Let’s just walk off the chessboard’, a suggestion which the ever-dutiful Michael refuses.

When God (Rob Benedict) finally reveals himself after his long absence, during which he was pretending to be a human called Chuck Shurley, in season eleven’s ‘Don’t Call Me Shurley’ (11.20), he is portrayed as shallow (he filled his time as Chuck with activities such as creating a blog of cat pictures), vain and self-absorbed (he drinks from a mug printed with ‘World’s Greatest Dad’ but is more interested in writing his autobiography than protecting humanity). Although God is not entirely unlikeable – he has a certain geeky charm and he does finally pitch in to help save the world at the end of ‘Don’t Call Me Shurley’ – once again, Lucifer (Mark Pellegrino), generally one of the show’s most formidable villains, is presented as the victim in their relationship. It is only after much persuasion from Sam and Dean and recrimination from Lucifer that God finally apologizes

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18 In *Supernatural*, demons and angels appear on Earth by possessing the bodies of humans, so many of them are played by more than one actor. Therefore, when I give the name of an actor playing an angel or a demon, I am referring to the person who plays that character at the particular moment I am describing.
for his treatment of his son (‘We Happy Few’, 11.22) – an apology that Lucifer (Rick Springfield) later complains was only made because God, who has once again disappeared, needed his help (‘Rock Never Dies’, 12.7).

Sam and Dean have a certain empathy with Lucifer and the other angels since, as will be explained in a moment, their father was also both frequently absent and controlling. In ‘Dark Side of the Moon’ (5.16), Dean refers to God as ‘just another deadbeat dad with a bunch of excuses’ and then comments, ‘I’m used to that’, while in ‘All in the Family’ (11.21), God warns Dean, who had been berating him for abandoning humanity, not to ‘confuse me with your dad’.19 Tellingly, when Dean’s angel friend Castiel (Misha Collins) asks him how he ‘manage[s]’ his disappointment with his father, Dean replies, ‘On a good day you get to kill a Whore’ (‘99 Problems’, 5.17). He is referring to their current mission to kill the Whore of Babylon, but this statement also implies that, more generally, he and Sam have channelled their Oedipal patricidal feelings into their ongoing quest to slay monsters.20 Although the brothers often encourage other characters to stand up to their tyrannical fathers, they themselves never escape for long from the life into which their own father pushed them. As Charlotte E. Howell puts it, ‘Supernatural’s story line and characters have not found a way out of patriarchy nor a viable alternative’ (2014, p. 180).

Sam and Dean are the sons of an ex-marine, John Winchester (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), who became an obsessive demon hunter after a demon killed his wife Mary (Samantha Smith) when Sam was a baby. Mary does, in fact, appear in the show rather more often than the mothers in many other Prince Hal narratives, through various supernatural means, such as visions and time travel. Most significantly, God’s sister Amara (Emily Swallow) resurrects her at the end of season eleven (‘Alpha and Omega’, 11.23), and she appears in numerous episodes throughout seasons twelve and thirteen. It should be noted, however, that the supernatural nature of all of Mary’s appearances, apart from a flashback in the pilot, means that she is always either the age she was at the time of her death (according to Supernatural’s internal chronology, this should be around thirty, although the actor who usually plays her, Samantha Smith, is currently in her

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19 See Howell (2014) and Wright (2016, p. 83) for further discussion of the way the show creates parallels between God and Sam and Dean’s father.

20 The fact that the specific monster mentioned here is a ‘Whore’ is doubtless coincidental (though reasonably representative since many of the foes which Sam and Dean face take the form of attractive women; we shall return to this point later), but it does suggest that for Dean, hunting such creatures satisfies a mixture of violent and sexual urges. This recalls Watson’s interpretation of Henry V’s motives for invading France, mentioned above.
late forties) or younger. Thus, while Supernatural does not completely exclude mothers, it certainly excludes older women in a manner typical of postfeminist culture; we shall return to this issue in Chapter 4.21

In any case, Mary was absent for almost all of Sam and Dean's lives. They spent their childhood on the road with their father, often left alone in motel rooms while he was out hunting, Dean charged with the task of caring for and protecting his younger brother. Sam in particular never enjoyed this life: a flashback in ‘After School Special’ (4.13) sees a teacher (Chad Willet) ask the fourteen-year-old Sam (Colin Ford) if he would like to go into ‘the family business’, and he replies, ‘More than anything, no.’22 He eventually had a major quarrel with John and ran away to attend Stanford University. In contrast with our other Prince Hals, Sam's rebellion consisted not of wild or immoral behaviour but of settling into a comfortable middle-class existence with a live-in girlfriend called Jessica (Adrianne Palicki) and (in an echo of Lee Adama) plans to go to law school.

The event that pulls Sam back to his family is not, in this case, an apocalypse (though, as with Heroes, many threaten later and the protagonists must struggle to avert them) but Dean’s arriving at his house and asking for help looking for John, who has disappeared (‘Pilot’, 1.1). When Jessica is killed by a demon shortly afterwards in exactly the same manner that Mary was, Sam decides not to attend his interview for law school but instead to join Dean on the road looking for John and hunting monsters along the way (‘Pilot’). The brothers finally reunite with their father, who has been on the trail of the demon that killed Mary, late in the first season, and he and Sam reconcile. John apologizes for being a ‘drill sergeant’ instead of a father, and Sam acknowledges that the two of them are ‘not different. Not anymore. With what happened with Mom and Jess – Well, we probably have a lot more in common than just about anyone’ (‘Dead Man's Blood’, 1.20). When John dies in the first episode of season two, ‘In My Time of Dying’, Sam and Dean are left to take over from him as ‘hunters’, and Sam soon abandons all plans to return to university (‘Everybody Loves a Clown’, 2.2).

21 We might also note here that the other mother of a major character that appears in Supernatural, Crowley’s (Mark A. Sheppard) mother Rowena (Ruth Connell), who is over three hundred years old, is played by an actor in her thirties, her youthfulness explained by the fact that she is a witch.
22 The young Dean, on the other hand, usually claimed that he enjoyed the hunter lifestyle and that he and Sam had ‘the coolest dad in the world’ (‘A Very Supernatural Christmas,’ 3.8). However, in a flashback to when he was sixteen in ‘Bad Boys’ (9.7), he does admit to a girlfriend that he does not really like his father’s job, ‘but [his] dad expects [him] to follow in his footsteps, so [he’s] kind of gotten used to it.’
A toxic inheritance

What is perhaps surprising is the extent to which the series casts doubt on whether the brothers’ decision to follow in their father’s footsteps was a good one. The brief description of Supernatural’s premise I gave above may seem to suggest that a familiar post-9/11 narrative logic is at work in the show whereby attacks on innocent women and children provide the justification for violent male retribution. Reinforcing such a reading, Jessica and Mary are both, as Bronwen Calvert notes, blonde and clad in white nightdresses at the time of their deaths, thereby associating them with ‘purity and goodness’ (2011a, p. 93). Alexandra Lykissas even goes as far as to suggest that the brutal murder of Mary in the Winchester family home can be seen as symbolic of 9/11 itself because it represents a ‘violation [of] … the domestic’ (2016, p. 21).23 Nor are the Winchesters an isolated case; the majority of other hunters encountered in the series have also become such because of the murder of family members, usually women and children, by supernatural creatures. This is so much the case that when Dean meets a fellow hunter in ‘Time After Time’ (7.12), Dean asks him, ‘Who died in your life and made you a hunter?’

However, as Calvert points out, Supernatural does not unambiguously applaud the hunters’ activities: several episodes ‘raise questions about the nature of evil and the ethics of “hunting” (i.e., killing)’ (2011a, p. 95). For instance, as Julia M. Wright highlights, in ‘Nightshifter’ (2.12), an FBI agent (Charles Malik Whitfield) describes John Winchester as a ‘wacko’ ‘paramilitary-survivalist type’ and compares him to ‘Timmy McVeigh’. Wright argues that this description ‘overtly addresses an easy reading of the hunters … as a rural militia group, protecting post-9/11 America from evil’ (2016, pp. 111–112).24 In a similar vein, Linnie Blake contends that the series intentionally blurs the line between the hunters and their prey as an ‘exploration of the ways in which the non-American other has been made monstrous in the wake of 9/11 and the monstrosity that has been seen to lie, since Abu Ghraib at least, in the hearts of Americans themselves’ (2015, p. 232).

Reinforcing the view of hunters as ‘sociopaths’, as an acquaintance of Sam and Dean’s (Lauren Cohan) describes them in ‘Bad Day at Black Rock’ (3.3), it is revealed at the end of season two that Sam was actually manipulated into

23 Lykissas also cites Faludi in linking the general prevalence of ‘weakened wom[e]n’ who need rescuing by ‘hyper-strengthened m[e]n’ in Supernatural to 9/11 (Lykissas 2016, p. 20).
24 See Valenzano and Engstrom (2014) for an example of such a reading.
becoming one by a demon. This demon, Azazel (Frederic Lehne), carried out Mary’s murder and orchestrated Jessica’s as part of a longer-term plan to induce Sam to become the Antichrist and lead the demon army at the (biblical) Apocalypse. He explains to Sam in ‘All Hell Breaks Loose: Part One’ (2.21): ‘You were all set to marry that little blonde thing, become a tax lawyer with two kids, a beer gut, and a little McMansion in the suburbs. I needed you sharp, on the road, honing your skills.’

In this respect, Azazel is yet another of Supernatural’s pushy fathers: both an alternative father for Sam and a demonic reflection of John. He even possesses the latter in ‘Devil’s Trap’ (1.22). Like John, he sees it as his mission to train up his ‘kids’, as he calls them (‘In the Beginning’, 4.3) – a group of young people he selected ten years before they were born, of which Sam is one – to fight. Part of this process involved feeding the children his own blood when they were babies, which gave them various supernatural powers. As a result of this, in season four, Sam develops an addiction to demon blood, which also affects his personality, making him cold, ruthless and deceitful. Dean is so concerned about this change in his brother that in ‘Yellow Fever’ (4.6), when infected with a ‘ghost sickness’, he hallucinates Sam turning into Azazel and saying, ‘This is what I’m going to become’, before choking him.

However, some ambiguity is left as to what extent Sam’s ‘demonic’ attributes really are his ‘inheritance’ from Azazel, or if they were always latent within him, an inheritance from his real father, John. At the end of season four, Ruby (Genevieve Cortese), a demon with whom Sam had been sexually involved and whose blood he regularly drank, taunts him by suggesting that it wasn’t the blood that ‘poisoned’ him: ‘It was you and your choices … You didn’t need the feather to fly; you had it in you the whole time, Dumbo’ (‘Lucifer Rising’, 4.22). Furthermore, as Melissa N. Bruce points out, Sam’s behaviour during season four and just before, when Dean had (temporarily) been killed by Azazel’s successor Lilith (Sierra McCormick), and Sam was single-mindedly seeking revenge, closely resembles John’s (2010, para. 4.8). Indeed, in ‘Jump the Shark’ (4.19), Dean criticizes Sam for echoing John’s views. Either way, whether it is a result of indoctrination by his real father John or manipulation by his demon ‘father’ Azazel, Sam’s obsessive desire to avenge his family members is presented as thoroughly unhealthy. This is perhaps made clearest in ‘When the Levee Breaks’ (4.21), when Sam, ‘detoxing’ from the demon blood, has various disturbing hallucinations including one of his mother, dressed in her bloody nightdress, who tells him that he must ‘kill Lilith … Make my death mean something.’
In general, as with Lee Adama, following in their father’s footsteps is not shown to be something that makes either Sam or Dean very happy. In fact, the show constantly dwells on just how unhappy it makes them; yet they continue to do it, occasional temporary rebellions notwithstanding. This situation is encapsulated by the song that accompanies the long recap montages at the start of each season finale, Kansas’s ‘Carry On Wayward Son’, in the opening lines of which the singer exhorts his ‘wayward son’ to stop crying and keep going.25

Female audiences and male melodrama

Henry Jenkins perceptively suggests that *Supernatural*’s monsters are, on a symbolic level, ‘emotional scars and psychic wounds. They represent unresolved emotional issues, often within the context of family life’ (2007). He goes on to note, ‘This is the stuff of classic melodrama’ (ibid.), a point with which numerous other critics concur (e.g. Bruce (2010), Schmidt (2010), Jowett and Abbott (2013), Howell (2014)). Indeed, this generic affiliation is metatextually noted within the show itself for humorous effect on more than one occasion. Most notably, in ‘Fan Fiction’ (10.5), the writer/director (Katie Sarife) of a girls’-school play based on a series of books about the Winchesters’ adventures refers to ‘the B.M. scene’. She then clarifies to a bemused Dean: ‘The boy melodrama scene! You know, the scene where the boys get together, and … they’re driving or leaning against Baby [Dean’s nickname for his car]. Drinking a beer, sharing their feelings.’

Jenkins and Bruce both note that the series’ incorporation of melodramatic elements makes it ‘ideally suited to the themes and concerns which have long interested the female fan community’ (Jenkins 2007) (the community which is, of course, being satirized in ‘Fan Fiction’), and Bruce comments that this was likely a deliberate strategy to attract the network’s target audience (2010, para. 2.5). If so, this makes *Supernatural* a rather different kind of male (or ‘boy’) melodrama to the Westerns analysed by Lusted, mentioned in Chapter 1, since these were aimed at a ‘male, mainly rural working-class audience’ (Lusted 1996, p. 63), who could identify with the films’ cowboy heroes on several levels. ‘In

25 The first season ends with a two-part episode, so the song is used at the beginning of the first of the two episodes, ‘Salvation’ (1.21). Even the name of the band is relevant as the Winchesters originally hail from Kansas.
particular’, writes Lusted, ‘the male landscape of the Western speaks powerfully to the conditions of working-class labour which are overwhelmingly … of action regulated and controlled by figures of male authority’ (ibid.).

*Supernatural*, on the other hand, aims its tale of young working- to middle-class men, whose actions are regulated and controlled by figures of (paternal) male authority, at an audience predominantly composed of young women (notwithstanding the creator’s original pitch of the show as one that would attract male viewers, mentioned earlier). And, as Suzette Chan shows, this strategy has been a successful one with some segments of the audience at least. Sam and Dean’s suffering at the hands of ‘patriarchal forces’ (2010, para. 2.4) is something that seems to have struck a particular chord with the many fanfiction authors inspired by the series. Chan notes that there are a number of fanfiction stories which convert the Winchesters’ psychological and sometimes physical domination by various father figures into scenarios in which they are raped – a narrative device that literalizes the brothers’ metaphorical violation (ibid., para. 4.4).

As the protagonists’ emotional (and sometimes physical) suffering is an important factor in *Supernatural*’s popularity, the ongoing narrative sees them continuing to hunt despite the fact that it causes them a lot of misery: ‘Our lives suck’, as Dean puts it in ‘Taxi Driver’ (8.19). Their reason for doing so is a vague feeling of obligation to ‘save people’ that is closely tied to their sense of duty towards their father. Indeed, this sense is conveyed in Dean’s line in the second episode, ‘Wendigo’ (1.2), which became the show’s most famous tag line: ‘I think he [John] wants us to pick up where he left off. You know, saving people, hunting things. The family business.’

Nevertheless, as was the case with the programmes examined in Chapter 1, *Supernatural* often draws attention to the problems inherent in making one’s life’s purpose to ‘save’ people. For instance, in ‘Clip Show’ (8.22), Crowley (Mark A. Sheppard), the king of Hell, begins murdering all the people the Winchesters have ever saved because he knows this is the best way to torment them. He taunts them, ‘I think the people you save, they’re how you justify your pathetic little lives. The alcoholism, the collateral damage, the pain you’ve caused.’

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*Supernatural* is an extremely popular subject for fanfiction (as well as other kinds of fan work such as vids). It is, at my 2018 time of writing, the television series with the highest number of stories archived on *fanfiction.net* (approximately 122,000). The episode ‘Fan Fiction’ is just one of many that acknowledge the existence of the show’s extremely passionate and prolific fans. Strangely, though, given how adept the writers are at catering to fan interests, the metatextual representations of them are often distinctly unflattering (for further discussion of this issue see, for instance, Felschow (2010), Cherry (2011), Coker and Benefiel (2014)).
Furthermore, Sam and Dean often suffer extreme bouts of guilt about people they have failed to save, a guilt which, as Jenkins’s comment about the show’s symbolic use of monsters suggests, sometimes literally haunts them: in ‘Are You There, God? It’s Me, Dean Winchester’ (4.2) they and other hunters are attacked by the ghosts of people they failed to save.

Occasionally, one of the Winchesters does temporarily leave the hunting profession and attempt to live a ‘normal’ life. This ‘normal’ life is always connected to a woman and the kind of domesticated existence that, the programme implies, makes men ‘soft’ – remember Azazel’s reason for killing Jessica – and contrasts strongly with the ultra-masculine hunter lifestyle. This dichotomy is, as Lorrie Palmer describes, one of the elements of Supernatural that gives it an affinity with the Western, as is the protagonists’ decision each time to ultimately abandon domesticity ‘in favor of unsettledness, mobility, and the predominant absence of women’ (2011, p. 85).

In turn, the sense the programme evokes that the Winchesters can never permanently quit the hunting profession marks it out as melodramatic in structure according to Deborah Thomas’s definition (see Chapter 1). Thomas argues that ‘melodramatic films typically contrast a social space of some sort … [such as a] domestic setting … with an alternative space (the city’s criminal underworld, a battlefield, the wilderness, for example) where social values and expectations to some extent break down’ (2000, p. 13). When the films are set largely within the latter, ‘the space of violent male adventure’ (ibid., p. 14) – that is, in Supernatural, the hunting life – ‘some sense of “home” or “community” … is often implied … as a dream of unattainable domestic or familial bliss’ (ibid.). In Supernatural, this ‘dream’ takes the form of the periods Sam or Dean spend living with women. These periods mostly take place outside the time depicted on the show (i.e. before the start of the first season or between seasons) and therefore function primarily as idealized memories for the characters.

Escape or entrapment

Before we look at the specifics of Sam and Dean’s short-lived attempts to abandon hunting, we should note that the show’s portrayal of the women for whom they abandon it (as well as other ‘good’ women such as their mother) as idealized paragons of domesticity runs parallel to its representation of many other women as sexualized villains (Beliveau and Bolf-Beliveau 2014). This
evidently establishes a fairly straightforward virgin/whore dichotomy, though, as Calvert notes, there are a few female characters in the series who ‘blur the line between good and evil’ (2011a, p. 95), and there has arguably been some overall improvement in the show’s representation of women over the course of its very long lifespan (Macklem 2014).

If we follow Thomas’s argument, it is possible to read *Supernatural*’s villainous women – for example, the demon Ruby, mentioned earlier, who seduces Sam for nefarious ends – in the same way that she views *film noir*’s *femmes fatales*: ‘[T]he *femme fatale* often threaten[s] the male protagonist with a distorted and magnified version of the disempowerment feared in small-town marriage. In the case of the *femme fatale*, however, her blatant infidelities and betrayals license the male protagonist to turn his violence or vengeful fantasies onto her’ (2000, p. 31). Similarly, in *Supernatural*, the Winchesters are ‘licensed’ to kill Ruby when her betrayal is revealed, just as they torture and kill many other sexy female demons and other monsters throughout the series in ways that are, as E.J. Nielsen points out, often downright ‘sadistic’ (2016, p. 110). Such a reading is enhanced by moments where these monsters possess or take on the appearance of ‘good’ female characters, thereby implying a slippage between the two. Indeed, the episode ‘The French Mistake’ (6.15) virtually literalizes Thomas’s suggestion that the *femme fatale* functions as a distorted reflection of the hero’s fears of entrapment in domesticity. In it, Sam and Dean are sent to a parallel universe in which they ‘are’ Jared Padalecki and Jensen Ackles, stars of the TV series *Supernatural*. They are shocked and horrified to discover a woman who appears to be Ruby at Sam/Jared’s house but who actually turns out to be his wife, Genevieve Padalecki (one of the actors who plays Ruby and Padalecki’s real-life wife). Admittedly, ‘Jared’s’ life with ‘Genevieve’ could not be described as a ‘small-town marriage’ because they are extremely rich TV stars, but it still represents the kind of ‘soft’, ‘feminized’ existence which the Winchesters always ultimately abandon: they return to their own universe at the end of the episode.

Dean only voluntarily attempts to leave the hunting profession once (not including the time he spends temporarily transformed into a demon between seasons nine and ten), going to live with a woman called Lisa (Cindy Sampson) and her son Ben (Nicholas Elia) at the end of season five when he thinks Sam is dead (‘Swan Song’). However, Sam reappears a year later, at the beginning of season six, with a group of relatives, also hunters, and Dean immediately becomes embarrassed of his new, ‘feminized’ lifestyle. ‘Go ahead, say it: call me a soccer mom, whatever’, he says, after his relatives have looked derisively at various items
in his home including the women's magazine *InStyle* (‘Exile on Main Street’, 6.1) (in fact, he has been working as a builder – hardly a traditionally feminine profession). Dean leaves Lisa and Ben in the next episode (‘Two and a Half Men’, 6.2), ironically because Sam thinks that staying with them will ‘turn [Dean] into [their d]ad’ – in other words, that he will turn into a ‘prison guard’, as Dean puts it, as a result of his concern with protecting them from the dangers inherent in the hunter lifestyle. This implies, of course, that both the brothers feel that they have no choice but to be hunters. Significantly, in a later episode, when Ben confronts Dean about his reasons for leaving, Dean tells him, ‘I think my job turns me into somebody that can’t sit at your dinner table. And if I stayed, you’d end up just like me’ (‘Mannequin 3: The Reckoning’, 6.14), thereby suggesting that Dean believes that the hunter vocation is something that cannot help but be passed down from father to son.

From this point forwards, Dean seems to accept that he will never be anything but a hunter. This fatalistic quality of this belief becomes apparent as he urges Sam to let him complete dangerous tasks alone because Sam sees ‘a light at the end of this ugly-ass tunnel’ (i.e. hunting), while he, Dean, doesn't (‘Trial and Error’, 8.14). Wright, writing after only two full seasons of *Supernatural* had aired, argues that ‘self-abjection’, revealed through his ‘apparent death-wish’, is the ‘keynote of Dean's characterization’ (2008, para. 19; reiterated in a 2016 update of Wright’s article, pp. 109–110). She believes that this character trait is a result of the blue-collar masculinity that Dean's father imposed upon him when he forced his sons to abandon their former middle-class existence for a life on the road. While I certainly agree that the show implies that Dean's downward class mobility contributed to his self-hatred, later seasons suggest that his father's overbearing influence more generally also played an important role.

This is perhaps indicated most clearly in a melodramatic scene in ‘Dream a Little Dream of Me’ (3.10), in which Dean meets himself in a dream. As in classic melodrama, the *mise-en-scène* and music here reflect Dean's emotions. The scene takes place in a gloomy motel room (the only kind of ‘home’ Dean has, at this point in the show, ever really known, thanks to his father) decorated with dark, patterned wallpaper that creates an oppressive effect (Figure 2.6). The only light comes from sinister red lamps and quiet yet menacing non-diegetic music starts up partway through. Dream Dean begins to talk about Dean's self-hatred – ‘You look into a mirror and hate what you see’ – and claims the reason for this is that his entire life and personality have been dictated by his father: ‘What are the things that you want? What are the things that you dream? I mean, your car? That's Dad's. Your favourite leather jacket? Dad's. Your music? Dad's. Do you even have an original thought?’
Eventually, Dean rises to the taunts, shoves his doppelgänger violently against the wall and begins hitting and kicking him (thereby graphically demonstrating his self-loathing) as the music grows louder and more dramatic. ‘My father was an obsessed bastard!’ Dean shouts. ‘All that crap he dumped on me about protecting Sam, that was his crap. He’s the one who couldn’t protect his family. He’s the one who let Mom die … I didn’t deserve what he put on me.’ This tirade is interesting because although it clearly conveys Dean’s anger that John gave him the responsibility of protecting his family at an early age, it simultaneously affirms Dean’s belief that such a responsibility exists; he simply believes that it should belong solely to the family patriarch. Indeed, as mentioned, when Dean does briefly adopt that role himself, after he settles down with Ben and Lisa, he becomes extremely protective of his new family. Ironically, then, Dean’s tirade against his father only serves to reinforce Dream Dean’s point: he has internalized the patriarchal attitudes that John passed down to him, along with his car, clothing, music and profession.

In a later episode, ‘It’s a Terrible Life’ (4.16), an angel called Zachariah (Kurt Fuller) engineers an *It’s a Wonderful Life*-style (Frank Capra, 1946) scenario to try to convince Dean that he is a hunter because he enjoys and is good at it, ‘not because [his] dad made [him]’. The scenario sees a ‘feminized’ version of Dean, who eats salad instead of hamburgers and loves *Project Runway*, working at a boring desk job until a ghost in the office causes him to rediscover the ‘manly’
joy of hunting. (‘Save people, maybe even the world. All the while you drive a
classic car and fornicate with women,’ as Zachariah puts it.)

At a superficial level, the storyline of this episode seems to function as a potted
post-9/11 ‘remasculinization’ narrative (Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 2). However,
the very fact that Zachariah goes to all this trouble to convince Dean he is ‘really’
happy in the hunter lifestyle perhaps implies the opposite. Furthermore, since
his ulterior motive is to manipulate Dean into doing the angels’ bidding, this
episode only serves to enhance, rather than lessen, the impression that Dean is
not the master of his own destiny. In fact, Zachariah’s scheme functions similarly
to the second kind of melodramatic film discussed by Thomas (the inverse of the
kind set primarily within ‘the space of violent male adventure’ described above),
of which she calls It’s a Wonderful Life ‘the quintessential example’ (2000, p. 14):
‘melodramas set within the home and/or small town [whose protagonists] may
long for escape to an alternative and more exciting place’ (ibid.). The events of
‘It’s a Terrible Life’, therefore, only serve to convince Dean that he is better off
imprisoned in one kind of ‘melodramatic’ scenario than another. And for all his
indignation at having been temporarily turned into a feminized office worker
(the kind of ‘weak-chinned BlackBerry clutcher [suspected by the media of
leaving] the nation open to attack’ on 9/11 (Faludi 2008, p. 8)), Dean is in fact,
ironically, equally impotent in a different way: trapped in a rigid, traditionally
masculine role imposed upon him by patriarchal forces.

Sam, on the other hand, bucks against the hunter life more frequently than
his brother. In addition to his initial rebellion when he left ‘home’ to go to
university, he also gives up hunting for a year between seasons seven and eight,
though, like Dean, only because he believes his brother, who has disappeared,
to be dead. Also like Dean, during this time he settles down with a woman,
a very traditionally feminine vet called Amelia (Liane Balaban). Their life
together is shown in a series of over-saturated flashbacks throughout season
eight, which contrast with Supernatural’s usual muted colour palette and low-
key lighting. This difference in style marks the flashbacks out as Sam’s ‘dreams
of unattainable domestic … bliss’: idyllic yet totally incompatible with his
habitual lifestyle.27

27 Dean’s ‘dreams’ of his life with Lisa and Ben are not seen so extensively: only during a minute-
long montage sequence, set to sentimental synthesizer music, of various happy moments they had
together, which takes place as Dean drives away from Lisa’s house after discovering she has a new
boyfriend (‘Mannequin 3: The Reckoning’). Dean has another fantasy of domesticity, induced by
a djinn, in ‘What Is and What Should Never Be’ (2.20), in which he lives in his hometown with a
fictional, idealized girlfriend called Carmen (Michelle Borth) and works in a garage.
When Dean returns, Sam leaves Amelia to resume being a hunter, just as Dean did when Sam reappeared in season six, thereby reiterating that in *Supernatural* (as in many Westerns) loyalty to male comrades or relatives always trumps relationships with women. Indeed, it is revealed in season eleven that Sam is plagued with guilt at having settled down with Amelia rather than searching for his missing brother (‘The Devil in the Details’, 11.10). The episode in which Sam decides to leave Amelia for good, ‘Torn and Frayed’ (8.10), ends with a sequence which encapsulates the show’s representation of the hunter lifestyle as both extremely ‘masculine’ and deeply melancholic. A scene in which Amelia arrives at the motel room where she had arranged to meet Sam to find it empty is followed by one in which Sam and Dean sit in front of a boxing match on the television in the log cabin they are using as their base, with beers and bowls of unappetizing-looking food. They do not speak but exchange a nod and a sad look as the camera pulls out and upwards, emphasizing their isolation (Figure 2.7). Throughout the sequence there is prominent melancholy, non-diegetic strings music which gradually rises in volume.

**A high-class birthright**

For all the hopelessness evoked in ‘Torn and Frayed’, in later episodes of season eight it is implied that there may be a way out of the hunter life for Sam – though
this does not turn out to be the case in subsequent seasons. In ‘As Time Goes By’ (8.12), Sam and Dean meet their paternal grandfather, Henry (Gil McKinney), who has time-travelled from the 1950s. Henry, like several generations of Winchesters before him, is a ‘Man of Letters’: a member of a secret organization dedicated to collecting information about the supernatural. According to Henry, his son John should also have become a Man of Letters, but since Henry was killed during his visit to 2013, John assumed his father had abandoned him and became a hunter instead.

After Henry’s death, Sam and Dean take over the Men of Letters’ headquarters and Sam – who has always had a scholarly bent – begins to act like one, reading his way through the group’s library and adding to their repository of information. The latter activity leads Dean to ask him, apparently mockingly, ‘So, uh, what, … you’re a Man of Letters now, is that it?’ (‘Everybody Hates Hitler’, 8.13), though in fact Dean follows this question (which Sam does not answer) with ‘Good’. This response was motivated, it becomes clear in the following episode, by Dean’s belief that his brother is ‘the brains of this operation’ (rather than an expendable ‘grunt’ like Dean himself) and should therefore ‘get out’ of the dangerous hunter lifestyle one day (‘Trial and Error’, 8.14).

