Constant Cravings: Femininity, Desire and Post-Feminism

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For the amazing women in my life who know what this cost because they have paid their own prices and fought similar battles with themselves — Lily, Jane, Sarah, Renee, Simone, Denise and Kate. I have been lucky to be surrounded by such strong, intelligent women so I have never been alone on this journey. To those same travelling companions, thank you for keeping me going, (en)couraging me, sharing with me and being so patient. I truly could not have done this without you.

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or at any other institution.

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Abstract

This research takes a feminist post-structuralist perspective, informed by Lacanian and post-Lacanian theory to explore constructions of femininity, woman, and women’s experiences in the ‘post-feminist’ context of contemporary Western culture. Its starting point was Freud’s question, “What does the woman want?” In particular I was interested in the issue of women’s desire in the context of the current broad insistence on women’s ‘freedom’ and limitless array of choices which can be understood to underpin ‘post-feminism’. Therefore, I was concerned to explore the dominant ways that ‘woman’ and ‘femininity’ are constructed in discourse and whether these can be said to represent a radical change in the way ‘woman’ is represented. How do post-feminist discursive constructions of woman regulate women’s subjectivity and define the field of possible actions and shape desire? What does post-feminist discourse make possible and consequently what does it exclude from the realm of possible actions and articulations? These questions are explored empirically through two studies: first, a discourse analysis of post-feminist discourses in popular media and, second, a discourse analysis of in-depth interviews with women on their experiences and views of ‘femininity’ and gender-power relations. From the analysis of Study 1, I argue that ‘post-feminism’ produces a feminine subject who understands herself to be ‘emancipated’, to have the same opportunities as men and the same ‘choices’ whilst simultaneously reproducing dominant patriarchal versions of femininity which continue to regulate and constrain women’s desire. Significantly, I argue that by producing ‘equality’ as a truth post-feminist discourse ocludes continuing inequalities in gender-power relations, thereby severely limiting the space for the articulation of gender politics. In other words, if post-feminism presents a version of reality in which sexism no longer exists, how can we see it? In Study 2, analysis of the interview texts illustrates some of the ways that feminine subjectivity continues to be regulated by patriarchal fantasies and ideals of ‘woman’. It was found that the regulative power of masculine fantasies of woman as ‘home’ and as ‘ideal mother’ constrain the interviewee’s experiences, choices and desires despite the post-feminist insistence that woman is no longer bound by anachronistic expectations or outmoded stereotypes. Moreover, the analysis highlighted the way that taking up a post-feminist subject position precluded women from recognising features of their lives and experiences as being structured by relations of power or the regulative effects of patriarchally defined femininity. Overall, it is proposed that a post-feminist ‘regime of truth’ profoundly impacts on our ability to critically engage with issues of power as they relate to gender inequality.
1

Introduction

The great question that has never been answered and which I have not been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul, is ‘What does a woman want?’ (Freud, cited in Jones, 1955, p. 421)

Though the path she is cutting is a difficult one, she is impatient to set everything else aside and pleads to go on. But she cannot specify exactly what she wants. Words begin to fail her. She senses something remains to be said that resists all speech, that can at best be stammered out. All the words are weak, worn out, unfit to translate anything sensibly. For it is no longer a matter of longing for some determinable attribute, some mode of essence, some face of presence. What is expected is neither a this nor a that, not a here any more than a there. No being, no places are designated. (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 193)

1.1 Introduction

“What does a woman want?”, Freud’s (cited in Jones, 1955, p. 421) infamous question, was my starting point for exploring the problematics of feminine identity, specifically as they are elaborated by Lacan. I suppose I believed when I began that if I could answer this question I could find the solution to my own restlessness and relentless search for something which if pressed I could not put a name to. Now it is not that I think it has a definitive answer or rather that the answer is no answer at all but rather a space. A place undefined, a space beyond and outside available representations. Indeed, I have found my only comfort has been to explore and try to understand the conditions of its emergence as a question. In other words, what is it about the experience of being a woman, of doing woman, the constructions and construals of woman that gives rise to this question? Why is it one that haunts me? Why is it popularly posed of ‘her’? Why can she not seem to answer?

In asking these questions this thesis explores the problematics of feminine subjectivity in the specific context of a ubiquitous post-feminist discourse. Feminine subjectivity is understood through the theoretical positions of Lacanian and Post-
Lacanian psychoanalysis and Post-structuralism, particularly Foucault’s articulation of Discourse and its relation to power. The research is made up of two studies, the first being a critical discourse analysis of popular media which seeks to sketch the terrain of post-feminist discourses and the way they constitute the feminine subject as a quasi-masculine subject, that is, autonomous and free. The second study is in-depth interviews with women which were analysed to identify the effects of post-feminist discourse on women’s subjectivity.

Thus, one aim of the work that follows was to explore and articulate the way that post-feminist discourses constitute ‘woman’ and the political and social implications of these constructions. In particular, it was my concern that such productions of woman as are promoted through post-feminist discourse serve the interests of ongoing patriarchal power by occluding the operation of that power and simultaneously closing the space for politics and resistance. I also aimed to explore how dominant discourses of traditional (heterosexual) femininity might continue to be taken up by women and how these interact with their positioning within post-feminist discourses. Finally, I was interested through the interviews in exploring the lived effects of taking up such subject positions in recognition of the notion that ‘particular regimes of truth, bodies of knowledge, make possible both what can be said and what can be done’ (Walkerdine, 1984, pp. 154-155).

Returning then to Freud’s question of ‘what the woman wants?’, it is clear that in contemporary theoretical contexts this question has greater potential to vex than even before, since it supposes a subject – ‘woman’ – whose existence is debateable given the post-modern dissolution of categories of identity as fixed and stable (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn & Walkerdine, 1984). Sexual identity can no longer be guaranteed by the body (Butler, 1993; Grosz, 1994). Bodies in themselves come to matter through language. They are themselves subject. The answer then to what a woman might want is likely to be given up in advance if we acknowledge women are scattered about the fields of discourse, lying at the intersections of multiple and competing positions. There can be as many types of desire as there are varied subject positions to desire from and women are variously positioned within discourse by, for example, class, ethnicity and sexuality and local as well as global cultural contexts. Hence, the answer(s) to the question of what the ‘woman’ wants is likely to be as various (and as unguaranteed) as ‘woman’ is.
1.2 “Post-feminism”?

Furthermore, in the contemporary context of ‘post-feminism’ where equality is frequently taken to be a truism beyond reproach or argument, “What does the woman want?” is a question ripe with its own apparent redundancy, given that women are assumed to have everything. The very notion that we can be said to be a ‘post-feminist’ society assumes that the radical work undertaken and envisaged by the second wave feminists particularly is achieved, that we have progressed to a state of affairs where feminist ideals are all but realised, or even where they have gone too far (Faludi, 1992; Summers, 2003). As this progressivist trope goes, any remnants of disadvantage or discrimination can be understood or explained away as anachronisms, as remnants of a past which we have rightfully and righteously cast aside. Hence women (should) want for nothing. The following statement, for example, was made by the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard to a leading Australian newspaper, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in 2002:

> We are in the post-feminist stage of the debate. The good thing about this stage is that I think we have broken through some of the old stereotypes. I find that for the under 30s women... the feminist battle has been won. That is not an issue. Of course, a woman has a right to a career. Of course, women are as good as men. Of course, they are entitled to the same promotion and they can do it as well. Of course. That is accepted... (cited in Hewett, 2002, September 7-8, p. 12)

Part of the reason for declaring ourselves to be ‘post-feminist’ is surely the fact that women in previous waves of feminism had something concrete to ‘want’. They could rally around specific causes and agendas: suffrage, the right to own property, the right to equal pay, child care, access to places and occupations previously barred and so on. In the context of anti-discrimination legislation, quotas and equal opportunity employment policy the very idea of any kind of feminist activism is met with derision and incredulity. Since women apparently have everything there cannot reasonably be anything more to want.

However, whilst there is widespread belief in a level playing field and a general denial of systemic inequality which notably applies to racial as well as gender issues (e.g. Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Fine, Stewart & Zucker, 2000; Macpherson & Fine, 1995; Peace, 2003; Riley, 2001) the reality – or at least another reality – is reflected in the following kinds of statistics: Australian women’s total
average earnings are only 66 per cent of men’s (Summers, 2003) and they also continue to be concentrated in part-time work in large part because of family responsibilities (ABS, 2001); only 38 per cent of women in Australia are covered by paid maternity leave provisions and tax-benefits favour stay-at-home mothers but provide little assistance for those who wish to work (Summers, 2003); sexual divisions of labour remain relatively unchanged despite women’s larger representation in paid labour, with women doing 65 per cent of unpaid household labour and around 75 per cent of child care (ABS, 1999; 2000); also, the last time anyone cared to ask (ABS, 1996), 23 per cent of all women who had ever been married or in a de-facto relationship reported experiencing some kind of violence; at least 43 women are sexually assaulted in Australia each day (ABS, 2002a). Furthermore, Indigenous women in Australia fare far worse on all social indicators, including health, showing the intersection of sexism and racism multiplies the impact of social inequalities. For Indigenous women, access to employment and equal earnings are issues eclipsed by the extremely high rates of violence and homicide and poor health outcomes (ABS, 2002b). Thus, there must be recognition of the heterogeneity of the category ‘woman’ in combination with an acknowledgement of systematic gender inequality. These tensions between sameness and difference are simply the terrain that feminism must negotiate (Riley, 1988; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996).

Despite such glaring inequalities conditions of equality are nonetheless presumed to exist in a ‘post-feminist’ context. This is owing largely to its basis in a neo-liberalist agenda which constructs each individual’s life as the outcome of ‘choices’ exercised freely or in spite of external constraints (Fine, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1982). The assumption following liberal-humanism is that we are entirely the authors of our own destiny, fully autonomous and unconstrained except by our own peculiar fears, faults and talents or lack thereof. This leads to a logic which attributes life-outcomes and situations primarily to choice, achievement and merit. If we all profess to believe in equality then each person is not to be judged according to race or class or gender but according to merit. To each her/his own. You cannot have it both ways according to this argument, if you want equality then you cannot have programs like affirmative action, for example (e.g. Fish, 1994; McElroy, 2001; Wetherell, Stiven & Potter, 1987). These are frequently rejected as unfair or discriminatory.
From all this follows a popular insistence that women can and frequently do (if they are deserving, hard working, etc) ‘have it all’, thus disqualifying complaint. This emphasis has the effect of turning our gaze from critical analyses of structures of power and locating responsibility for outcomes back firmly with the ‘individual’, itself a product of Western discursive practices (Fine, 1992; Fine, Stewart & Zucker, 2000; Macpherson & Fine, 1995; Sayers, 1986). If you are not where you want to be it is clearly your own fault. Oppression, it is supposed, cannot possibly exist under these conditions where the playing field is said to be level and we are all responsible for our own outcomes. So here is the hitch – posing the question “What does the woman want?” becomes ludicrous. It is understood that women need not want for anything, that they can choose to be and do and have what they please.