Thus, from season eight onwards, Sam, like Lee Adama, embraces an identity somewhere between his warrior father and his more intellectual grandfather. In *Supernatural*, however, this can be seen not only as a negotiation between types of masculinity but between social classes. Wright describes Sam as a character with an ‘upwardly mobile trajectory’ (2016, p. 101). From this point of view, his escape to Stanford was a means of reclaiming the bourgeois class position which the family lost after Mary’s murder. Sam’s abandoning hunting to settle down with Amelia can therefore be seen as a further attempt to do the same thing; indeed, during this time, he considered going back to university (‘Heartache’). However, just like Dean’s life with Lisa, Sam’s life with Amelia is represented as unacceptably feminized: when Dean returns, he is horrified to discover that his brother now shops at the farmers’ market, teasing him that he ‘took a year off to do yoga and play the lute’ (‘Heartache’). Shopping at the farmers’ market, doing

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28 We discover in ‘In the Beginning’ (4.3) that Mary Winchester (Amy Gumenick) was, when young, also a hunter and from a long line of hunters, implying that even though John was not born into a hunter family, this vocation is still in his sons’ blood. While it is certainly a welcome narrative surprise at this point in the series to discover that Mary was not the damsel-in-distress she first appeared to be, the revelation is somewhat undercut by the fact that she hated hunting. She was pushed into it by her father (Mitch Pileggi), and soon gave it up to embrace a stereotypically feminine life as a housewife (although, rather contradictorily, she resumes hunting following her resurrection).
yoga and playing the lute are all activities that suggest both ‘middle-classness’ and feminization, attributes which are often linked together in *Supernatural*: recall the ‘feminine’ qualities Dean himself acquired in tandem with his white-collar job in ‘It’s a Terrible Life’.29

Being a Man of Letters, on the other hand, constitutes a sufficiently masculine (they are, as their name implies and especially in their American incarnation, mostly men), yet also higher-class identity; members of the order consider themselves far superior to hunters, whom they regard, in Henry’s words, as ‘apes’ (‘As Time Goes By’). Thus, if Sam did ultimately give up being a hunter and became a Man of Letters instead, this could be seen as his acceding to his high-class birthright, just as Prince Hal does when he becomes Henry V. As things stand, however, Sam apparently views himself and Dean as hunters and *Men of Letters*; in ‘Into the Mystic’ (11.11) he refers to them as both.30

Since the premise and, it seems, a good deal of the popularity of *Supernatural* hinge on the brothers’ continuing to suffer in their role as hunters, it seems unlikely that they will ever entirely relinquish this vocation – at least not before the programme finally comes to an end. Recent seasons of the show see both characters vacillate between insisting they love hunting (‘This is my life. I love it’, declares Sam in ‘Book of the Damned’ (10.18)) and dreaming of quitting. (Dean suggests, perhaps only half-jokingly, that they should make a reservation at an ‘awesome’ retirement home they visit in ‘Into the Mystic’, and Sam later stashes away its brochure.) Furthermore, both Winchesters continue to struggle with their ‘daddy issues’, as Lucifer puts it (‘The Devil in the Details’, 11.10). Sometimes they complain bitterly about the man who, according to a demon-possessed Dean, ‘brainwashed [them] into wasting [their] lives fighting his losing battle’ (‘Soul Survivor’, 10.03). Yet at other moments they betray a deep nostalgia for the time they spent with him: they attend a wrestler’s funeral in ‘Beyond the Mat’ (10.15) because John used to take them to wrestling matches when they were 29 Although Dean continually expresses disdain for ‘feminine’ things and especially displays of emotion – which he describes as ‘chick-flick moments’ – as both Susan A. George (2014) and Rhonda Nicol (2014) point out, he himself possesses some ‘feminine’ qualities, in particular his ‘motherly’ nurturing of his younger brother (George and Nicol’s contention was given extra weight by the end of season eleven, broadcast after their time of writing, when Dean admits that he actually ‘love[s]’ ‘chick-flicks’ (‘Alpha and Omega’)). Hence, George argues, ‘while Dean does incorporate some of his father’s characteristics into his persona, the form of masculinity he embodies is less ‘traditional’ than John’s (2014, p. 143). 30 One of the main storylines of season twelve is the British branch of the Men of Letters – who are more active and ruthless than their (now virtually extinct) American counterparts – attempting to recruit American hunters, especially the Winchesters. Sam is briefly won over (‘The Raid’, 12.14), but the British Men of Letters are soon revealed to be downright villainous, setting out to exterminate all American hunters after they have given up trying to recruit them.
boys. Fittingly, one of the ageing wrestlers they meet there (Aleks Paunovic) expresses a sentiment that Dean later paraphrases to Sam as an encapsulation of the philosophy they live by – one which they have learnt from their father: ‘Keep grinding. No matter how much it hurts, no matter how hard it gets, you got to keep grinding.’

**Deviations and subversions: Other series**

Although *BSG* and *Supernatural* highlight flaws in the Prince Hal narrative, they both do still essentially adhere to it, reinforcing the long-standing cultural myth that it is a young man’s duty to take over his father’s role as leader, warrior, protector or avenger, no matter how unpleasant he may find it. Programmes in which sons resist paternal pressure altogether are far rarer. One example is *Heroes*, in which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, Peter has chosen to work as a nurse despite his father’s disapproval. A more subtle rebellion is carried out by Hiro: his father Kaito wants him to take over the family business even though Hiro’s older sister Kimiko, who already runs three divisions of the company, is a more suitable and willing choice. In ‘Distractions’ (1.4), Hiro accepts the role of executive vice-president and then announces a business decision that Kimiko thinks is unwise so that she, in arguing with him, will demonstrate her own appropriateness for the job to their father. His plan works: Kaito accepts Kimiko as his successor and Hiro declares, ‘[T]he son you wanted to be like you will follow his own path.’

We may admire Hiro and *Heroes* for this gesture towards gender equality, but the series, like the others discussed in this chapter, still focuses heavily on relationships between fathers and their children. As we shall see in Chapter 4, mother–daughter relationships are especially rare in post-9/11 American apocalyptic television (as well as elsewhere in Hollywood output) and those that do exist are usually hostile. The one in the reimagined *V* is worth mentioning within our discussion of Prince Hal narratives because the central mother and daughter are the queen and princess of a matriarchal alien race. However, the way their relationship develops is very different from a Prince Hal narrative (despite the fact that one episode title, ‘Uneasy Lies the Head’ (2.8), is a quotation from *Henry IV, Part Two*). Unlike all the fathers we have seen so far who, however controlling, are fundamentally ‘good,’ *V*’s queen, Anna (Morena Baccarin), is the series’ antagonist. Rather than fighting to prevent the apocalypse, Anna
The Prince Hal Narrative

seeks to cause one: she wants her people, the Visitors, to take over the Earth and forcibly interbreed with humans. Anna is trying to train her daughter Lisa (Laura Vandervoort) to be a ruthless leader like her, but, unlike our Prince Hals, who succumb to parental pressure, Lisa falls in love with a human and begins working with the human resistance.

Not only are Anna and Lisa opposed in allegiance, in season two we learn that Anna overthrew the previous queen, her own mother Diana (Jane Badler), because she too wanted to make peace with the humans. When Lisa discovers Diana in the dungeon where Anna has kept her for fifteen years (‘Siege’, 2.6), they bond and hatch a plot with the anti-Visitor resistance movement to kill Anna. However, the plot fails: in the season two finale (which turned out to be the last episode altogether because the series was subsequently cancelled), ironically titled ‘Mother’s Day’ (2.22), Anna tricks Lisa into not killing her by pretending that she really loves her and that she has decided to make peace with the humans. Anna then dramatically kills Diana with her tail as the latter makes a speech to try to win back the support of the other Visitors. Afterwards, Anna turns to Lisa and says coldly, ‘Now that’s how you kill your mother’, before having her imprisoned in the dungeon where she had previously kept Diana.

In V, then, no form of mother–daughter bond exists, beyond the pretence carried out by Anna in ‘Mother’s Day’. While the father–son relationships discussed above are troubled, all are basically loving. Anna, on the other hand, not only clashes with her mother and her daughter, she is positively sadistic towards both of them, cruelly manipulating Lisa and even ordering a henchman to break her legs in order to lure her human boyfriend to her rescue (‘Hearts and Minds’, 1.10). Furthermore, the series implies that rebellion by daughters, or the daughters of Visitor queens at least, against their mothers is inevitable. Diana (somewhat illogically given her own sympathies) warns Anna that Lisa is likely to betray her before she even meets her granddaughter (‘Laid Bare’, 2.3), and Anna herself is pleased when Lisa slaps her in ‘Birth Pangs’ (2.7) because she believes that aggression is a necessary quality for a queen. Of course, within the moral logic of the show, this mother–daughter antipathy is a good thing. Whereas in the other programmes analysed in this chapter, father–son solidarity and the passing down of responsibility from one to the other is constructed as vital to the survival of the human race, in V, if Diana and Lisa were to support Anna’s cause, this would be disastrous for humanity. Patriarchal lineage, these programmes imply, is necessary, if potentially damaging to individuals; matriarchal lineage, on the other hand, is dangerous.
Gender in Post-9/11 American Apocalyptic TV

*T:TSCC*, a spin-off from the *Terminator* films (*The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991; *T2*), *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (Jonathan Mostow, 2003; *T3*), *Terminator Salvation* (McG, 2009) and *Terminator Genisys* (Alan Taylor, 2015)), is unusual in that it features a mother rather than a father training up her son, John Connor (Thomas Dekker), to be a warrior and leader. It dispenses with the ‘good’ male Terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) from *T2* and *T3*, whom several critics have seen as a father figure for John (e.g. Pask (1995), French (1996), Short (2011)), and instead resurrects his mother Sarah (Lena Headey), who, in the films, died of cancer between *T2* and *T3*. However, it is important to note, first, that Sarah is never a leader in her own right, and she only learns how to fight (between *The Terminator* and *T2*) in order to protect and train John, leading many commentators – such as Jeffords (1993), Tasker (1993), Inness (1999) and Cornea (2007) – to question whether she can truly be considered a ‘tough’ female character. Secondly, in both *T2* and the television series, Sarah is preoccupied with the idea that she and her allies can change the future so that the apocalypse will never happen and John will never have to lead the human resistance against the intelligent machines that caused it. This is, therefore, another difference from the fathers discussed earlier, who believe their sons have no choice but to fight, and one that emphasizes Sarah’s status as a mother. As Short puts it in reference to *T2*: ‘*[T]he mother’s “instinct” to protect her young [is] foregrounded*’ (2011, p. 137).

John himself, on the other hand, becomes increasingly resigned to his ‘destiny’ throughout *T:TSCC*, though he certainly finds aspects of it traumatic, in particular, having to kill people; a psychologist (Dorian Harewood) tells Sarah that John (aged sixteen) reminds him of a Vietnam War veteran (‘The Tower Is Tall but the Fall Is Short’, 2.6). The final episode of the show sees John rebel against his mother’s orders by travelling to the post-apocalyptic future, while she stays behind, still insisting, ‘I’ll stop it’ (i.e. the apocalypse) (‘Born to Run’, 2.22). Thus, here too, as in *Supernatural*, a woman, though well meaning, tries to hold a young man back from his heroic destiny and must therefore ultimately be abandoned.

In *The Event* there is a mother who *is* a leader, but her relationship with her son is nonetheless quite different from a typical Prince Hal narrative. Sophia (Laura Innes) is the leader of a group of ‘non-terrestrials’ who have been on Earth since 1945, while her adult son Thomas (Clifton Collins, Jr.) is her deputy. At the beginning of the series, Sophia is friendly-disposed towards humans but Thomas is not. Urged on by his girlfriend Isabel (Necar Zadegan) (like *Falling...
Skies’ Karen, an external female threat to family unity), Thomas plots to kill Sophia, brings many more non-terrestrials to Earth and wipes out humanity. Although Thomas can’t finally bring himself to kill his mother (and she forgives him for trying, putting all the blame on Isabel’s influence) (‘Your World to Take,’ 9), the two continue to plot against one another, and Sophia later tries unsuccessfully to have Thomas killed (‘Turnabout,’ 13).

Unlike the mothers and daughters in V, Sophia and Thomas do finally reconcile but in a way that puts him in the dominant position. In ‘A Message Back’ (14), Thomas receives news from the non-terrestrials’ home that, as their sun is about to go supernova, the planet will be uninhabitable in less than a year. He tells Sophia that they ‘can’t afford to be divided any longer’, before making a rousing speech at a meeting of the non-terrestrials about how it is now essential that they bring all the rest of their people to Earth. Sophia watches Thomas make the speech in apparent awe, and in the next episode, ‘Face Off’ (15), they make amends, hugging as Isabel looks on sullenly. Thomas dies later in the episode, sacrificing himself to save his mother, but Sophia spends the rest of the series attempting to carry out his plans to wipe out all humans and bring the rest of the non-terrestrials to Earth. That she frequently complains (e.g. to her friend Michael (Scott Patterson) in ‘Us or Them’ (19)) about how upsetting she finds ‘having’ to do this only serves to highlight the fact that The Event contains what is effectively a kind of reverse Prince Hal narrative. Rather than a son reluctantly carrying out his father’s wishes and taking over from him after his death, it is a mother who reluctantly takes over from her dead son.31 As is the case with T:TSCC, therefore, The Event implies that men are the ‘natural’ leaders to whom women, even their own mothers, should ultimately defer.

Conclusion: ‘Folks like us, there ain’t no happy ending’

Clearly, Hollywood is still as obsessed with the difficult relationships between fathers and sons as it ever was and is still, as Bruzzi suggests, using them to work through anxieties about masculinity. But whereas, as Tasker, Hamad and others have shown, many contemporary Hollywood films show a preoccupation with fatherhood, in American apocalyptic television, ‘Prince Hal narratives’

31 According to a casting announcement in Variety (Littleton 2010), the role of Sophia was originally written for a man. It is tempting to speculate about whether the character’s relationship with Thomas would have developed differently had a man been given the part.
focusing primarily on sons are more common. They trace a young man’s (or young men’s) gradual and reluctant acknowledgement that he is actually very similar to his father and must take over his important job, or a comparable one, for the good of humanity. Deviations from this pattern involving women, such as *V*, *T:TSCC* and *The Event*, are really only exceptions that prove the rule. They underline that Prince Hal/Henry IV-type relationships ‘must’ always be between men, since when female characters are placed in the same positions they behave very differently and in a manner which, whether intentionally or not, may be detrimental for the human race.

What I have tried to emphasize in this chapter, however, is the somewhat surprising extent to which the two principal programmes under analysis, *BSG* and *Supernatural*, dwell on their protagonists’ unhappiness, an unhappiness which seems to stem from the weighty responsibility bequeathed them by their fathers. Emotional (and physical) suffering is, as Kord and Krimmer observe, something which the heroes of many recent Hollywood blockbusters likewise endure, to a far greater extent than their predecessors (2011, p. 132). But this suffering, they argue, usually forms part of a narrative of ‘remasculinization’, in which the ‘protagonists rise from the ashes and convert their setbacks into ever-greater glory’ (ibid., pp. 1–2).

In apocalyptic TV programmes, on the other hand, as we saw in Chapter 1, this narrative does not seem to unfold in a straightforward manner. This is probably attributable to a large degree to the sheer length of many American series and the fact that their plotlines are usually only planned out from season to season, factors conducive to considerable textual evolution. The result is programmes in which the protagonists’ occasional triumphs are interspersed with periods of intense suffering, often represented in an overtly melodramatic way and without a clear end point or solution in sight. This in itself should prevent us from viewing these series as unambiguous propaganda for the kind of ‘John Wayne masculinity’ that was resurgent after 9/11. It also makes them significantly different from the apocalyptic films described by Hamad, Gunn and Kord and Krimmer, which portray the restitution of patriarchal authority in a relatively uncomplicated way, as the masculinity of a previously beaten down and failing father is gradually but inexorably restored.

Having said that, *Supernatural* in particular is keen to assure its audience that its heroes’ suffering does not adversely affect their masculinity; it is shown to be the more ‘masculine’ choice to be on the road fighting monsters and feeling miserable than settled happily in a house with a woman. In both *Supernatural*
and _BSG_, as in the _Henriad_, the most important marker of masculinity of all seems to be the ability and willingness to fight (or perhaps I should use the more proactive verb to ‘hunt’, given the connotations of Lee’s call sign and the Winchesters’ profession); recall that in _BSG_, Lee becomes fat and ‘soft’ when he fails to come to the rescue of the humans on New Caprica. Yet, in both Sam and Lee, mixed in with the obligation and capacity to fight, though importantly never replacing it altogether, there is an impulse towards a more cerebral and, in _Supernatural_’s case, higher-class kind of masculinity. Interestingly, in both cases, this is presented as an inheritance from the generation _before_ the characters’ fathers, perhaps suggesting a yearning for some kind of mythologized past ideal of ‘civilized’ masculinity.

That Sam and Lee seem caught between ‘competing aspects of masculinity’ (Lotz 2014, p. 106) gives them some similarity to the heroes of the non-apocalyptic drama series analysed by Lotz. But, crucially, unlike those shows, the ones discussed here do not ‘resist a return to more distinctly patriarchal norms’ (ibid., p. 114). Instead, throughout both _BSG_ and _Supernatural_, as well as the more ideologically univocal _Jericho_, a sense of patriarchal lineage is repeatedly evoked and valorized, as the protagonists employ skills and knowledge passed down from their fathers and grandfathers to prevent or deal with the apocalypse.

Nevertheless, a second significant result of the lengthiness of these programmes’ narratives is that there is an ongoing vacillation between those moments when our Prince Hals prove themselves to be worthy successors to their fathers, albeit miserable and reluctant ones, and those in which they rebel against or escape from this role. _BSG_ ends with Lee finally having achieved the latter, so the show is not ultimately melodramatic in Deborah Thomas’s sense, for all that the pessimistic tone of earlier seasons suggests that it may be (Thomas acknowledges that many texts shift in and out of the melodramatic mode (2000, p. 14)). However, it is telling that Lee is only able to escape the destiny which patriarchal society has assigned him once that society has been completely dissolved. We do not yet know the fate of Sam and Dean – whether they will ever ‘lay [their] weary head[s] to rest’, as the singer of the Kansas song promises that his ‘wayward son’ will one day be able to. The show’s melodramatic structure makes it unlikely that they will ever entirely escape their father’s injunction to keep on ‘saving people, hunting things’. Yet what seems even more certain is that as long as they do continue, in the words of jaded old hunter Rufus (Steven Williams), they will not get ‘no happy ending’ (‘Time Is on My Side’, 3.15).
This chapter and the preceding one focused on individual male characters and the kinds of masculinity they embody and pass down through the generations. They also concentrated mainly on characters who are, broadly speaking, ‘good’, or at least start out as such, though, as we have seen, moral distinctions are often hazy in post-9/11 apocalyptic television and characters may change drastically as series wear on. Nevertheless, for the most part, the characters we have examined so far have been the ‘heroes’ of their respective programmes: men who either attempt to stop apocalypses from happening or who try to protect others after they have happened. In the next chapter, however, we shall widen our focus to examine the other key figures in these apocalyptic narratives as well: the people who cause the apocalypses and those who are portrayed as the primary victims.
Patriarchal Conspiracies and Female Victims

Introduction: Instigators of the apocalypse

As I stated in Chapter 2, a major focus of this chapter will be the people who cause the apocalypses in post-9/11 American apocalyptic television. The first thing to note here is that, in the largest proportion of the programmes, it is people who are to blame for causing the disaster, rather than the other threats typically found in apocalyptic fiction such as plagues, comets or biblical Armageddon (though there is at least one programme featuring each of these too). In seven out of the twenty-five American series featuring an apocalypse or apocalyptic threat that appeared within the time period on which I am focusing, that apocalypse (or at least one of them if there are several) is caused or threatened by a specific group of people or sometimes more than one.1 These are Firefly (actually Serenity (Joss Whedon, 2005), the film which concludes Firefly’s narrative; see note 1, below), Jericho, Heroes, Bionic Woman, Fringe, FlashForward and Dollhouse.2 In four more series, BSG, Surface, T:TSCC and Caprica, the threat comes from entities that were created by people: cyborgs in BSG and Caprica (which are two parts of the same narrative), genetically engineered creatures in Surface and an artificial intelligence in T:TSCC. Thus, in eleven of the programmes in total, the root cause of the apocalypse is specific human actions. By contrast, the second most prevalent cause, alien invasion, only appears in five of the programmes: Invasion, Threshold, V, The Event and Falling Skies.

1 I say specific group because in two series, Firefly and Terra Nova, the cause is pollution/destruction of the Earth’s resources, which is obviously a result of the behaviour of large sections of the population. In Firefly this apocalypse happened long before the start of the series; Earth is referred to in it as ‘Earth-That-Was’. Serenity, however, also features an apocalypse on another planet, which has a more specific human cause, so I do include Firefly/Serenity among the seven. I do not, however, include Carnivàle, Point Pleasant or the numerous seasons of Supernatural in which, though the threatened apocalypses are mostly biblical in nature, the biblical figures involved, such as angels and the Antichrist, take human form.

2 The 4400 is a borderline case. Although the cause of the threatened apocalypse is unknown, a group of people are working to ensure that it does occur.
The second important thing to note is that the vast majority of these perpetrators of the apocalypse are men, men who belong to large organizations with secret, often Machiavellian, plans – in other words, conspiracies. The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct the gendered dynamics of the relationship between these patriarchal conspiracies, the heroes (and occasionally heroines) who fight to thwart their plans and the conspiracies’ victims. In some cases, including my first case study, *Jericho* (which was also discussed, albeit briefly, in the last chapter in relation to the Prince Hal narrative enacted by its protagonist), these victims are the people who need protection from an apocalypse or its aftermath, but in others, such as my second case study, *Dollhouse*, they are actually used by a conspiracy as part of its nefarious plans. In all cases, the victims, or at least the most narratively important ones, are female.

This is a narrative configuration which seems easy to link to 9/11 in two ways: first, in terms of Faludi’s (and others’) account of the media’s gendering of 9/11 and secondly, because we might assume that since ‘the manner in which the Bush administration conducted the so-called war on terror brought paranoia to the forefront’ (Hantke 2010b, p. 144; see also Hantke (2010a)), this must have led to that paranoia being ‘injected … into genres of popular entertainment’ (ibid.). However, although these factors do seem relevant to some of our apocalyptic programmes at least, we should keep in mind that there are numerous other cultural and industrial factors which likely played a role in the prevalence of the conspiracy narrative on American television at this particular moment in history. Hence, I shall begin this chapter by considering some of these.

A paranoid style: American television conspiracy narratives in context

From one point of view, contemporary American serial television is a natural home for the conspiracy story. In a highly competitive industrial context in which it is impossible for writers and producers to predict for how many seasons a given series is likely to run, the prevalence of mystery-centred narratives that grow ever more complex take myriad unexpected twists and turns and constantly withhold meaningful answers is hardly surprising. As Felix Brinker explains, such programmes ‘adapt the structure of the conspiracy narrative in order to meet the demands of television’s post-network era’ (2012). Of course, from the viewers’ perspective, this formula can be a frustrating one, particularly if, as
often happens, a series is cancelled suddenly leaving many of its key questions unanswered (see Anders (2010) for a list of examples which includes many of the shows mentioned in this chapter). And even when ‘conspiratorial television shows’ do end in the manner their writers intended, their finales ‘often fail to meet the expectations of their fans, as their conclusions cannot resolve all of the dangling plotlines’ (Brinker 2012).

As suggested above, many of the apocalyptic series under discussion in this book are also conspiracy narratives: their principal ongoing plot-arcs involve the protagonists either trying to identify the perpetrators of an apocalyptic event that has already happened or, more commonly, attempting to foil a secret plot likely to cause an apocalypse. However, it should be noted that the conspiracy plot is not usually these programmes’ sole storyline. As Mark Fenster explains, while network executives may like their shows to have infinitely extendable ‘mythologies’ that can ‘expand across television seasons’ and potentially into other formats such as films, books and merchandise (2008, p. 148), they tend to harbour a simultaneous and contradictory preoccupation with ‘closure’ (Carter cited in Fenster 2008, p. 145): a predilection for stand-alone episodes which will not alienate casual viewers. Caught in this double bind, many showrunners opt to follow the model pioneered by The X-Files (1993–2002, 2016–) in featuring a mixture of stand-alone episodes and those dealing with a central conspiracy.

Given the appropriateness of such a format to the contemporary Hollywood television industry, not to mention the obvious creative influence of the hugely successful X-Files on many subsequent shows, we should, as I suggest above, be wary of the link drawn by commentators such as Steffen Hantke between 9/11 and the resurgence of conspiracy narratives on American television.3 On the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that most post-9/11 apocalyptic conspiracy series do reference 9/11 in the construction of their apocalypse or the events surrounding it, whether through explicit references, imagery or plot (this was discussed in relation to Heroes in Chapter 1; see also, for example, Froula (2011) on T:TSCC and Ames (2012) on Fringe, Heroes and FlashForward).

Some of these shows, such as the three ‘alien’ invasion series discussed by Hantke, Surface, Invasion and Threshold, do certainly evoke the brand of paranoia generated by the ‘war on terror’: ‘visions of omnipresent covert infiltration and

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3 The programme that acknowledges its debt to The X-Files most openly is Fringe, which, like the earlier show, features an FBI unit dedicated to investigating paranormal phenomena. In the episode ‘A New Day in the Old Town’ (2.1), The X-Files is seen on a television screen and a Senate committee chairman (Ken Camroux-Taylor) refers to the ‘Fringe Division’ as a successor to ‘the old “X” designation.’
subversion, sleeper cells and fifth columns’ (Hantke 2010b, p. 145; see also Takacs (2009)). However, at least equally present is a mistrust of the American government, which is almost always implicated in the conspiracy that will result in an apocalypse and/or in concealing the apocalyptic threat from the public. This is true of all three of Hantke’s ‘alien’ invasion series – though in Threshold the government agents are the heroes and believe their covering up of the alien threat to be in the public’s best interests – as well as numerous other programmes including Heroes, The Event, Dollhouse and Jericho.

All of these shows belie Enrica Picarelli and M. Carmen Gomez-Galisteo’s claim that The X-Files’ ‘message that preached government distrust was deemed inappropriate and discarded’ by television producers following 9/11 (2013, p. 83). This may have been the case in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, but it is clear that by 2005’s Surface and Invasion at least (the latter of which, like The X-Files, deals with the government’s collusion with alien invaders) political paranoia had returned in force. From this point onwards, many new series followed the extreme direction in which The X-Files had taken the conspiracy genre, portraying an American government that is not only corrupt but implicated in the most serious crime imaginable: causing an apocalypse. Moreover, political paranoia in the post-9/11 period was by no means limited to the relatively niche sphere of science fiction television. Hantke and Ian Scott both see the government’s response to the attacks as a key influence in bringing conspiracy back to the Hollywood mainstream. Scott points in particular to ‘[t]he … direction of the war in Iraq and then later Afghanistan … ; the controversies surrounding non-combatant detainment; extraordinary rendition; and … government relations with prominent corporate interests’ (2011, p. 116).

Not mentioned by Scott or Hantke but also, I think, relevant was the contemporary cultural prevalence of conspiracy theories relating to the American government’s supposed complicity in the 9/11 attacks themselves (Olmstead 2010, p. 206). Although the so-called ‘9/11 Truth’ movement is extremely diverse, encompassing many different factions and theories (ibid., p. 225), as Fenster relates, most ‘truthers’ agree about what the government stood to gain from the attacks:

The conspirators correctly predicted that the attack would … provide the pretext for military action in the Middle East, while it would also leave the public fearful

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4 Surface is not technically an alien invasion series because the creatures that appear to be of alien origin turn out to have been genetically engineered.
and willing to cede greater political and military authority to the president and thus allow President Bush and the Republican Party to gain stronger majorities in Congress, win reelection in 2004, suppress dissent, and drastically reduce the public’s civil liberties. (2008, p. 241)

The second aspect of these motivations is quite obviously alluded to in the first season of *Heroes*. Mafia boss Daniel Linderman and his allies wish to ensure that the nuclear explosion in New York City occurs, ostensibly because they believe, in Linderman’s words, that the ‘tragedy will be a catalyst for good, for change. Out of the ashes humanity will find a common goal, a united sense of fear’ (‘.07%’, 1.19). They use underhand means to get Nathan Petrelli elected as New York State congressman, hoping that the nation will rally around him after the disaster and he will thus be able to become president. Of course, in the show’s main timeline the explosion never occurs, but in the alternative future seen in ‘Five Years Gone’ (1.20) in which it has occurred and Nathan has indeed become president, he is using his position to drastically reduce the civil liberties of people with superpowers, whom he has designated as ‘terrorists’.5

Likewise, as will be discussed later in more detail, in *Jericho*, a conspiracy involving both corporate and government factions plans a devastating nuclear attack on the United States, which in this case actually takes place. Here the conspirators’ motivation is both to increase their own power and to pursue colonial/economic interests of the kind 9/11 ‘truthers’ (as well as many other people) suspect were behind the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (Fenster 2008, p. 241). Perhaps, then, it is not entirely coincidental that both *Heroes* and *Jericho* premiered in 2006, the year by which, Kathryn S. Olmstead argues, ‘alternative 9/11 theories had entered the American mainstream,’ popularized by celebrities such as Charlie Sheen and Rosie O’Donnell (2010, p. 229).

As Olmstead and Fenster both point out, the ‘9/11 Truth’ movement forms part of a long tradition of conspiracy theories in American politics and culture, which Richard Hofstadter famously named the ‘paranoid style’.6 The object of this paranoia was originally ‘outsiders and foreigners’ (Hofstadter 2008, p. 24), but, as Olmstead explains, over the course of the twentieth century, public opinion

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5 It is revealed at the end of the episode that Nathan has in fact, at some point since the explosion, been replaced by the villainous Sylar. The reason for this is doubtless that the writers did not wish to sully the character of Nathan too much.

6 Contrary to popular belief (Olmstead makes this mistake), Hofstadter does not view the paranoid style as a specifically American tendency but rather an ‘international phenomenon’ that can be traced back at least as far as ‘European millennial sects from the eleventh to the sixteenth century’ (2008, p. 38).
shifted: ‘No longer were conspiracy theorists chiefly concerned that alien forces were plotting to capture the federal government; instead, they proposed that the federal government itself was the conspirator’ (2010, p. 4).

In recent apocalyptic series, however, the federal government is not the only conspirator: they are almost always in league with, or being controlled or manipulated by, a multinational corporation. This is the case in both the case studies to which we will shortly turn, Jericho and Dollhouse, and other programmes including Fringe, Surface and The 4400. In season seven of Supernatural, the CEO of a corporation composed of monsters who aim to fatten the human race for food has political aspirations, while the creator of Firefly, Joss Whedon, has stated that had the show not been prematurely cancelled, it would have emerged that ‘the notional government of the Alliance’ was in fact ‘more or less completely controlled’ by ‘a powerful corporate conglomorate’ (Canavan 2011a, p. 193, note 16). Corporate conspiracies also crop up in Terra Nova, Lost and The Event, though these are not directly world threatening.7

This is not an unprecedented development: corporate conspiracies have appeared quite regularly in American film and television since at least the 1970s paranoia cycle; The Parallax View (Alan J. Pakula, 1974) is a famous example. As Edward Jay Epstein points out, a major reason for this is an economic one. Since the end of the Cold War especially, Hollywood ‘studios are finding it risky to use villains from potentially valuable markets such as China’ (2011), and they are also wary of incurring the opprobrium of ‘stereotype-sensitive advocacy groups, representing everyone from hyphenated ethnic minorities and physically handicapped people to Army and CIA veterans’ (ibid.). Consequently, ‘the safest remaining [villains] are lily-white, impeccably dressed American corporate executives’ (ibid.) – male ones, Epstein might have added but, significantly, didn’t. (I shall return to this point later.)

The ever-increasing prevalence of corporate conspiracies in twenty-first-century Hollywood output may also reflect a growing public awareness of

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7 The exception that perhaps proves the rule is T:TSCC, which features a technology company called Zeira Corporation, headed by Catherine Weaver (Shirley Manson), a Terminator posing as a human. Throughout most of the series, the audience, like Sarah Connor and her allies, is led to believe that Weaver is plotting on behalf of Skynet, the military-designed artificial intelligence which will cause the apocalypse. The twist revealed in the final episode (‘Born to Run’) (which will be discussed further in the next chapter), that Weaver actually wishes to help thwart Skynet, thus seems designed to subvert audience assumptions gleaned from similar programmes that the corporation is bound to be the villain. Such assumptions, however, would not be entirely incorrect as it transpires that Skynet has in fact established a different, less high-profile but equally powerful technological research company called the Kaliba Group.
the fact that, in recent decades, as Richard J. Barnet and John Cavanagh put it, ‘the balance of power in world politics has shifted … from territorially bound governments to companies that can roam the world’ (1995, p. 14). This idea was popularized in the early years of the century by the likes of Naomi Klein’s international bestseller No Logo (2010 (2000)) and the documentary The Corporation (Mark Achbar and Jennifer Abbott, 2003). Furthermore, as Klein points out in the introduction to the tenth-anniversary edition of No Logo, one of the most long-lasting legacies of the George W. Bush administration may well be the way that it ‘hollowed out’ the US government, ‘handing over to the private sector many of the most essential functions of government, from protecting borders to responding to disasters to collecting intelligence’ (2010 (2000), p. xix). As we shall see, this is an issue that is explicitly addressed in Jericho.

Gendered conspiracies

The twenty-first-century apocalyptic conspiracy series may differ from their predecessor The X-Files in making corporations rather than governments the main conspirators, but the way these conspirators are portrayed in physical terms has not changed. Like the members of The X-Files’ ‘Syndicate’, the shadowy subgroup of the State Department that aided extra-terrestrial would-be invaders, the most powerful figures in the newer shows’ corporate conspiracies, are overwhelmingly white, male and middle to upper class. Even when women appear to hold high-ranking positions within the corporations, like Fringe’s Nina Sharp (Blair Brown) or Dollhouse’s Adelle DeWitt (Olivia Williams), it is always revealed that they are, in fact, under the authority of a male boss or bosses.8

It would be unwise to propose any generalizations about whether the patriarchal nature of these conspirators constitutes a progressive or a reactionary gesture because this undoubtedly varies from text to text. It may indicate an inability on the part of the programme-makers to imagine true global power in the hands of anyone apart from a white male elite. However, it might equally be read, as Elizabeth Kubek reads The X-Files’ Syndicate, as a critique of the Symbolic Order, ‘the conspiracy of patriarchal culture itself’ (1996, p. 178),

8 The exception to this is, once again, T:TSCC’s Catherine Weaver, but then, as explained in the previous footnote, she turns out not to be the orchestrator of a conspiracy after all. Furthermore, she isn’t actually human, so her ‘female’ identity could be contested (although she is mostly seen in female form).
as well as a simple reflection of the fact that between 2002 and 2012 women only held between 1.2 per cent and 3.6 per cent of Fortune 500 CEO positions (Catalyst 2013).

My two case studies will, I hope, demonstrate something of the range of ideological uses to which the trope of the male-dominated conspiracy can be put. In *Jericho*, though the key conspirators are male, the effect of their machinations is, in fact, implicitly feminizing, allowing the programme to posit the actions of ‘manly’ men and the establishment of a more ‘masculine’ kind of patriarchal authority as the ‘solution’. *Dollhouse*, on the other hand, follows in the footsteps of *The X-Files* in its depiction of the central conspiracy as literally patriarchal: in the latter series, it is revealed that protagonist Fox Mulder’s (David Duchovny) father Bill (Peter Donat) was a member of the Syndicate and gave up his own daughter Samantha (Vanessa Morley/Ashlyn Rose/Megan Leitch/Mimi Paley) to the aliens as ‘collateral’. Although she was returned shortly afterwards, Samantha was kept in captivity by the Syndicate and used, along with numerous other women including Fox Mulder’s partner Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson), in experiments to create a human–alien hybrid. In *Dollhouse*, meanwhile, as we shall see, the head of the sinister corporation that owns the eponymous mind-wiping facility turns out to be a man who had previously seemed a benign father figure to the heroine, Echo (Eliza Dushku).

This pattern of a father or father figure as the orchestrator of or collaborator in a conspiracy and his ‘daughter’ as its victim is not limited to these two programmes; it appears in numerous post-*X-Files* American science fiction series including *Dark Angel, Heroes, Fringe, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (2013–)* and *Stranger Things (2016–)*. Conspiracy itself, particularly patriarchal conspiracy, is a typical feature of the Gothic mode (Wright 2016, p. 156), and the dynamic of hidden familial guilt found in these shows further endows them with Gothic overtones; this quality will be explored here in relation to *Dollhouse*, a programme with an especially strong relationship to the Gothic. Even more common is the broader trope of an important female character being the subject or intended subject of physical experimentation or exploitation by the conspirators. This occurs in many apocalyptic programmes including *Firefly, Invasion, The 4400, The Event* and *BSG*, though, of course, it is given greater narrative importance in some shows than in others. Chapter 4 will focus on the young female victims of conspiracies across a number of series.

Once again, it is tempting to attribute the recurrence of this feature to the sexist cultural convention, especially strong after 9/11 if Faludi is to be
believed, of casting women as victims. A more charitable point of view would be that these storylines demonstrate that, even though corporations rather than governments are now the principal holders of biopolitical power, it is still women, and often their sexuality and reproductive functions, who are the primary victims of control and exploitation. *Dollhouse* is one of the shows most apt to be read in the latter way, as I hope my analysis of it will show. It also makes for a stark comparison with *Jericho*, which does, I think, conform much more closely to the women-as-victims/men-as-protectors paradigm proposed by Faludi, especially since, in *Jericho*, it is men who lead the fight against the conspirators, whereas in *Dollhouse* it is a woman, Echo, who thereby throws off her own victim status.

I have chosen these two programmes as case studies precisely because the gendered dynamics of the relationship between perpetrators, victims and heroes are so different in each, despite the fact that the conspiracies themselves have several points in common. Looking at them together not only highlights the ideological flexibility of the apocalyptic conspiracy narrative but also reminds us how important it is to consider the role of gender within such narratives – an issue often ignored by commentators (e.g. Epstein, cited above). The two series also make for a neat comparison because they are broadly similar in terms of their production and reception contexts. Both were produced by major networks (*Jericho* by CBS, *Dollhouse* by Fox) but cancelled after two seasons due to poor ratings.\(^9\) Indeed, both were threatened with cancellation after one season but renewed due to fan pressure (Elber 2007, Wortham 2008). Thus, both programmes can be considered cult texts in that they each garnered an extremely devoted fanbase despite being neither a commercial nor a critical success: the first season of *Jericho* scored an average of forty-eight out of 100 across the thirty reviews analysed by the aggregator site *Metacritic* (Metacritic 2006), while *Dollhouse*’s first season scored fifty-seven out of 100 across twenty-eight reviews (Metacritic 2009).\(^{10}\) It is only a shame that there is not space here to investigate how the two series’ fans responded to their very different representations of gender – an avenue for future research perhaps.

\(^9\) *Dollhouse*’s ratings were considerably worse than *Jericho*’s. The former averaged 4.63 million viewers for its first season (ABC Medianet 2009a) and only 2.17 million for its second (Gorman 2010), while the latter averaged 9.24 million for its first season (Gorman and Seidman 2008) and 6.16 million for its second (ibid.).

\(^{10}\) It should be borne in mind that *Metacritic*’s methodology is not very scientific; however, its scores do give a rough idea of how well regarded popular cultural works were by critics.
Jericho: Conservative values versus corporate conspirators

Jericho has been characterized by Mathias Nilges as an example of a series which ‘allow[s] for the celebration of traditional masculinity and the re-centering of the male labouring body as a result of the post-apocalyptic return to the good old times’ (2010, p. 32). While I do not disagree with this assessment, the show’s politics are more complex, or perhaps simply less coherent, than Nilges’s analysis suggests. Like the 1970s disaster films discussed by Ryan and Kellner in their influential book Camera Politica, Jericho is not ‘unidimensionally conservative’ (1988, p. 52) in that it ‘warn[s] about the dangers of unrestrained corporate capitalism’ by depicting the sudden breakdown of a ‘patriarchal, capitalist, technological order’ (ibid.). However, at the same time, the alternatives it proposes are deeply conservative: ‘the ritualised legitimation of strong male leadership, the renewal of traditional moral values, and the regeneration of institutions like the patriarchal family’ (ibid.).

Shades of the ‘war on terror’

As noted earlier, Jericho’s conspiracy carries many echoes of the theories proposed by 9/11 ‘truthers’. Undercover CIA agent Robert Hawkins uncovers evidence that the former Director of Homeland Security Thomas Valente (Daniel Benzali) coordinated a coalition of diverse terrorist groups to carry out the ‘September Attacks’: nuclear bomb detonations in more than twenty major American cities (‘A.K.A.’, 1.18). The series even makes a nod to the intelligence failings acknowledged by the official 9/11 Commission Report (see Olmstead 2010, pp. 211–212) in the form of an LA Times reporter (Lance Guest) who ‘wrote an exposé about the appalling gaps in port security three years before the Attacks and it ended up on page C-18 because it didn’t have any zazz’ (‘Condor’, 2.2).

Though Hawkins and his colleagues are able to save New York, most of the terrorist plot goes ahead according to plan and the conspirators proceed to set up a new government called the Allied States of America (ASA). An unelected president, John Tomarchio (George Newbern), is appointed and gains popularity by spouting Bush-esque patriotic platitudes about how America is ‘down but not out’ (‘Condor’). Meanwhile, his government has its perceived enemies branded as terrorists and killed on sight, curtails civil liberties and makes controversial changes to the Constitution. However, the aspect of Bush-era government policy
which *Jericho* vilifies above all is the state’s collusion with private contractors who take advantage of war for financial gain. The series’ chief villain is not the ASA government itself – we actually see very little of Valente and Tomarchio – but rather the government contractor Jennings and Rall (commonly known as J&R), which assumes administration of the country after the September Attacks, and its military arm Ravenwood. The corrupt relationship between the ASA and J&R/Ravenwood is clearly meant to specifically resemble the controversial dealings between the contractor Halliburton and Bush’s vice-president Dick Cheney, Halliburton’s former CEO. We learn in ‘Termination for Cause’ (2.5) that Tomarchio used to work for J&R and it was a major donor in his first campaign for office. Now, post-Attacks, it has been granted a no-bid contract (‘Sedition’, 2.6), just as Halliburton was granted a no-bid contract for military support services in Iraq. Ravenwood’s past sale of weapons to ‘America’s enemies’ (‘The Day Before’, 1.12) further links the company with Halliburton, which was fined 3.81 million dollars in 1995 for violating federal law by selling equipment to Iraq and Libya that could be used to make weapons of mass destruction.

J&R is also symbolically linked to another, even more infamous, real-world private contractor, Blackwater (now Academi), mainly through a specific incident that took place pre-Attacks when J&R was employed in Iraq.11 We learn of this incident when the protagonist, Jake Green, who used to work as a pilot and driver for the contractor, makes the following confession to his brother Eric (Kenneth Mitchell) in ‘Jennings and Rall’ (2.3):

> One day in Iraq, our convoy was ambushed. A couple of our guys were killed. We had no rules of engagement and we had seen the village they fell back to, so we just – we just went in and we started shooting. After it was done, there were six gunmen dead along with four bystanders. One of them was a twelve-year-old girl.

This event was likely inspired by the Nisour Square massacre in September 2007, in which fourteen Iraqi civilians were killed, and many more wounded, by troops from a Blackwater convoy. The Blackwater personnel claimed, like Jake, to have been ambushed, though no evidence of this was found by investigators (von Zielbauer 2007), and all four individuals involved were later convicted in an American court of either manslaughter or first-degree murder (Roberts 2014).

*Jericho*’s thinly veiled critique of Halliburton and Blackwater is actually not at all unique in recent American media. Indictments of what Klein calls ‘the privatized...
war industry’ (2010 (2000), p. xx) are rife in other films and TV series of a range of
genres roughly contemporaneous to Jericho. Examples include State of Play (Kevin
Macdonald, 2009), The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), The A-Team (Joe
Carnahan, 2010), 24 and Damages (2007–2012), as well as the apocalyptic series
Bionic Woman, The 4400, FlashForward, Terra Nova and Dollhouse, to name just a
few. All of them were no doubt to some extent inspired by the contemporary spate
of revelations relating to private security firms, especially Blackwater, that emerged
during various legal actions and investigations, such as the 2007 congressional
hearing on Blackwater’s conduct in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in books like Jeremy

In Jericho, the function of the Nisour Square-like incident is clearly not only to
confirm J&R’s malign nature but also to help map Jake’s moral development, outlined
in the last chapter, from black sheep to hero. Incidentally, this trajectory is not unique
to Jake and Jericho. Peter Bishop (Joshua Jackson), one of the heroes of Fringe, also
previously worked as a private contractor in Iraq, involved in oil-related construction
(‘Pilot’, 1.1), Halliburton’s primary activity. As with Jake, Peter’s former career is used
as shorthand for ‘selfish and unscrupulous’: ‘More than anything else, a person like
you is good at looking out for yourself’, one of Peter’s old Iraqi acquaintances (Patrick
Sabongoui) tells him in ‘Fracture’ (2.3). And also as with Jake, it acts as a starting point
in the character’s Prince Hal narrative (see Chapter 2): Peter is recalled reluctantly
from Iraq in Fringe’s first episode and forced to work alongside his estranged father, a
brilliant though eccentric scientist, with whom he gradually reconciles.

Women and children under threat

In Jericho, however, the ‘Nisour Square’ incident also has a third purpose: it is made
to serve the larger gender logic of the show. It is significant that Jake highlights
a twelve-year-old girl among the victims of the attack in his confession – and

12 Videogame examples are equally if not even more plentiful. Haze (2008), Tom Clancy’s H.A.W.X.
(2009), Far Cry 2 (2008), Crysis 2 (2011) and the first two Army of Two games (Army of Two (2008)
and Army of Two: The 40th Day (2009)), among others, all feature corrupt private military contractors
as antagonists. The designers apparently believe that the public’s opinion of such corporations is low
enough that no one is likely to mind shooting them!

13 The revelation that Jake once worked for J&R is actually fairly typical of the conspiracy genre. As
Hofstadter explains, the ‘renegade’, the person who was once part of the secret world of the enemy
(2008, p. 35), is a common figure in conspiracy narratives. This is not only because he or she is able
to verify and elucidate the conspirators’ crimes but because, within the genre’s typically Manichean
construction of good and evil, ‘the renegade is living proof that all the conversions are not made by
the wrong side’ (ibid.).
it is made even clearer that her death haunts him the most when he cries and rambles about it when delirious in ‘Heart of Winter’ (1.14) – because it forms part of a wider pattern in *Jericho* whereby women, and to a lesser extent children, are the people most under threat in the show’s post-apocalyptic world. Of course, the incident in which the girl was killed took place before the apocalypse occurred, but Jake tells the story as a means of illustrating J&R’s malign nature (‘Do you understand who we’re dealing with? These guys, they don’t answer to anybody’, he finishes) and suggesting that it will continue to behave in a similar way now that it has control of most of the United States. ‘Jake, this isn’t Iraq’, Eric responds to his brother’s story. ‘Maybe, but the rules are the same’, replies Jake.

Jake is, of course, correct. Ravenwood in particular poses an active threat, making its way round the country’s surviving towns, stripping them of supplies and murdering civilians who get in the way. However, there are also other male-dominated groups that seek to profit from the post-apocalyptic environment in various ways, such as the fake marines who try to con the citizens of Jericho in ‘Semper Fidelis’ (1.15) and the escaped convicts, disguised as policemen, who take over Stanley’s (Brad Beyer) farm and hold Bonnie (Shoshanna Stern) and Emily (Ashley Scott) hostage in ‘Fallout’ (1.2).

As with *TWD*, this is a world where the toughest and most ruthless men have the upper hand. The women, on the other hand, suffer disproportionately. In many cases, they suffer because of the actions of the men, as in the example from ‘Fallout’ just mentioned, or in the hints that their primary value is as sexual currency: the blood-stained bunk beds with handcuffs attached glimpsed at the trading post in ‘Black Jack’ (1.13) or Maggie’s (Erin Daniels) comment that “Town’s aren’t taking refugees and there’s only one thing they want women for” (‘Semper Fidelis’), for example. But there is also an implication that women are simply naturally vulnerable and therefore not suited to a post-apocalyptic environment; for instance, Eric’s pregnant wife April (Darby Stanchfield) and unborn baby both suddenly die for reasons not properly explained, despite being attended by a qualified doctor in a hospital (‘Winter’s End’, 1.16). Positioning women and children as constantly under threat in this way has the effect of allowing ‘good’ men to be established as their protectors (a role which they generally carry out much more successfully than their counterparts in *TWD* or *Heroes*); I shall return to this issue later.15

14 There was no twelve-year-old girl among the real victims at Nisour Square; in fact they were overwhelmingly male (Martin 2015).

15 April’s death can potentially be interpreted as a symbolic result of Eric’s failure to ‘look after’ her properly because he is having an affair.
While J&R’s subsidiary Ravenwood is openly violent, J&R itself and the
government for which it works cause harm through more insidious, bureaucratic
means such as withholding a vital vaccine, charging prices no one can afford for
food and planning changes to the Constitution. They also, of course, cause harm
by failing to exert sufficient control over Ravenwood or to curtail the activities
of the other marauding armed factions. Consequently, although most of their
senior members appear to be male, J&R and the ASA could together be viewed as
an implicitly ‘feminine’ entity, who threaten the population (but, within the logic
of the show, primarily women) in an indirect manner by making the country
an unsafe place. Indeed, it is notable that groups that should, in principle, act
as protectors, such as the police and marines, have, under the ASA’s rule, been
subverted and become a threat. The ‘feminine’ nature of J&R in particular is
implied not only by its bureaucratic role as the ASA’s administrative arm (see
Faludi on the ‘corporate functioning’ as the epitome of the ‘feminized society’
(2008, p. 61) viewed by the media as a root cause of 9/11) but the fact that its most
prominent representative in Jericho, Trish Merrick (Emily Rose) (Figure 3.1), is
a young, blonde, blue-eyed woman with ‘skin like porcelain’, according to Mimi
(Alicia Coppola) (‘Reconstruction’, 2.1). Furthermore, both J&R and the ASA
can be seen as potentially feminizing: they seek to reduce American citizens’
capacity for action, in particular the ability to protect themselves, by attempting

Figure 3.1 Trish Merrick (standing, right), the ‘face’ of J&R in Jericho, carrying out
to abolish the Second Amendment (‘Patriots and Tyrants’), while also spreading the idea (reminiscent of post-9/11 media rhetoric) that the September Attacks occurred because America had become ‘weak’; Eric and schoolteacher Emily react with indignation to new history schoolbooks distributed by J&R that advance this view (‘Condor’).

Conflicting parallels

The ‘solution’ that Jericho proposes to the problems posed by the ASA, J&R and Ravenwood is, as we shall see, the upholding of traditional, conservative American values. However, this is, on one level, rather surprising because, as I hope my discussion above has shown, the show’s writers seem to be drawing parallels between the post-apocalyptic United States and American-occupied Iraq or Afghanistan. It is Jericho, previously ‘an idyllic and mythic vision of the US heartland’ (Johnson-Lewis 2013, p. 127), that is ‘run as a corporate city-state’ by J&R, just as Iraq’s Green Zone was by Halliburton (Klein 2010 (2000), p. xx). Even on a visual level, shots like the one shown in Figure 3.2 of the military encampment outside Jericho seem designed to recall the desert terrain of the Middle East. The substitution is further reinforced by the fact that Ravenwood

![Figure 3.2](image.png) The military encampment outside Jericho in ‘Reconstruction’. Jericho (2006–2008).
refers to those who resist their occupation as ‘insurgents’ and by the Ravenwood commander John Goetz’s (D.B. Sweeney) response when Jake reacts angrily to his arrival in Jericho in ‘Jennings and Rall’: ‘Let me try and put it in perspective for you, Jake. You had a very interesting period of employment with J&R. Especially Safa, Iraq. Remember Safa? You’ve heard stories about me. You think you know who I am. I wonder what the people of Safa must think about you.’

However, although Jake apparently acknowledges the similarity between himself and Goetz, walking away looking ashamed after the latter’s comment above, there are other moments in which the series seems much less committed to upholding the parallel between Jericho and Iraq or Afghanistan. In ‘Sedition’, Jake, held captive by the Allied States army, imagines a conversation with his dead grandfather, who compares Jake’s predicament to his own capture by the Nazis and the town’s struggle against J&R to the American Revolutionary War. Meanwhile, the American Civil War is referenced in the title of the episode ‘Reconstruction’ as well as by Jake’s prediction in the final episode, ‘Patriots and Tyrants’ (2.7) (whose title is a quotation from Thomas Jefferson), that ‘the next American Civil War’ is about to start. These comparisons furnish alternative, ostentatiously American, points of comparison for Jericho’s plight that seem designed to disavow or at least dilute the parallels between its citizens and America’s official enemies, the Taliban and Iraqi insurgents. Thus, while Jericho decries the phoney patriotism of the Bush-esque Tomarchio, it still has a strongly patriotic vein which allows it to suggest that the restitution of traditional American values is the ‘solution’ to the problem of untrustworthy governments who have unhealthily close relationships with amoral and greedy corporations.

Individualism, self-governance and patriarchal leadership

First, Jericho valorizes the individual, the family and the small community and defends these entities’ rights to govern and protect themselves. A key moment after the citizens of Jericho decide to rebel against the government is the replacement of the ASA flag outside the town hall with one that had previously hung in the mayor’s office and is therefore symbolically Jericho’s ‘own’ flag (‘Patriots and Tyrants’). It is actually the Gadsden flag, which was designed by a notable general in the American Revolutionary War (therefore providing a further reference to that conflict) and is usually associated with an anti-government stance; for example, it has been adopted as a symbol of the modern
Tea Party (a movement which was just beginning to form when the second season of *Jericho* aired in early 2008). The demonization and rejection of both the government and especially the institution that carries out its administration, J&R, in *Jericho* underline the programme’s support of that most quintessential American value, individualism.\(^{16}\) As Kord and Krimmer, commenting on the continued prevalence of this ‘core American masculine myth’ (Spicer cited in Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 3) in contemporary Hollywood film, observe, ‘[C]lear and present danger is [typically] averted by exceptional individuals, never by … institutions … Incompetent and malevolent bureaucracies do not solve problems; they are the problem’ (Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 3; original emphasis).

Secondly, as I have already indicated, the series implies that the individuals who take charge of governing and protecting their families and communities should be ‘manly’ men. There are many possible examples of the way that the show promotes this conservative, patriarchal ethos but it can perhaps most clearly be seen in the narrative trajectories of the two most important characters, Jake and Hawkins. As described in the last chapter, the former is a prodigal son who had only meant to return to his hometown of Jericho temporarily to collect an inheritance. However, after the September Attacks prevent his departure, he gradually reconciles with his estranged father, the mayor, and forms a group called the Jericho Rangers to protect the town from external threats.

Thus, Jake undergoes his conversion from the ‘bad’ (selfish, mercenary, unconcerned with family and community) person he once was, epitomized by his work for J&R, to a selfless, heroic one. And, once again, as was the case with many characters examined in previous chapters, this heroism is often predicated on his willingness and ability to rescue people, especially women and children. Whereas in his former life, he was partially responsible for the death of a young girl, now – in *Jericho*’s pilot episode – he rushes to the rescue of the passengers of a crashed school bus, performing life-saving field surgery on a little girl before driving the bus back to town (‘Pilot’). And this is just the first of many heroic rescues he carries out throughout the show, often accompanied by Hawkins. These are too numerous to list, but they include Jake’s rescue of

\(^{16}\) Here I may seem to contradict Erika Johnson-Lewis, who argues that the people of Jericho ‘reject the capitalist logic of radical individualism represented in the ideology of survival of the fittest’ (2013, p. 128) because they work together and, after some dispute, decide to allow refugees to remain in the town. This is certainly true, and therefore I would not wish to argue that the heroes of *Jericho* are individualistic in the sense of only wishing to look after themselves. However, I do believe that the show as a whole embraces individualism in the political sense of exhibiting ‘a fundamental belief in the protection of the rights of the individual against the incursions of the state’ (Allison 2014).
Bonnie and Emily from the hostage situation in ‘Fallout’; Jake and Hawkins putting out numerous fires, including one at a school, in ‘Federal Response’ (1.5) and the pair saving Eric when he is captured by a neighbouring town in ‘Casus Belli’ (1.19).17

The other citizens’ unquestioning acceptance of Jake, a man who once belonged to a criminal gang, as a de facto leader is not explained. However, we may infer that it stems in part from his heroic actions and in part from a sense of patriarchal lineage endowed by his being the mayor’s son. Perhaps most of all, however, the series wants to convince us that Jake simply possesses an innate authority. This is alluded to by the army officer Major Beck (Esai Morales) in ‘Reconstruction’ through a story he tells just before offering Jake the position of Jericho’s sheriff. Beck describes how, when he discovered a group of would-be bombers near Kandahar, he made a point of finding ‘the guy’ among them because ‘there’s always one’, and he wanted to show him that he ‘understood his place in the order of things’. This tale not only confirms Jake’s position as Jericho’s ‘guy’, or natural leader (and, incidentally, once again aligns him with Afghan insurgents), but also implies, through the use of the word ‘guy’, that it is an inherently male role.

Reassembling the normative family

The trajectory of Robert Hawkins, on the other hand, Jericho’s secondary, somewhat older action hero, serves to affirm the importance of the normative patriarchal family and the father as its protector. Just as Jake starts the series as a ‘bad son’, as mentioned in the last chapter, Hawkins is initially presented as a ‘bad father’ who has recently been reunited with his family after a long absence. Both his wife Darcy (April Parker-Jones) and teenage daughter Allison (Jazz Raycole) are resentful because he was ‘never around’ in the past; Allison shouts at him that this meant that her mother had to work ‘all the time’ (‘Walls of Jericho’, 1.4). His small son Samuel (Sterling Ardrey), meanwhile, replies, ‘Mommy’ when Hawkins asks him, ‘Who is always gonna take care of you?’, clearly expecting the answer ‘You’ (‘Walls of Jericho’).

17 As his capture and earlier ‘failure’ to save his wife and child suggest, Eric is a somewhat feminized figure who acts as a contrast to his brother Jake. We might also note that in ‘Federal Response’ Eric tries unsuccessfully to rescue a teacher from the burning school into which she has run to try to rescue a little girl; all three are only saved when Jake and his friend Stanley activate the building’s sprinklers.
An episode mid-way through the first season seems to cast Hawkins in a still more negative light: flashbacks show that he was part of the group of bombers who carried out the September Attacks and that he was romantically involved with his co-conspirator Sarah Mason (Siena Goines) (‘The Day Before’). Before setting out on his mission, Hawkins kidnaps his wife and children and brings them from their home in Washington, DC, to Jericho. Obviously, the audience knows that this is technically for their own good as a nuclear explosion is about to hit the city. However, as Hawkins does not explain his motivation, manhandles Darcy, locks them all in his truck and knocks out the two policemen Darcy has managed to summon, they are naturally extremely scared and angry. Furthermore, it is implied that Hawkins has behaved in a violent or threatening way towards his family in the past as Darcy has apparently taken out a restraining order against him: ‘You are not allowed within 500 feet of this family’, she protests (‘The Day Before’).

Later, it is revealed that both Hawkins and Sarah are actually undercover CIA agents who were tasked with infiltrating the terrorist cells (‘A.K.A.’). Sarah, however, is a traitor working for Valente, though she ultimately betrays him too (‘Semper Fidelis’). These plot twists serve to exonerate Hawkins from his part in the conspiracy while ensuring that Sarah remains a villain, the only female one in the show. Her position as a lone agent rather than a part of the main conspiracy underlines the fact that Sarah does not hold any real power and is, as Robert’s former lover, primarily a threat to the stability of the Hawkins’s family unit. This is made explicit in ‘Black Jack’ when Darcy – cooking, as if to emphasize her own status as a ‘good’, domestic woman – expresses concern that Robert will leave Jericho with Sarah because ‘our children need a father’. She goes on to question Sarah’s trustworthiness and commands her husband, ‘If she’s a threat to this family’s safety, … you kill her.’ As Sarah does indeed turn out to be a threat to the family’s safety, she can be removed from the narrative without major qualms on the part of the other characters or, the writers presumably hope, the audience. In ‘Semper Fidelis’, she holds the Hawkinses hostage and attempts to stab Robert before Allison – fittingly, as she was the most resentful of her father’s neglect – shoots her dead.

Sarah’s death paves the way for Hawkins and Darcy’s reconciliation in the penultimate episode of season one, just after he affirms his intention to ‘keep [her] safe’ and declares, ‘In the middle of all this madness, the only thing that makes sense to me … is you and the kids. Took me a while to realise that and I’m sorry’ (‘Coalition of the Willing’, 1.21). This is the final step in his gradual
progression over the course of the season towards being a better husband and father. However, unlike the ‘recuperated’ fathers of recent apocalyptic cinema discussed by Hamad (see Chapter 2), and in keeping with Jericho’s extremely traditional representation of gender roles, Hawkins never becomes anything close to a ‘New Man’. Even his bonding with his children has a distinctly masculine flavour: he plays football with Sam for the first time in ‘Vox Populi’ (1.11) and, as part of his duty as protector, teaches Allison to shoot (‘You may need to defend yourself one day’, he tells her (‘9:02’, 1.6)).

Darcy’s forgiveness of her husband given his behaviour in ‘The Day Before’ and the implication that he has abused his family in the past is extremely disturbing. Nonetheless, it conforms to a wider pattern in Jericho where the female characters abandon independent lifestyles or ‘wet’ boyfriends and big cities to settle down in Jericho with ‘manly’ men – implicitly, those better able to protect them. Emily, Jake’s ex-fiancée, is engaged to rich banker Roger (Christopher Wiehl), who was pressurizing her to move to Chicago before the Attacks (‘The Day Before’) and whom she secretly worries is ‘bland’ (‘Crossroads’, 1.9). However, after the Attacks, Roger descends into a state of hysterical panic and ends up being banished from Jericho (‘One Man’s Terrorist’, 1.17), leaving Emily free to rekindle her relationship with Jake (‘Why We Fight’), about whom she had been daydreaming for some while (‘Crossroads’). Meanwhile, Mimi, a feisty IRS agent from Washington, DC, is initially horrified when the Attacks leave her stranded in rural Jericho because previously, ‘[t]he closest [she] ever got to the outdoors was the Ralph Lauren section at Neiman Marcus’ (‘Heart of Winter’). But she falls in love with farmer Stanley, they get engaged and Mimi is soon to be found in a rocking chair finishing Stanley’s dead mother’s knitting (‘Vox Populi’).