1.3 Post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis

But we cannot choose to simply ‘be’ whoever we like. Especially, once we accept the post-structuralist critique of the modernist fiction of the autonomous, coherent and rational individual. A post-structuralist revision of the subject and identity theorises a de-centred and multiple subject, constituted from without by the workings of power/knowledge and situated at the intersections of various discourses (Henriques et al, 1984). Foucauldian analyses of power (e.g. 1972, 1979, 1980) revealed the inadequacy of conceiving of a liberationist politics in terms of simple opposition to oppressive external systems or apparatus of power. Our places are far more circumscribed than we would like to believe they are. The idea that we can choose is the very product of a regulative discourse that constitutes the individual as one who understands her or himself to enact their lives in terms of choice (see Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1996, 1999). The illusion of personal autonomy and freedom are in fact the most insidious effects of contemporary regulative power (Foucault, 1972, 1980). What then are the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a ‘new’ discourse, for example, one that could represent women outside of patriarchal terms. Obviously they are always informed by what has preceded them and there is no way to stand outside of the field of power. We are always implicated in the power we seek to resist or challenge (see Butler, 1997). Of course the problem is that we cannot simply invent something ‘new’. After all, who would be the originating author?

In combination with post-structuralist theory this research also employs
Lacanian psychoanalytic theory for its account of the constructive effects of a phallocentric economy of signification on the process of constituting and regulating sexual difference. Specifically, Lacan’s articulation of the phallocentrism of the Symbolic order reveals the problematics of feminine identity that are directly related to the question “what does the woman want?” For Lacan (1977), the Symbolic is regulated by the Law of the Father; that is, it is a patriarchal order. In this structure woman is a negation, a non-identity as it were since her identity is to be discovered only through its relation to the One-identity which is masculine (Mitchell & Rose, 1982). Lacan (1972-3a) infamously encapsulated this in the statement “there is no such thing as The woman” (p. 144). In other words, feminine identity within such a patriarchal structure is highly problematic for those beings psychically designated beneath its mark.

There has always been a substantial amount of discomfort and criticism of Lacanian theory for its implied determinism, especially relating to the place of the phallus in Lacan’s theory (1977). Whilst it proposes an account of sexual difference as a construction it appears that the particular construction, as patriarchal, is inevitable. It is hard to see from Lacan’s universal and ahistorical phallocentric Symbolic that any alternative could ever be achieved. It is here that Luce Irigaray’s work enters, critiquing Lacan’s phallocentrism and attempting to conceive of an alternative (e.g. Irigaray, 1985). She acknowledges her work as utopian imaginings but nonetheless the suggestion of this other place illuminates the cracks in the apparently monolithic patriarchal Symbolic. Also, Lacan’s work itself points to its own spaces and ruptures in the Symbolic, its fragility.

How we might get to places, that is, to other Symbolic orders other than where we are is another matter altogether. “Some other regulation of sexual difference and subjectivity might be theorised, if only we can force ourselves to ‘imagine an “elsewhere”’” (Frosh, 1994, p. 11). However, the difficulty of that task should not put us in a position of shooting the messenger as it were. It should instead alert us to the size and scope of what is required to conceive of and effect genuine and radical change. The forces massed against such radical change are massive, they involve powerful psychic investments in each of us and the pervasive movement of power in discourse in Foucauldian terms.

A psycho-analytic explanation of sexual difference and specifically of ‘woman’, articulates a particular problem, that of phallocentrism and the difficulty of
escaping it. However, ‘woman’ within psychoanalytic theory is undifferentiated and abstract, invoking an apparently universal and monolithic category without historical or cultural specificity. Psychoanalytic theory cannot tell us how the particular problem it articulates is lived or how it manifests in any given cultural or historical context. To do this, we require an analysis of historicity and contingency of the ‘truths’ that define our various ways of understanding ‘woman’. I was concerned with the ways that dominant discourses of heterosexual femininity constitute women’s subjectivity, particularly at the intersection of ‘post-feminism’ where ‘woman’ is produced as ostensibly emancipated and neutrality is emphasised at the expense of analyses of gendered power relations and politics. How have traditional or mainstream discourses of heterosexual femininity altered (or not) to accommodate a discursive identification of woman as ‘post-feminist’ or ‘emancipated’? Psychoanalysis has something to offer in terms of understanding psychic investment and the power this has to maintain us within discursive formations which may be detrimental, unsatisfactory or destructive (Frosh, 1999; Hollway, 1995; Sayers, 1982).

Taken together, the discursive and Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic perspectives illustrate that being ‘woman’ is not something women merely ‘do’ as if we knew we had a choice about it – it is who we are, constitutive of our very subjectivity and identity. Thus, resistance is problematised, for example where for heterosexual women to resist the discourse of heterosexual femininity is to pay the price of resisting a part of themselves, not merely resisting an abstract discourse which lies ‘out’ there in the social world. Gender may well be a performance but not in the sense that we have ultimate control (Butler, 1993) over either how we intend it, or how others read it. And our ‘choices’ to perform even when they are ‘conscious choices’ can embroil us in reinforcing an identification which may conflict with other constructions of ourselves that we hold. Gender is performative. However, as Butler (1993) states:

Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it simply be equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity.…. “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo,
with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (p. 95)

Now if we cannot choose freely who we are then the issue of resistance becomes entirely problematic, (specifically resisting patriarchy and the way it orders sexual difference) since we are what we resist. We already inhabit, to at least some degree, the discursive position we object to or wish to resist (Butler, 1997). How we desire, how desire manifests, in other words – what we desire – depends on who we desire as. Our desire is shaped and structured by our subject positions which are constituted in discourse. Thus, from a feminist perspective, woman’s access to her own desire is problematic, given that, from a Lacanian perspective, hers’ is a subject position that is constituted in and through masculine representations and fantasies that serve patriarchal ends. Where then, is the position from which we can desire to be other than we are?

This is a fundamentally different question about what women might want than the redistributive one of equal pay, for example (although that is still not won!). It is a question of how another kind of woman – not the product of masculine discourses – might be conceived of? Thereby bringing us to a crucial problem: she might know that she wants something else but cannot say what it is because it comes from an order outside of the logic of the Symbolic or the set of discourses already available – it is unrepresented and seemingly unrepresentable at present.

Virginia Woolf wrote in 1929, that in order to create, a woman needed economic independence and a room of one’s own. A space both literal and figurative which was entirely her own. A space where she would be free of the demands of others. But even more than this Woolf’s room, I would argue, was a metaphor for a woman’s opportunity to cultivate an identity. That is, not being defined by her relational responsibility to others and especially, not by her relation to the One – the masculine. In other words, Woolf talked about the way that women would be free then to write not as patriarchally defined women, but not as men either. It could be said that what she was arguing for was nothing short of a radical resignification of ‘woman’ in non-patriarchal terms. Second Wave Feminism was arguably reasonably effective at demanding access to places, services, opportunities (although in the post-feminist engendered erasure of ‘woman’ as politically significant these gains are always under threat of reversal). It was most effective when couched in liberal terms
as ‘equality’ where equality really translated to being the same as a man. Thus the equivalence of human and masculine remained uninterrupted and ‘woman’ continues to have no specificity in so far as she accedes to the public domain when she is ‘like a man’ (Irigaray, 1977; Pateman, 1988; Whitford, 1991).

Luce Irigaray’s (1984, 1985a/b) work advocated a “continuous process of critical engagement” (Whitford, 1991, p.14) with patriarchal systems of representation that submit women to masculine models. Her particularly ambitious and moving project was to attempt to articulate what feminine representations of and for-ourselves might be. A gesture towards envisaging an alternative symbolic using the metaphor of the woman’s body, specifically the “two lips” (Irigaray, 1985a). Irigaray theorised a shift away from the feminine as other in relation to masculine sameness (the Other of the Same), towards an entirely different mode of signification. She attempted to make central what had only been on the periphery for Lacan. His project was to say what was, whilst hers was to imagine what might be. Irigaray (1985a) writes about the particular difficulty of speaking about what might be and the failure to satisfactorily articulate this alternative: “For it is no longer a matter of longing for some determinable attribute, some mode of essence, some face of presence. What is expected is neither a this nor a that, not a here any more than a there” (ibid, p. 93). We can imagine a space, a possibility for an alternative but find the challenge is in filling that space with any specific content. This relates entirely to the seeming impossibility of defining woman outside of the phallocentric, that is, as other than the negative, complement or opposite of the masculine (Grosz, 1991; Rose, 1982). The problem is how we articulate the desire to be other than who we are and, specifically, where would we launch that challenge from?

As I discussed earlier, this is not only a dilemma of articulating an alternative to phallocentric femininity but there is also an inherent conflict that adheres in this project. That is, resisting patriarchy and patriarchally defined femininity means inevitably resisting a part of ourselves. The former problems of a failure to define a ‘space’ may be characterised as more abstract and theoretical, that is, as failures of imagination and conceptualisation. However, at the level of the individual subject, the potential for extreme conflict is great since we fail to be comprehensible to ourselves if we seek to recreate ourselves where we have no map. That is, if we seek ourselves where, as Irigaray (1985b) says, “no being, no places are designated” (p. 193). For where there is an investment in patriarchally defined heterosexual
femininity we are required to reject ‘ourselves’ without knowing what we should replace ourselves with.

If the subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were. To claim that the subject exceeds either/or is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its own making. Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound. In this sense, the subject cannot quell the ambivalence by which it is constituted. Painful, dynamic, and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency. (Butler, 1997, p. 18)

1.4 On the other side: madness and death

I found that this conflict that is inherent to the project of rearticulating ‘woman’ and what women want is often beautifully represented in literature and film, specifically where women’s madness and death is central to the plot or narrative. I had wanted to take at least a brief moment in this academic space to include a different voice. To explore the genre of storytelling for the freedom such narratives have to speak in a way that is apart from the rational and logic driven language of academia. This does not mean that what they tell of has any less ‘truth’.

Most often the demise of the ‘unconventional’ woman in a plot has been read as an instructive moral. A lesson to women to be good and chaste, or else. But another reading might see madness and death as the inevitable and only apparent solution or outcome to a profound conflict of identity where the self is incoherent to the self. In this sense, madness and death act as metaphors for the annihilation of femininity. In other words, the heroines are written to madness or death because there is literally nowhere else to write them to (Heilbrun, 1979, 1988; Showalter, 1977). The narrative cannot accommodate her if she exceeds the limits of her designation or intuits that such an excess is possible (Ledger, 1997). What personal struggle is at stake if we pass ‘through the looking glass’ to the other side as it were, where ‘woman’ is free of ‘their [men’s] representations’ (see Irigaray, 1985a) but finds herself in Alice’s world unable to name what she sees? In the next section I read two texts, Kate Chopin’s (1899) The Awakening and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s (1892) The Yellow Wallpaper, as accounts of this dilemma of subjectivity confronting the limits of discourse and representation. These texts illustrate some of
the key questions around feminine subjectivity and desire that I am concerned with in the thesis.

1.4.1 The Awakening
The Awakening by Kate Chopin (1899) is the quite remarkable narrative of a woman who abandons her husband and children in late 19th Century America. The protagonist, Edna Pontellier, ensconced in conventional domesticity, has her first intimations of an “indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish.” (ibid, p. 14) The narrative deals with Edna’s inability to accept her designation as mother and wife and her battle with the conventions of mother and wife. The conclusion to the narrative is Edna’s suicide – she drowns herself in the sea. The account of her death is profoundly symbolic in that it represents her inability to (re)create herself. That is, to entirely escape convention and the needs of her family and to reconcile those investments with a desire to be defined independently of others. Edna’s anguish is precisely that of desiring an identity (distinct, unitary, autonomous) which is antithetical to her identity as woman (femininity) which is precisely the lack of a distinct, autonomous, self, this self being given over to the demand of others’ needs. As Edna tires, floating further and further out to sea, she “thinks of Leonce [her husband] and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought they could possess her, body and soul.” (ibid, p. 190).