As with the early seasons of TWD, it seems that the apocalypse has the effect of inducing women to become more domestic – in other words, shoring up traditional gender roles in the women as well as the men (another example is a flowery-apron-clad Emily making a cake in ‘Reconstruction’, even though, according to Jake, she never used to bake). Admittedly, a female character does occasionally carry out a more traditionally masculine heroic gesture, such as when Stanley’s sister Bonnie dies defending the farm from Ravenwood in ‘Oversight’ (2.4), but this seems like no more than tokenism in a programme where women who seriously transgress accepted gender roles are quickly killed off. The latter is the case, for instance, with teenager Dale’s (Erik Knudsen) mother, who left him home alone while she spent time with her lover in Atlanta and was consequently killed in the Attacks (‘Pilot’) and, of course, with Sarah Mason.
A contradictory ending

As Ryan and Kellner observe about 1970s disaster movies, *Jericho*’s resolutely patriarchal bent in the representation of its principal characters and their personal relationships stands in contrast to the critique of patriarchal authority implied by its depiction of corruption and conspiracy on the part of a male-dominated government and corporation (1988, pp. 56–57). However, the ending of the show suggests that the writers were not fully committed to this critique, as Hawkins discovers that it was not actually a faction in the government that orchestrated the September Attacks after all, but rather a former J&R employee called John Smith (Xander Berkeley). Smith explains to Hawkins that he saw the Attacks as a means to ‘liberate’ the country from the ‘corrupt … relationship between the company and the federal government’ (‘Sedition’).

In plot terms, this is an unlikely twist as the government previously seemed keen to hide evidence relating to the Attacks (in ‘A.K.A.’, Hawkins discovers that Valente is trying to purchase a leftover warhead) and had even bombed Iran and North Korea as scapegoats (‘Semper Fidelis’). Furthermore, Smith reveals that he had originally drawn up the plan for the Attacks when working for J&R on a government commission to devise a ‘disaster plan’ (‘Oversight’). This perhaps implies that Valente and his cronies at J&R had been planning to carry out the Attacks in any case – the very existence of the ‘disaster plan’ is enough to convince Major Beck of this (‘Patriots and Tyrants’) – though it does beg the question of why Smith thought it was a good idea to put the plan into action because, as Hawkins points out, it only increased J&R’s power (‘Sedition’).

My aim in describing these confusing plot holes is to illustrate the writers’ apparent hesitation over the extent to which they wished to implicate the American government and its associates in what Darcy describes as ‘the greatest crime in the history of the world’ (‘Why We Fight’). The last-minute pinning of blame on Smith alone is in fact consistent with a trend in contemporary Hollywood spy films identified by Kord and Krimmer whereby, although ‘government bureaucracies’ are frequently portrayed in a negative light, in numerous cases, their nefarious actions are ultimately revealed to have been the consequence of ‘moral failure or madness on the part of one individual in a mid-level position’ (Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 113). Kord and Krimmer view this as an example of ideology’s tendency, noted by Robin Wood, to ‘acknowledge … a minor, local, reformable evil in order to divert attention from the fundamental
ones’ (Wood cited in Kord and Krimmer 2011, p. 113), but it can perhaps also be seen as another manifestation of Hollywood’s ongoing love affair with individualism.

In any case, for all its interest in conspiracy, *Jericho* also betrays a somewhat contradictory impulse to portray traditional American patriarchal institutions as benign. This can be seen, for example, in the representation of Major Beck, a former US Army officer (rather than a Ravenwood employee) who is now working for the ASA but refuses to follow J&R’s inhumane instructions, such as withholding the vaccine for a virus from an infected town, because he wants ‘to look after the people under [his] charge’ (‘Jennings and Rall’). In the final episode, Beck and his men renounce their allegiance to the Allied States government, of whose ill intentions they have been convinced by the disaster plan, and join the people of Jericho in siding with an alternative government based in Columbus, Ohio (‘Patriots and Tyrants’). Though we know little about the Columbus government, Jericho’s principal characters seem willing to believe that they are, as Hawkins’s colleague Chavez (Chris Kramer) puts it, ‘the good guys’ (ibid.). Thus, when Jake describes the anticipated conflict between Columbus and the ASA as ‘the next American Civil War’ (ibid.), it serves as an affirmation of the quintessentially American belief in ‘moral regeneration’ (Glanz 1982, p. 151): the country’s ability to purge itself of corrupt, immoral or otherwise unsavoury elements and move ever onwards towards ‘perfection’ (ibid.).

**Dollhouse:** Female Gothic for the neoliberal era

The final episode of *Dollhouse* (‘Epitaph Two: Return,’ 2.13) ends on a similarly positive note of post-apocalyptic regeneration. Scientist Topher Brink (Fran Kranz) sets off a device which will undo the effects of what he refers to as the ‘thought-pocalypse’ (‘The Hollow Men,’ 2.12): the random wiping of the minds of most of the population and the reprogramming of many as killing machines. However, this apocalyptic event differs from *Jericho’s* in that it was not instigated intentionally, at least not by any characters that play a part in the series. Nevertheless, the blame can ultimately be attributed to the irresponsible behaviour of a multinational corporation, a medical research and pharmaceuticals company called Rossum. Rossum developed the mind-wiping and imprinting technology and used it to run its most profitable venture: a secret network of establishments called Dollhouses, where rich clients pay to have
mind-wiped employees – known as Dolls or Actives – temporarily programmed (or ‘imprinted’) with new personalities.

Though Rossum did not plan to cause the ‘thought-pocalypse’ – it occurred when Rossum lost control of the Dollhouse technology (‘Epitaph One’, 1.13) – it is involved in various sinister conspiratorial activities, including placing a Doll in government to increase its political power (‘The Public Eye’, 2.5/’The Left Hand’, 2.6) and developing a private army composed of kidnapped ex-Dolls who have had their minds programmed in such a way that they all think as one (‘Stop-Loss’, 2.9). Indeed, as Zalina Alvi points out, the Rossum Corporation is one more example of the kind of ‘institutionalized, Big Brother-type organization that seems to appear in every [Joss] Whedon series’ (2010, p. 37), suggesting that Dollhouse’s showrunner has a long-standing interest in conspiracy narratives.

Rossum is not so obviously linked to specific real-world cases of corporate corruption and malfeasance as Jericho’s J&R. However, as I have pointed out elsewhere, scandals involving pharmaceutical giants are regularly in the headlines (Bennett 2011, p. 4), and one could argue that Rossum’s plans to ‘manufactur[e] a president’, as the Los Angeles Dollhouse’s head of security Boyd Langton (Harry Lennix) puts it in ‘The Left Hand’, recall the Bush administration’s unhealthily close ties to pharmaceutical industry lobbyists (ibid., pp. 4–5). Indeed, Daniel Perrin (Alexis Denisof), the Doll whom Rossum has installed as an ambitious senator, has certain similarities with Bush himself, at least as the latter has often been portrayed in the media: both came from famous political dynasties (the reason Rossum selected Perrin for the task) but did not immediately pursue careers in politics, spending their youths drinking and partying instead (ibid., p. 4).

Biopolitics, sex trafficking and gender

Gerry Canavan reads Dollhouse in terms of postmodern, neoliberal biopolitics, where it is now the multinational corporation rather than the state that controls and modifies the body politic and the bodies of individuals. This new kind of biopower, he argues, ‘upgrades its mechanisms of control not by threatening with violence but through efficient management of needs through the marketplace’ (2011a, p. 196). According to Canavan, the ‘thought-pocalypse’ can be read in biopolitical terms too. As a war between ‘those who answered the phone [the means by which they had their minds wiped] and those who didn’t’ (‘Epitaph
One’), *Dollhouse*’s apocalypse represents the ‘absurd, hyperbolic climax’ of ‘the inclusive/exclusive logic of biopower . . . ; the foundation of the ultimate race war is an utterly arbitrary division, a quirk of pure chance’ (Canavan 2011a, p. 199).

Canavan’s argument is persuasive and can be extended to other apocalyptic series. Canavan (2011a), Bussolini (2008) and Froese and Buzzard (2015) all read another Whedon creation, *Firefly/Serenity*, in biopolitical terms: here it is the Alliance’s – the neoliberal interplanetary government – ‘search for better regulation of biological life’ (Bussolini 2008, p. 151) that leads to the accidental annihilation of most of the population of the planet Miranda (*Serenity*). Meanwhile, *Fringe*’s Massive Dynamic, an organization similar to Rossum (described by Peter as ‘just your average multinational corporation specializing in secret bio-research and defence contracting’ (‘The Dreamscape’, 1.9)), is likewise engaged in developing ever-more efficient methods of biopolitical surveillance and regulation such as mind control and telepathy.

My criticism of Canavan’s reading of *Dollhouse*, however, is that he ignores the gendered specificities of neoliberal, globalized biopolitics. And this is also the case with most other commentators who view the show as a critique of capitalism and the culture industry more generally such as Tony M. Vinci (2011) and Katie Moylan (2012). This is a strange omission as *Dollhouse* is a programme in which, it seems to me, gender is an issue that is hard to overlook. As Ananya Mukherjea (2014) and Sutherland and Swan (2014) discuss, even though there are both male and female Dolls, the closest real-world equivalent to the Dollhouses is human trafficking, in particular sex trafficking, which overwhelmingly affects women.

Elina Penttinen has characterized the international sex industry as ‘shadow globalization’, because it is ‘made possible by global flows of information, technology, finance and people’ (2008, p. 7). Furthermore, she argues that the market logic of the neoliberal globalized economy acts as a form of ‘subjectivating bio-power’ (ibid., p. 2) on women from the regions affected by the international sex trade, such as Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. In other words, it forces them to adopt certain kinds of subjectivities to fulfil the demands of Western consumers – typically, in terms of the sex industry, that of the ‘exotic other’

18 Holly Randell-Moon, on the other hand, does consider the relationship between biopower and gender as displayed in *Dollhouse* but with a focus on bodily experience. Citing Judith Butler, she argues that: “The physical and sexual trauma experienced by Dr Saunders [Amy Acker] and Sierra [Dichen Lachman] reveal the social and cultural “distribution of corporeal vulnerability” . . . based on gender, ability, and sexuality’ (2012, p. 275). I shall discuss the traumas experienced by these two characters myself shortly.
Dollhouse explicitly draws attention to its own parallels with sex/human trafficking on a number of occasions: in ‘Man on the Street’ (1.6), a vox pop interviewee (Jamie Silberhartz) asked for her opinion on the Dollhouse replies, ‘It’s human trafficking, end of story. It’s repulsive’, while in the pilot, ‘Ghost’ (1.1), Paul Ballard (Tahmoh Penikett), an FBI agent on an assignment to uncover the Dollhouse, is reprimanded by a superior (Tim Kelleher) because he has disrupted another investigation into a Russian gang’s human trafficking operation. As Mukherjea notes, this latter plot point reflects the fact that ‘the nations of the former Soviet Union have proved fertile grounds for an industry of sex work and migration’ (2014, p. 72) – a reality to which the show alludes a second time in ‘Epitaph One’ when Echo is imprinted as a Russian girl whom Topher describes as ‘fresh out of the shipping container’.

Dollhouse may well make textual acknowledgement of the fact that its premise evokes uncomfortable echoes of the global sex trade but whether the show presents an effective critique of it is another matter. Certainly, as I point out elsewhere, many online forum contributors who discuss Dollhouse in terms of real-world equivalents such as ‘prostitution’ (‘Charlemagne19’ cited in Bennett 2011, p. 11) or ‘human trafficking’ (‘bluefish’ ibid.) said that they had stopped watching after a few episodes either because they found the parallels distasteful or because they felt Whedon was being disingenuous in condemning such activities while ‘capitalizing on the titillation’ associated with them (‘Temis the Vorta’ ibid.).

In fact, Whedon’s own avowed intention for the show was not to condemn the Dollhouse outright but rather to explore the possible ‘difference[s] of opinion’ and ‘grey areas’ relating to it (Whedon 2009). Nevertheless, as Whedon acknowledges, one aspect of the series that is unarguably ‘morally very tricky’ (ibid.) is the suggestion that the Actives are complicit in their own exploitation. Whedon was talking in particular about a moment in ‘Man on the Street’ when Echo chooses to go back and complete an unfinished ‘engagement’ (the Dollhouses’ term for the hiring of an Active). However, all the Actives have, in theory at least, voluntarily signed up for the job for a five-year term in exchange for ‘a truck of money’, as Topher puts it (‘Needs’, 1.8).

In the series’ defence, one could argue that it raises just the sort of questions about ‘choice’ that are a common part of debates about sex work. As Penttinen observes,

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19 These quotations are from the DVD commentary for ‘Man on the Street’, an episode which literally presents a variety of opinions about the Dollhouse through its vox pop interviews.
those who defend the sex industry typically ‘follow the principles of marketization and consumerism by arguing for the commodification of the private or personal’ and thus frame prostitution as ‘a rational choice as opposed to other forms of labor’ (2008, p. 17; see also Sutherland and Swan 2014, p. 227). Of course, as Penttinen explains in detail, such arguments ignore the fact that for women in ‘developing’ countries it is usually the very transition to neoliberalist governmentality and associated changes in the economy that force them to position themselves as ‘objects of consumption’ for Western men (ibid., p. 30).

To give Dollhouse further credit, the show gradually reveals that none of the principal characters had as much ‘choice’ in becoming Dolls as it first appeared, though some had more than others. In doing so, as Mukherjea notes, the programme ‘depict[s] … the spectrum of scenarios that compose the international sex industry’ (2014, p. 73). Two of the Actives, Victor (Enver Gjokaj) and November (Miracle Laurie), came to the Los Angeles Dollhouse – the one on which the show focuses – because they were emotionally or mentally vulnerable: Victor was an Afghan war veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (‘Stop-Loss’) and November had lost a child to cancer (‘Needs’).

Alpha (Alan Tudyk), on the other hand, was a convict who traded a long prison sentence for five years in the Dollhouse (‘Omega’, 1.12), while Echo was an activist on a mission to expose Rossum’s nefarious activities, who got caught trying to blow up one of their labs and was consequently coerced into becoming an Active (‘Ghost’/’Echoes’, 1.7). Similarly, Sam (Mehcad Brooks), from the episode ‘Echoes’, enters the Dollhouse to avoid legal repercussions for his ‘misconduct while working at the Rossum lab’, as well as ‘to secure a good financial future for his mother and himself’ (Mukherjea 2014, p. 73).

The most shocking backstory is undoubtedly that of Sierra, the only principal Doll played by a non-white actor, Tibetan-Australian Dichen Lachman, and therefore the most obviously reminiscent of real-world sex-trafficking victims. Sierra was formerly an Australian artist called Priya Tsetsang who was working in the United States without a visa – as Mukherjea observes, another similarity with trafficked women (2014, p. 72) – before she was drugged and imprisoned in a mental institution and then in the Dollhouse by a Rossum employee, Nolan Kinnard (Vincent Ventresca), who was obsessed with her (‘Belonging’, 2.4). As Holly Randell-Moon contends, the Dollhouse’s ‘waiving of consent for people with mental illness points to the ways in which the liberal notion of a rational, autonomous subject is

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20 As Mukherjea explains, southern Asian countries, including Tibet, are another ‘fertile ground’ for sex-work-related migration, both voluntary and coerced (2014, p. 72).
applied contingently to some bodies and not others on the basis of ability, race or gender’ (2012, pp. 276–277, note 7) within society as a whole. Sierra’s backstory thus also implicitly recalls the fact that ‘transnational neoliberal capitalism operates and profits on the basis of denying consent and freedom to laboring bodies located outside of Western liberal democracies’ (ibid., p. 277, note 7).

Although Sierra’s backstory, and therefore the full extent of her potential to function as a symbol of real-world sex-trafficking victims, is not revealed until season two, as I have pointed out elsewhere, she is used repeatedly throughout the series to illustrate the various kinds of physical and psychological abuse to which the Dolls are vulnerable (Bennett 2011, p. 23, note 11; see also Mukherjea 2014, pp. 68–69). For example, it comes to light in ‘Man on the Street’ that she is being raped by her handler, a storyline which, as Whedon notes in the episode’s commentary, demonstrates ‘everything that is wrong with this [the Dollhouse] system’ (Whedon 2009). On one occasion Sierra is also used to draw attention to the racist, objectifying attitudes of some of the Dollhouse clients: in ‘Vows’ (2.1), she arrives back from an engagement dressed in a Jackie Kennedy-style pink suit and pearls and speaking with an upper-class English accent. When Ivy (Liza Lapira), Topher’s Asian assistant, tries to give Sierra her ‘treatment’ (a euphemism for the mind-wiping process), she objects, ‘I’m not comfortable with Orientals’ (Figure 3.3). But then she sighs, sits down, leans towards Ivy and, smiling slightly, confides, ‘I suppose I’m at your mercy. In fact, if you were to tie

Figure 3.3 ‘I’m not comfortable with Orientals’, Sierra (right) tells Ivy in ‘Vows’. Dollhouse (2009–2010).
me down and spank me, I could hardly be expected to resist, could I?’ We do not know the exact nature of the engagement from which Sierra has returned, but we can guess it was some kind of BDSM lesbian fantasy scenario, perhaps involving a second Asian woman. However, by requesting that Sierra’s imprint be upper class, English and racist, the client has simultaneously disavowed his or her own desire for ethnic ‘others’ and revealed his or her own racist attitudes.

Evidently, the scene just described is designed largely for comic effect. Nevertheless, it is also yet another example of the way Sierra is used to demonstrate ‘everything that is wrong’ with the Dollhouse as a system and perhaps also, allegorically, with its real-world equivalents such as sex trafficking. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of this critique is undercut by the fact that even after Priya regains her original personality and learns how she came to be in the Dollhouse, she chooses to stay there (‘Belonging’).21 The extra-textual reason for this was no doubt that the writers wished to keep Sierra as a regular character. The explanation given within the show is that Priya cannot live with the knowledge of the things she has done, especially killing Nolan (in self-defence) after she confronted him with his crime (‘Belonging’). This justification is troubling because it supports the official line of the Dollhouse staff that the people who become Dolls are all, as Boyd puts it, ‘broken’ (‘Man on the Street’) and that being in the Dollhouse functions as a kind of therapy or at least a temporary relief from their suffering.

### Patriarchal oppression and the Female Gothic

Of course, the sex industry is by no means the only thing for which the Dollhouse works as an allegory, and it would be a mistake to critique the programme only in those terms. As Vinci summarizes, the imprinting process ‘negotiate[s] an extraordinary variety of metaphoric terrains: genetic and biotechnological engineering, human trafficking, post- and trans-human notions of identity, identities created and expressed via virtualised spaces, the influence of mass communication technology, the acting profession, metaphysical explorations of life and death and the affects of ideological influence, among others’ (2011, p. 227).

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21 Mukherjea does, however, make the important point that Sierra/Priya’s fate after the ‘thought-pocalypse’ is a relatively positive one: she recaptures some of her old ‘sunny warmth’ and ‘creates a future with her family’ (2014, p. 75). She therefore ultimately subverts the Western stereotype of the ‘innocent Asian woman mistreated, abused, or forced into sex work’, which typically has a tragic ending (*Madama Butterfly* is one of the examples Mukherjea gives) (ibid., p. 69).
Dollhouse’s co-creator and star Eliza Dushku views her character, Echo, primarily as a reflection of Dushku’s own position as a female celebrity: ‘That feeling as an actress, and as a young woman, of who does society, who does the media, who do my family and friends want me to be versus my authentic self’ (cited in Farley 2010, p. 109). As I note elsewhere (2011, p. 2), this theme is explored most obviously in the episode ‘Stage Fright’ (1.3), which centres on a successful young pop singer called Rayna Russell (Jaime Lee Kirchner). Rayna started out as a child star on the Disney Corporation’s Mickey Mouse Club and consequently feels that she has ‘been grown in the lab’. She has always been obliged to be ‘everybody’s fantasy’ to the extent that the ‘real’ Rayna ‘do[es]n’t exist’. Her case may be less extreme than that of a Doll or a trafficked prostitute, but Rayna is another example of a woman who has been forced into the position of a commodity by the workings of corporate capitalism. Her effective imprisonment is made abundantly clear by the live performance which opens the episode in which Rayna dances inside a cage. Admittedly, as Whedon himself has pointed out (cited in Bennett 2011, p. 3), to a certain degree, Dollhouse’s themes are relevant to anyone working in the entertainment industry, male or female. However, because the protagonist and most of the other important Dolls are female, the show cannot help but seem focused on female experience and exploitation, especially since all the Rossum executives are male.22

The emphasis on patriarchal oppression is one reason one might classify Dollhouse as a Gothic text. Peter Tupper reads the programme in this light, arguing that: ‘The Gothic is an excellent form for exploring the effect of power on the individual’ (2010, p. 60). Whereas, ‘[i]n the classic Gothic novel, power is familial and feudal, exercised through … patriarchal rules … [i]n Dollhouse, power is corporate capitalism, exercised through the technologies of surveillance, paramilitary force, and imprinting’ (ibid., p. 59). This is certainly true, but in Dollhouse the corporate power is patriarchal too, a fact made especially clear by the revelation in the third-from-last episode that the co-founder and head of the Rossum Corporation is none other than the Los Angeles Dollhouse’s head of security and Echo’s former handler, Boyd Langton (‘Getting Closer’, 2.11).

Furthermore, as I note elsewhere, we rarely see male Dolls in roles that are either sexual (Bennett 2011, p. 12) or involve entertainment/performance. An exception to the latter is Victor’s accidental imprinting as a female student called Kiki in ‘Belle Chose’ (2.3). A memorable scene in a nightclub follows, in which Victor-as-Kiki performs a seductive dance and attempts to flirt with one of a group of young men who have been watching her. The fact that the man is first amused at Kiki’s dancing and then angry when ‘she’ flirts with him highlights that this kind of sexualized performance is typically only expected of women (except in a few specific contexts such as drag shows; indeed, we might guess that the man’s anger is rooted in homophobia).
Up until this point, Boyd seemed to be one of the most moral characters in the series, displaying a fatherly, protective attitude towards Echo in particular. In fact, he is the mastermind behind a plot to turn the Dollhouse technology into a weapon capable of instantly imprinting anyone. However, as he reveals in ‘The Hollow Men’, Boyd also wants to use Echo, who has a special genetic quality that makes her less susceptible to imprinting, to create a vaccine against the process. He plans to use this vaccine to protect himself and the people of his choosing from the apocalyptic war which he believes will be the inevitable final result of the Dollhouse technology’s existence. Among these chosen people are Topher, DeWitt and Echo, whom Boyd claims he thinks of as his ‘family’, explaining to them how he has tested and nurtured each of them to develop their skills and moral fibre in various ways (‘The Hollow Men’). These remarks are met with indignation and horror by those to whom they are addressed (‘You are spectacularly insane’, says DeWitt), but it is clear that in Boyd’s own mind at least he is the father of the Dollhouse ‘family’.23

The subgenre of Gothic which Dollhouse particularly resembles, in my opinion, is that which Ellen Moers (1976) dubbed ‘Female Gothic’. These were narratives written by female authors that, according to Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz, typically ‘revolve around an innocent … heroine threatened by a powerful male figure and confined to a labyrinthine interior space’ (2007, p. 5).24 If, as Eugenia C. Delamotte describes, the heroine of the Female Gothic is ‘hidden from the world as if she were dead, her long suffering unknown to those outside … the ruined castle, … subterranean prison, or secret apartments’ (1990, p. 153), in Dollhouse, many innocent heroines sleep in coffin-like pods (Figure 3.4) in the labyrinthine complex of the Dollhouse, which is hidden four stories beneath Rossum’s Los Angeles offices.

23 Interestingly, in the online game Dollplay, which was released by Fox in February 2009 as part of a viral marketing campaign for Dollhouse, it is revealed that the original inventor of the imprinting technology was a woman. The woman in question was an MIT psychologist called Andrea Rose, who used her young daughter Hazel (Hailee Araya) as a test subject in order to try to remove the angry, violent side of the latter’s nature. Andrea imprinted Hazel with the personality of the dead daughter of a man called Edward Bertucci (yet another test-subject daughter), along with some of her own abilities (see Coker 2010, pp. 233–235). However, Andrea Rose, who never appears in either Dollplay or Dollhouse itself, was not a Rossum employee (though it funded her research) and, according to Hazel, was opposed to the Dollhouse project (Coker 2010, p. 233). Dollhouse’s conspiracy is therefore still a male-dominated one with Boyd Langton as its patriarchal head.

24 One might object that Dollhouse cannot be classified as Female Gothic because Joss Whedon is not female, but we should remember that co-creator Dushku is a woman, as are eight out of the show’s thirteen writers.
Most critics who have written about the Female Gothic agree that the original eighteenth- and nineteenth-century examples functioned as allegories for women’s confinement in a ‘separate “sphere”’ (Delamotte 1990, p. 150) by the social structures of the period: ‘the patriarchal family, the patriarchal marriage, and a patriarchal class, legal, educational, and economic system’ (ibid. p. 151). This confinement was both physical – in the domestic spaces to which women were largely restricted – and mental, in that almost all contemporary commentators on woman’s place in society strove ‘to ensure her participation in an ideology that limited the exercise of her physical, intellectual and emotional faculties’ (ibid., pp. 150–151). Viewed in the same light, *Dollhouse* shows how, in the twenty-first century, women (and, to a lesser extent, men) may be confined and controlled by the corporate-capitalist entertainment industry or, worse, the globalized sex industry.

As Fred Botting explains, the Gothic is a mode that has always ‘shadow[ed] the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values’ (1996, p. 1). Thus, the plot of *Dollhouse* concerns the uncovering of the underside of supposedly rational neoliberal principles such as self-betterment and the right of individuals and corporations to pursue profit by any means (we may recall here Penttinen’s description of the sex industry as ‘the shadow of globalization’). The Dollhouse is a hidden – literally underground – but highly profitable part of the Rossum empire. It purports to
be a benign institution which provides funding for Rossum’s medical research while, as Topher puts it, ‘help[ing] people become better people by giving them what they need’ (‘Needs’). However, as Tupper notes, like all Gothic houses, it hides a multitude of dark secrets that refuse to stay secret (2010, p. 52). Rossum tries to dispose of anyone that causes it problems by sending them to ‘the Attic’, a facility where inmates are hooked up to machines which plunge them into their own worst nightmares. But people keep breaking out of the Attic or resist being put in, as does rogue homicidal Doll Alpha, a character who, according to Whedon, represents ‘the total chaos that was possible with what [Rossum] were doing’ (Making Dollhouse 2009). After his first bloody rampage, Alpha escapes from the Dollhouse only to return some time later to wreak more havoc (‘Briar Rose’, 1.11); in the Gothic, the repressed always returns.

The Hidden Woman

As Tupper observes, an important component of the first season of Dollhouse’s narrative is the uncovering of the hidden history of the programme’s ‘requisite “madwoman in the attic” – akin to Rochester’s secret wife Bertha in Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre … – Dr. Claire Saunders (Amy Acker)’ (2010, p. 52). As Delamotte explains, ‘the discovery of the Hidden Woman’ is a trope by no means unique to Jane Eyre but rather ‘a staple of women’s Gothic’ (1990, p. 153). This character may be either a ‘Good Other Woman’, who is ‘long … suffering and angelic’ (ibid.), or ‘an Evil Other Woman’ (ibid.), who is ‘angry, rebellious and sexual’ (ibid., p. 154). In either case, she is usually revealed to have certain connections or similarities to the novel’s heroine, though if she is evil these connections are often ultimately disavowed (ibid.). Her discovery therefore helps expose the physical and psychological confinement of which the heroine herself is also a victim (ibid.).

Dr Saunders, the Dollhouse’s physician, starts out as a Good Other Woman. Although not literally hidden, or at least no more so than the other inhabitants of the Dollhouse, she is a reclusive figure who tends to hide in her office. This character trait, along with the terrible scars on her face, suggests past trauma (see Klein (2010) for a thorough examination of the symbolic significance of

25 As I have noted elsewhere, the Attic is a kind of Gothic mirror image of the Dollhouse itself because the waking nightmares in which the prisoners find themselves are actually twisted fantasies: what they think they deserve (Bennett 2011, p. 15).
Saunders’ scars). Nevertheless, Saunders is initially a kind and relatively moral person, showing a concern for the Dolls’ well-being markedly lacking in most of the rest of the Dollhouse staff. In a variation on the classic Female Gothic narrative, it is Saunders herself, as well as Dollhouse’s heroine, Echo, who discovers her own concealment or, rather, the concealment of her true identity. She was once an Active named Whiskey whose face was slashed by Alpha, rendering her ‘un-engageable’, as Topher puts it (‘The Left Hand’). As Alpha had also murdered the Dollhouse’s then physician and Rossum ‘didn’t want to waste an investment’, as Saunders herself bitterly remarks (‘Omega’), Topher imprinted her as a doctor.

Saunders’ story is thus indeed rather similar to that of Bertha in Jane Eyre (1992 (1847)), whom Rochester married on account of her beauty and wealth but then locked in his attic when she became mad and no longer attractive. Saunders, understandably, also shows signs of mental disturbance after she finds out that her entire personality and all her memories are fake, turning into a figure closer to the Evil Other Woman. Like Bertha, who, in obvious sexual symbolism, sets fire to Rochester’s bed, Saunders sets out to avenge herself upon the man she blames for her situation, head programmer Topher. In ‘Vows’, she torments him in various ways: disrupting his computer display with images from the aptly Gothic film The Bride of Frankenstein (James Whale, 1935), putting rats in his cupboard and finally molesting him sexually, slapping and berating him.\(^{26}\) If the Evil Other Woman is typically ‘angry, rebellious and sexual’ in a way ‘that conventional morality taught [women] to reject’ (Delamotte 1990, p. 154), Saunders angrily rebels against the Dollhouse (represented, in her mind, by Topher) for seeking to control her sexuality and indeed her whole life.

Furthermore, as in the classic Female Gothic novel, Saunders, the Hidden Woman, is in several respects a double for the heroine, Echo. Whiskey used to be the most popular Active, now Echo is; the two have been on engagements together (‘Vows’) and have even, on separate occasions, been imprinted with

\(^{26}\) Saunders’s emotionally fraught confrontation with Topher in ‘Vows’ may serve as a reminder of the close relationship between the Gothic, especially the Female Gothic, and melodrama; Diane Long Hoeveler writes that the canonical Female Gothic authors ‘have been recognized as adhering to the traditions of sensibility and sentimentality, melodrama and the hyperbolic staging of female suffering and victimization’ (1998, pp. 3–4). However, while Dollhouse certainly does contain some melodramatic moments, often focusing on ‘female suffering and victimization’, these are fairly isolated instances, usually related to the Dolls’ original identities (Priya in particular). I would therefore hesitate to classify the series as melodrama in the same way I would classify TWD or Supernatural, especially since it does not have a melodramatic structure in the sense defined by Deborah Thomas (see Chapters 1 and 2): the narrative thrust of the programme is, from the very first episode, towards Echo’s developing the ability to resist imprinting and ultimately escaping from and/or bringing down the Dollhouse.
the same personality (‘Omega’). Shortly after Saunders has discovered her true identity (as an Active, at least; she refuses to find out who she was before that), Echo remembers too as she recalls going on a joint engagement with Whiskey (‘Vows’). This is one more step in the gradual development, which began early in the first season, of Echo’s resistance to the mind-wiping process and therefore a step on her journey towards self-awareness.