However, the narrative of Edna’s death simultaneously acts as a metaphor for being “born again” and links the possibility contained in this symbolic (as well as literal death) with memories of childhood, a retroactive fantasy of there being a time prior to language when we were not so constrained or limited (Lacan’s ‘real’ and Freud’s ‘oceanic consciousness’). As Edna stands at the edge of the abyss having cast off her clothes, ready to enter the water and meet her death, Chopin writes: “How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! How delicious! She felt like some new born creature opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (ibid, p. 189). The resonances with Irigaray’s world on the other side of the Speculum seem unmistakable to me. It is terrifying, but necessary and pleasurable, to pass on to the other side, to “cast off the unpleasant, prickling garments” (ibid, p.189).

Malson and Ussher (1997) explored themes of disappearance and self-
destruction in the narratives of anorexic women and read ‘death’ as an expression of femininity but also the ‘deathly anorexic’ was constituted as ‘one who has escaped the mundane oppression of prescribed femininity’ (p. 55). In this sense, death is positively construed as active resistance. Through to the other side of the mirror, lacking the means to represent oneself, is represented as both delicious and awful, pleasurable and terrifying. As she swam further out, Edna “recalled the terror that seized her at the fear of being unable to regain the shore. She did not look back now” (Chopin, 1899, p. 190).

This dual construal of the loss or rejection of self/identity (in this case seeking to slip the structuring constraints of femininity) as offering both the exciting potential to redefine one’s self but also signalling danger is understandable. Just as for Foucault objects exist only in discourse so to for Lacan similarly, subjects only exist in the Symbolic. The extra-discursive (the Lacanian ‘real’) then is a space of dissolution, a quite literal void or abyss which because it acts as the outside of a limit (death) can be imagined to contain every excluded possibility and everything that we might be, only no representable content. Who will we be there? As Frosh (1999) points out, “loss of self carries the risk of disappearance, of becoming nothing rather than everything, and it should never be romanticised” (p. 381). Furthermore, he suggests that “people are much more likely to struggle to the end of their lives to stay with some experience of selfhood or ‘identity’ than to welcome the doing-away with it” (ibid, p. 381). However, where femininity is already constituted as a kind of annihilation of self, a lack of positive identity (Irigaray 1985a/b; Malson & Ussher, 1997) then death can also represent resistance – a metaphorical ‘passing through’ in Irigaray’s terms to the ‘other side of their representations’, and thus possibility. If we refuse to accept such a living death what is the alternative? How does woman come into a relation of being for-herself? The self-destruction represented in The Awakening by Edna’s suicide exposes a subject pitted against itself – and the anguish which is a consequence of the intractability of freeing oneself from oneself. What remains if we reject ourselves? When you tear apart a discourse in which you are constituted, you invariably tear apart yourself - and the greater your investment has been the more painful it will be.

1.4.2 The Yellow Wallpaper

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story of 1892, The Yellow Wallpaper, is also
a most beautiful and complex fictional account of the very problems I am concerned with. *The Yellow Wallpaper* remains, I would argue, a relevant allegory for women’s struggle around identity arising from our position in discourse and language.

The story itself is a fairly clear account of a young woman, a writer, confined to the ‘rest cure’, popularly prescribed in its day to women inclined to melancholia or depression as Gilman had been, especially after the birth of her first and only child. It is overtly an account of paternalism and a woman’s powerlessness, of the destruction caused by denying women a function beyond the maternal or domestic. The story is a vehicle for the exploration of a particular metaphor, that being the yellow wallpaper of the title. The wallpaper lines the room (which had previously been a nursery) in which the protagonist is confined to bed rest. It is an elegant and complex metaphor for patriarchy (the Symbolic) and the narrator’s struggle with the wallpaper, her desire to penetrate it leads to her madness in the end as her stripping of the wallpaper leaves her unidentifiable.

I never saw a worse paper in my life. One of those sprawling, flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin. It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough constantly to irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard-of contradictions.

The colour is repellent, almost revolting: a smouldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others. (p. 385)

The narrator grows increasingly obsessed with the wallpaper, following its pattern hour by hour as she determines “for the thousandth time that I will follow that pointless pattern to some sort of conclusion.” She describes the wallpaper in greater detail finding it to be extravagant and fatuous, sprawling and wallowing, horizontal lines, columns and diagonals. Until finally, the narrator begins to apprehend something beneath, behind and outside the pattern:

There are things in that wallpaper that nobody knows about but me, or ever will. Behind that pattern the dim shapes get clearer every day. It is always the same shape, only very numerous. And it is like a woman stooping down and creeping about behind
that pattern. I don’t like it a bit. (p.388)

As she continues to study it she thinks she sees the pattern move too. But she cannot tell yet whether the front pattern and back pattern move together or separately. Meanwhile, the narrative develops her increasing distress. What began as a fairly simple aesthetic dislike grows into hatred and ‘torture’. A discomfort that on closer engagement with the cause of the irritation becomes more intolerable and frightening – perhaps as the full scope of the pattern and its implications dawns. As her vigil continues the narrator notices that in the moonlight the thing behind the pattern becomes easier to see:

By moonlight – the moon shines in all night when there is a moon – I wouldn’t know it was the same paper.

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, in candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern, I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be.

I didn’t realise for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman.

By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. (p. 390)

As recognition of the ‘woman’s’ (and by extension the narrator’s) place in this pattern dawns, the narrator slips further into her psychosis, she becomes suspicious of her husband, John, a physician who prescribed her treatment. However, she also finds that “life is very much more exciting” as this recognition of limitation and death (non-self) gathers in an experience reflective of Kristevan abjection: “the excitement of disappearing into the whole lives in tension with the terror induced by this disappearance…. The enjoyment of destructiveness is part and parcel of this: of course exhilaration is exhilarating, stepping out of the self is a thrill…” (Frosh, 1999, p. 382). Her excitement and slip into psychosis are part of the same thing – an apprehension of non-self outside of discourse. As she tears apart the wallpaper doesn’t she lose the framework within which to identify herself?

The wallpaper’s complexity does not decrease and it begins to have a smell that pervades the narrator’s senses, getting in her hair and hanging over her in the night. She considers burning the house down to get at the smell. Now she notices also, a “smooch”
a streak that runs round the room, … as if it had been rubbed over and over.
I wonder how it was done and who did it, and what they did it for.
Round and round and round – round and round and round – it makes me dizzy! (p. 391)

There is an implication that she will soon find out this mystery. And then an important discovery is made:

The front pattern does move - and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it! Sometimes I think there are a great many women behind, and sometimes only one, and she crawls around fast, and her crawling shakes it all over.
Then in the very bright spots she keeps still, and in the very shady spots she just takes hold of the bars and shakes them hard.
And she is all the time trying to climb through. But nobody could climb through that pattern - it strangles so; I think that is why it has so many heads.
They get through and the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white! (p. 391)

She begins to realise that these women who try to get out, actually do sometimes succeed but they are only able to creep around and must hide when somebody comes. The identification heightens between the narrator and the creeping ‘other’ (sometimes pluralised) woman who dares to break through the pattern. Her suspicion of her husband continues to grow: “He asked me all sorts of questions, too, and pretended to be very loving and kind. As if I couldn’t see through him!” (p. 391).

She begins to imagine that this woman might be able to creep faster than she first thought. She will need to free herself from the pattern though and the narrative simultaneously develops our sense of her increasing ‘madness’.

If only that top pattern could be gotten off from the under one! I mean to try it, little by little. (p. 392)

As soon as night fell,

And that poor thing began to crawl and shake the pattern, I got up and ran to help her.
I pulled and she shook. I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper. A strip about as high as my head and half around the room. And then when the sun came and that awful pattern began to laugh at me, I declared I would finish it today! (pp. 392-393)

The narrator became increasingly isolated as her quest to remove the wallpaper intensified:

I have locked the door and thrown the key down into the front path. I don’t want to go out, and I don’t want to have anybody come in, till John comes. I want to astonish him (p. 393)

Simultaneously as she attempted to destroy the wallpaper it grew increasingly resistant to her attempt:

Then I pulled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it! All those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungous growths just shriek with derision! I am getting angry enough to do something desperate. To jump out of the window would be admirable exercise, but the bars are too strong even to try. (p. 393)

At this point in the narrative the woman’s identification with the woman or women behind the wallpaper becomes complete and along with it the optimism of her early awareness gives way to recognition that she is trapped, a product of the wallpaper with no existence outside of it that is comprehensible to herself or others. When she knew it was herself she was watching - she sought to free herself but was trapped by herself just as effectively as she was trapped by the pattern; she was part of the pattern, part of her own subjugation - her own gaoler:

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? But I am securely fastened here now by my well-hidden rope – you don’t get me out in the road there! I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night and that is hard! I don’t want to go outside. For outside you have to creep on the ground, and everything is green instead of yellow. But here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in the long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way. (p. 394, emphasis added)
John opens the door to this terrible scene – a woman tied by her waist to a bed, climbing the walls as it were:

I kept on creeping just the same, but I looked at him over my shoulder.

“I’ve got out at last” said I, “in spite of you and Jane. “And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!” (p. 394)

This is the first time Jane has entered the narrative, it seems likely Jane is ‘everywoman’ just as the narrator herself is ‘everywoman’ hence the fact that she has never been named in the narrative. Potentially, Jane is the narrator herself speaking of herself in the third person. Just as John is ‘everyman’ – their designation is as no one in particular but as representing something broader than themselves. She does not want to go out but she cannot go back either - she has tied herself by rope and can only creep round and round and round - trapped by the room, by the paper, by the pattern, by herself. She has been freed from a particular place but where to?
Where has she gone? In a sense where there is no relationship to the wallpaper/patriarchy, there is no identity either.

1.4.3 Some Concluding Remarks

In *The Awakening* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the painful (im)possibility of representing femininity outside of patriarchal parameters is articulated. In relation to that challenge, death and madness stand in for another space, a different economy, another set of representations. They can be read as metaphors for an imagined alternative order outside of a phallocentric Symbolic and of the problems (of death and/or insanity) that are invoked by such imaginings. The fantasy of passing through the mirror or “casting off the prickly garments” tells us something about the nature of our desire but these fantasised other places remain uninhabitable. We may apprehend the need to find a way ‘out’ but cannot live ‘out’ there, as it were. In this way these Victorian fictions are still relevant today to the questions of women’s desire and subjectivity.