Just as the fate of the Gothic novel’s Hidden Woman reflects both the heroine’s situation and that of women in general under patriarchy, the revelation of Saunders’ history also helps elucidate the Dollhouse’s true nature. For all its benign façade, it is ultimately a mercenary institution which generates its profit from the exploitation of people whom it regards as little more than ‘lucrative asset[s]’, as Saunders puts it (‘Vows’). Remembering what was done to Whiskey helps Echo understand this too: after she and Saunders have discussed the latter’s history, the doctor disparagingly tells her to ‘go be your best’ because Echo has just repeated the Dolls’ mantra: ‘I try to be my best’, but Echo replies sadly, ‘No one is their best in here’ (‘Vows’).

Escaping the conspiracy?

Belonging to the Female Gothic tradition does not in itself endow *Dollhouse* with feminist credentials, since, as Brabon and Genz note, it is a form that has often been criticized for ‘its tendency to focus on and reproduce women’s subordinate social position and victim status’ (2007, p. 6). The show’s Hidden Woman, Dr Saunders, certainly does not succeed in undoing her own victim status. Although she does temporarily run away from the Dollhouse (‘Vows’), this does not constitute a true escape from Rossum’s clutches because it was Boyd who encouraged her to leave, and she spends at least part of her absence at his home, the two having struck up a romantic relationship. All of this is apparently just a part of Boyd’s machinations as Saunders later returns to the Dollhouse programmed with a ‘sleeper’ imprint which, when activated, makes her completely obedient to Boyd’s orders (‘Getting Closer’).

More troubling still, even when she has regained her ‘own’ personality, like Priya, Saunders chooses not to leave the Dollhouse, remaining there even after the apocalypse has started and all the other inhabitants have left. She eventually loses her mind and becomes a truly Gothic, ghostlike figure who haunts the (Doll)house in a white dress (Figure 3.5). At this point more than ever, Saunders’s
key function as the ‘Hidden Woman’ is as a living record of Rossum’s crimes. In ‘Epitaph One’, which is largely set during the ‘thought-pocalypse’, Saunders, now calling herself Whiskey, offers herself to a group of travellers who have stumbled across the Dollhouse as a means of accessing the memories of various former residents. When the travellers imprint these memories into Whiskey, she is able to describe a series of significant moments in the Dollhouse’s history – such as the increasingly profit-hungry Rossum’s decision to start selling off the Actives’ bodies for ‘a lump nine-figure sum’ – which, together, document its downfall.

The fate of Whiskey’s double, Echo, however, is more positive and not only because she manages to kill Boyd, thereby avoiding being used to make the vaccine and foiling his apocalyptic plans (though the apocalypse later ensues in any case, just as Boyd predicted). Whereas most classic Female Gothic tales ultimately subscribe to the dominant patriarchal ideology of their epoch by culminating in ‘a happy ending that reintegrates the female protagonist into a wider community through marriage’ (Brabon and Genz 2007, p. 5), Echo maintains the independence she has gradually attained over the course of the series. Indeed, by the end of the first season, she has already gained the ability to resist all outside attempts to control or define her, as she retains a sense of self no matter how many new personalities she is imprinted with: ‘I’m experiencing, like, thirty-five [personalities] right now’, she says in ‘Omega’, ‘but I somehow understand that none of them are me’. Moreover, in the post-apocalyptic future...
seen in ‘Epitaph One’ and ‘Epitaph Two: Return’, she has become, along with DeWitt, the effective leader of the ex-Dollhouse employees fighting Rossum, thereby fully casting off her previous victim status.

Echo also rejects a conventional heterosexual union with her on-off love interest, Paul Ballard. Though well meaning, Ballard has been as guilty as any Dollhouse client of trying to project his fantasy onto Echo, specifically that of the damsel-in-distress (see Bennett 2011, p. 6). Ballard is another example of the kind of failed male rescuer discussed in Chapter 1 because he does not succeed in his obsessive quest to rescue Echo’s original self, Caroline, from the Dollhouse (in fact, he ends up working there himself), though he does ultimately team up with Echo to try to bring it down. Yet Echo always keeps their relationship on her terms, only ‘let[ting Ballard] in’ on rare occasions, he complains, during the ten years they spend together fighting Rossum (‘Epitaph Two: Return’). The two are finally permanently united at the end of *Dollhouse*’s last episode but in a way that both subordinates Ballard’s identity to Echo’s and also means that she effectively rescues him: after Ballard’s death, Echo imprints herself with his personality so that the two of them can live together in her mind (‘Epitaph Two: Return’).

In general, the ending of *Dollhouse* breaks with Gothic tradition by refusing to allow hegemonic ideologies to triumph or the Gothic forces that threaten them to be contained. Rossum loses control of the imprinting technology and chaos ensues. Admittedly, at least some of the Rossum executives do survive and even prosper during the ‘thought-pocalypse’ (‘Epitaph Two: Return’). However, as they continually jump into fitter, younger bodies, their original identities are presumably all lost as soon as Topher activates his machine to ‘bring back the world’ (‘Epitaph Two: Return’). It is the ‘reboot’ of history (Canavan 2011a, p. 199) brought about by this device which means that *Dollhouse*’s apocalypse can be seen, in Canavan’s words, ‘as the postmodern version of Jameson’s called-for “radical break”: … the frame we use for imagining an end to capitalism, precisely because (after the “end of history”) we can’t imagine any other possible way for it to end’ (2012, p. 139).

**Conclusion: The divergent uses of the conspiracy narrative**

In *Jericho*, the apocalypse is used as the starting point which allows not so much a reboot but rather a replay of American history, invoking the two major wars on American soil and advocating a return to traditional conservative American
values. In *Dollhouse*, on the other hand, we are left with no idea of what the future will bring. The show ends just after the activation of Topher’s device and so stops short of trying to imagine a different kind of society to the patriarchal, corporate-capitalist one that existed pre-apocalypse. However, an alternative is perhaps hinted at in the depiction of the matriarchal (DeWitt is in charge), commune-like settlements formed by many of the Dollhouse inhabitants during the ‘thought-pocalypse’, first at the Dollhouse itself (‘Epitaph One’) and then on a farm known as Safe Haven (‘Epitaph Two: Return’).

What the two programmes discussed in this chapter share is a lack of faith in the government – a characteristic identified by Olmstead as the central element in twentieth-century American conspiracy theories (2010, p. 4). In *Jericho*, though, this suspicion is linked to a right-wing libertarian rejection of federal government in general, as symbolized by the Gadsden flag, whereas in *Dollhouse* the recrimination is targeted at particular governmental actions, especially the Bush administration’s dealings with the pharmaceutical industry. The two series also share an even deeper suspicion of multinational corporations, which, they imply, hold far more power than the government and may even control it. Both programmes seem to yearn for an end to the exploitative machinations of technocratic corporate capitalism and a return to a simpler, more ‘authentic’ way of life in small agrarian communities, though in *Jericho* these communities are emphatically patriarchal, whereas in *Dollhouse* they are potentially matriarchal and socialist.27 As this difference implies, *Jericho* and *Dollhouse* uphold almost opposite ideological positions. *Jericho* is, as Hantke puts it, ‘unapologetically right wing’ (2010a, p. 149), while *Dollhouse* is a co-creation of the openly ‘left[-]of[-]centre’ Joss Whedon (Whedon cited in Bennett 2010, p. 19).28 Thus, looked at together, the two shows illustrate the point made by Hofstadter, Olmstead and Fenster that conspiracy theories are an integral part of American culture and may equally be concocted or disseminated by people with widely varying political views.

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27 In *Dollhouse*, these settlements are only briefly seen but their matriarchal organization and the values they espouse, such as spiritualism, mistrust of technology and, in the case of Safe Haven, self-sufficiency through agriculture, mean they can be aligned with the ‘eco-feminist’ tradition of apocalyptic literature. As Susan Watkins explains, eco-feminist representations of post-apocalyptic society are potentially positive, though they also run the risk of perpetuating essentialist binaries such as that ‘between masculine reason and feminine nature’ (2012, p. 122).

28 One could argue that Whedon summarizes the basic message of *Dollhouse* in the short video he produced in support of Barack Obama’s second presidential campaign: in a deadpan monologue ostensibly in support of Obama’s rival Mitt Romney, Whedon claims that Romney’s ‘commitment to ungoverned corporate privilege… will nosedive this economy into true insolvency and chaos’ and ultimately ‘put this country back on the path to the zombie apocalypse’ (‘WhedonOnRomney’ 2012).
One of the areas in which the ideological gulf between *Jericho* and *Dollhouse* is most apparent is in their respective handling of gender, despite the fact that the principal antagonist in each show is a male-dominated conspiracy and the people who are represented as suffering the most as a result of that conspiracy’s actions are female. In *Jericho*, women and children are constantly under threat, it is implied, because of the inadequate leadership of a feminized government in cahoots with a malevolent, bureaucratic corporation. This helps legitimize the programme’s call for ‘manly’ men to protect those women and children, acting both as the leaders of small, self-governing communities and as the heads of nuclear families. By justifying its heroes’ (sometimes troubling) behaviour in this way, *Jericho* recalls the rhetoric of the perpetrators of the ‘war on terror’ and their supporters among the media, who sought to portray 9/11 as primarily an attack on America’s women and children (Faludi 2008, pp. 5–6) or, indeed, suggested that the war in Afghanistan was motivated by a desire to ‘save’ Afghan women from the Taliban (Young 2003, p. 229). Consequently, it is rather contradictory that the programme overtly critiques the Bush administration and especially the private contractors it employed, even to the extent of drawing a parallel between the eponymous town and American-occupied Iraq.

*Dollhouse*, on the other hand, employs a scenario and characters typical of the Female Gothic to explore the position of the vulnerable women (and, to a lesser extent, men), most obviously trafficked sex workers, who are exploited by neoliberal, globalized capitalism, represented in the show by megacorporation Rossum. Unlike in *Jericho*, where women and children repeatedly require saving by men, it is Rossum’s former victims (along with some of its former staff) who ‘rescue’ themselves from the corporation’s clutches, fight against it and ultimately reverse the effects of the apocalypse it caused. In fact, the programme expressly subverts the traditional female-victim/male-rescuer binary through its depiction of Echo and Paul Ballard.

As noted earlier, *Dollhouse* is just one of many apocalyptic series which follows *The X-Files* in featuring at least one female character who has been exploited by a patriarchal conspiracy, often symbolized by a father or father figure. The next chapter will focus on five more such characters in five other series, all of whom were physically altered in some way in order to convert them into human, or semi-human, weapons. As we shall see, although most of these women succeed, like Echo, in escaping the conspiracies that abused them, few are as successful as she at remaining independent.
Introduction: TV’s woman warriors

In the last chapter we examined the conspiracies that are responsible for plotting or causing many of post-9/11 American television’s apocalypses. Though these schemes threaten to bring death or upheaval to millions, there is a tendency, as we saw, for the series in which they appear to focus on a single, female victim. This woman was typically taken against her will by the conspirators at a young age and enhanced or altered in some way so that she became effectively a human, or quasi-human, weapon. This transformation may have taken place either through various medical procedures or by replacing the victim with a robot implanted with her personality and/or memories.

The characters I have chosen to examine here are River Tam from *Firefly/Serenity*, Olivia Dunham from *Fringe*, Allison/Cameron from *T:TSCC*, Zoe Graystone from *Caprica* and Jaime Sommers from *Bionic Woman*. The latter is, to some extent, an exception because the personnel of the Berkut Group, the clandestine organization that gives ‘bionic’ body parts to car-crash victim Jaime without her consent, are technically *Bionic Woman’s* ‘good guys’. Berkut does not plot or cause an apocalypse; in fact, in the words of the boss, Jonas Bledsoe (Miguel Ferrer), it is ‘dedicated to stopping rogue organizations from ending civilization as we know it’ (‘Paradise Lost’, 2). However, the writers go to such pains to stress Berkut’s questionable ethics and its exploitation of both Jaime and especially another bionic woman the organization created previously, Sarah Corvus (Katee Sackhoff), that I think it may reasonably be considered alongside the other programmes’ conspiracies. Indeed,

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1 One might argue that Cameron’s creators do not, strictly speaking, constitute a conspiracy either (though they are definitely evil) as she was built by fellow Terminators, acting under the control of the artificial intelligence Skynet. However, Skynet itself was the result of a secret collaboration between a corporation called Cyberdyne Systems and the US military. Since the key players involved in this project, at least as far as we see in the *Terminator* films, are both men – Cyberdyne executive Miles Dyson (Joe Morton, *T2*) and Lieutenant General Robert Brewster (David Andrews, *T3*) – I feel it is classifiable as another example of a patriarchal conspiracy.
the writers even invoke the shorthand for immorality discussed in the last chapter when the ex-girlfriend (Stefanie Samuels) of a Berkut employee remarks about his current job: ‘Torture, executions – you’ve been working private-sector ops too long’ (‘Trust Issues’, 7).

In selecting the characters on which to focus, for the sake of brevity I had to exclude several others who share many characteristics with my chosen five. These include Echo and the other female Dolls from Dollhouse (discussed in the previous chapter), Elle Bishop (Kristen Bell) from Heroes (who wasn’t, strictly speaking, altered or enhanced; her superpowers were naturally occurring and were simply exploited by a sinister corporation), Lexi Glass-Mason (Scarlett Byrne) from Falling Skies (who was genetically altered by aliens rather than human conspirators) and Isabelle Tyler (Megalyn Echikunwoke) from The 4400 (who was entirely ‘engineered’ by the conspirators, in that her mother was surgically impregnated with her father’s sperm while both were unconscious).2

Before we consider the possible reasons why such a plethora of ‘female weapons’ appeared on television in the first decade of the twenty-first century, we should note that ‘tough’ female characters in general are by no means a new phenomenon in American popular culture. Indeed, much critical work about them and their history already exists (e.g. Tasker (1993), Helford (2000), Stuller (2010), Inness (1999), Schubart (2007)). Many commentators have pointed out that fighting women first began to appear in television shows like Charlie’s Angels (1976–1981) and Wonder Woman (1975–1979), as well as in cult film genres such as Blaxploitation, during the late 1960s and 1970s, perhaps, as Tasker (1993, p. 19), Inness (1999, p. 32; 2004, p. 5) and Stuller (2010, p. 2) suggest, as a response to second-wave feminism. By the early 1990s, the tough heroine had moved into mainstream film genres with the likes of Thelma and Louise (Ridley Scott, 1991), Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in T2 and Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in The Silence of the Lambs (Jonathan Demme, 1991), though, as Helford (2000, p. 3) and Stuller (2010, p. 3) note, she was largely absent from television screens during the same period.

2 There are also similar characters in shows which fall outside the scope of this book such as Dark Angel’s Max (Jessica Alba), Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Skye/Daisy Johnson/Quake (Chloe Bennet) and Stranger Things’ (2016–) Eleven (Millie Bobby Brown), as well as in films such as Hanna (Joe Wright, 2011) and Lucy (Luc Besson, 2014). Male human weapons do crop up too, but they typically have somewhat more choice in becoming such and less individual narrative importance; villainous organizations attempting to create an army of ‘super-soldiers’ is a particularly common trope found, for example, in Buffy, Dollhouse and The 4400.
She returned to TV in force in the mid-1990s, however, particularly in the science fiction and fantasy genres, with figures such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena: Warrior Princess (Lucy Lawless) and The X-Files’ Dana Scully. As mentioned in the last chapter, it was arguably the latter character who initiated the cycle of women being tampered with by a patriarchal conspiracy (although tough to begin with, Scully differs from the women analysed in this chapter in that she did not gain any superpowers as a result of her ordeal; in fact, she developed cancer). Buffy too can potentially be seen as part of the same lineage since she was turned into the ‘Slayer’ and given the attendant superpowers without her consent as a result of magic worked by a group of male African tribal elders, the Shadow Men.

Of course, artificially enhanced fighter women have always been a staple of science fiction, linked to traditional correlations of men with the mind and women with the body (see, e.g., Lance Olsen (1992) on Neuromancer’s (William Gibson, 1995 (1984)) enhanced assassin/bodyguard Molly). On American TV, though, the only notable one to appear before the 1990s was the original Jaime Sommers (Lindsay Wagner) from The Bionic Woman (1976–1978) (to whom Buffy’s surname, Summers, is possibly an homage). Yet critical reactions to all of these tough female characters across the decades have been mixed. Most feminist critics view them all as ‘compromised’ in one way or another, as Helford puts it (2000, p. 4). For example, 1960s and 1970s TV heroines are often criticized for their ‘sexual objectification’ (ibid., p. 1) and frequent subservience to a ‘central male figure’ (Tasker 1993, p. 19). Film heroines of the 1980s, on the other hand, are usually viewed in terms of Tasker’s famous paradigm of ‘musculinity’ (ibid., p. 3), whereby, as the name suggests, they are masculinized by means of their ‘developed musculature’ (ibid.) and are therefore, it is suggested, not portrayed as ‘real’ or ‘natural’ women. Even the ‘strong, independent women’ (Helford 2000, p. 5) of 1990s television do not escape censure because they are still, like their forbears, ‘overwhelmingly white, … heterosexual, and silent on such issues as class disenfranchisement’ (ibid.).

Postfeminist heroines

The 1990s cycle of televisual fighter women is often read in terms of its postfeminist context, which in turn may, as Rikke Schubart (2007, p. 6) observes, be viewed as either a positive or negative influence. As Tasker and Diane Negra
explain, the term ‘postfeminism’ rose to prominence in both academic and journalistic circles during the 1990s (2007, p. 8). It ‘broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the “pastness” of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned or celebrated’ (ibid., p. 1). However, postfeminist culture tends to focus exclusively on the experiences of young, affluent, Western women, celebrating their achievements in both the workplace and the domestic sphere. It also promotes individualism, consumerism and, related to both of these, a perception of the self as project. Women are encouraged to see themselves as endlessly improvable, in terms of both education and career advancement but, perhaps more importantly, on a physical level through the consumption of make-up, beauty treatments and fashion. Helford decries postfeminism as part of a wider 1990s cultural climate characterized by ‘change without change’, arguing that while female television characters were often portrayed as physically and intellectually skilled with successful careers, they were also usually ‘obsessed with [their] looks, and desperate for men’s attention’ (Helford 2000, p. 6). Schubart, on the other hand, applauds the 1990s ‘female hero’s’ postfeminist ability to “choose” gendered actions like women choose clothes’ (2007, p. 19) and contends that ‘her use of masculine violence and discourse signals the end of an outdated psychoanalytic taxonomy of male versus female’ (ibid., p. 6).

One of the main questions I want to consider in this chapter is the extent to which postfeminism is still a useful framework for analysing a somewhat later generation of televisual tough women: the female weapons. Superficially, all five of my objects of study certainly fit the standard model of the postfeminist heroine in being not only ‘pretty’ and ‘feminine’ but white, middle to upper class, apparently heterosexual (in River’s case we see no evidence either way) and, perhaps most importantly, young (see Tasker and Negra (2007), Negra (2009), McRobbie (2009)). However, unlike the earlier fantasy film and television heroines who have been identified as typical of the postfeminist era by the likes of Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg (2000) and Rachel Moseley (2002), none of the five are especially preoccupied with ‘adhering to cultural standards of heterosexual fashion and beauty’ (Projansky and Vande Berg 2000, 2009).

3 The only female weapons who do not fit this description in any of the programmes within my corpus are Sierra from Dollhouse (and other non-white female Dolls such as Kilo (Maurissa Tancharoen), though none of these have an important role) and Isabelle from The 4400, who is of mixed white/African-American heritage. Nevertheless, these women still fit the standard postfeminist model in all other ways.
Olivia, Cameron and Jaime, though well groomed, usually dress in an understated, utilitarian way, while River resembles an overgrown child, with long, loose clothing, straggly hair, no make-up and often bare feet. The only one that could be described as ‘glamorous’ – ‘glamour’ being the quintessential attribute of the postfeminist TV witches analysed by Moseley: a ‘conjunction of ideal femininities and (sexual) power’ (2002, p. 405) – is Zoe, who usually wears high heels and a cocktail dress. However, as I shall explain later, for most of Caprica’s duration she is in fact an entirely virtual construct, an avatar, who therefore requires none of the ‘body maintenance’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 63) enforced by postfeminism. Consequently, unlike Moseley’s witches, there is no implication that my five characters’ power ‘really’ derives from their sexual allure (though, as we shall see, Cameron and Zoe are not above using it on occasion).

Following Charlotte Brunsdon (2012), it is perhaps worth differentiating at this point between programmes which display a ‘postfeminist sensibility’ and those which are simply situated within a postfeminist historical context. The former is a concept elaborated by Rosalind Gill and defined by characteristics including not only the ‘fetishization of] a young, able-bodied, “fit” … female body’ (2007, p. 163), but the employment of an ironic and knowing tone (ibid., p. 159). It is arguably associated primarily with 1990s media culture (the ‘Hello Boys’ Wonderbra advertisements were, as Brunsdon notes, an early and quintessential example (2012, p. 388)) and ‘has very particular roots in nationally specific formations’ (Brunsdon 2012, p. 389). A ‘baggier’ (ibid.) view of postfeminism, on the other hand, would take into account the ‘changing social and economic conditions’ in which ‘ideas of gender [are] articulated’ and thus highlight ‘the significance of the postfeminist/neoliberal relation’ (ibid., p. 388) and, in particular, ‘the compatibility between ideas of women’s agency and neoliberal reorganisation of world economies’ (ibid., p. 389). It is this broader perspective which I feel is more useful to us here, though that, of course, does not necessarily mean that there is no trace of postfeminist sensibility to be found in the series under consideration.

Contexts

In the light of Brunsdon’s argument, we can now reflect on which aspects of the neoliberal, globalized economy may have had a bearing on the spate of female
weapons in contemporary American television. In the last chapter, I discussed the effect of neoliberal market logic on the international sex industry in relation to *Dollhouse*, arguing that the series draws parallels between the Dolls’ situation and that of the women from regions such as Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia who are forced to position themselves as objects of consumption for Western men. On a fundamental level, the women analysed in this chapter share a similar identity to the Dolls, somewhere between a worker and a commodity, since they are all, in their altered or enhanced states, essentially products. This is especially true of Zoe because her father, the CEO of a technology corporation, wishes to use the cyborg she becomes to fulfil a contract with the Ministry of Defence; he literally plans to sell her to the military. It is perhaps the least true of Cameron, a Terminator copy of a young resistance fighter called Allison, as she was created by other machines. However, she and her fellow Terminators are still repeatedly identified as assets that both sides in the series’ human–machine war wish to own.

A second identity which global capitalism forces women and girls in the Global South particularly to adopt is that of workers in the manufacturing industry. As Elina Penttinen notes, ‘Women’s cheap labor … has enabled globalization to take place as female workers have been essential for transnational corporations that want to maximize profits’ (2008, p. 4). There has thus been, as Brynnar Swenson (2013) pointed out in a conference paper, a global shift from Fordist production processes carried out by machines back to hand-manufacturing methods where people, overwhelmingly women, work like machines. It is tempting to see echoes of this in the once human, now mechanized women in popular culture, such as Jaime and Zoe, who are exploited by greedy corporations and aggressive governments.

Of course, to map the exploitation of women in the Global South onto TV characters who are white and ostensibly ‘Western’ (as far as this concept can be

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4 We should keep in mind when discussing the prevalence of this trope that the majority of programmes in which it has featured never attained more than cult status. Of the five series under consideration here, *Bionic Woman* premiered with a very respectable 13.9 million viewers, but this had dropped to 5.9 million by the final episode (World Entertainment News Network 2007); *Fringe* averaged between 4.22 and 10.02 million viewers per season across its five seasons (ABC Medianet 2009b, Gorman 2010, Gorman 2011a, Gorman 2012, Bibel 2013); *T:TSCC* attracted an extremely healthy 18.3 million viewers for its first episode but hit a low of 2.9 million during the second season (Kimball 2009) and *Firefly* averaged 4.48 million for its sole season (Haberman 2002). *Caprica* fared by far the worst, its ratings ranging between 1.6 million and 528,000 viewers per episode (Crupi 2010, Gorman 2011b). It is interesting to note, however, that a more recent show featuring the same trope, the Netflix series *Stranger Things*, outperformed all five by a considerable margin. It averaged 14.07 million viewers aged eighteen to forty-nine within the first thirty-five days that its first season was available to stream (Holloway 2016).
said to exist within their worlds) will always be a tenuous and even potentially offensive undertaking. It is perhaps more appropriate to look for parallels with women’s position in the workforce in Western societies. In this regard, the work of Lisa Adkins on contemporary ‘reflexive’ economies seems helpful. These are defined as economies in which ‘external forms of authority are replaced by the authority of … individual[s]’ (Adkins 2004, p. 192), who are able to ‘reflect on the social conditions of their existence and to change them accordingly’ (Beck cited in Adkins 2004, p. 192). Drawing on the work of many other sociologists, Adkins observes that in recent years there has been ‘a general increase in demand for feminine skills in the labour market’ (Adkins 2004, p. 201), such as ‘paying attention to emotions, controlling anger and listening sympathetically to others’ (Illouz cited in Adkins 2004, p. 201). The result of this is that, in the workplace, ‘gender is increasingly taking the form of a self-conscious artifice which can be managed, strategically deployed and performed’ (Adkins 2004, p. 202). However, Adkins argues that this trend has not been beneficial for women because their ‘[p]erformances of femininity at work are often defined as not concerning reflexive skills or competencies, but rather as “natural advantages” … which should not receive workplace recognition and rewards such as, for instance, promotion’ (ibid., p. 203). Thus, while men are able to ‘create new labour market resources as a consequence of this process’ (1998, p. 43), women are often left doing low-status, low-paid, embodied and material labour.

These observations seem potentially relevant to the female weapons, whose labour is exploited by various male-dominated institutions, particularly because, as we shall see, in several cases that labour can be characterized as not only embodied and material but affective and therefore traditionally ‘feminine’.5 Even though most of the female weapons escape or are rescued from the sinister corporations that ‘created’, or perhaps we should say ‘commodified’, them, they largely end up using their skills in the service of another male-led group, albeit a benign one. The exceptions to this are first Jaime, who, as I described above, is both ‘created’ and exploited by an organization that cannot be easily classified as either good or bad and from whom she does not, within Bionic Woman’s short eight-episode lifespan, escape. The second exception is Zoe who, as we shall see, largely evades external control or exploitation.

5 Dollhouse’s Dolls also fit this paradigm. As Robin S. Johnson points out, ‘The service that the dollhouse provides its clients is based on affective labor that has been technologically enhanced… While affective labor is portrayed as valuable for capital in Dollhouse, the organization of labor at the Rossum Corporation feminizes and subordinates both male and female workers who perform services for clients’ (2011, p. 115).
As we now examine some of the defining characteristics of these five women, I believe some further links with postfeminist, neoliberal culture will emerge. Reading these series in this light seems more relevant to me than the approach taken by the likes of Faludi and Spigel, who view the ‘woman-as-victim’ trope as a symptom of 9/11, since the threat in each of them originates at the heart of Western society rather than outside it. Nevertheless, being careful to avoid simplistic ‘zeitgeist readings’, we also need to consider which of the characters’ traits are in fact recurring tropes in the history of Hollywood’s female fighters.

Daddy’s girls

One cultural archetype of female warrior that seems especially pertinent to the five characters is that which Rikke Schubart has christened ‘the daughter’ (2007, p. 23). This categorization was anticipated or perhaps inspired by Tasker, who notes that the action heroine ‘may be represented as identified with the father’ (1998, p. 69). Schubart expands on Tasker’s comments, explaining that the ‘daughter’ archetype, which appeared in the 1990s, is an ‘ordinary young woman’ (2007, p. 33) who became ‘a hero’ because ‘Daddy’ (ibid., p. 32) – whether her biological father or ‘a symbolic father figure’ (ibid., p. 33) – ‘taught her to “be this way”’ (ibid., p. 32; original emphasis). Because of the effort which the ‘father’ typically expends in transforming his ‘daughter’ (through intensive training in Schubart’s examples), Schubart concludes that ‘[t]he daughter is not a person. She is … a “product”’ (ibid., p. 33). This, as I mentioned earlier, is even more literally true of the five women under discussion here. All five carry a number of connotations of ‘the daughter’, first because of the young age at which their transformations took place. Furthermore, Zoe, Olivia and Jaime were all transformed using drugs or technology created by either their father (Zoe) or future father-in-law (Olivia and Jaime). In the case of both Zoe and Olivia, however, it is implied that one of the reasons that they have become so tough and resourceful is not because of their love for their fathers (or vice-versa) but rather the opposite: as a reaction against them. Zoe, who is deeply religious, is disgusted with the base uses of her father’s inventions – his ‘dirty science’, as she puts it (‘Pilot’, 1–2) – in particular, the ‘holoband’ technology, which is largely used to stage virtual reality orgies. She therefore uses her own scientific aptitude, which exceeds his, to undermine his plans and sabotage his inventions in various ways.
FBI agent Olivia, on the other hand, was raised by an abusive stepfather who used to get drunk and hit her and her mother. She confides to her colleague (later husband) Peter that at the age of nine she shot her stepfather, trying to protect her mother, but he didn't die and later disappeared (‘The Cure’, 1.6). As she has also told Peter in an earlier episode that she ‘pretty much knew that [law enforcement] was what [she] wanted to do by the time [she] was nine’ (‘The Ghost Network’, 1.3), we can surmise that her stepfather’s behaviour was the catalyst for her joining the FBI, especially since she concludes her story about shooting him, ‘I still blame myself, because I … should have killed him. And I know that rationally he is not responsible for all the bad things in the world, but he is responsible for some of them’ (‘The Cure’). In this respect, she resembles one of the action heroines discussed by Tasker, Megan Turner (Jamie Lee Curtis) in Blue Steel (Kathryn Bigelow, 1989), a New York cop, who, it is implied, chose her career because of her bad relationship with her father and his violence towards her mother (Tasker 1993, p. 147). These heroines’ troubled family histories arguably contribute to the pathologization that is at the heart of Tasker and Schubart’s characterization of the ‘daughter’ (we shall return to this point later).

A second related characteristic of the ‘daughter’, which all five examples manifest, is her bad or non-existent relationship with her mother. Schubart claims that ‘the female hero … has no mother’ (2007, p. 33). However, Jennifer Stuller, who also notes that ‘[a] consistent theme in stories about the female super, or action, hero is that she is reared or mentored by a man rather than a woman’ (2010, p. 105), makes the more precise observation that if the mother is not ‘physically absent’, she is ‘at least emotionally unavailable’ (ibid.). The latter is certainly true of Zoe’s mother Amanda (Paula Malcomson), who has mental health issues (‘The Imperfections of Memory’, 8), and at one point, after Zoe’s death, admits that Zoe was ‘an accident’ that she didn’t want and that she worries that Zoe picked up on her feelings (‘False Labor’, 13).

6 Fringe’s narrative takes place across numerous parallel universes and timelines, so any references I make to characters’ life histories may only apply in one of these. For example, in the alternative timeline that is created at the end of season three, Olivia did kill her stepfather (‘Neither Here Nor There’, 4.1).