Whilst the restrictions, the conditions which make such an alternative vision desirable can be articulated more or less, what that alternative may be remains an unarticulated horizon. Certainly Irigaray’s (1985) work goes some way towards
sketching the basis of an alternative economy of sexual difference not based on the
domination of the monolithic One but based on reciprocity and recognition of (at
least) two sexes. But the inability to imagine a ‘new order’ should not be
disheartening. Irigaray’s work cautions against the “attempt to arrive at a final once-
for-all truth, beyond patriarchy” and instead encourages a “continuous process of
critical engagement” (Whitford, 1991, p. 14) so that we might recognise the ways we
are subjected to patriarchal definition and representations that thwart our desire.
Similarly, Foucault (cited in Rabinow, 1984) advocated a form of critique which,

Will not deduce from the form of what we are what is possible for
us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency
that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being,
doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. (p. 46)

What cannot be done away with then, is a continuous unsettling of what is
given to us as immutable or inevitable and recognition of the ‘omnipresence of
relations of force’, rather than the seeking of an answer or final solution. Thus,
perhaps any alternative can only be acquired, act by act, piece by piece? “One can
act, sometimes shocking oneself at one’s courage, or audacity. One lives with the
terror, the knowledge of mixed motives and fundamental conflicts, the guilt - but one
acts” (Heilbrun, 1979, p. 72). Through the reiterative performance and critical
engagement with what we are, we may struggle to become something else, even, and
especially where “no being, no places are designated” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 193).
Post-feminist discourse, with its empty affirmation of ‘liberation’ threatens to
produce a closure or at the very least a serious restriction of the space within which
such critical engagement with our limits might be undertaken.

1.5 The research

The starting point of this thesis was, as discussed above, Freud’s question,
“What does the woman want?” No definitive answer was sought but rather, the
question is taken to represent the problem of woman’s subjectivity and desire
generally as it is produced and regulated in a patriarchal discursive context.
Specifically, I will be concerned with exploring discursive constructions of
‘femininity’ in the context of post-feminism. This exploration will be concerned
primarily with white, middle class, heterosexual women since it is this particular
‘woman’ who is undoubtedly more often privileged than other women and who post-feminism takes – at least implicitly - as its universal whilst claiming to address all women.

I will critically analyse the way ‘woman’ is produced by post-feminist discourse and importantly explore the impact or effect of such productions. My initial impetus was a critical attitude toward extravagant claims of women’s emancipation and equality that are not borne out by the material conditions of women’s lives. I was interested then in how women negotiate identity within the parameters of contemporary heterosexual femininity? What happens at the intersection between heterosexual femininity and post-feminist discourses of emancipation? What kind of subjects does this plural positioning produce and what kind of effect does it have in terms of producing (or not) change?

There are two broad studies that form the research. The first is a critical discourse analysis of representations of women in post-feminist discourse in popular media. This is important to establish the ways in which post-feminist discourse (re)produces ‘woman’ and what relations of power are immanent in those productions. The second is a discourse analysis of open-ended interviews with women to explore their constructions of femininity and the place of post-feminist subjectivity.

1.5.1 Outline of thesis

Chapter 2 establishes the psychoanalytic theory underpinning the research question. Specifically, it explores desire and the problem of ‘woman’ from a Lacanian perspective. Lacan (1972-3a) has (in)famously stated that “there is no such thing as The woman” (p. 144) and the implications of this for women and feminine subjectivity and identity are explored. The criticism that Lacan’s formulation of sexual difference is prescriptive and deterministic is also considered. Irigaray’s extension and subversion of Lacanian theory is discussed both for the power of the imaginative alternative it poses and because it simultaneously highlights the difficulties inherent in any alternative project of identity.

Chapter 2 also explores post-structuralist theory of the subject and looks at the way that it shares certain assumptions with Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis to do with the deconstruction of the ‘individual’ as a product of liberal humanist discourse. Discourse analysis is approached as a necessary
supplement to the psychoanalytic theory. For, whilst psychoanalysis can be seen to present a certain problem and to offer a compelling explanation of the complexity of sexed subjectivity, discourse analysis offers a means of grounding these abstractions within concrete and specific socio-historical circumstances. To argue that the Symbolic order circulates essentially undisrupted is not to say that it never changes its appearance. Similarly, on its own discourse theory has difficulty accounting for subjectivity and ideas of agency, investment and desire. How do subjects psychically manage their positioning within various discourses and why indeed do we invest in some positions and not others? Combining discourse theory with psychoanalysis offers an effective means of understanding the difficulty of establishing ‘new’ discourses, the persistence of the status quo and the effects of power on subjectivity. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological issues, explaining the situatedness of the research in a feminist post-structuralist framework and giving an overview of discourse analytic approaches. This chapter sets out the methodological details of both studies, the media analysis and the analysis of interviews with women.

Chapter 4 presents the first study, an exploration of our ‘post-feminist’ cultural context through a discursive analysis of popular media in the form of magazine articles, newspapers and television. The notion that we are post-feminist is expressed in popular culture through a number of different tropes or representations of women as empowered and fulfilled, including the woman as warrior, ‘having it all’ and the conflict between work and family seen as an effect of feminist politics which must now be ‘fixed’ in these more reasonable and egalitarian times. Part of this amalgamation of different discursive strategies for promoting the idea of a ‘post-feminist’ utopia for women also involves discourses about men’s relative failure or crises in the face of such ‘outright victories’ for women in the ‘battle of the sexes’. Also considered are some of the effects of these post-feminist claims of equality in terms of creating a backlash where women’s material gains are able to be actively eroded or reversed.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present the analyses of the second study which was based on in-depth, open ended interviews with ten women. Chapter 5, considers the construction of heterosexual femininity and post-feminist subjectivity. Interviewees’ talk about lesbian sexuality shows the way that non-heterosexual women are discursively used to mark the boundaries of ‘proper’ femininity and by extension ‘woman’. Primarily, being a woman is discursively constituted as being in, or
having some relation to men or ‘man’. This has all sorts of implications for the way women understand themselves and the way they may speak about themselves which are explored. As a result of this constitutive imperative, it can be seen in the interviews that it is very important not to present one’s self as strident or aggressive and particularly never to direct those particular emotions towards men specifically. Women are required to engage in a great deal of rhetorical work in order to speak about their grievances with men and voice their dissatisfaction without appearing to make wholesale generalisations about men as a group. This policing – evident in the interviews - is undoubtedly increased by ‘post-feminist’ discourse as well as a change in political focus towards the problem of masculinity and men’s issues. The chapter also looks at some of the ways that the women can be seen to take up a post-feminist subject position and the profound impact this has in terms of occluding gender politics and closing down a space for the articulation of complaint.

Chapter 6, It’s a Man’s World, looks at the way the interviewees reproduced dominant cultural constructions of woman and man respectively equated with the private and public domains. Woman is repeatedly signified as ‘Home’, and associated with the private and domestic. Simultaneously, masculinity is signified by ‘work’. Thus, women are established as caretakers of the ‘internal’ and ‘private’ world of feelings, emotion and relationship. The construction of the public as a masculine domain is shown to result in ‘woman’ being produced in that public space as the victim of prejudice, discrimination and violence. A masculine domestic fantasy emerges from the interview analysis where woman is constructed as ‘Home’ and Home in turn is constructed as a place where women are protected from the realities of a harsh masculine world. However, as the analysis highlights, it is women who actively construct and act as this ‘safe’ home for men. The counterpoint to this patriarchal domestic myth is the violence and abuse that women experience in the ‘Home’. The chapter highlights, a profoundly phallocentric construction of woman, despite post-feminist rhetoric of women’s emancipation, a woman’s place is given here as still being ‘in the home’. It also indicates throughout, the ways in which the construction of woman along these lines represents the restriction of women’s choices despite a context which produces women as free of restriction.

Chapter 7, Hard Labour, following on from the way that woman is signified as ‘Home’, explores a construction of woman as a position burdened with responsibility for care and emotional labour and the way that this is an ‘inevitable’
outcome of her positioning. The analysis here of women’s talk about emotional and care labour illustrates the argument that women are substantially defined by their relational capacity and that therefore their ‘identity’ is more diffuse. The primary focus of this chapter is on the way that femininity is collapsed into the maternal function and thus resonates with Irigaray’s assertion that in a patriarchal context woman is buried in the maternal function. From this ‘she’ is overwhelmingly signified by the qualities associated with the maternal, that is, nurture, care and sacrifice. Thus, woman is produced as a subject position based on self-lessness – the erasure of self in the service of other’s needs. Whilst this is most powerfully articulated in discourses of motherhood, which are explored in the chapter, the analysis also highlights that ‘woman’ never escapes being designated as ‘mother’. This regulative (masculine) ideal of femininity as self-less, that is, oriented towards others, is found to have a seriously restrictive impact on women’s choices. Most problematically, a post-feminist discourse which produces woman as a quasi-masculine subject, that is, autonomous and free, occludes the operations of power which regulate women’s immersion in care and domesticity by recasting it as a matter of individual choice. This is found to be most vividly apparent where women discuss experiences of conflict between the demands of work and family and of how they are encouraged to find ‘individual’ solutions to what is a systemic social problem.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with an overview of the most significant points from the analysis and a general discussion of some of the political implications of the research. In particular, my own sense of urgency is around the need to rearticulate ‘woman’ as a category of political relevance in order to (re)open the space in which women can find a voice of complaint that locates their problems and dilemmas in the field of power relations rather than in the realm of the private and individual. Of course, as has been widely discussed in feminist theory, any such ‘identity’ based politics must take its foundational category as contingent and contestable (Butler, 1992) in order to avoid the violence of universalising tendencies which act to reproduce relations of dominance by flattening out difference. Especially, in the face of the neo-liberalising effects of post-feminist discourse a critical engagement and questioning of the systems of representation to which we are subject must be revived at the level of the everyday.
I think the most important aim is to make visible the exploitation common to all women and to discover the struggles which every woman should engage in, wherever she is: depending on her country, her occupation, her class, and her sexual estate – i.e. the most immediately unbearable of her mode of oppression. (Irigaray, 1977, p. 69)
2

Theorising the feminine subject

Then the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of man’s ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. Then the man said, “At last, here is one of my own kind – Bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. ‘Woman’ is her name because she was taken out of man.” (Good News Bible, Genesis: 2.21-24)

Whatever inequalities may exist among women, they all undergo, even without realising it, the same oppression, the same exploitation of their body, the same denial of their desire. (Irigaray, 1977: 66)

2.1 Introduction

Freud very famously saw women as the ‘dark continent’ in terms of understanding their psychosexual make-up and development (Freud, 1933). Specifically, it is the nature of our desire which proved a stumbling block for psychoanalytic theory. Freud stated in a letter to Marie Bonaparte that ‘the great question that has never been answered and which I have never been able to answer despite my thirty years of research into the feminine soul is “what does a woman want?”’ (Jones, 1955, p. 421). Further, Freud (1933) stated that no one would fail to be perplexed by the problem or riddle of ‘femininity’ – though he was specifically addressing the men in his audience for he says, “…to those of you who are women this will not apply – you are yourselves the problem” (p. 71).

Lacan, in what is considered to be a seminal essay on the nature of femininity and ‘woman’ performs an identically dismissive turn. In the seminar “God and the Jouissance of the Woman” (1972-3a), he purports to ask about the source of Theresa of Avila’s coming, her jouissance, only he is not asking, he is telling. Grosz (1990), in her introduction to Lacan, notes this when she says, “If Lacan begs women to tell him in what their pleasure consists, he is not prepared to hear what they have to say” (p. 146). In “God and the Jouissance of the Woman” Lacan is theorising what
woman is in so far as he is articulating what ‘woman’ is for man – that is, what part she plays in the sexual relation. To return to Freud’s question, ‘wanting’ is particularly fraught for women if we accept a psychoanalytic perspective on sexual difference and consider the effects of being subject to a phallocentric order. If woman is constructed and understood only in her relation to the masculine then her desire becomes highly problematic since it can only circulate within an economy which excludes the possibility of a desire which is specific to her (see Irigaray, 1984, 1985a, 1985b).

The tension between psychoanalysis and feminism is well known (see Brennan, 1989; Gallop, 1982; Sayers, 1986). Feminist scholars (e.g. Rose, J. 1982) have been critical of tendencies toward universalism, determinism and toward collapsing sexual difference into biological difference. Resistance arises also for the sheer misogyny and contempt that often appears to be inherent in psychoanalytic theory, encountered in concepts such as penis envy, the significance of the phallus or assertions that women are characteristically passive and morally suspect (see Frosh, 1999, pp.196-197). There is however, also substantial support for a relationship between psychoanalysis and feminism, ushered in by Juliet Mitchell’s (1974) monumental text, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Whilst accepting the above criticisms as relevant, I fall on the side of those feminists for psychoanalysis rather than against, to use the terminology in Bowlby’s (1989) discussion of the relationship between feminism(s) and psychoanalysis. However, I hope to address or at least acknowledge questions and criticisms produced by these tensions as and when they arise in the discussion that follows.

Whilst psychoanalytic theory gives an account of the ‘successful’ actualisation of the process of sexual differentiation, it is in the fact that this is a process which can and to some degree inevitably will fail which inheres the radical potential of psychoanalytic theory of gender. It has been pointed out by those who would seek to use psychoanalysis to understand the process of our production as sexed beings that Freud outlines a politics of gender, of what is made of the human body in a patriarchal society (Ferrel, 1996; Gallop, 1982; Mitchell, 1974; Rose, 1986; Sayers, 1982, 1986). Psychoanalysis shows how gendered identity is not biologically given but must be achieved and that it is achieved through constraint, regulation and prohibition. Lacan, in extending Freud’s theory showed the way that
identity and sexual difference are produced at the level of the Symbolic and how their meaning circulates reiteratively at the Symbolic level.

This chapter considers the problematic nature of feminine identity as it is encountered in Lacan’s re-reading of, or ‘return to Freud’ (Lacan, 1955). It begins by exploring the Lacanian understanding of the ‘subject’. Here Lacan’s three orders, the Real, Imaginary and Symbolic, are briefly explained. This is followed by discussion of a key concept in Lacanian theory, that is, Desire.

These explanations of Lacan’s theory of subjectivity and the place of Desire reveal ‘Woman’ as a highly problematic subject position. This becomes clearer as the chapter goes on to discuss the way that Lacan theorises sexual difference specifically through the concept of the phallus and what he regards as the fantasy of the sexual relation. This discussion reveals that “woman” is defined by her relation to man and as such has no definitive or distinctive identity within the symbolic other than as a support for his identity (Grosz, 1990; Irigaray, 1977; Rose, 1982). She is positioned as Other to the masculine One and constituted as negative and lacking, thereby forming the constitutive outside of masculine identity. That is, the subject, or the ‘I’ is masculine whilst femininity is mired in the ‘not-I’. However, for each woman individually it is virtually impossible to be sunk in a category of non-identity. So the problem of women’s subjectivity and desire lived out day to day could be said to involve the struggle between femininity and subjectivity (Sayers, 1986, 1987). The “recognition that women might also have other desires, the desire to be active agents of their own destiny rather than to be simply passive subjects of men’s agency” (Sayers, 1986, p.168) reveals the basis for a profound tension between competing desires. The one structured along patriarchal lines and the other, that which exceeds (though cannot escape) this regulation of our desire as the product of masculine fantasy.

Irigaray’s work (1977, 1984, 1985a/b) is then taken up in the next section for the way she extends the implications of Lacanian theory for women but also initiates a project of imagining an alternative in Lacan’s seemingly rigid, deterministic scheme. Irigaray further elaborates and makes explicit the phallocentrism inherent in Lacanian theorisation of the woman. Her position is particularly complicated in that she does not refute that ‘Woman’ is constructed in and through her relation to the masculine and in fact she extends Lacan’s work by elaborating on the implications of this positioning for women’s identity. Irigaray makes explicit that the Symbolic
operates on an economy of the same where man is man and woman is not-man which is not to have any subject position of her own (Grosz, 1989). The other aspect of Irigaray’s work is her engagement in the project of imagining an other woman who would not be the product of the phallocentric symbolic (Whitford, 1991). In other words, she is concerned with the problem given above of what subject position women might be able to aspire to as beings-for-ourselves. Her specific agenda has important implications for feminism in the contemporary context and indicates why a feminism based on liberal humanist principles is inadequate for our present needs.

The theoretical focus of this chapter then moves to look at post-structuralism as a way of addressing some of the problematic of psychoanalytic tendencies toward universalising and abstraction. I look at Foucault’s theory of discourse and the implications of a Foucauldian framework for understanding subjectivity, power and the problem of resistance and agency where power is understood to be constitutive of our very subjectivity rather than simply an external restraint that one could conceivably be liberated from. Also discussed are some of the implications for feminist politics of adopting a post-structuralist framework that problematises ‘identity’ as a stable and coherent category that could act as the basis for a ‘politics’. This is understood in Butler’s (1992) terms as requiring that we take ‘woman’ as a ‘contingent’ and thus, ever contestable, foundation of political engagement.

2.2 The subject and the Symbolic

The term, the subject is, quite typically for Lacan, intentionally over-determined. The nomenclature is meant to designate the psychological notion of the human individual but more specifically, to indicate that this entity is “subject to” or “subjected” in the sense of being dependant or conditional upon something else (Elliot, 2001; Henrique et al, 1984). Closely aligned with this sense of being subjected is to be under rule of law or authority. For Lacan, this something else on which we are dependant and to which we are subject(ed) is language. Our very existence as speaking beings is conditional upon entry to language or more precisely the Symbolic Order (Frosh, 1999; Grosz, 1990; Lacan, 1977). And the rule of this order, the Law we are subject to is governed by the paternal metaphor or Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, 1953). The order that produces us as subjects precedes us and is governed by rules which likewise precede us and position us. There is also another sense in which as conscious beings we are subject in Lacan’s theory and that is that
we are subject to the unconscious and its processes. The subject is ruled by something of itself of which it knows nothing. In the unconscious, the subject of consciousness is not itself, is not an ‘I’. “For Lacan, the unconscious undermines the subject from any position of certainty, from any relation of knowledge to his or her psychic processes and history” (Rose, 1982, p. 29). Identity in the liberal humanist sense of the term then is fictional, illusory. In this, psychoanalysis shares a conceptualisation of the human subject wholly in keeping with post-structuralist thought which rejects the notion of a ‘real’ or ‘true’ self which can have rational control over its self. Subjectivity is constituted outside itself, in and through language (Frosh, 1999; Grosz, 1990). “The subject, the pronominal ‘I’, is created through an order that originates outside it, in the flux of inter-subjective relationships that surround it and elect it to a place in their midst” (Frosh, 1999, p.140).

This symbolic constituted subject of the enunciation, that is, the speaking subject who is spoken through is preceded by another I, according to Lacan, (1949) formed in an earlier stage, the mirror stage, and based on a mis-identification or méconnaissance, wherein the infant takes on as its own an image of the (m)other. The apprehension of the (m)other as whole and separate is taken to be one’s own. This image of unity and integration replaces a prior experience of fragmentation. Importantly here, this Ideal-I or ego is assumed by being discovered in someone else. That is, the subject’s identity is formed in a mis-identification with something external to itself, its mirror image. Therefore, this initial identification constitutes the subject’s first alienation from itself. The mirror stage also establishes “a relation between the organism and it’s reality” (Lacan, 1949, p. 4) engendering an experience of exteriority and interiority where previously the infant is presumed to have felt continuous with everything around it. This process marks the “assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development” (ibid, p. 4).

For Lacan then, the Ideal-I precipitates the I as the subject of language in the symbolic. Lacan (1949) also makes the distinction between the former as a specular I and the latter as a social I. Significantly, no linearity is intended, the Ideal-I or ego remains a structure of subjectivity which must be reconciled with the I of the Symbolic. Something noteworthy to draw out of this theorisation is that since the I is based on an initial alienation and is according to Lacan ‘paranoic’ in character it is maintained as an ‘armour’, a ‘rigid structure’, likened to a fortress which must be
defended. This is precisely because it is ‘the seat of illusions’ representing only an imaginary fixity thus, according to Lacan (1949), setting the infant off in the direction of its fictional identity, i.e. as coherent and unified.

Lacan’s theorising of the subject whilst self-avowedly being a ‘return to Freud’ was also much influenced by Saussurian linguistics or structural linguistics (Lacan, 1957; de Saussure, 1916). This holds that meaning does not exist in things-in-themselves and words do not transparently represent the things they name. The relationship between words and meaning is essentially arbitrary and maintained by social convention. There is in fact a distance between the thing (the signified) and its word (its signifier) (Henriques et al, 1984; Rose, 1982). In fact, words represent the absence of the thing they profess to make present. A signifier ‘stands in for’ or in place of the object or thing it signifies (Rose, 1982). Language makes up for our lack of a relation. In other words, language represents a fantasy that we can have unmediated access to experience or to some “real” thing which precedes us and is unaltered by our perception and naming of it. Meaning in this formulation does not inhere in the things themselves but is a product of language systems – of differences between signifiers. Some recognition of difference is essential to meaning. Language indicates the loss behind the moment of symbolisation – it stands in for presence. In the same way our identity stands in for our lack of presence or the absence or lack that conditions us on entry to the Symbolic order (Grosz, 1990; Rose, 1982).

This understanding of language formed the basis of Lacan’s conceptualisation of the Symbolic order, primarily the order of law and structure. Lacan also referred to the Symbolic as the Other (Grosz, 1990; Lacan, 1957). The unconscious belongs wholly to the Symbolic, being the discourse of this Other (Lacan, 1957). Entry into the Symbolic hails the emergence of the ‘Subject’ as distinct from the ego of the Imaginary. “[Freud] wrote Das Ich und das Es [there where it was it is my duty that I should come into being] in order to maintain this fundamental distinction between the true subject of the unconscious and the ego as constituted in its nucleus by a series of alienating identifications” (Lacan, 1955, p. 141). The subject then, is an effect of language. Barred from knowledge of itself and spoken through in the sense that language comes from the Other.
It is not only man [sic] who speaks, but in man and through man that it [ca] speaks, that his nature is woven by effects in which we can find the structure of language, whose material he becomes, and that consequently there resounds in him, beyond anything ever conceived of by the psychology of ideas, the relation of speech. (Lacan, 1958, p. 78)

The unconscious speaks through the subject but the subject cannot speak of it, of what it knows of it. This subject is a radical departure, as already indicated, from the humanist fiction of a self-consciousness which is transparent to itself. The designation ‘I’ then is a fictitious entity, an illusory sense of self which veils the lack which constitutes all speaking beings on entry to the Symbolic. Lacan (1960, 1964) referred to ‘I’ as a shifter, having an undecidable and problematic nature by virtue of being both a signifier since it always represents the person saying ‘I’ and an index in that it can represent anyone in any context. This distinction is fundamental to the idea of the split subject or barred subject.