7 The Event plays with this trope by having assassin Vicky (Taylor Cole) tell the hero Sean Walker (Jason Ritter), who has just exclaimed à propos of her cold-hearted behaviour, ‘You make absolutely no sense to me, a story very similar to Olivia’s about how she shot her abusive stepfather when she was a child. However, when Sean reacts with sympathy and horror, Vicky admits, smiling, that she ‘made the whole sob story up’ and continues, ‘There’s no reason I am the way I am, Walker. I just came out this way’ (‘A Message Back’, 14).
Cameron doesn’t have a mother as she is a Terminator, but she poses as Sarah Connor’s daughter. Sarah, however, hates her (she refers to her as her ‘spoilt stepdaughter’) (‘Gnothi Seauton’, 1.2) and is quite obviously jealous of Cameron’s borderline-romantic relationship with her son John (for instance, in a drug-induced delirium, she imagines Cameron walking past a mesmerized John in her underwear (‘Some Must Watch While Some Must Sleep’, 2.16)). Olivia and Jaime’s mothers, meanwhile, are both dead. River’s is only seen in a flashback in one episode, in which both her parents refuse to believe her brother Simon’s (Sean Maher) claims that River, who is being experimented on at her government-run school, is in trouble. ‘It’s one of her silly games’, says her mother (Isabella Hofmann) when Simon shows her River’s letters, which he believes, correctly, contain coded messages. She goes on to counsel him that he should not let his ‘paranoi[a]’ jeopardize his promising medical career, thereby suggesting that she puts her son’s interests before her daughter’s (‘Safe’, 5).

It is not only female fighters who lack mothers in Hollywood, of course. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes their absence in both classical romantic comedy (Rowe 1995) and 1980s and 1990s media culture in general (Karlyn 2011). In more recent texts, she suggests, echoing Stuller, the absent mother is often ‘a guilty mother’ (2011, p. 70), who has either abandoned her family to fulfil her own desires or is “present” physically but absent emotionally’ (ibid.). Karlyn connects the heroines of 1980s and 1990s films’ poor or non-existent relationships with their mothers to a wider tendency in postfeminist culture for young women to feel alienated from their second-wave feminist ‘mothers’. She gives many possible reasons for young women’s ‘retreat … from a feminism they associate with their mother’s generation’ (ibid., p. 28), one of which is that their neoliberalism-influenced desire for individual success prompts them to ‘maintain connections with the still (largely male) power structure’ (ibid., pp. 28–29). In film, Karlyn suggests, this process is often symbolized by the heroine’s close relationship with her father, which she describes (citing Jane Gallop) as “the father’s seduction”, the most widespread and damaging seduction of all, as patriarchy lures girls into a femininity based on overvaluing and idealizing men and devaluing women’ (ibid., p. 70). One might argue that a similar logic is at work in the television series under consideration here, wherein, although the heroines may have poor relationships with their real fathers, as we shall see, all of them except Zoe end up with an older male boss/father figure.
Teamwork

It seems only fair to note that while all five women are disconnected from their mothers, they do not exhibit the more general ‘emphatic individualism’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, p. 2) which is seen as typical of postfeminist culture. Admittedly, none of the five could be described as engaging in feminist politics, but they do band together with others to fight for causes with high stakes (often the highest of all: preventing an apocalypse). Furthermore, the teams in which they work, although they may experience occasional internal rifts, are very close knit, resembling families. In fact, they all include members who are related to one another by blood or marriage. Stuller, Dawn Heinecken and Michael Marano all note that being ‘surrounded by a bevy of friends who support her, fight for/with her’ (Heinecken 2003, p. 24) is a frequent attribute of the female hero. Marano’s focus is on Firefly showrunner Joss Whedon’s ‘weaponized women’ including River. He argues that all of them show a ‘self-determination to subvert their status as weapons/objects … In that this self-determination is other-directed, focused on the protection of immediate and domestic groups of real and substitute families, it can be thought of as the antithesis of the Patriarchal authority that has made objects/weapons of these women. We can think of it as “Matriarchal” in that it is female-centered power’ (2007, p. 45). From one point of view, such a statement is uncomfortably essentialist. Indeed, Stuller and Heinecken both observe that the ‘familial’ context of most female warriors and the fact that they often fight in order to protect their ‘families’ can be viewed in a variety of lights, both positive and negative (Heinecken 2003, p. 140; Stuller 2010, p. 119).

In my opinion, however, the team-based structure of most TV programmes featuring female warriors is probably mostly simply due to the tendency of all contemporary ‘quality’ American television drama to have ‘large ensemble cast[s]’ (Thompson 1996, p. 14). A lot of male telefantasy heroes work in teams too, such as the protagonists of Arrow, Chuck (2007–2012), Smallville and Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. All of these shows, like those with female protagonists, mix storylines about the characters’ relationships with those more typical of their genre (i.e. science fiction/fantasy). This is a trend to which Glen Creeber refers as ‘the soap operaisation of long-form television drama’ (2004, p. 13), while Jason Mittell prefers the term ‘serial melodrama’ (2015, p. 233). Although there are
many possible causes for this trend, the economic necessity to appeal to as wide an audience as possible is surely an important factor.

Unfortunately, one difference that can still be discerned between shows featuring female warriors and those with male ones is that the women are much less likely to be the head of their team. Of the five under discussion here, only Zoe is, in as much as she has a team. Olivia is arguably the protagonist of *Fringe* (as Rhonda Wilcox notes, the actor who plays her, Anna Torv, receives top billing in the programme’s titles (2014, p. 57)), but she has a male boss – nominally her FBI boss Philip Broyles (Lance Reddick), effectively her future father-in-law Walter Bishop (John Noble) – as does Jaime: Bledsoe (she also has a male ‘supervisor’: Antonio Pope (Isaiah Washington)). River, meanwhile, joins the crew of a ship captained by a man, Mal Reynolds (Nathan Fillion), who, as Marano points out, doesn’t hesitate to take advantage of her special powers for his own ends (2007, p. 46). The head of Cameron’s ‘family’ is ostensibly Sarah (the show is subtitled *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, after all), but Cameron’s allegiance is first and foremost to John, both the present-day one and the future version who sent her back in time to protect his younger self.

In this respect, therefore, contemporary television female heroes differ little from their 1960s and 1970s forerunners, who largely used their fighting skills or supernatural powers in the service of male bosses and husbands (Helford 2000, pp. 2–3). Admittedly, the contemporary heroines have all ostensibly ‘chosen’ to do so but, in each case, this ‘choice’, a buzzword of postfeminism, was, as McRobbie (2009, p. 1) suggests is usually the case, somewhat illusory. Olivia is (initially at least) unhappy working under the sexist Broyles; River was brought aboard Mal’s ship by Simon while she was in a cryogenic sleep (‘Serenity’, 1) and Cameron was programmed to obey John, though, as I will discuss later, the show goes to some pains to imply that she eventually chooses to remain loyal to him. Jaime had the least choice of all: Bledsoe tells her that she is obliged to work for him because he owns her bionic body parts, which cost fifty million dollars (‘Paradise Lost’). However, even here, the writers make a point of showing that Jaime does, to some extent, choose to work for Berkut: shortly before she makes her final decision, she expresses anxiety that she is not ‘moving on with [her] life’ in the same way her friends are (‘Paradise Lost’).

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8 As mentioned in the last chapter, this is also true of all the principal Dolls in *Dollhouse*: none of them had as much choice in becoming Actives as the Dollhouse staff claim.
Pathologization and victimhood

Jaime is in fact one of the less ‘troubled’ female weapons in recent American television programmes (though the other bionic woman, Sarah Corvus, is downright psychotic). Many of the others have experienced moderate to severe mental health issues as a result of the procedures that turned them into weapons. Of the five on which we are focusing here, Olivia and River are the worst affected: River, who underwent brain surgery, has nightmares and panic attacks because she doesn’t know ‘what [she is]’ (‘War Stories’, 10), and Olivia worries that the drug trials to which she was subjected as a child ‘stunted [her] emotions’ (‘Wallflower’, 4.7). Even Cameron is unhappy to the extent of possibly considering suicide (she reads a leaflet about it in ‘The Tower Is Tall but the Fall Is Short’ (2.6)) and discusses it with a friend in ‘Self-Made Man’ (2.11) throughout most of the second season of T:TSCC because she fears that she may malfunction and pose a danger to John.

Schubart and Tasker both argue that it is very common for Hollywood’s warrior women to be pathologized in some way. Tasker labels the female hero ‘pervers[e]’ (1993, p. 31) and associates her with the ‘stereotype of the “tomboy”’ (1998, p. 69), who is stuck in a ‘transitional state’ (ibid., p. 81), unable or unwilling to develop into a ‘normal’ adult woman. River in particular certainly has a superficial resemblance to the tomboy archetype: she is about sixteen years old but even when not in the grip of total insanity she behaves like a child. She is often seen running wildly around Mal’s ship, the Serenity (for instance, in ‘War Stories’, when she steals Kaylee’s (Jewel Staite) apple and runs away), or playing games.9

However, what is notable about the series under discussion here is that they emphasize that their heroines’ ‘abnormality’, as well as their unhappiness, is the direct result of what was physically done to them against their will by a patriarchal conspiracy and/or father figure.10 One of the ways this is made clear is through flashbacks to moments before the transformation into a human weapon occurred, when the girl in question was still ‘normal’ – for instance, in ‘Allison

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9 Admittedly, the somewhat older Kaylee often participates in these activities too, but she is capable of acting like an adult in a way that River is not, working as the ship’s mechanic and displaying a healthy sexuality which River apparently entirely lacks.

10 This is also true of both Sierra in Dollhouse and Elle in Heroes. As described in the last chapter, Sierra was given drugs that made her appear psychotic and then placed in a mental hospital by a Rossum employee. Elle, meanwhile, was apparently ‘a normal girl: unicorns and rainbows’ until her father began a series of cruel tests of her ability to generate electricity (‘Cautionary Tales’, 2.9), which eventually caused her to become so unstable that she was diagnosed as a sociopath with paranoid delusions and locked up for sixteen years (‘Four Months Ago…; 2.8).
from Palmdale’ (2.4) in T:TSCC and ‘Safe’ in Firefly. In River’s case, it is made especially clear by the R. Tam Sessions (‘CroHellMan’, 2013 (2005)), a series of short promotional videos released on the internet in the run-up to Serenity. The Sessions consist of a series of interviews with River conducted by an anonymous member of the Alliance (Joss Whedon) that took place throughout the time she was being experimented on and chart her deterioration from a perfectly sane, if exceptionally intelligent, young girl to a screaming, raving lunatic who finally stabs the interviewer in the throat with a pen. In Fringe, meanwhile, it becomes apparent that all the children who underwent the drug trials were emotionally damaged as a result, not just Olivia. In fact, Walter, one of the orchestrators of the trials, tells her that she coped with the experience better than many of the other children because she was ‘the strongest’ (‘Subject 9’, 4.4). This comment is borne out by the several other former test subjects Olivia encounters who are far more unstable than she, such as Nick Lane (David Call), who is in a mental asylum (‘Bad Dreams’, 1.17).

The unambiguous placing of blame for the female weapons’ mental illness on a specific externally imposed physical and emotional trauma makes them significantly different from Tasker’s tomboys and Schubart’s ‘daughters’. The latter types, it is implied, failed to develop into ‘normal’ women as a result of the overly strong masculine influence of a ‘lost or loved father’ (Tasker 1998, p. 69). The female weapons, on the other hand, are somewhat more comparable to the son characters discussed in Chapter 2, who also experience emotional suffering as a result of their fathers’ actions. However, they differ from them too, not only because the women’s trauma was caused by biological interference rather than psychological pressure but because the programmes in which they appear do not tend to have the same melodramatic tone as the likes of TWD and Supernatural, whose male protagonists are trapped in unwanted situations or roles (a typical feature of melodrama). The women, on the other hand, have, as mentioned, escaped, or escape in the course of their respective shows, from the malign men or machines that ‘created’ them (though whether they are subsequently truly free is, as I am trying to show, another question). The traumatic incidents that caused their unhappiness or mental instability are therefore in the past and can

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11 The exception is Bionic Woman, in which Jaime is ‘trapped’ working for the Berkut Group and which does display a decidedly melodramatic, even Gothic, bent at times, particularly in the representation of Sarah Corvus. In many ways, Sarah plays a ‘Hidden Woman’ role similar to that of Dr Saunders in Dollhouse (see Chapter 3), acting as an ‘angry, rebellious and sexual’ double for Jaime and attempting to warn her about Berkut’s sinister nature (see Calvert (2017, p. 122) for further discussion of Sarah as a dark and sexualized double for Jaime).
potentially be recovered from; as we shall see, several of the programmes imply that their respective heroines are gradually recovering.

Furthermore, although Olivia, River and Cameron are all shown to suffer negative psychological consequences as a result of their transformations, they are not portrayed as so uncomfortable with their status as tough women that they kill themselves. This is a charge Sara Crosby levels against three slightly earlier televisual ‘tough females’ (2004, p. 153): Max of Dark Angel, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Xena: Warrior Princess, all of whom committed suicide in the seasons of their respective programmes that aired in 2001. Crosby argues that although these three women ‘died heroically, even admirably’ (ibid.), their decisions to ‘sacrifice [themselves] to the needs of a patriarchal community’ (ibid., p. 154) are linked to the feelings of ‘guilt’ and ‘abject self-hatred’ (ibid.) which they experience ‘because of their heroism’ (ibid., p. 155; original emphasis). She continues: ‘[F]emale heroes do not want their transgressive toughness. They want to give it up and be “just normal girls”’ (ibid.). While it is certainly true that all five of the female characters on whom I am focusing would rather be ‘normal girls’, they differ from the women discussed by Crosby in that none of them voluntarily ‘give up’ their toughness by sacrificing or otherwise killing themselves.12 As I noted earlier, it is implied that Cameron contemplates it, but in the end she clearly decides that it is better she remain alive to protect John from outside threats. In other words, she does recognize the value of her own toughness, even though she views it primarily as a quality to be placed in the service of a man.

Nevertheless, Cameron, Olivia and Zoe are all, at one point, sacrificed ‘for the greater good’, but, significantly, this is a decision made not by the women themselves but by their male companions. Zoe’s boyfriend Ben (Avan Jogia) blows up the subway train they are both on in a religiously motivated suicide bombing (‘Pilot’), Walter shoots Olivia in the head so his former partner William Bell (Leonard Nimoy) can’t use her as an energy source in his plot to collapse two universes (‘Brave New World: Part Two’, 4.22) and Cameron is ‘killed’ by John when she reverts to her original programming and becomes a threat to him and

12 While the suicide/sacrifice trope has not completely disappeared from apocalyptic narratives involving weaponized women – both Isabelle from The 4400 and Lexi from Falling Skies do sacrifice themselves to save others – it is actually more likely to appear in relation to ‘Prince Hals’ (in keeping with the generally more melodramatic representation of the latter’s suffering). BSG’s Lee has suicidal inclinations (and finally gives up the ‘heroic’ role into which his father pushed him); Supernatural’s Sam and Dean continually attempt to sacrifice themselves, usually to save one another and/or the world, and Peter from Fringe, who, as noted in the last chapter, also undergoes a Prince Hal narrative, wipes himself from existence as a side effect of saving the world (‘The Day We Died’, 3.22).
his family (‘Samson and Delilah’). Their deaths, therefore, though temporary, once again emphasize that these heroines should be viewed as victims whom various male-led groups, both ‘good’ and ‘bad’, use as they see fit.

Olivia and Cameron’s ‘murders’ are both represented as acceptable within the narratives of their respective programmes since Olivia’s death saves two universes and Cameron puts John’s life before her own, and neither woman bears any apparent ill will towards her ‘murderer’ as a result.13 Zoe, on the other hand, is much less of a passive victim than the other two: she does not condone Ben’s sacrificing her for his beliefs. Furthermore, unlike Cameron, who is repaired by John, and Olivia, who resurrects because her brain is saturated with Cortexiphan, the drug Walter and Bell dosed her with, Zoe effects her own ‘resurrection’ in the form of an avatar which she created in V-World, the virtual reality one enters using a holoband. Consequently, Zoe also differs from the various pre-9/11 superwomen discussed by Dawn Heinecken – including Buffy, Xena and Max – who all resurrect in and through their bodies (2003, p. 145). Heinecken believes that this is a quality unique to female heroes in popular culture, linked to a wider tendency for their identities to be grounded in their bodies, in contrast to male heroes, who perpetually seek to gain mastery over their ‘unruly bod[ies]’ (ibid., p. 138) with their minds. The ability to resurrect in and through the body is evidently one that continues to be present in some twenty-first-century superwomen, such as Olivia and Heroes’ invulnerable Claire Bennet. Even Dollhouse’s Echo is able to retain her own identity no matter how many times her mind is wiped because of a unique biological quality.

Heinecken views this aptitude as a strength, commenting, ‘Perhaps stemming from an age-old hysteria around the weakness of the body, the body is simultaneously revealed as a source of strength and the path to immortality’ (ibid., p. 149). And certainly, on occasion, televisual female heroes do use their bodily invulnerability in an active, productive way. For example, Lorna Jowett remarks about an incident in Heroes where Claire crashes a car she is in with a schoolmate who has tried to rape her because she knows he will be injured or die, while she will be able to heal or resurrect (‘Collision’, 1.4): ‘[Claire’s] ability allows her to take control by apparently losing it’ (2011, p. 127). Nevertheless,

13 Rhonda Wilcox points out that Fringe’s Peter also effectively dies to save the world (as mentioned in the previous footnote), arguing that this is part of a wider parallel created between him and Olivia, who were both ‘changed to be different than the standard human and supplied with special abilities’ (2014, p. 52) by the actions of Peter’s father/Olivia’s eventual father-in-law, Walter. We might therefore conceivably view Peter as a cross between a Prince Hal and a ‘female’ weapon (Walter even refers to his having been ‘weaponized’ (‘Reciprocity’, 3.11)). Nonetheless, the fact remains that Peter chooses to sacrifice himself, whereas Olivia is sacrificed by Walter.
as Heinecken acknowledges, the ‘dreams of bodily weakness mutating into strength’ (2003, p. 149) revealed in such scenarios also reiterate the cultural association of the feminine with the body and its fragility (ibid., pp. 149–150). Zoe, on the other hand, represents a true exception to convention because she is able to resurrect not in and through her body but in and through her mind. She created the Zoe-avatar using her own intelligence and computer programming skills and the avatar is effectively a resurrection of her mind rather than her body. In fact, it is her father Daniel (Eric Stoltz) who re-tethers her to a physical body when he downloads the avatar into a robot he has built (‘Pilot’).

‘Doing it all’

Zoe, who excels at computer programming, is not the only one of the five women to exhibit stereotypically masculine skills. The others do too, possessing abilities including engineering (Cameron), facility with numbers (Olivia), sharpshooting (Olivia’s parallel universe counterpart ‘Fauxlivia’) and general, loosely defined ‘genius’ (River). They are also, of course, like all the heroines mentioned in this chapter, all very good at physical combat. In Cameron, Jaime and River’s cases, this ability has been put in place by external agents, though Jaime still has to train hard to perfect her skills. Olivia and Zoe, on the other hand, have developed their fighting skills themselves, the former presumably through physical training and the latter presumably through modifications to her avatar.

It is possible to argue that these characters’ possession of ‘masculine’ skills is indicative of their postfeminist cultural context because a major criticism that is often levelled against postfeminist culture is that ‘[i]nstead of challenging the traditional expectation that women take primary responsibility in the home, there is a shift towards abandoning the critique of patriarchy and instead heroically attempting to “do it all”’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 80). This interpretation can certainly be applied to Cameron, Jaime and Olivia, who are all under pressure, or at least feel as if they are, to succeed in both traditionally masculine and feminine domains.14

14 This is also true, in a way, of Dollhouse’s Actives, who are almost literally expected to ‘do it all’, though they are not aware of doing so. The engagements we see the female Dolls perform range between the highly ‘masculine’ – for example, acting as bodyguards or bounty hunters – and the traditionally ‘feminine’. The most extreme example of the latter is probably Echo’s imprint as the mother of a baby in ‘Instinct’ (2.2), but, more generally, all the female Dolls carry out many engagements with an emotional dimension, most often, of course, being ‘in love’ with the client. Presumably, we are meant to assume that the male Dolls regularly carry out this kind of engagement too, but we do not see them doing so nearly as much.
Cameron must protect John from other Terminators, but she must also make him fall in love with her so that he will trust her completely and follow her when she travels to the future. Showrunner Josh Friedman remarks in a writers’ room discussion featured in the season two ‘making of’ documentary Write the Future (2009) that Cameron’s ‘overall programming includes trying to become as human-like as possible in order to have John love her’. Viewed in this light, Cameron’s repeated attempts to copy the speech and behaviour of her female schoolmates – for example, in ‘The Turk’ (1.3), she picks up some make-up that a girl has left behind in the toilets, puts it on and then asks John the same question she heard the girl ask her friend: ‘Do you like this colour on me?’ – provide a literal illustration of the concept of the postfeminist ‘masquerade’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 63). Whereas previously, as Judith Butler famously argued, the performance of gender was the unconscious ‘citation of a norm’ (1990, p. 141), under postfeminism, femininity’s ‘fictive status’ is ‘openly acknowledge[d]’ (McRobbie 2009, p. 64) yet nonetheless rigidly ‘self-imposed’ (ibid., p. 63). 

Jaime, on the other hand, must balance her work for the Berkut Group with caring for her rebellious teenage sister Becca (Lucy Hale), a task which she often finds extremely challenging. Becca was left on Jaime’s doorstep by their alcoholic activist father (‘Second Chances’, 1), forcing Jaime to turn down her place at Harvard and take a job in a bar in order to support the two of them (‘Paradise Lost’). This backstory reflects not only the ongoing expectation that women should be responsible for childcare but McRobbie’s related observation that young working women are often obliged to ‘scal[e] … down … [their] ambition in favour of a discourse of managing following the onset of motherhood’ (2009, p. 80). Obviously, Jaime’s job as a secret agent for Berkut is higher status than her previous one as a bartender, but it is still largely material and embodied (not to mention possibly low paid, given that Bledsoe claims she owes him fifty million dollars), in that her missions, of course, rely heavily on the use of her bionic body parts.

Olivia, meanwhile, must be an effective FBI agent in what, it is made clear, is a sexist, man’s world. We learn early on in Fringe that in the course of her

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15 Cameron’s behaviour differs from that of an ‘ordinary’ woman, at least according to McRobbie, in that the latter does not believe she is performing a masquerade in order to win ‘male approval’ but rather in order to fit in with ‘feminine cultural norms’ (2009, p. 63). Cameron, on the other hand, is trying to conform to the latter – in Friedman’s words, to become ‘as human-like [or rather, as girl-like] as possible’ – but her ultimate aim is to win male (John’s) approval.
career she has tried to have at least two male colleagues prosecuted for sexually harassing female ones and that consequently the men in question and their friends bear her a grudge (‘Pilot’; ‘Bound’, 1.11). One of these friends is her new boss Colonel Broyles, who is initially extremely patronizing and unhelpful towards her, as is her other new colleague Peter (in the pilot episode they call her ‘honey’ and ‘sweetheart’, respectively), until she gradually wins their respect with her impeccable skills as a detective. Yet despite her success in a ‘traditionally male working environment’ (an achievement lauded by postfeminism (Tasker and Negra 2007, p. 1)), on a personal level, Olivia feels herself to be a failure. As mentioned above, she worries that she has been emotionally ‘stunted’ by her traumatic childhood experiences. Exacerbating matters, at the end of the second season, Olivia is switched against her will with her parallel-universe counterpart, nicknamed ‘Fauxlivia’ (‘Over There: Part Two’, 2.23). Fauxlivia had a much happier childhood than Olivia and consequently is a more outgoing and sociable person. She swiftly initiates a romantic relationship with Peter (‘Olivia’), something towards which Olivia had been slowly progressing for a long time.

After Olivia is eventually rescued and returned to her own universe (‘Entrada’, 3.8), she is distraught to discover the extent to which her doppelgänger had succeeded in replacing her. In particular, as with the single women in the postfeminist ‘chick flicks’ discussed by Diane Negra, Olivia’s ‘failure’ to establish a relationship with a man, Peter, is, in her own eyes at least, the ultimate proof of her ‘aberrant … status’ (Negra 2009, p. 8) and ‘emotional disconnection’ (ibid., p. 9). In ‘Concentrate and Ask Again’ (3.12), Olivia confesses her worries that perhaps Peter has ‘genuine feelings’ for Fauxlivia to her associate Nina Sharp. She continues: ‘I would understand if he did … She’s like me but better … She still has her mother, and she wasn’t experimented on as a child. And she can laugh; she has real friends. She even wears a dress every once in a while. ’ Thus, Olivia views Fauxlivia as a version of herself who is more adept at ‘doing it all’. She not only has an equally if not more successful career than Olivia in the Department of Defense, but she is also more skilled at performing femininity in both appearance (wearing a dress) and behaviour (being attractive and charming enough to make friends and seduce Peter).16

16 It is worth recalling here that we have also encountered male characters experiencing similar pressure to fulfil both ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles: those in Heroes discussed in Chapter 1. While those characters tried (somewhat unsuccessfully) to overcome these difficulties by adopting the supposedly quintessentially male persona of superhero, as we shall see, Olivia eventually takes on a more traditionally feminine identity.
Olivia does eventually succeed in establishing a romantic relationship with Peter; they marry and have a daughter, Etta. Yet even so, her fears about being an inadequate woman remain. Olivia reveals to Peter later, after they have been reunited with Etta following years of separation, that she always doubted her own capability to be a mother:

I wanted so much to be a mother, but I just didn't think that I was programmed that way, that I was destined for something else. Ever since I was a kid, ever since the Cortexiphan trials, I just – I was at odds. So how could I have this incredible little girl? So when we lost her, I felt like that was my punishment, my punishment for being too conflicted to appreciate her when we had her. (‘The Recordist’, 5.3)

Once again, Olivia expresses her anxiety that, despite her ardent desire to do so, she is incapable of fulfilling a ‘normal’ feminine role and that this is a result of her childhood trauma. However, as Peter reminds her, their family ‘got a second chance’ (ibid.), and, over the course of the first few episodes of the fifth season, she bonds with her now adult daughter (Georgina Haig) as well as reconnecting with Peter, from whom she became distanced after Etta’s disappearance.17

Although Etta is murdered in ‘The Bullet That Saved the World’ (5.4), the Fringe team are ultimately able to reset the timeline so that Etta was neither separated from her parents nor did she die. The penultimate scene of the final episode of Fringe, ‘An Enemy of Fate’ (5.13), is a ‘flashback’ to Peter, Olivia and a three-year-old Etta (Abagayle Hardwicke) picnicking in a park, now able to continue their lives together as a family.18 Slow motion, over-saturated white light and sentimental music hammer home the scene’s idyllic quality, while a series of close-ups of Olivia’s smiling face as she watches Peter and Etta playing together makes it clear that she feels she has at last achieved her goal of becoming a ‘normal’ woman (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Her ‘happy ending’ is to embrace a heteronormative female identity. The conclusion to Olivia’s narrative trajectory thus reflects the standard discourse of postfeminist culture, often reproduced

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17 In an echo of the themes discussed in Chapter 1, Peter views his estrangement from Olivia as a result of his obsessive quest to find their daughter, whom he feels that he failed to adequately ‘protect’ (‘Transilience Thought Unifier Model-11’, 5.1).

18 We know from Peter and Olivia’s nightmares in earlier episodes (‘Transilience Thought Unifier Model-11’; ‘In Absentia’, 5.2) that this is the moment when the Observers (highly evolved humans from the future) had previously invaded, separating the Bishops from their daughter before Peter could grab her. Now he is able to pick her up and swing her around uninterrupted. Therefore the scene is not, strictly speaking, a flashback.
by Hollywood, wherein ‘career’ women are ultimately encouraged to devote themselves to marriage, motherhood and domesticity ‘in a display of “restored priorities”’ (Negra 2009, p. 118).  

19 As Stacey Abbott has discussed, there is a certain amount of ambivalence to this ‘overly tidy and dissatisfying’ (2013) ‘happy ending’ due to the fact that it is not actually the final scene of Fringe. The final scene is a ‘heart-breaking’ one that focuses on the relationship between Walter, who has
‘Feminine’ superpowers

Although Olivia worries that she is incapable of adequately ‘using’ emotions in her personal life, the superpowers she acquired as a result of the Cortexiphan trials are related to emotion. Nina tells Olivia that it was her ‘incredible compassion’ and ‘capacity for feeling’ that made William and Walter so sure [she was] the perfect candidate for the trials’ (‘Brave New World: Part Two’) because the special abilities developed by the Cortexiphan only manifest themselves when the subject is in a heightened state of emotion. Sure enough, Olivia proved herself to be the scientists’ ‘greatest achievement’ (‘Over There: Part Two’), in Bell’s words, because her abusive home created a combination of ‘love and terror’ (‘Subject 13’, 3.15) that was apparently particularly effective at triggering her abilities. Likewise, when she is an adult and Bell’s henchman David Robert Jones (Jared Harris) wishes to ‘activate’ her powers as part of Bell’s apocalyptic plot, he does so by torturing or threatening people she loves (‘Ability’, 1.14; ‘The End of All Things’, 4.14). In this respect, Olivia’s experiences recall Adkins’s observations about workplace gender roles in reflexive economies: her ‘feminine’ capacity for empathy was harnessed and converted into an asset by a male-headed corporation, Bell’s Massive Dynamic, with no benefit to Olivia herself – in fact, the opposite.

There are some similarities here with Cameron and especially River because they both also have ‘feminine’ powers or qualities that outside factions aim to exploit. Cameron was originally created by other Terminators because they knew that the girl she was made to resemble, Allison, was close to the human resistance leader, John Connor, and therefore they would be able to use her as a spy and/or assassin (‘Allison from Palmdale’). Later, John himself seemingly uses her in a similar way. Having reprogrammed Cameron so that she is now on his side, the two become inseparable (one resistance member (Theo Rossi) describes her as ‘that little metal bitch that follows Connor everywhere’ (‘Today Is the Day, Part Two’, 2.19)). It is presumably because of their close (one might even infer romantic) relationship that John entrusts her with the mission of going back in time and building an equally close relationship with his younger self.

‘sacrifice[d] himself by travelling into the future to save the past’, and Peter (ibid.). Although the resultant resetting of the timeline means that Peter no longer remembers his father’s sacrifice, in the final scene he finds a drawing Walter has left him of a tulip, ‘a symbol Walter once used as a sign that Peter would one day forgive him his failings’ (ibid.). Of course, ending the series in this way – on the reconciliation between the once estranged father and son – has the effect of emphasizing the centrality of its Prince Hal narrative.
One of River’s superpowers is even more directly related to the emotional sphere. We learn in ‘Ariel’ (9) that she had the part of her brain that keeps the emotions in check physically removed, the result of which is that ‘she feels everything. She can’t not’, as Simon puts it. What this seems to mean is that she has the ability to vicariously experience the emotions, moods and sensations of others. For example, at the beginning of ‘Objects in Space’ (14), River wanders about the Serenity listening to snatches of her shipmates’ conversations and apparently picking up fragments of their thoughts or moods, as Simon, Jayne (Adam Baldwin) and Shepherd Book (Ron Glass) all make abrupt, incongruous statements addressed directly to River, whom they do not otherwise seem to have noticed. For example, the usually kind Book suddenly angrily says, ‘I don’t give half a hump if you’re innocent or not! So where does that put you?’ in the middle of a jocular conversation with Jayne about the priesthood. Finally, River happens upon Zoe (Gina Torres) and her husband Wash (Alan Tudyk) kissing on the bridge (Figure 4.3). There is a sequence of cuts between blurry close-ups of River’s confused face and shots of Zoe and Wash’s faces and hands that are much closer and more intimate than what River would ‘really’ be able to see, given that she is at the other end of the corridor (Figures 4.4 and 4.5). As the couple run their hands over one another, River strokes her own arm then staggers away, a jumpcut emphasizing her disorientation. This sequence as a whole, then, makes it clear that, as Karin Beeler points out, River’s psychic

Figure 4.3 River stumbles upon Zoe and Wash kissing in ‘Objects in Space’. Firefly (2002–2003).
ability is not straightforward, controlled ‘mind-reading’ but more an extreme ‘sensitiv[ity] to the emotions of others’ (2008, p. 46).