The insertion of the human subject into language depends on an experience of otherness, of absence and of lack: it is only by the perception of a boundary between self and other, and hence of the impossibility of total fulfilment, that the child can formulate a communicable notion of the self; hence, in all its experiences in language, the subject is constantly reiterating its division. The thrust of development is therefore not towards greater integration, but towards greater division. (Frosh, 1999, p. 148)

The Symbolic is the realm of Law, specifically, the Law of the Father (Frosh, 1999; Grosz, 1990). Law, for Lacan is self-identical with language. Language communicates the fundamental principles underlying social exchange. And in the Lacanian Symbolic, the Law is paternal or more specifically, imposed through the paternal metaphor, that is, the “Name-of-the-Father” (Lacan, 1953, 1955-6). Thus, it is a patriarchal Symbolic that Lacan describes. The father in this sense is not so much a real being but a function, a metaphor. The symbolic father is taken to be the third term which mediates between mother and child and it is identification with this third term which hails the subject’s accession to the Symbolic via the castration complex. The intervention of the Law mediates the anti-social dyad of the mother and child creating a necessary ‘symbolic distance’ between them (Lacan, 1956-57, cited in Evans, 1996, p. 62). This is necessary to enable the individual to take a place
as speaking subject, thereby making possible relationships with other people (Frosh, 1999; Rose, 1982). The intervention of the Law and entry into the Symbolic engenders the subject, the unconscious and also Desire.

2.3 Desire

Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn’t the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. (Lacan, 1954-5, pp. 222-3)

As Frosh (1999) states, “[T]he concern of Lacanian theory with loss, lack and the impossibility of unification is exquisitely expressed in the notion of ‘desire’” (p.148). Lacan (1964) argues that ‘desire is the essence of man [sic]’ (p. 275). It is present for every subject, male and female, as the very condition of their emergence into the symbolic as an alienated ‘I’. What is desire according to Lacan? First of all it is not ‘need’ or ‘demand’, since Lacan (1958a) was explicit about the distinction between these terms and their position within different orders. ‘Need’ is closely linked to Freud’s concept of instinct. It is a biological imperative which disappears (even if only temporarily) once satisfied (Lacan, 1958a). However, since the human being is born in such a state of helplessness, it depends on the (m)other to satisfy its needs. Therefore, needs must be addressed to the (m)other somehow in which case they are articulated as ‘demand’ (Lacan, 1958a). Demand however, which operates in the Imaginary register, is not simply the articulation of need but the demand for love. In Lacan’s (1958a) formula, “desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction [need], nor the demand for love, but the difference resulting from the subtraction of the first from the second” (p. 81). Need, once put into signifying form, thereby becoming demand, becomes alienated. Frosh (1999) explains it thus: “As needs are put into a signifying form …they become converted into a message in which what is being demanded is not some specific satisfaction, but complete affirmation or recognition” (p. 148). Desire, therefore, can be understood to emerge in the gap between the Symbolic and ‘real’, created through our alienating entry into the Symbolic and is thus impossible to satisfy.

Zizek (1991) explains Lacan’s understanding of desire as recognition and the distinction between need, demand and desire thus:
An everyday object destined to satisfy some of our needs undergoes a kind of transubstantiation as soon as it is caught in the dialectic of demand and ends up producing desire. When we demand an object from somebody, its “use value”... *eo ipso* becomes a form of expression of its exchange value”.... If the other complies with our wish, he [sic] thereby bears witness to a certain attitude toward us. The final purpose of our demand for an object is thus not the satisfaction of a need attached to it but confirmation of the other’s attitude toward us. (p. 5)

Desire then is fundamental to a sense of being and identity. “In these terms, when we desire we are attempting to assert a sense of being, of existence” (Fuery, 1995, p. 23-4). Lacan (1958b) explains that desire is the metonymy of the lack of being or “manque à être” (want-to-be) (p. 254). The desire to want-to-be arises out of the subject’s lack of being. Lacan’s most oft-repeated formula of desire was that it is essentially “desire of the Other’s desire”. This is another way of putting the subject’s want-to-be. Desire of the Other’s desire is the desire to be the object of another’s desire, again, it is desire for recognition. Lacan was influenced by Kojeve’s reading of Hegel in his understanding of desire (Evans, 1996; Muller & Richardson, 1982):

Desire is human only if the one desires, not the body, but the Desire of the other...that is to say, if he wants to be ‘desired’ or ‘loved’, or, rather, ‘recognised’ in his human value.... In other words, all human, anthropogenetic Desire...is finally, a function of the desire for recognition. (Kojève, 1947, p. 6)

In the same way that signifiers take their meaning only from the chain of other signifiers, so too subjects’ rely on the other to be confirmed in their existence. Here we return to the subject for whom self-knowledge is not a given as Descartes assumed but is ever elusive and precarious, dependant on recognition from others and on the entire system of signs and symbols (Lacan, 1957).

Desire by definition within a Lacanian framework cannot be satisfied since this would necessitate the dissolution of the subject as subject. Desire in itself is a condition, a force – not satisfied by anything - an impossible longing for a return to origin, “the affective memory of a pleasure prior to individuation” (Butler, 1987, p.187) which is irrecoverable. Desire is in a sense a process - that the subject pursues in order to guarantee its existence. It is, according to Lacan, an activity “eternally stretching forth towards the *desire for something else*” (Lacan, 1957,
p.184, emphasis in original). That is, since it must be mediated by the Symbolic, it is constantly transferred and displaced onto various objects. It is not related to a lack-of-having such that it can be satisfied by any given thing but is related to a lack-in-being (Evans, 1996).

“There is only one object of desire, objet a, [which] is not the object towards which desire tends, but the cause of desire” (Evans, 1996, p. 37). This somewhat paradoxical statement expresses the notion that we no longer desire what we already have. The object of our desire must appear to satisfy whilst sustaining desire. An excellent explanation of the objet a is contained in Zizek’s (1991) introduction to Lacanian theory, Looking Awry:

As in a dream, the pursuer never succeeds in catching up with the fugitive whom he is after, and the fugitive likewise cannot ever clearly escape his pursuer”…. What we have here is thus the relationship of subject to the object experienced by every one of us in a dream: the subject, faster than the object, gets closer and closer to it and yet can never attain it – the dream paradox of a continuous approach to an object that nevertheless preserves a constant distance…. the paradox stages the relation of the subject to the object-cause [objet a] of its desire, which can never be attained. The object-cause is always missed; all we can do is encircle it. (p.4)

Desire is not related to any particular object since it cannot be satisfied but is rather related in an inverse way to its cause. The a standing for autre or other which is homologous and distinct from the Autre or the big Other (Evans, 1996). The objet a can be understood as the “representative object of lack” or the “metonymic object of desire” (Lemaire, 1970, p. 174). It is an “inestimable treasure” we believe to be hidden in the Other which we desire to be given up to us by the other (Lacan, 1960, p.356). It is whatever confirms us – and was for Lacan also closely associated with the gaze (Grosz, 1990), again returning us to the idea that what we desire is recognition (Lacan, 1957).

Desire then is understood as a condition or force rather than a simple desire for this or that object and importantly it is closely bound up with identity. The next section builds on Lacan’s theorisation of the emergence of subjectivity and the place of desire to the specificities of his explanation of sexual difference as an effect of the process of subjectification and the phallic nature of the Symbolic. The key ideas for Lacan in theorising sexual difference are the phallus and the fantasy of the sexual
relation as a disavowal of the impossibility of desire. The implications of these concepts for ‘woman’s’ subject position will be highlighted.

2.4 Sexual difference: woman and the phallus

For Lacan, there is no pre-discursive reality, no place prior to the law which is available and can be retrieved [this is precisely what has been lost]. And there is no feminine outside language. First, because the unconscious severs the subject from any unmediated relation to the body as such, and secondly because the ‘feminine’ is constituted as a division in language, a division which produces the feminine as it’s negative term. (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 55)

Rose (1982) states, “[S]exual identity operates as a law – it is something enjoined on the subject” (p. 29). It is not based on any biological imperative but occurs by virtue of the subject taking up a place in an order wherein sexual difference is always already inscribed. In this way accession to the Symbolic is also accession to sexual difference or a sexed subjectivity. Femininity is not reducible to any ‘real’ or biological substrate. Instead it is a position constituted within language as the negative of the masculine, as that which is not.

In line with the Symbolic being synonymous with the paternal metaphor, the privileged signifier of the symbolic is the phallus. Quite possibly the phallus is one of Lacan’s most controversial and contested concepts (Grosz, 1990). The following section attempts an explanation of the phallus, specifically as it relates to sexual difference and explores the way that ‘Woman’ is theorised within the Lacanian paradigm. Lacan has been widely accused of phallocentrism in describing the symbolic as synonymous with the Law of the Father and especially through the centrality he accords the phallus (see Brennan, 1989). It is around the phallus that the question of sexual difference turns. Indeed, Lacan’s Symbolic is phallocentric. However, as Gallop (1982) argues, “if feminism is to change a phallocentric world, phallocentrism must be dealt with and not denied” (p. 18). So, I turn here to Lacan’s account of sexual difference with the phallus taking centre stage as it were.
2.4.1 The meaning of the phallus

Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God and he was the same as God. From the very beginning the word was with God. Through him God made all things, not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life. What was made had life in union with the word. (Good News Bible, John: 1.1-5)

In Lacanian (1958a) theory, the phallus marks the advent of the subject as split, as lacking. The imagined unity between mother and child is submitted to a third term/law which enacts a consequent separation between the self and the object(s) of its desire. This third term is the Name-of-the-Father. The intervention of the paternal metaphor substitutes the Other (i.e. the Symbolic) for the (m)other and signals a moment of rupture from which the subject will never recover and which will condition its very existence. The phallus is the mark of this split, the double alienation of the subject from itself and from the other and simultaneously it signifies the One, the fiction of a singular, coherent (masculine) identity. In the Meaning of the Phallus, Lacan (1958a) is clear as mud about what the phallus is:

[t]he phallus is not a fantasy, if what is understood by that is an imaginary effect. Nor is it as such an object (part-, internal, good, bad, etc.) in so far as this term tends to accentuate the reality involved in a relationship. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolises. And it is not incidental that Freud took his reference from the simulacrum which it represents for the ancients. The phallus is a signifier… It is the signifier that is given to designate as a whole the effect of their being a signified. (pp. 80-81)

From this passage let me first begin with what Lacan says the phallus is rather than what he asserts it is not, although that is equally important since the phallus is entirely what it is and isn’t. “The phallus is a signifier….It is the signifier that is given to designate as a whole the effect of there being a signified”: this is what is meant when the phallus is referred to often as the signifier of signifiers. It signifies what has been lost (and gained) for the subject to enter the symbolic and is thus the signifier of desire. Its advent represents the acknowledgment in Lacanian theory that it is the signified that is subordinate to the signifier, that the signifier creates the signified. As such it represents the subject’s ‘lack-in-being’ (Benvenuto & Kennedy,
The phallus is representative of the very function of language (signification) which is to make what is absent present. The phallus then is the signifier of ‘identity’ and thus also the conditioning lack/loss in the subject.

In any case, man cannot aim at being whole (the ‘total personality’ being another premise where modern psychotherapy goes off course) once the play of displacement and condensation, to which he is committed in the exercise of his functions, marks his relation as subject to the signifier. (Lacan, 1958a, pp. 81-82)

As it is the signifier of the effect of the subject’s submission to the effects of language it is also therefore, the signifier of desire. Lacan explains, “[T]he phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of logos is wedded to the advent of desire” (ibid, p. 82). Desire arises through the subject’s alienation under the effects of the signifier. The subject always speaks from the locus of the Other, and its demands to (an)other are alienated from him/her by virtue of being mediated by the chain of signification or the exigencies of the Other (Grosz, 1990). As we speak so we are spoken. Individuals do not own language but language already has a life and project of its own (Frosh, 1994; Lacan, 1953). Language institutes a split both within and without. Desire arises from and is this split, launching the subject into an impossible attempt at wholeness through recognition (identity). Hence, desire being the desire of the Other. In being the signifier of the Other, the signifier of desire, the phallus is then taken to be that which could ‘fill’ or repair the lacking subject. In all this, the phallus actually signifies no-thing, it is empty of content and signifies an effect only (Lacan, 1958; Rose, 1982).

The phallus as signifier of signifiers represents the very duplicity of language. Words, as things in themselves, contain no inherent meanings in the sense that they are not referent to some underlying reality. There is nothing beneath the signifier except the signified it instantiates which is only an effect of language. However, it can only operate effectively (meaningfully) if it appears to be ‘real’, to be self-same with the thing it names. Similarly, the phallus institutes the fantasy of fixed meaning, including the fantasy of fixed and stable identity but it also contains its own cancellation – slipping away and vanishing into nothing. To represent itself as ‘presence’ it must hide the fact that meaning requires an(other) and that truth is therefore, negotiable. This idea of deception is central to Lacan’s theoretical edifice
(Rose, 1982). The phallus is the sign in itself of its own cancelling out. It is the signifier with which every other signifier is marked or struck by its own latency. Everything that is signifiable is signifiable by virtue of the phallus whilst simultaneously undermined by the phallus as the sign in itself of its own absence or disappearance.

Recall, in The Meaning of the Phallus (1958a), Lacan states with regard to the phallus, “it is not incidental that Freud took his reference for it from the simulacrum which it represented for the ancients” (p. 79). A quick consultation of the thesaurus (Roget’s International Thesaurus, 1977) reveals some useful synonyms for the simulacrum which relate to the function of the phallus in effecting sexual difference: untruth, sham, fakery, false, pretence, fabrication, lie and so forth.

Baudrillard (1994) advanced the notion of the universal simulacrum – arrived at when the distinction between representation and reality breaks down, that is, the distinction between signs and what they refer to. That is, the sign, is not the thing-in-itself. This is the function of language to mark the absence of a basic reality (or at least the impossibility of an unmediated relation to the thing-in-itself).

In all of the explanation given above, the phallus could be taken to simply be a neutral signifier of the absence conditioning human subjectivity and of the effects of signification. However, the phallus is not neutral. It does bar both male and female subjects but it also forces sexual difference by producing male and female subjects (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986; Brennan, 1989). The very process of symbolisation itself is structured around a central impossibility: the impossibility of structuring the Real (Zizek, 1991). Therefore, symbolisation (and necessarily then the phallus) relies on an exclusion. In order to create meaning (semblance) something must be excluded – this is the paradox of language itself. What cannot be structured must be excluded and the exclusion must be hidden – absence masquerades as presence. This inherent quality of symbolisation maps onto masculinity and femininity. In this way, we could understand masculinity and femininity as the qualities of the very effect of speaking. In signifying the effect of the Symbolic the phallus signifies sexed ‘identity’, both masculinity and femininity. However, as will be discussed below, the consequences of this phallic nature of the Symbolic are quite different for women and men.

There is substantial confusion and controversy which surrounds the concept of the phallus, particularly because it is located by Lacan as the privileged signifier
of the Symbolic. Recall, that Lacan (1958) said the phallus wasn’t “the organ, penis or clitoris, that it symbolises”. Despite this assertion, Lacan’s own use of the term is often ambiguous, sometimes appearing to denote the real or imagined organ and other times appearing in its role of signifier (Brennan, 1989; Evans, 1996; Muller & Richardson, 1982). That Lacan can clearly make the distinction that the phallus is not the organ, is simply due to the fact that the phallus is a signifier – it cannot be the penis. On the other hand, in Lacan’s formulation the phallus is linked with the penis. “Lacanian’s may wish to separate phallus from penis but it is virtually impossible to prevent the one from slipping into the other” (Frosh, 1999, p. 224). Lacan does state that the coincidence of the penis with the phallus is an arbitrary one but seems to leave it there. However, as Butler (1993, p. 90) points out, “it is not enough to claim that the signifier is not the same as the signified (phallus/penis), if both terms are nevertheless bound to each other by an essential relation in which that difference is contained”. There is no critical reflection by Lacan on the dominance of the phallus as signifier or its privileged relation to the masculine. This is highly problematic in Lacan’s theorisation since it appears to indicate that this linkage and dominance is incontestable or originating in some way (Butler, 1993; Gallop, 1982, 1988; Irigaray, 1986). As Frosh (1999) explains,

the fact that it is the penis which gives shape to the image of power cannot be accidental, is not totally arbitrary; rather, it is either biologically determined or it reflects pervasive social arrangements which are built on underlying relations of force. Lacan’s failure to consider the second of these explanations vacates the field for easy appeal to the first. (p. 240)

This absence of a critical position in Lacan with reference to the privileging of the masculine in his theory should be kept in mind when I continue discussing the implications of the phallus in signifying sexual difference. It is not so much that Lacan’s account of the production of sexual difference and ‘woman’, specifically, is not relevant, but that it is necessary to consistently assert the possibility of an alternative set of social arrangements than those Lacan describes. This is a point that will be returned to in discussion later in the chapter.

The phallus then, is both an abstract signifier and that which institutes sexual difference. On the one hand, it represents the “basic struggle of human finitude independent of sexual differentiation” (Muller & Richardson, 1982, p. 338) and in a
patriarchy it also collapses into the real organ the penis, such that women can be said not to have it. The polarity of having or not having the phallus is not a simple one then, operating as it does on two simultaneous levels. As an abstract signifier the phallus represents the impossibility of desire and as such can be had by no one. No one is all. Or put another way, everyone is not-all (lacks). However, the position of masculinity is aligned with the ‘positive’ function of the phallus such that it is he who is seen to “have” the phallus. Although, since no one can actually have the phallus it is more correct to say that man is not without having it (Lacan, 1958). The Woman, however, is without having it at all. Though that is not to say that she does not partake of it at all, as she must since she is subject to the Symbolic and barred by desire also (ibid).

In this way then, the relation to the phallus is generally understood to turn around the relations of ‘having’ and ‘being’ (ibid). Man takes up the phallus in its aspect of presence, as autonomous, bounded and self-contained. Of course, this is precarious for two reasons at least. Firstly, it is only through the phallus that he (the empirical male) partakes of a power which is bestowed on him from outside and to which his claims, as an individual male, are therefore always shaky (Frosch, 1994). Secondly, because the phallus signifies absence as surely as presence – it is always in danger of sliding into nothingness. Recall that the entire process of symbolisation turns on the object as absent. The ‘Woman’ is constituted as not having the phallus, as lacking it (though in truth he lacks the phallus also). For one sex to posture as having it one must necessarily be without it, as Grosz (1990, p. 132) points out when she explains that “the phallus functions intersubjectively, for it is only by means of the other that one’s possession of or identity with the phallus can be confirmed”.

The ‘Woman’ then, according to Lacan, takes up the position of ‘being’ the phallus:

Simply by keeping to the function of the phallus, we can pinpoint the structures which will govern the relations between the sexes.

Let us say these relations will revolve around a being and a having which, [because they] refer to a signifier, the phallus… (Lacan, 1958, p. 83)

There is an explicit lack of symmetry in the phallus as signifier. The relation of the Woman to the phallus is that she does not have it. She is without it. Lacan (1955-6, p. 176) is explicit about this lack of symmetry in the signifier, the phallus, when he
states, “strictly speaking, there is no symbolisation of women’s sex as such … the phallus is a symbol to which there is no correspondent, no equivalent. It is a matter of dissymmetry in the signifier”. That is, there is no ‘female signifier’. Sexual difference is based on a masculine paradigm for Lacan. The masculine is the universal term. Overall, for Lacan, masculinity and femininity are not absolutely fixed or biological categories but are the result of the subject’s insertion into the Symbolic order which regulates sexed identity according to the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, patriarchal law instantiates masculinity and femininity in a certain mode.

For Lacan, as we shall see the notion of complementarity was an absolute anathema. He saw complementarity as a male phantasy established to deny the impossibility of the sexual relation. One subject’s need creates of the other – an other, a type of other, who could support that need. Lacan (1972-3b) states in ‘A Love Letter’, that “when one is a man, one sees in one’s partner what can serve, narcissistically, to act as one’s support” (p. 157). This asymmetry is again clear when Lacan (ibid, p. 150, emphasis added) claims that, “it is through the phallic function that man takes up his inscription as all”. If someone is all there is no room for complementarity, the only other category available is what is not all. There is an inherent problem then with a subject position which is designated as nothing – one cannot take up a place as nothing without profound difficulty.

The phallic function includes the woman as a contingency, a part singled out within 'the gates', or 'the bars' of the feminine side, the 'dark side'. The place of the subject's origin (in the woman) is barred, or repressed. The woman functions as 'not-all' (pas toute), as a part which has to be integrated into a whole; more commonly, Lacan rightly added, this involves her in denigration or degradation. She then becomes the little other object [(a)-utre], other of being, other of phallic function; the woman enters the Symbolic Order as a 'not-whole', a part-object serving the sub-existence of the so-called whole phallus, and thus as backing up the privileged function of the phallus in representing human identity. (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986, p. 181)

Woman is that which serves to secure or support the fantasy of phallic ‘wholeness’ and privilege through her exclusion. She is not excluded from participating in his meaning (phallogocentrism) and if she wants to speak legitimately this is her only option. But as excluded within language she cannot participate in creating meaning –
she must act to uphold a certain fixity of meaning that privileges him. Of course, since meaning is intersubjective – depending on another – and is arbitrary – this fixity is always in danger of being revealed as the sham it is.

Sexual division then in this formulation is based on the division of the subject and on the division of the phallus itself. Man takes up the phallus in its fraudulent aspect of presence, authority and meaning - which is consequently unsettled by the shadow of what the phallus necessarily represses in order to represent itself as such. This is the part of woman's relation to the phallus. As difference she marks the absence of identity on which the phallic function is founded.

Lacan (1972-3a/b) consistently links sexual difference with the fantasy of ‘the sexual relation’ instituting a heterosexual imperative. Central to the fantasy of the sexual relation is the belief of each that the other can “camouflage its gaping abyss” (p. 158). Of course, this is doomed to failure because the subject is irremediably split by its insertion into an order of meaning that precedes it. According to Lacan, the entire masquerade of sexual difference is to sustain the sexual fantasy – that is, the fantasy of the possibility of ‘Union’ and ‘Oneness’ that is impossible for the speaking subject to achieve. The imperative towards heterosexuality then is not natural but normative, created in the fantasy of the sexual relation which is set up to deny the impossibility of desire. The place of ‘woman’ within this sexual fantasy and its connected heterosexual imperative is highly significant for the implications it has for women’s subjectivity and the constitution of the female subject within the circuit of masculine desire. Lacan’s most explicit delineation of the fantasy of the sexual relation and the function of ‘Woman’ as a subject position is in his infamous texts ‘God and the jouissance of The Woman’ (1972-3a) and “A Love Letter” (1972-3b).