Since the superhuman abilities of both River and Olivia are connected with emotion and empathy, they corroborate Richard J. Gray’s contention that ‘[t]he powers attributed to female superhero bodies are linked to traditional notions
of female power’ (2011, p. 83). However, AmiJo Comeford, who, in a conference paper, noted the presence of female characters who feel ‘extreme empathy’ (2013) in many of Joss Whedon’s television series, also pointed out that, in most cases, this apparently stereotypical female ability was, in fact, imposed on them by a man or men. This is certainly true of River, whom we see being experimented on by a team of male scientists at the beginning of Serenity. Nevertheless, one of the scientists’ (Michael Hitchcock) boast that, out of all their test subjects, ‘River Tam is our star pupil’, suggests that she has a natural affinity for the skills they have given her in the same way that Olivia was uniquely suitable for the Cortexiphan trials.20

In the case of Olivia at least, it would not be fair to say that she herself does not benefit at all from her high capacity for empathy. It is something she is able to use to her advantage in the course of her work, if not in her personal life. In ‘The Cure’, she pre-empted a chastisement from Broyles thus:

I understand that you think I acted too emotionally. Putting aside the fact that men always say that about women they work with, I’ll get straight to the point: I am emotional. I do bring it into my work. It’s what motivates me. It’s what helps me get into the headspace of our victims, see what they’ve seen, even if I don’t want to, even if it horrifies me. And I think it makes me a better agent.

The fact that she is able to use her emotionality to her advantage and moreover use it in tandem with ‘masculine’ skills such as deduction and a prodigious facility with numbers suggests that, in some respects, for Olivia, gender is indeed, as Adkins argues, ‘a self-conscious artifice’. Of course, we don’t know exactly how well Olivia is rewarded for her strategic deployment of gendered characteristics. Broyles responds to the above speech with a stern, ‘You’re not getting off that easy, Agent Dunham.’ However, as noted earlier, she does gradually win his respect with her excellent detective work.21

20 In the first of the R. Tam Sessions, which takes place before the testing on River has commenced, it is implied that she is already either highly perceptive of others’ emotions or slightly psychic. ‘People tell you things all the time without talking: the way they move, the way they aren’t talking,’ she says. ‘You’re very intuitive,’ observes the interviewer. ‘Simon says I was born with a third eye,’ River replies.

21 While on this topic, it is interesting to compare Olivia with the male Cortexiphan test subjects. While Olivia learns to control her abilities and use them at will soon after she discovers she has them, several of the men are unable to control theirs, with terrible results for themselves and for others. Interestingly, two of them, Simon Phillips (Omid Abtahi) and Nick Lane, both have superpowers that are related to emotion and empathy: Phillips can read minds and Lane involuntarily projects his (largely negative) emotions onto others. The latter, who was Olivia’s partner in the ‘buddy system’ Bell and Walter instituted during the trials (‘Bad Dreams’), is therefore, in this respect, a kind of ‘failed’ Olivia. While she is able to understand the emotions of others and influence them in a positive way, he inadvertently causes suicides and murders. One could interpret this as an implication that, try as they might, men are unable to perform femininity as successfully as women.
There are moments in both *Fringe* and *Firefly* when Olivia and River independently and single-handedly save the day using their ‘extreme empathy’. In Olivia’s case, this occurs in the fifth-season episode ‘The Human Kind’ (5.8), when she prevents Peter from turning into an Observer. The Observers, who invade the Earth in season five, are cold, callous modified humans from the future (significantly, all male) who were created when scientists removed the parts of the brain responsible for emotion and replaced them with increased intelligence (‘The Boy Must Live’, 5.11). Peter implants himself with a piece of their technology in order to gain the same precognitive abilities they have because he believes this will help him avenge Etta’s murder by an Observer (‘An Origin Story’, 5.5). But the implant affects Peter’s personality too. Following in the footsteps of ‘good’ characters in other post-9/11 telefantasy who suddenly become actual or potential terrorists, such as *Heroes*’ Matt Parkman (see Chapter 1) or *BSG*’s Tucker ‘Duck’ Clellan (Christian Tessier), a former Viper pilot who becomes a suicide bomber (‘Occupation’), Peter has soon carried out the bombing of an Observer meeting and is planning more (‘Five-Twenty-Ten’, 5.7). Walter discovers that if the implant is left in place for too long then Peter will lose all emotion and permanently become an Observer himself. He sternly tells his son to change his plans, but to no avail (‘The Human Kind’).

Olivia, however, invokes Etta’s memory to change Peter’s mind: ‘Etta’s not gone, Peter … She’s alive inside us … And I know that our hearts are broken and that it hurts but that’s what makes us human.’ Peter replies, ‘Emotion is our weakness.’ But Olivia counters, ‘No, Peter, it’s our strength because it’s the one thing that they don’t have … You’re not one of them; you’re one of us.’ This triggers a memory for Peter of him, Olivia and Etta in the park just before the Observers invaded: the same idyllic scene which appears in the ‘flashback’ at the end of ‘An Enemy of Fate’. ‘Peter, look at me. I love you’, continues Olivia. A rapidly cut montage of memories follows, interspersed with flash frames of white light, of various happy moments in the family’s history. After the montage is over, Peter takes out a knife and cuts the implant out of his neck (‘The Human Kind’). In other words, a feminine discourse of familial love is successfully invoked as the antidote to the tyranny of a masculinized science and reason which lead to war, terrorism and death.22

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22 As Calvert observes, while Olivia’s successful persuasion of ‘Peter to remove the Observer tech from his body… present[s] a classical appeal to masculine intellect/reason from female emotion’ (2017, p. 203), there is also some blurring of these gendered binaries in evidence in the wider storyline (as there is in the show as a whole) in that, in an earlier episode, Walter made a similar emotional appeal to Olivia to stop ‘building walls around [her] heart’ in response to Etta’s death (Calvert 2017, p. 204).
River’s most useful deployment of her ‘extreme empathy’ takes place in the episode ‘Objects in Space’. As described above, the episode begins with a lengthy sequence demonstrating River’s ability to read others’ emotions and/or minds. During this sequence, it is made clear that River finds her ‘gift’ both disorienting and distressing, as she finds out that several of her shipmates, including her brother, harbour resentment towards her. However, the gift becomes vital later on when a ruthless bounty hunter, Jubal Early (Richard Brooks), boards the Serenity to try to capture River on behalf of the Alliance. Addressing Early over the intercom and claiming to have become part of the ship itself, River uses her uncanny knowledge of his thoughts, feelings and history to confuse and unsettle him: ‘You like to hurt folk … It’s why you took the job. Not the chase, not the money. Power. Control. Pain. Your mother knew. Sadness in her when she waved goodbye, but she’s relieved.’ Finally, she lures him off the ship and Mal, acting on River’s instructions for once, ambushes him and pushes him into space.

Disappointingly, though, in both Fringe and Serenity (the conclusion to Firefly), it is not Olivia or River who ultimately saves the day but their male ‘bosses’. In Fringe, it is Walter who stops the Observers from wiping out the human race. He heroically sacrifices his own life in taking an anomalous Observer boy, Michael (Rowan Longworth), who has both emotion and intelligence, to the future to show the Observers’ creators that such a combination is possible (‘An Enemy of Fate’). Similarly, the plan to expose the genocide committed by the Alliance on the planet Miranda, which forms the latter half of Serenity’s narrative, is both concocted and carried out by Mal. Olivia and River do both play important, though secondary, parts in these plans. Olivia uses her ability to cross between parallel universes to rescue Michael when he is captured by the Observers (‘Liberty’, 5.12), and River single-handedly massacres a hoard of Reavers (people who were turned into monsters by the same chemical that caused the genocide), thereby buying Mal the time to broadcast a recording explaining the fate of

I would add that both moments are reflective of Fringe’s overall worldview, in which family and personal relationships are valorized ahead of science – the ostensible subject of the show – and scientific rationality, which are often viewed with suspicion. Fringe is, therefore, a good example of the kind of ‘serial melodrama’ discussed by Jason Mittell, in which programmes with superficially ‘masculine’ formats (here, science fiction/police procedural) are nonetheless filled with moments designed to ‘generate… deeply felt emotional responses’ (2015, p. 248). However, here too, as with the series discussed in Chapter 2, the melodrama is most often focused on a father–son relationship: that between Walter and Peter.

It is interesting that in this instance the character who successfully unites emotion and reason, Michael, is male, albeit a highly evolved male from the future. This could be taken to mean that men will eventually be able to perform both ‘male’ and ‘female’ roles equally well, thereby rendering women obsolete (just as the Observers apparently have no need of them).
Miranda’s population across the solar system. Thus, in both cases, the female weapon carries out embodied, material labour in the service of a plan conceived by her male boss.

Revising the female cyborg

Cameron, Jaime and Zoe cannot be described as having superpowers in quite the same way as River and Olivia because they are cyborgs. Cameron and Zoe were both replaced with robots that were implanted with their personalities and memories after their deaths. In Cameron’s (previously Allison) case, this replacement was carried out by Terminators controlled by Skynet, an artificial intelligence designed by defence contractor Cyberdyne Systems on behalf of the US military, which later rebelled and wiped out most of humanity. In Zoe’s case, her robot body, the ‘U-87’, was produced by her father Daniel’s technology corporation, Graystone Industries, in a bid to win a government defence contract. Jaime, meanwhile, was given her bionic body parts by her fiancé Will Anthros (Chris Bowers), using technology designed by his father Anthony (Mark A. Sheppard), again on behalf of the American military. Thus, on the surface, all three’s histories seem to correspond to the typical confluence of femininity and cyborg technology in popular culture. As Zoë Sofia summarizes, ‘Instead of a female-identified woman, we find an Athenoid (daddy’s girl), or … a fembot, like the false Maria (Brigitte Helm) in Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927) who is commissioned as a sexy tool of the male-dominated state’ (1999, p. 60).

Many other critics have commented on science fiction’s propensity to conflate fear of female sexuality and fear of technology within the figure of the female cyborg; Metropolis’s false Maria is an oft-cited example (see, for instance, Doane (1999), Springer (1999), Cornea (2007), Short (2011)). These critics were largely writing in reference to film, however, and Lorrie Palmer argues that the ‘sf convention of presenting female sexuality as analogous to threatening, embodied technology has increasingly been interrogated – and reconsidered – as it has passed from cinema to television’ (2012, p. 86; see also Short 2011, p. 105). Nevertheless, Palmer acknowledges that the tendency does still survive in some TV programmes, including in Caprica’s sequel BSG, in the representation of many of the female Cylons, the robots ‘descended’ from the ‘Zoe-bot’ who wipe out most of humanity (ibid.). I agree with this contention regarding BSG (Bennett 2012) – as do Susan A. George (2008) and
Lorna Jowett (2010) – but, as we shall see, I believe that *Caprica*’s representation of the relationship between gender and technology is less conventional. Corroborating Palmer’s argument, none of the three cyborgs under discussion here are straightforwardly ‘evil’, although Cameron started out that way before she was reprogrammed, and neither Jaime nor Zoe fight on behalf of morally irreproachable causes (as mentioned, Berkut’s ethics are questionable and, from one point of view, Zoe is a religious fanatic). Yet, on the whole, as I have argued earlier, they are represented as more sinned against than sinning.

As for their ‘sexiness’, though all three are, as noted, conventionally attractive, none of them are sexually predatory. In fact, one could argue that both Jaime and her predecessor Sarah (who, as Bronwen Calvert points out, does adopt a *femme fatale*-like image in the pilot episode (2017, p. 122)) are sexually as well as physically exploited, thereby once again emphasizing their victim status (see Quinlan and Bates (2009) for evidence that a number of bloggers, reviewers and other commentators interpreted the show in this way). Jaime discovers that Will had a secret file on her dating back two years before they met (‘Paradise Lost’), suggesting that, as Sarah taunts her, he may have been ‘prim[ing]’ her as a ‘bionic candidate’ all along (‘Sisterhood’, 3). Sarah also warns Jaime that she should disable the tracking device/camera in her bionic eye because: ‘Those Berkut guys look at you in the shower … Don’t even get me started on how objectifying this bionic woman thing is’ (‘Sisterhood’). Sarah herself, meanwhile, is sexually involved first with Berkut employee Jae (Will Yun Lee) and later with another unnamed man (Thomas Kretschmann) who also gives her orders. She plaintively asks each of them to tell her they love her, but Jae shoots her (after she has ‘lost control’ and killed fourteen soldiers), and the other man abandons her when she fails to complete a mission (‘Second Chances’).

In the case of *T:TSCC*’s Cameron, while I agree with Palmer that she is not portrayed as ‘sexually threatening’ (2012, p. 87), she does make use of her physical allure to carry out a key component of her mission: making John fall in love with her.\(^\text{24}\) Palmer comments that Cameron’s apparent delicacy functions as a kind of ‘camouflage’: she ‘wields her ability to pass as a normal

\(^{24}\) Although Cameron is not sexually threatening, some of the series’ numerous biblical allusions seem designed to encourage the audience to speculate that a dangerous sexuality may be hidden beneath her innocent exterior. She is linked with both Eve – picking up an apple in ‘Allison from Palmdale’ is the trigger for her remembering her origins and eventually temporarily reverting to being evil – and Delilah: as mentioned above, in ‘Samson and Delilah’, Cameron is damaged and likewise reverts to her original programming. John’s subsequent hesitation to shut her down when she cries and tells him that she loves him implies that she may be his downfall, just as Delilah was Samson’s. However, this does not ultimately prove to be the case.
teenage girl to help carry out her mission of protection’ (ibid., p. 89). However, one might add that this ability is also key to the second aspect of her mission: as I argue elsewhere, ‘she is able to use her gamine attractiveness to strengthen [John’s] feelings for her in a subtler way than if she were overtly sexualized’ (Bennett 2014, p. 13). There are a number of occasions where Cameron is clearly using her sexuality to manipulate John, albeit with good intentions. For example, in ‘Mr. Ferguson Is Ill Today’ (2.8), she gets into his bed wearing hot pants and a vest top to try to talk him into breaking up with his girlfriend whom she does not trust (Bennett 2014, p. 13).

The most obvious instance of all comes in the final episode of the show, ‘Born to Run’, when Cameron sits on John’s bed and tells him: ‘I need to show you something. This body.’ In a sequence whose formal qualities and dialogue are, as I have described elsewhere, strongly reminiscent of a sex scene (Bennett 2014, p. 13), Cameron then removes her top and bra, lies down and instructs John to get on top of her, open up her chest and put his hand inside, ostensibly to check if her nuclear power source is damaged (Figure 4.6). While, as Calvert explains, there are two layers of signification in play here, with Cameron presented as both ‘alluring female’ and ‘mysterious machine’ (2017, p. 147), Josh Friedman, the creator of T:TSCC and writer of the episode, describes Cameron’s behaviour as a deliberate ploy to ‘lock’ her and John together, ensuring that he will follow her when she travels to the future to join the resistance (Dekker et al. 2009b).

Figure 4.6 John opens Cameron’s chest in ‘Born to Run’. Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles (2008–2009).
However, since Cameron was programmed by the older version of John, in part to make his younger self fall in love with her, one could argue this moment, and others like it, should be viewed not as Cameron's manipulating young John but rather as an extension of the (unpaid) affective labour which the adult John expects her to perform. That there is a sexual dimension to this task recalls Adkins's description of the way that employers may 'appropriate' the sexuality of female workers, particularly in the service or tourist industries – for example, by obliging them to wear 'sexy' uniforms or to deal with customers' innuendoes (1998, pp. 44–45; see also Adkins (1995)). Perhaps to alleviate the potential distastefulness of this scenario – the older John effectively 'pimping' Cameron to his younger self – the writers do, as we shall see, make an effort to imply that she loves John in a way that goes beyond her programming.

While Cameron does, superficially at least, reproduce the stereotype of the seductive female cyborg, there are two other Terminators in T:TSCC who outright subvert it. First, there is a male Terminator, Vick Chamberlain (Matt McCollm). Vick is an ‘infiltrator’ model like Cameron, but, unlike Cameron, he is still evil, working for Skynet. He is married to a human (Karina Logue), who is unaware that her handsome husband is a machine and whom he eventually kills, getting into the shower with her and stroking her face before strangling her (‘Vick’s Chip’, 1.8). Despite their opposing allegiances, Cameron is impressed by Vick’s manipulation techniques and wishes to learn from them. In ‘Vick’s Chip’ John accesses the memories stored on (the now defeated and dismantled) Vick’s memory chip. At one point he views a moment where the Terminator talks his wife into doing something by caressing her face and lying her down on the bed. Turning around, John is surprised to find Cameron sitting behind him; she has also been watching the recording. ‘That was effective’, she says. ‘What he did when he touched her lips … I could see that she liked that.’ John is visibly discomfited, obviously suspecting that Cameron plans to use similar strategies on him, or has already done so, but when he asks what she is doing she claims she is ‘just making conversation’.

Thus, although T:TSCC does recycle the familiar narrative in which attractive robots are used to manipulate humans, the show does not always conform to expected gender roles: Cameron, a good female Terminator, hones her seduction technique by observing Vick, an evil male one. Furthermore, as Palmer observes, there is a third Terminator in the series who ‘deconstruct[s] … the familiar trope of the female cyborg as sexually threatening’ (2012, p. 93) to an even greater extent: technology mogul Catherine Weaver (Shirley Manson). As Palmer notes,
the writers obviously intend for the audience to be deeply suspicious of Weaver: ‘Our expectation, born of prior experiences with sf cinema, is that Weaver is resolutely Other, with antagonistic opposition written on her technological (and gendered) body’ (ibid.). Although Weaver has, as Palmer puts it, ‘a form-fitting but conservative, even severe wardrobe, diverging from the sexually suggestive female cyborg villain in earlier media texts’ (ibid., p. 96, note 7), her behaviour does, on occasion, seem to fit that mould. Most notably, in ‘Goodbye to All That’ (2.5), she transforms herself into a scantily clad young girl (Bobby Sue Luther) and seduces the manager of a power plant (Dean Norris), before morphing her tongue into a phallic metal spike and stabbing him through the mouth.

However, a twist in ‘Born to Run’ reveals that Weaver is not, in fact, a ‘villain’: she is not, as the Connors believe, using her technology company, Zeira Corporation, to build Skynet but rather to build another artificial intelligence to fight it. Admittedly, she still cannot be described as a thoroughly ‘good’ character because she ruthlessly massacres many humans in the course of achieving her aim, including all the workers in a factory in ‘The Good Wound’ (2.14) (as Calvert notes, the series as a whole continually complicates distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in its portrayal of both cyborgs and humans (2017, p. 144)). Nonetheless, Weaver, a powerful and soberly dressed business executive who turns out to be fighting on the same side as the heroes to prevent the apocalypse, certainly contrasts with traditional representations of the female cyborg as a malevolent yet sexy ‘tool’.

*Caprica*’s Zoe is not a sexually threatening cyborg either. On the surface, she is a clunking, metallic, very old-fashioned-looking robot: the U-87. Interestingly, though, only some of the time does the viewer see the Zoe-bot in its real form; the rest of the time, it is portrayed by Alessandra Torresani, the actor who played the living Zoe, wearing various glamorous outfits (initially, she wears the same short ancient Grecian-style cocktail dress the Zoe-avatar was previously seen wearing in V-World). The reasons for this are doubtless, first, that the CGI required for the U-87 shots was expensive (Murphy cited in Caprica Times 2011) and, secondly, that it allows the audience to see ‘Zoe’s’ reactions (or rather those of the avatar which has replaced her) to the events that befall the expressionless robot body in which she is trapped. However, it does, of course, also have the effect of marking the Zoe-bot as both ‘female’ and ‘attractive’, connotations it would not otherwise have had.

As mentioned earlier, Zoe, both girl and robot, is actually rather puritanical in her views because she is very religious. She deeply disapproves of the activities enjoyed by her peers in V-World, which, like many depictions of cyberspace
or virtual reality, is a highly sexualized domain (Springer 1999), where people engage in orgies, as well as other taboo or illegal behaviour, such as drug-taking and even human sacrifice (‘Pilot’). Indeed, before her death, Zoe and her friends were plotting to use the Zoe-avatar to somehow put a stop to this (‘Pilot’) (the exact details of their plan were not revealed before the series was cancelled). Thus, in a way, the Zoe-bot is the opposite of a female cyborg that has been created by a man as a ‘sexy tool’, since she was designed by a woman (or at least the avatar which provides her ‘consciousness’ was) as a tool to counter the sexualization of technology.

Nevertheless, like Cameron, Zoe is still willing to use seduction, or at least flirting, as a means to achieve her aims. She initiates a relationship with her father’s chief lab technician Philomon (Alex Arsenault) on a virtual reality dating website, in the guise of a girl called Rachel, hoping to use him to escape from the Graystone Industries lab (‘Know Thy Enemy’, 6). However, when Daniel forces her hand by threatening to wipe her processing chip, she reveals her true identity to Philomon and begs him to help her. He agrees but then triggers a security alert on his computer. Zoe shouts, ‘No!’ and pulls him away, her robot strength meaning that she throws him across the room and into a metal pillar, killing him. She stares aghast at what she has done for several seconds before running from the room on the verge of tears (‘End of Line’, 10). Unintentionally, the Zoe-bot has become deadly.

While Zoe and Cameron do both use flirtatious behaviour to manipulate men, they are perhaps only able to do so because the men in question have a pre-existing tendency to eroticize technology, a tendency common among male science fiction characters and writers too, according to critics such as Sofia, Springer and Mary Ann Doane (all 1999). John Connor is a character who, throughout the Terminator franchise, has always shown a fascination with, as well as a great aptitude for, technology. As I point out elsewhere:

That this fascination borders on the sexual is implied in a deleted scene from ‘Dungeons and Dragons’ … in which Sarah’s ex-fiancé Charley (Dean Winters) confronts John about the latter’s attraction to Cameron. When John replies, ‘No, dude, come on, that’s insane,’ Charley brings up the boy’s earlier crush on a girl who worked on the parts counter at the bike shop, thereby implying that he has always associated technology and eroticism. (Bennett 2014, p. 12)

Indeed, Josh Friedman sees the ‘sex scene’ in ‘Born to Run’ as, in part, Cameron’s way of forcing John to acknowledge that he has romantic feelings for her as a machine
rather than as a girl. In addition to ‘locking’ the two of them together, Friedman asserts that Cameron’s actions are ‘also a way to remind [John], “I’m not a girl … but you do love me. Know that what you love is a machine”’ (Dekker et al. 2009b).

Philomenon, meanwhile, treats the U-87 as if it were female from the start, even though it does not look female in any way and he has no idea that there is actually the personality of a real girl trapped inside.25 He refers to the robot as ‘she’, causing his colleague Drew (James Pizzinato) to admonish him, ‘Dude, stop feminizing it … It’s not a person; it’s just a tool’ (‘Rebirth’), and ‘flirts’ with it, calling it ‘beautiful’ and even dancing with it (‘Gravedancing’, 4). Having had no luck on his dating website, Philomenon asks the U-87, ‘You’d go out with me, right, beautiful?’ touching its shoulders and chest as he describes what they’d do on their ‘date’ (‘Know Thy Enemy’: Figure 4.7). A cut to Zoe, as a girl, shows she is listening (Figure 4.8), and later in the same episode she sends Philomenon a message on the dating site as ‘Rachel’, inviting him to meet her in V-World. Therefore, it seems that Zoe got the inspiration for her plan to seduce Philomenon from his own flirtatious behaviour towards the U-87.

Of course, that ‘seduction’ was never going to be a physical one because ‘Rachel’, or rather Zoe, has no corporeal presence beyond the robotic body of the U-87 – and that is one of the most unusual things about the character. It is common for cyberpunk works (the subgenre of science fiction with which Caprica is most closely aligned) to reproduce the traditional schema wherein women are associated with the body (or, in cyberpunk terminology, ‘meat’) and men with the mind. The latter therefore tend to have a much greater affinity for cyberspace, a place accessed only with the mind. Yet Zoe reverses this dichotomy. Similar to Dixie Flatline, the dead hacker in Neuromancer who exists only as a ‘construct’ within cyberspace, the Zoe avatar is pure mind. She only becomes embodied when Daniel imprisons her in the U-87. This action not only neatly symbolizes the traditional patriarchal association of femininity with both embodiment and technology but also draws attention to and critiques the standard science fiction trope in which a male scientist seeks to exploit feminized, embodied technology by creating a female robot to do his bidding.

25 Both Zoe’s friend Lacy (Magda Apanowicz) and Zoe’s mother Amanda see the U-87 as male, and it is implied that Zoe does too, as she asks Lacy, ‘Do I look male to you?’ exclaiming, ‘Frak!’ (BSG and Caprica’s swearword) when her reply is affirmative (‘Rebirth’). Amanda is repulsed by the robot – she remarks, ‘I think I saw this guy in a movie once. He was trampling Oranu. Horrible’ (‘Rebirth’) – as is Zoe’s headmistress Clarice (Polly Walker), who calls it ‘a scary thing’ (‘Know Thy Enemy’). Daniel, on the other hand, seems to see it as female as he jokes that Serge, the Graystones’ ‘male’ servant robot, has a crush on it (‘Rebirth’). It is interesting that women regard the U-87 as male and horrifying, while men view it as female and attractive.
Mastery over technology?

In general, as Leila Wimmler asserts, through the character of Zoe, *Caprica* ‘challeng[es both] the masculinized ideological basis of science itself’ (i.e. the association of femininity with ‘body and nature’ and masculinity with ‘mind and science’) and ‘the dominance of men in science’ (2014, p. 122). Though her father
is the seeming master of all things technological on their home planet, Zoe has taken his most famous invention (the holoband/V-World) and developed it in a far more sophisticated way by creating her avatar: effectively, a flawless artificial intelligence. Realizing this after Zoe's death, Daniel downloads the avatar into the U-87 (whose basic design, it is implied in ‘Things We Lock Away’ (12), was in fact inspired by a childhood drawing of Zoe's). For a moment, he seems to have successfully ‘resurrected’ his daughter – the robot says, ‘Daddy, Daddy’ and moves towards him – but then, almost immediately, it breaks down, and Daniel's computer displays the message ‘System Error/Data Loss/Irrecoverable Error’. Daniel puts on a holoband and shouts Zoe's name, but the avatar has disappeared from V-World too; he breaks down in tears (‘Pilot’). We assume at first that his anguish is because he has lost his daughter a second time, but it quickly becomes clear that he had another, perhaps stronger, motivation for putting the avatar into the U-87: he hoped to make the hitherto ineffectual battle robot more intelligent and thereby win the defence contract.

It turns out, of course, that the avatar is not really irrecoverably corrupted; alone in the lab later, the robot comes back to ‘life’ (‘Pilot’). But Zoe refuses to give her father any sign that she is still inside the U-87 beyond the fact that it shows a great improvement in its shooting ability. Daniel and his employees' attempts to make another equally skilled robot fail (‘Rebirth’), so he resorts to trying to force Zoe to reveal herself through increasingly cruel means, thus indicating that he cares more about the defence contract than his daughter. He starts a fire around her and later orders her to shoot the family dog (‘Ghosts in the Machine’, 8), but Zoe does not crack and ultimately, after being betrayed by Philomon, escapes Graystone Industries alone (‘End of Line’). After she has gone, Daniel tries to recreate the computer code she used to make her avatar but with little success, since, in his own words, it was ‘so intuitive’ (‘False Labor’). He builds an avatar of his wife, who has also left him, but can't succeed in making her into anything more than a clichéd male fantasy who sets the dinner table in a pink apron, constantly tells Daniel she loves and forgives him and offers sex. Frustrated, Daniel eventually deletes her (‘Blowback’, 14). Thus, Caprica reverses the usual science fiction trend wherein men are the masters of what Springer calls ‘technological reproduction’ and women are punished for attempting to engage in it (1999, p. 50).

Not only does Zoe excel at technological reproduction, she also takes control of cyberspace in a way usually reserved for cyberpunk's male characters, such as Neuromancer's Case or The Matrix's (Lana and Lily Wachowsk, 1999) Neo
(Keanu Reeves). To do so, she enlists the aid of the avatar of another dead teenage girl, Tamara Adams (Genevieve Buechner), who was created by Daniel but rescued by Zoe from his ‘private virtual space’ (‘Reins of a Waterfall’, 3). On Zoe’s initiative, the two set out to ‘clean up’ New Cap City, a noirish city in V-World, by ‘killing’ (and thus ejecting from the virtual environment) anyone doing anything that they consider immoral. Calling themselves the Avenging Angels, the girls become a cultural phenomenon both in the real world, with their faces on T-shirts, and in V-World. When Daniel enters New Cap City to look for them, the barman (Diego Diablo Del Mar) at nightclub Sinny McNutt’s Slash and Cut tells him: ‘Most of my clientele are here to kill them or be killed by them. Either way you’re famous, right?’ (‘The Dirteaters’, 15). However, perceiving that her father is on her trail, Zoe declares to Tamara that they should ‘act like’ the ‘gods’ of V-World they have become and destroys New Cap City in a swirl of cascading pixels, turning it into forests and mountains (‘The Dirteaters’). As Wimminger suggests: ‘This process of re-appropriation and re-creation can be read as an act of female rebellion against male structures of violence and power, especially since Zoe … is pitted against Daniel, who had written the code she now destabilizes and re-writes’ (2015, p. 137).

In comparison with Zoe, Jaime and Cameron are far less independently powerful. In Cameron’s case, she initially has no choice about who controls her: she is first programmed to work for Skynet and then reprogrammed by the adult John Connor to protect his younger self. However, as I have mentioned, the writers of T:TSCC put some effort into showing that it eventually becomes Cameron’s own choice to remain loyal to the teenage John. In ‘Samson and Delilah’, when Cameron has reverted to her original programming and is trying to kill John, he takes out her processing chip thereby shutting her down. But subsequently, much to his family’s horror, he starts her back up and even gives her a gun, at which point a point-of-view shot of Cameron’s internal information feed shows that she has overridden her ‘Termination’ command. As the cast and writers discuss in the episode’s commentary, it is left ambiguous whether Cameron does this because John has carried out some perfunctory cleaning of her chip or because she overrode her own programming due to the love she has developed for John. Josh Friedman, who wrote the episode, says

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26 Daniel created the Tamara avatar because he struck a deal with her father Joseph (Esai Morales) to do so in exchange for Joseph’s getting his acquaintances in the mafia to steal a component Daniel needed for the U-87 from a rival technology firm (‘Pilot’). Therefore, as with Zoe herself, Daniel intended to use Tamara for personal gain but Zoe rescued her.
he feels it’s the latter and Summer Glau, who plays Cameron, agrees (Dekker et al. 2009a). Of course, even if she did ‘us[e] … her will to override [her programming]; as Friedman puts it (ibid.), the effect is the same anyway. The only difference is that she is now under John’s control because of love rather than programming.

Cameron does not have the same level of mastery over technology as Zoe either. She may have advanced hacking skills and be able to dismantle other Terminators, but her control over her own mechanical body is somewhat tenuous. After her initial malfunction in ‘Samson and Delilah’, caused by damage to her processing chip when she was caught in an explosion (‘What He Beheld’, 1.9), she experiences further glitches. In ‘Allison from Palmdale’, Cameron suddenly reverts first to thinking she is Allison and then to believing she is an evil ‘infiltrator Terminator’, almost strangling a girl as a result. Later, in ‘Ourselves Alone’ (2.17), she suffers random hand spasms, unintentionally killing a pigeon.

In this respect, Cameron/Allison’s experiences correspond with both Jaime’s and that of Echo in Dollhouse, as described by Robin S. Johnson. Johnson compares Jaime and Echo with the eponymous protagonist of Chuck (Zachary Levi), who has a CIA database embedded in his brain, arguing that while all three of them are cyborgs in Donna Haraway’s sense of being ‘a hybrid of machine and organism’ (Haraway cited in Johnson 2011, p. 107), Chuck ‘has the technological proficiency to instantly manage the embodiment of his hybrid coupling’ (Johnson 2011, p. 107). The two women, on the other hand, ‘struggle to manage their cyborg subjectivities’ (ibid.), thereby, according to Johnson, reinforcing the discourse of ‘technomasculinity’ (ibid., p. 110), wherein men are associated with the mastery of technology, while the female body is ‘a site of exploitation by patriarchal technology’ (ibid., p. 121). As Johnson points out (and I discussed in Chapter 3), Dollhouse ultimately ‘reverses this script’ (ibid.), with Echo gaining control of her cyborg subjectivity – more successfully than any of the other Actives (Calvert 2017, p. 178) – and leading the revolution against Rossum.27 Jaime’s mind, on the other hand, ‘constantly battles with the technology embodied within her’ (Johnson 2011, p. 120). While, as Aino-Kaisa Koistinen observes, Jaime too does gradually become

27 Charlotte Howell makes a similar point to Johnson about Echo, likening her to Fringe’s Olivia as well because both had ‘fractured subjectivities’ (2012, p. 100) forced upon them ‘at the behest of male desires’ (ibid., p. 104), yet both ultimately ‘find empowerment and value in their brokenness’ (ibid., p. 100).
more skilled at using her bionic body parts (2015, p. 62), they ultimately remain under the control of her (mostly male) employers. For example, in ‘The Education of Jaime Sommers’ (5), lab technician Nathan (Kevin Rankin) makes Jaime’s bionic ear ring because he is attracted to her and is jealous that she is flirting with someone else. As Koistinen comments: ‘[T]he ownership of Jaime’s body is discussed in virtually every episode, likening her to property, an object to be possessed. She is thought and spoken of as an investment, a weapon, even a fax machine and a can opener’ (2015, p. 69).

Sarah Corvus encourages Jaime to take greater control over her own body, as she has done – ‘hacking into your own computer’ – and Jaime does successfully disable her ‘ocular tracking device’ so that Berkut can no longer track her movements or spy on her (‘Sisterhood’). However, she rejects Sarah’s proposal that the two of them ‘stick together’ (‘form a union’, as Sarah sardonically puts it), creating a powerful all-female team in the manner of Zoe and Tamara, and instead voluntarily switches her tracking device back on so that Berkut soldiers can come and capture Sarah (thus rendering the episode title, ‘Sisterhood’, ironic). Even Sarah herself, though independent in spirit, is not really in control of her cyborg technology because it is breaking down, causing her to experience, in Bledsoe’s words, ‘hand tremors, night sweats, anxiety, paranoia’ (‘Faceoff’). She tells Jaime that she is ‘losing control again’, as she did three years previously when she killed fourteen people, and that she will die within a year (‘Sisterhood’). She believes that her only hope of a cure rests with Anthony Anthros, her creator, so she is forced to do his bidding, making her ultimately even more of a slave than Jaime.

*Bionic Woman*’s title sequence, in which a female silhouette, presumably Jaime, is trapped behind a frosted glass panel which she finally punches through, perhaps implies that the writers did intend for Jaime to eventually escape Berkut’s control had the series not been cancelled. However, she discovers in ‘Faceoff’ that her bionics only have a five-year lifespan, meaning that she will die in five years. This not only once again underlines her victim status but possibly means that, had the show continued, Jaime too would have found herself reliant on either Berkut or Anthros to save her. As Calvert summarizes: ‘Although Jaime and Sarah are given physical powers that amount to superhuman abilities, very often they are shown as not in control over their own bodies, work, relationships or future’ (2017, p. 118; original emphasis).

Like Jaime, Allison was ‘drag[ged] into the age of technology without her consent’ (Johnson 2011, p. 120) when she was killed and replaced with a Terminator. In ‘Allison from Palmdale’ in particular, we see her ‘struggling to
manage her cyborg subjectivity’ as she is caught somewhere between girl and robot. And, as the scene in ‘Samson and Delilah’ described above suggests, Cameron is engaged in a constant battle to master her own body, terrified that she might inadvertently harm John. As mentioned earlier, she even apparently contemplates killing herself but in the end settles for implanting an explosive in her head and giving John the detonator (‘Ourselves Alone’). Nonetheless, Cameron had made a certain amount of progress in controlling her body by the time T:TSCC was cancelled. After all, she is apparently able to override her ‘Termination’ command in ‘Samson and Delilah’, and by the end of ‘Today Is the Day, Part Two’ (2.19), having repaired her faulty hand (‘Ourselves Alone’), she is able to hold a bird without harming it.

Of course, it is worth noting, before we conclude, that there is another female Terminator in T:TSCC who definitely does subvert the discourse of technomasculinity: Catherine Weaver. Weaver engages very effectively in technological reproduction by using her technology company to produce an artificial intelligence potentially capable of fighting Skynet (the programme ended before it was tested). This marks her out as a counterpart and equal of Miles Dyson (Joe Morton) of Cyberdyne Systems, the creator of Skynet seen in T2. However, powerful as she is, even Weaver is not an entirely ‘uncompromised’ tough woman, to use Helford’s terminology, since she, like most of the other ‘good’ characters in T:TSCC, is working under the command of the adult John Connor, leader of the human resistance. Interestingly, the future-set two-part episode ‘Today Is the Day’ (2.18–19) shows the shape-shifting Terminator who will later travel back in time and become Weaver answering ‘No’ to Connor’s question ‘Will you join us?’ but evidently he succeeds in convincing her in the end.

Conclusion: The continuing containment of the female fighter

To be fair to T:TSCC’s writers, it is a wider feature of contemporary American drama, including most science fiction, that ‘good’ characters tend to work in teams. Even Zoe reconciles with her parents at the end of Caprica and teams up with them to thwart a terrorist plot orchestrated by her religious-fanatic headmistress Clarice Willow (Polly Walker) to bomb a sports stadium (‘Apotheosis’). Nonetheless, it is striking that in four out of the five programmes discussed here, the leader of the central team is a man: Mal, Walter, Bledsoe
and John. 28 All the other team members, even the women with superhuman powers, are really no more than the male leader’s assistants.

In Caprica, on the other hand, Zoe is certainly the central character and, in V-World at least, the most powerful: in ‘Apotheosis’ she declares, ‘I am God’, before destroying the virtual heaven Clarice has created as an afterlife for suicide bombers. However, her power in the real world is limited by her clumsy mechanical body. This was apparently set to change in future seasons, had the series not been cancelled, because a preview at the end of ‘Apotheosis’ shows Daniel and Amanda creating a cyborg version of Zoe who looks exactly as she did when she was alive. As the series stands, though, it is actually Daniel who performs the final heroic action, sending in a squadron of U-87s to stop the terrorists at the stadium (‘Apotheosis’).

Caprica too, then, ultimately falls into the same pattern as the other four programmes where, although the enhanced woman is, in principle, the toughest and most powerful character in her team, her power is contained or diluted in some way. This may be because she is mentally unstable; most obviously, River is downright unhinged, but Olivia also suffers from low self-esteem and Cameron may be suicidal. It may be as a result of her love for a man: Cameron is completely subservient to John and Olivia just wants to have a ‘normal’ family life with Peter. Or it may even be because she does not have complete physical control over her own body or abilities; all five characters experience this at one point or another. Furthermore, only Zoe acquired her extraordinary powers to some extent through her own choice and actions (though she did not choose to die or to be placed inside the U-87); all four of the others had them thrust upon them against their will by patriarchal conspiracies. Thus, they are marked out as victims as well as heroines from the very start. In this respect, they bear some similarity to the male characters discussed in Chapter 2, although the men are unhappy due to psychological pressure exerted by their fathers, while the women underwent traumatic physical transformations.

Moreover, while the male characters are being trained up to take over their fathers’ roles, there is no implication that the female ones will do the same. Both the men (or, in Cameron’s case, Terminators) who ‘created’ them and those for whom they end up working primarily use them to carry out tasks that fall

28 This is also true of many other post-9/11 American apocalyptic programmes not discussed in this chapter, including TWD, Jericho and Falling Skies. Examples where a woman is the head of the team are rare: as discussed in the last chapter, Dollhouse is one, as are Threshold and V, though in the latter two all the other team members are male.
into the categories of labour which women typically perform, even in reflexive economies: either embodied, material labour (such as fighting) or affective labour related to empathy or relationship-building. Mobilizing a postfeminist discourse of ‘choice’, the programmes do insist that these women have chosen to put their unique skills at the service of the male-headed teams to which they belong. But in actual fact, in most cases, they need these teams to fight the evil faction that created them and they themselves assume a secondary role in the fight, the most important one being played by their male bosses. The exceptions to this are, first *Caprica*, as Zoe outwits her father/creator by herself and forms her own small all-female team and, secondly, *Bionic Woman*, which amalgamates the institution which created the female weapon and the one for which she ultimately works. In a sense, then, *Bionic Woman* is somewhat more open about Jaime’s ongoing exploitation and victim status than the other programmes, particularly as Sarah Corvus explicitly voices this point of view.

It would perhaps be unfair to condemn the majority of these series too harshly for their female weapons’ failure to achieve independence because *Caprica*, *T:TSCC*, *Firefly* and *Bionic Woman* were all cancelled abruptly. Therefore, we do not know what plans the writers had for their characters. It could be that the weaponized women would ultimately have gained greater autonomy, though it seems unlikely that any of them, except possibly Jaime, would have entirely disassociated themselves from their teams (as noted, Zoe actually teams up with her father at the end of *Caprica*). As we saw, the show that was allowed to finish on its own terms, *Fringe*, gave Olivia a deeply traditional ‘happy ending’. River too had a fairly happy ending in a different way: at the end of *Serenity*, she is shown calmly and capably piloting the eponymous ship, indicating that she may be maturing out of her previous ‘tomboy’ identity. Nevertheless, even as a pilot she is still carrying out embodied labour in the service of a man, Mal, who, in the final sequence, strides through the ship dispensing orders and advice to his crew.
Conclusion

Laughing at the end of the world


The significant difference with the 2015 cohort, however, is that the latter four series I mentioned are all, to a greater or lesser extent, comedies (I would class them as a sitcom, a comedy-horror, a comedy-crime-drama and a comedy-drama, respectively; 2014’s Z Nation is also a comedy-drama). They thus follow in the footsteps of the small wave of apocalyptic comedy films that appeared in 2012–2013: Seeking a Friend for the End of the World (2012), This is the End (2013) and The World’s End (2013). Furthermore, on television, the trend has continued, albeit at a slower pace, in 2016 and 2017 with the CW’s apocalyptic rom-com No Tomorrow (2016) and Netflix’s comedy-horror Santa Clarita.

1 The only comedy among the twenty-five apocalyptic programmes that debuted between 2002 and 2012 is the comedy-drama Three Moons over Milford (2006), which was cancelled after its first eight-episode season due to poor ratings (Martin 2006). Nearly all of the 2015 apocalyptic comedies have been more successful, making it to second and third seasons, except You, Me and the Apocalypse, which was cancelled after the first.
Why has the apocalypse suddenly become comic? Is the cycle simply entering its baroque phase or are there sociopolitical factors at play? Writing in the New Statesman, Anna Leszkiewicz suggests that the recent spate of apocalyptic comedy shows may have been inspired by the ‘bizarre, catastrophic trajectory of world politics over the last three years’ (2017). This may be true, but, if so, the comedies are much less blatant about the specific ‘catastrophic’ events that inspired them than many of their earlier, non-comic counterparts, which, as we have seen, often unmistakeably referenced 9/11 and sometimes other real-world events. Unlike the earlier shows, the comedies’ apocalypses tend to have non-human-made causes, such as asteroids or viruses, therefore rendering them less obviously political than the likes of Dollhouse or Jericho with their governmental/corporate conspiracies – though some of the comedies do make subtle, occasional digs at President Donald Trump, such as the revelation in The Last Man on Earth that at the time the apocalyptic virus broke out, Mike Pence was the ‘forty-sixth president of the United States’ (‘Got Milk?’ , 3.10).

Leszkiewicz contends that the characters in recent apocalyptic comedy shows, actually she specifies ‘post-apocalyptic’, are ‘in denial’ about the disasters facing them, stubbornly attempting to carry on living their lives as normal (2017). This is true, in a way, of The Last Man on Earth, one of the programmes to which Leszkiewicz refers, but the others she discusses, Santa Clarita Diet, The Good Place (2016–) and A Series of Unfortunate Events (2017–), are not literally post-/apocalyptic; they focus on people facing dire circumstances that may seem cataclysmic to them (being dead in Santa Clarita Diet and The Good Place!). All the other comedies I have mentioned, however, feature impending literal apocalypses, and, in these programmes, the main characters are not ‘in denial’: they are working to prevent or mitigate the disaster. And just as in the earlier, non-comic series with the same theme, the person leading the attempt to save the world is, in most cases, male. The men in question are all ridiculous or inept in some way: the eponymous Ash Williams (Bruce Campbell) from Ash vs. Evil Dead is a vain fifty-something who works as a ‘stock boy’ at a ‘Value Stop’ store, lives alone in a trailer and frequently makes what he calls ‘not … very PC’ (‘Bait’, 1.2) – that is, slightly racist and sexist – remarks; You, Me and the Apocalypse’s Jamie Winton (Mathew Baynton) is a nervous, routine-obsessed bank manager from Slough and even handsome
hipster Xavier Holliday (Joshua Sasse) from No Tomorrow is viewed as crazy by almost everyone because of his belief that an asteroid is going to destroy the Earth in a few months’ time.

Yet, ultimately, the programmes suggest that these un-confidence-inspiring men are humanity’s best hope of survival: Xavier finally convinces a top scientist of the veracity of his theory and goes off to Washington, DC, to work with an ‘asteroid defence team’ (‘No Sleep ’til Reykjavik’, 1.13), while Ash effortlessly takes out ‘Deadite’ (zombie) after Deadite, often in (mock-)heroic slow motion, and, in the final episode of Ash vs. Evil Dead, single-handedly defeats a gigantic demon (‘The Mettle of Man’, 3.10). Meanwhile, Jamie, it is heavily implied, is in fact the Second Coming of Christ: his seemingly crazy mother, the suggestively named Mary (Anastasia Hille), always believed as much, and in You, Me and the Apocalypse’s final episode, ‘End of Days’ (10), he parts the Thames to allow his friends and family to reach a bunker where they can shelter from an impending comet impact. Even Phil Miller (Will Forte), the self-centred man-child protagonist of The Last Man on Earth, is able to rig up a water supply for his companion Carol’s (Kristen Schaal) vegetable garden when she herself has tried very hard but failed (‘The Elephant in the Room’, 1.2).

Thus, these comedies are, in a way, the opposite of many of the earlier, non-comic apocalyptic series in terms of their representation of masculinity. As we have seen, the latter often feature male protagonists who seem superficially to conform to traditional models of heroic masculinity (such as the cowboy or superhero) but, on closer inspection, are wracked with doubts and anxieties and/or end up causing as much harm as they do good. In the comedies, however, while the protagonists may appear feckless or mad, they prove themselves to be heroic when faced with a crisis. One might argue, therefore, that these shows actually function as more effective ‘fictional “bellows to pump up [the American male’s] sense of self-worth”’ (Faludi cited in Godfrey and Hamad 2012, p. 168) than their non-comic predecessors.

One exception to this is iZombie, whose female protagonist, zombie Olivia ‘Liv’ Moore (Rosie McIver), succeeds, with the help of her friends and colleagues, in preventing a ‘zombie outbreak’ of potentially apocalyptic proportions at the end of the show’s second season (‘Dead Beat’, 2.18) (though, by the beginning of season four, the outbreak has spread to such an extent that the entire city of Seattle has been quarantined). In several ways, iZombie resembles the female-weapon narratives examined in Chapter 4: a sinister patriarchal corporation is partially to blame for the existence of the zombies, including Liv, a fact
which it conspires to conceal. Furthermore, being a zombie gives Liv various superpowers, including the ability to access dead people’s memories by eating their brains (she also temporarily takes on their personalities, giving her some similarity with _Dollhouse_’s Actives) and, at times, super-strength and speed. But Liv is more independent than the typical weaponized woman. Although she does technically have a male boss (Rahul Kohli) at her official job at the police morgue (though he is labelled with the more egalitarian title ‘The Ally’ in the comic-strip-style title sequence), she chooses to use her psychic powers to assist a homicide detective, Clive Babineaux (Malcolm Goodwin) (labelled ‘The Partner’ in the title sequence), with his investigations because it allows her to make a ‘contribution to society’ (‘Brother, Can You Spare a Brain?’, 1.2). The show emphasizes, through Liv’s voice-over narration, that she finds this work personally fulfilling; it gives her ‘a reason for being not alive’ (‘Pilot’, 1.1), as she puts it, or even, as her name implies, allows her to ‘live more’, figuratively speaking, than she did when she was alive. Thus, although she does still sporadically become maudlin about her condition, Liv is not primarily represented as a victim nor as a woman who is under the control of a man; indeed, it is often she who directs Babineaux rather than the other way around.

The above discussion of apocalyptic comedy series shows that while the apocalypse remains a popular theme on American television, the cycle is in a constant state of evolution. Hence, one should not assume that the conclusions I have reached in this book necessarily apply to apocalyptic programmes that fall outside the quite specific scope of my study. Nevertheless, as this is the first

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2 Moreover, the exponential spread of the zombie virus is caused by yet another sinister private military contractor (the ubiquity of which in recent apocalyptic media is discussed in Chapter 3), the unsubtly named Fillmore Graves.

3 This is perhaps not surprising since _iZombie_ is the co-creation of Rob Thomas and Diane Ruigerio-Wright, who were previously the creator/showrunner of _Veronica Mars_ (2004–2007) and one of its writers, respectively. _Veronica Mars_ has an extremely independent female protagonist (Kristen Bell) and is often viewed as an at least partially feminist series (e.g. Braithwaite (2008), Burnett and Townsend (2011)).

4 _iZombie_ and the other recent comedy-horror television series – such as _Santa Clarita Diet, Ash vs. Evil Dead_ and the recently announced TV adaptation (Otterson 2018b) of the vampire mockumentary film _What We Do in the Shadows_ (Jemaine Clement and Taika Waititi, 2014) – can be linked with Catherine Spooner’s concept of the ‘happy Gothic’ (2017, p. 22). Spooner argues that since the turn of the millennium, there has been a proliferation of cultural texts across diverse media ‘that engage with Gothic themes and/or visual style, but do so with a sense of lightness, playfulness, comfort, joy or even euphoria’ (ibid., p. 186). _iZombie’s_ Liv in particular has some similarities with a figure Spooner identifies as ‘the Goth girl’, a young woman (typically a teenager, although, as Spooner notes, adult women like Liv may carry connotations of this stereotype too (ibid., p. 100)) who is ‘attractive, quirky, intelligent and sensitive but troubled’ (ibid., p. 99). Spooner contends that the Goth girl, and the genre of ‘whimsical macabre’ in which she usually appears, has the potential to subvert traditional expectations of femininity (ibid., p. 101).
Conclusion

piece of work to focus on this topic, it should be viewed as a starting point; I will indicate some possible directions for further study at the end of this conclusion. Before that, I will recapitulate the topics and conclusions of each of the four chapters and then point out some wider conclusions that seem to present themselves when the more specific ones are placed side by side.

Chapter-specific conclusions

Chapter 1 focused on two programmes, *TWD* and *Heroes*, that feature, respectively, the figures of the cowboy and the superhero, the two archetypes of masculinity widely invoked by the American media following 9/11. The programmes’ narratives see the male protagonists, men who were previously struggling with gender roles for various reasons, adopt these two heroic personae and confront apocalyptic scenarios. Thus the stage is apparently set for the kind of narrative of ‘remasculinization’ which, Faludi and others suggest, was needed to counteract the widespread ‘suspicion that the [American] nation and its men had gone “soft”’ (Faludi 2008, p. 8). However, in neither show does this narrative, which centres on saving and/or protecting people, primarily women, play out in the expected manner. Not only do the male protagonists often fail in their attempts to protect or rescue people, the sense of responsibility they feel to do so makes them deeply unhappy or even unhinged. In fact, for all their ‘good’ intentions, several of these would-be heroes end up becoming, on occasion, major threats. The two programmes thus blur the lines between good and evil, saviour and threat, thereby subverting the kind of Manichean dichotomies routinely employed by the Bush administration during the ‘war on terror’.

Chapter 2, on the other hand, showed that several recent American apocalyptic series – including *TWD, Jericho, Falling Skies, BSG* and *Supernatural* – do seem to imply that strong male leadership is necessary at a time of crisis, thus echoing the post-9/11 media and governmental discourse described by the likes of Faludi, Drew (2004) and Ducat (2004). The way the programmes do this is by tracing the story of a young man (or men) who gradually accepts that he must follow in his father’s footsteps as a warrior and/or leader for the good of humanity; they thereby simultaneously valorize patriarchal succession. Yet what complicates this seemingly conservative message in my two main case studies, *BSG* and *Supernatural*, at least, is the emphasis the writers place on the young male protagonists’ unhappiness, an emphasis which gives the programmes a strongly
melodramatic vein. In both cases, the characters' unhappiness stems from both the pressure exerted on them by their fathers and, as with the characters discussed in Chapter 1, the sense of responsibility to save and/or protect people they have assumed as a result.

Chapters 1 and 2 focused on characters that, although often deeply flawed, pass for ‘heroes’ within their respective programmes. Chapter 3, on the other hand, started with an overview of the apocalyptic series’ villains. I pointed out that, in many cases, the apocalypse itself is either caused or plotted by male-dominated – sometimes literally patriarchal in that the protagonists’ fathers are involved – conspiracies, usually rooted in the government and/or powerful corporations. Although both my case studies, *Jericho* and *Dollhouse*, follow the time-honoured tradition of the American conspiracy narrative in critiquing the government, they also illustrate the very different ideological uses to which the genre can be put. One of the most prominent disparities between the two programmes is in their handling of gender. *Jericho* depicts a post-apocalyptic world in which the failings of the ruling governmental-corporate coalition leave women and children in need of protection or rescue by the male heroes – tasks which the men generally carry out much more effectively than the characters examined in Chapter 1. *Dollhouse*, on the other hand, uses Female Gothic tropes to construct a science fiction allegory of the exploitative practices of neoliberal corporate capitalism, particularly as they affect women.

Following on from Chapter 3, the final chapter focused on the victims of apocalyptic conspiracies: young women who are, like *Dollhouse*’s protagonist Echo, often the literal or symbolic daughters of high-ranking conspirators. These women are not, on the surface, the kind of ‘vulnerable maidens’ (Faludi 2008, p. 5) who were portrayed by the media as the primary victims of 9/11: they are tough fighters. Yet, they are certainly still victims in that they were given superhuman abilities, often including their fighting skills, against their will by the conspiracies. Furthermore, their power is always contained or limited in some way, whether by mental illness, as a result of their devotion to a man or through their lack of control over their own bodies. With the exception of *Bionic Woman*’s Jaime, who remains under the control of the organization that tampered with her, and *Caprica*’s Zoe, who (like Echo) ‘rescues’ herself, the female weapons I examined are rescued and/or protected from the conspirators by other male-headed groups. What is more, all of them except Zoe end up working for these groups (in Jaime’s case, the one that ‘created’ her), performing labour that is traditionally ‘feminine’ in the sense that it is embodied and/or
affective. I suggested that their experiences can therefore be aligned with those of women in general in reflexive economies, whose employers often reap far greater benefit from their ‘feminine skills’ than they do themselves.

**General conclusions: Tradition persists**

As the summaries above indicate, gender roles in the programmes I have analysed remain, on the whole, fairly traditional, despite the fact that many characters show dissatisfaction with them or try to rebel. However, when they do try to adopt more unconventional gender roles – those that blend ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ attributes and activities – as do some of the men in *Heroes* discussed in Chapter 1 and some of the women discussed in Chapter 4, they find it difficult and are often criticized by others or even feel inadequate themselves as a result. Thus, overall, we are left with a sense that the programmes are willing to acknowledge that traditional gender roles and hierarchies are problematic but are largely unable or unwilling to imagine alternatives, despite the freedom theoretically offered by the non-realist genres (science fiction, fantasy and/or horror) to which the shows belong.

The relationship between 9/11 and the representation of gender in these series is unquestionably more complex than Faludi’s comments about ‘tough-guy shows’ (2008, p. 139) suggest. It is certainly easy to identify many of the narratives and character-types she describes, such as victims and (would-be) saviours, in the shows analysed here, but they rarely unfold or behave in a predictable way. Therefore, I would suggest that, in terms of fiction TV at least, we should view 9/11 and its aftermath as a moment of struggle and negotiation over gender roles rather than a simple cause of regression. This is, without doubt, partially due to the serial nature of contemporary television drama, which is able both to reflect ongoing anxieties and to respond to changing sociopolitical contexts in a way that many other forms of media cannot.

One trend in the programmes that may seem, at first glance, to be linked to the rhetoric employed in the service of the ‘war on terror’ is the foregrounding of familial or pseudo-familial relationships. Yet, on closer examination, this cannot be seen as reflective of George W. Bush’s warnings that terrorists ‘want to come and kill your family’ (cited in Takacs 2009, p. 3) because, in these shows, the root of many major problems, sometimes including the apocalypse itself, is found *within* the family. Usually it is the father, or a surrogate father, who is the source of the problems and his children who are the primary victims: reluctant sons are pressurized and trained
to follow in their fathers’ footsteps, while ‘daughters’ are physically transformed, against their will, to play a part in the patriarchs’ nefarious plans. Furthermore, since the fathers are frequently not only the heads of their families but of extremely powerful organizations, such as the military or multinational corporations, the apocalyptic programmes simultaneously express mistrust of the patriarchal institutions at the heart of American society. Correspondingly, the absence or relative narrative unimportance of mothers in many of the shows can be viewed as a reflection of the lack of women in positions of social and political power. However, it is also a further example of the long-standing tendency of American popular culture to exclude mothers (Rowe 1995, Karlyn 2011).

This leads me to a last general point, which this book demonstrates perhaps more clearly than any other: while I maintain my view that contemporary geopolitical events had an influence (albeit not a straightforward one) on the representation of gender in the programmes under consideration, many other factors are at least equally as important. Genre is a major one, especially as most, if not all, of the series combine what are arguably their core genres of fantasy, science fiction or horror with others. Corroborating the observations of Jason Mittell (2015), and other critics, about the ubiquity of melodrama in contemporary ‘complex’ TV, melodrama is indeed one of the most prominent of the ‘secondary’ genres found in these shows but specifically a kind of melodrama that is focused on male relationships, particularly those between fathers and sons. This, of course, has a considerable impact on the programmes’ representation of masculinity; most notably, they have a tendency to foreground male characters’ emotional suffering. Industrial factors play an important role too. Ones I have touched on here include TV networks’ desire to appeal to specific audience demographics (e.g. the CW’s targeting of women aged eighteen to thirty-four), their wish to emulate successful existing formulae (e.g. Buffy or The X-Files), their eagerness not to offend minority groups (hence why white, male corporate executives are often cast as villains) and, though this probably has a comparatively lesser impact, the ideological leanings of individual writers/creators – for example Joss Whedon’s (professed) left-wing views. As I noted in the Introduction,

5 The recent controversy surrounding the publication of an article by Whedon’s ex-wife, Kai Cole, in which she accused him of being a ‘hypocrite preaching feminist ideals’ while conducting a series of affairs (Cole 2017), demonstrates the need to be extremely careful when making assumptions about the ‘ideological leanings’ of public figures, whether these are explicitly stated by the figures in question in public fora or, even more so, deduced from their work (see Pateman (2017) for further discussion of the Whedon case).
critical and fan responses may also affect the writers’ choices, and, finally, I would surmise that there is simply a widespread tendency to unthinkingly reproduce the entrenched, often sexist conventions of popular culture (such as the exclusion of mothers). Hence, a useful way of extending the work I have done here would be to interview programme-makers to find out what influenced their portrayal of certain characters and storylines, rather than just speculating about their motivations. It would also be interesting to conduct audience research into the ways fans responded to the representations of gender in the programmes and the ways those representations have evolved (or not) over the course of long-running series such as TWD and Supernatural.

One final observation I would like to make about this book, which also highlights another potential avenue for further study, is that it has ended up with a greater focus on men and masculinity than on women and femininity. This was not my intention when I started out; I expected that the final work would deal equally with both genders. However, it gradually became clear, as I viewed more and more of the programmes, that masculinity and the relationships between men are major concerns of many of the shows within my corpus in a way that femininity and the relationships between women are not. Some explore the perceived challenges of being a man in the twenty-first century; some weigh up different kinds of masculinity (often represented by different generations of men within the same family), sometimes using the apocalypse as a justification for their ultimate valorization of a more traditional model, and several show a preoccupation with troubled father–son relationships.

Though there are undeniably numerous memorable female characters to be found in these series, several of whom were discussed in Chapter 4, important older women, especially mothers, are rare. (BSG’s Laura Roslin is a notable exception, though she is not a mother.) Furthermore, there is a general lack of close relationships between women in the programmes, whether between mothers and daughters, other kinds of female relatives, friends or lovers. These absences certainly merit further study in themselves, particularly since several American telefantasy series which debuted in the 1990s, such as Buffy, Xena and Charmed (1998–2006), are noteworthy for the strong bonds between their central female characters. It would be interesting to find out whether such bonds are equally lacking in recent non-apocalyptic American telefantasy and whether the situation
has improved at all in programmes that appeared after my 2012 cut-off date. In the twenty-five series that I considered here, however, men and male relationships dominate the pre- and post-apocalyptic landscape – though the question the shows continually raise is whether or not that is a good thing.


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