2.4.2 “There is no such thing as The woman”

It is in the seminar, “God and the Jouissance of The Woman” (1972-3a) that Lacan makes his infamous assertion that “There is no such thing as The woman…” (p. 144). So how are we to understand this polemic statement? It has at least two explanations, each of which is implicated in the other. One explanation has to do with the dissymmetry in the relation to the phallus which means that “there is no symbolisation of woman’s sex as such” (Lacan, 1955-6, p. 173). The other is to do with the fantasy of the sexual relation which sets up a fantasised symmetry or
reciprocity between man and woman whereby Woman becomes a ‘symptom of man’ or the product of masculine fantasy (Lacan, 1974-5, cited in Evans, 1996, p. 221).

Obviously Lacan was not denying the existence of somewhere near half the human population when he made this statement. He certainly was however, talking about us. There is a constant confusion and tension in reading the two seminars given by Lacan as Seminar xx, Encore over whether he refers to ‘Woman’ or women. He appears to be talking about ‘Woman’ as a position in language but this of course suffers a constant slippage onto women, those individual subjects who line up under this designation to whatever degree (see Riley, 1988). This confusion is instrumental of course rather than a failure of clarity. The most obvious reason for the slippage is that sexed positions are never fully fixed for any subject. Another reason is the very problematic inherent in ‘Woman’ as a subject position. ‘Woman’ does not partake of the phallus as described previously – all that is definitive of this subject position is that it does not have it. However, women, as speaking beings are subject to the phallus in so much as it is also the signifier of the effect of signification. In other words she is a subject and simultaneously she is not because paradigmatically, a subject, is male (masculine). Thus, she is conditioned by the lack marking passage into the Symbolic and she is constituted as a lack with regard to the phallus.

Woman is constituted as not all with reference to the phallic function. That is, the male subject takes up the phallic function and by means of that position is inscribed as all. Therefore, woman must become that position which is not all. The negativity of this position is the crux of the difficulty of speaking of ‘Woman’. We could say in effect, that ‘Woman’ is not a ‘subject’ position at all. It isn’t anything. But we cannot ‘be’ a negativity. When Lacan (1972-3a) wrote that “there is no such thing as The woman”, it was not the noun, woman, he was putting into question it was the definite article the which precedes it.

…”The woman can only be written with The crossed through. There is no such thing as The woman, where the definite article stands for the universal. There is no such thing as The woman since of her essence – having already risked the term why think twice about it? – of here essence, she is not all. (p. 144)
And again in “A Love Letter” (1972-3b):

She is incorrectly called the woman, since, as I have stressed before, once the the of the woman is formulated by means of a not all, then it cannot be written. There can be no the here other than crossed through. (p.151)

The woman then, by virtue of being not all, is impossible to speak of in any universal sense of what she is. In the phallic economy, it is as though the category of ‘woman’ is empty, “does not exist and signifies nothing” (Lacan, 1972-3a, p.145). As such “there is only woman as excluded by the nature of things which is the nature of words” (ibid, p. 144). Note that Lacan does not say excluded ‘from’ the nature of things, that is words, since she must have access to speech, but ‘by’ the nature of things. Since she (Woman/women) is clearly not entirely out of (entirely excluded from) the phallic function either. “Her being not all in the phallic function does not mean that she is not in it at all. She is in it not at all. She is right in it” (ibid, p.145). As well as being ‘in it’ as a speaking being, she is right in it by way of being “the lack that assumes positive existence in the shape of the formless Thing….i.e., as materialised Nothingness” (Zizek, 1991, p. 83).

This last statement introduces the idea of Woman as objet a – the object-thing which is nothing at all but an empty surface around which desire circulates. In taking Woman as his objet a man creates the circumstances under which he seeks to deny the impossibility of any relation to the objet a. He does this through the fantasy of the sexual relation. Fantasy, according to Zizek (1991), actually “designates the subject’s impossible relation to a” (p. 6). It is a scene on which we enact the conditions of satisfaction of desire and its constant failure.

One of Lacan’s most often repeated and vehement assertions was that “there is no sexual relation” (Lacan, 1872-3b, p. 153). This statement was an attack on the fantasy of sexual relation as the mythic union of complementary beings. Lacan repeatedly asserts that this fantasy is a defence against the recognition that the sexual relation does not exist and that the subject's inherent division cannot be overcome. “When one is made into two, there is no going back on it. It can never revert to making one again, not even a new one” (Lacan, 1972-3b, p. 156). However, by setting up the myth of union [Plato’s Symposium (Kraut, 1992) as an example in myth par excellence] the actuality of division and lack is consistently disavowed.
Moreover, Lacan indicates that this fantasy of the sexual relation is not to be thought of only literally as applying to sexual relationships but that it pervades our very language, our system of knowledge: “Up until now, in relation to knowledge nothing has ever been conceived of which did not share in the fantasy of inscribing a sexual tie” (Lacan 1972-3b, p. 153).

In this, the woman has a central function. The fantasy of the woman as the impossible object – ‘Thing’ is part of this tactic of disavowing lack. Woman functions “as the place onto which lack is projected, and through which it is simultaneously disavowed…” (Mitchell & Rose, 1982, p. 40). The desire to want-to-be (manque à être) is served for man at the level of fantasy by "woman". Lacan (1972-3a/b) uses the matrix of courtly love to illustrate how the myth of union functions and the way that the failure of the sexual relation is denied within that tradition. The essential element of the tradition of courtly love was what Lacan termed the ‘Lady’. Zizek (1994) extrapolates usefully on Lacan’s ‘Lady’:

…the Lady in courtly love loses concrete features and is addressed as an abstract Ideal, so that ‘writers have noted that all the poets seem to be addressing the same person. . . . In this poetic field the feminine object is emptied of all real substance’. (p. 89)

The Lady is the Woman. As lack, she is the object a: “what he relates to is the objet a, and the whole of his realisation in the sexual relation comes down to fantasy” (Lacan, 1972-3b, p. 157). As lack, woman comes to be taken not as an object of desire but the objet a itself – that is, the cause of desire. In the fantasy of having her, he believes himself to have the cause of his desire and as such attain wholeness. In this way, there is no such thing as the woman since she is merely a fantasy structure which supports the subject’s desire. “Deprived of every real substance, the Lady functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal. In other words . . . the Lady appears 'not as she is, but as she fills his dream’” (Zizek, 1994, p. 90). The Woman does not exist but is rather a category, a fantasy creature, a sexualised other which man uses to bolster his ‘identity’. Through union with his complement (who is merely another aspect of himself) he imagines he can accede to the wholeness he seeks or pretends.

As Virginia Woolf (1929) so famously understood: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of
reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (p. 45). Lacan (1972-3b) echoes Woolf in “A Love Letter” where he says Freud was mistaken in attributing perversions to the woman. This, he says, is “truly a confirmation that when one is a man, one sees in one’s partner what can serve, narcissistically, to act as one’s own support” (ibid, p. 157). The woman of man’s fantasy who will complete him - who is the object of his desire for wholeness (petit a) is actually a fantasy he has constructed to guarantee his own existence after a certain fashion.

In love, man is only loving himself. Not his empirical self, not the weaknesses and vulgarities, not the failings and smallnesses which he outwardly exhibits; but all that he wants to be, all that he ought to be, his truest deepest, intelligible nature, free from all fetters of necessity, from all taint of earth . . . (Weininger, cited in Zizek, 1994, p. 140)

Woman is a “symptom of man”, a being-for-another. The ground upon which the phallus presumes to erect itself.

2.4.3 Woman as being-for-another

Then the Lord God said, “it is not good for the man to live alone. I will make him a suitable companion to help him”…. Then the Lord God made the man fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took out one of the man’s ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. Then the man said, “at last, here is one of my own kind – Bone taken from my bone, and flesh from my flesh. ‘Woman’ is her name because she was taken out of man.” (Good News Bible, Genesis 2: 18-23)

In the final paragraph of “God and the Jouissance of the Woman”, Lacan makes a distinctive allusion to Kierkegaard’s (1969) Diary of a Seducer. In Diary of a Seducer, we find Johannes writing of his seduction of a young woman, Régine. Johannes is utterly preoccupied with the seduction and thoroughly uninterested in the actual consummation of a relationship with this ‘creature’ he pursues. He writes of the “death of the relation” which he fears once his seduction succeeds and she has given herself over to him. Lacan (1972-3a) comments, “it is not by chance that Kierkegaard discovered existence in a little tale of seduction” (p. 148). Johannes accedes to his existence via Régine who will for her part, according to Johannes,
gradually learn her significance as a creature who “is a being for another”- that is her highest realisation/potential, her (non)existence:

Like a princess who has been raised from the dust to the throne of her ancestors, so shall she now be installed in the kingdom where she belongs. And this is to happen through me, and as she learns to love, she learns to love me; as she develops the rule, the paradigm is gradually revealed, and this is myself. As through love she becomes aware of her full significance, she will devote it to loving me, and when she senses she has learned this from me, she will love me twice as much. (Kierkegaard, 1969, p. 100)

Régine then does not exist, as Lacan (1972-3a) attests to when he says: “but then why shouldn’t Régine have existed after all?” (p. 148). Simply, it is because she cannot exist as an actual woman and simultaneously support this fantasy. “The elevation of an ordinary, earthly woman to the sublime object always entails mortal danger for the miserable creature charged with embodying the Thing…” (Zizek, 1991, p. 84). Woman is invisible in that what is for another, is not (i.e., does not exist in itself) except as it becomes visible through another. What Kierkegaard offers is a rendering of the proposition that the Woman does not exist, by asserting that women’s sole existence is as a being for men, as the objet a to which his demand for totality is addressed. In this sense, unless she is visible to him as a sexual object, then she does not exist – i.e., is invisible. “She exists only in so far as she attracts his gaze” (Zizek, 1994, p. 149). Moreover, even in his gaze she does not exist since ‘she’ is constituted in that gaze as fantasy.

Importantly, women (actual women) cannot exist if this fantasy is to be sustained - her real existence as a person cannot be borne. Once she becomes a real woman her status as the objet a is destroyed and she can no longer uphold his fantasy of wholeness, nor confirm his existence as the One (who has the phallus). She would cease to be the empty surface, “that cold, neutral screen which opens up the space for possible projections” (Zizek, 1994, p. 148). This is what Lacan (1958a) means when he says that it is for what she is not that she asks to be loved. Femininity as masquerade (Riviere, 1929) can be understood in Lacanian terms as being related to this fact that the objet a in itself does not exist, is nothing but the materialisation of whatever is projected there. “Desire “takes off” when “something” (its object-cause) embodies, gives positive existence to its “nothing”, to its void….in the movement of desire, “something comes from nothing” (Zizek, 1991, p. 78). Woman as the objet a
is pure semblance, a masquerade behind which is “nothing”. Her high-visibility as an object (femininity as display) masks her invisibility as a being for another.

Therefore, the woman (of flesh and blood) threatens the imagined unity of the subject, and in this sense, her function can be castrating. The femme fatale, the devouring female - beneath her masks and the inconsistency of her desire is nothing - what she both reveals and conceals in her lack is the fraud of the phallus on which his identity is staked (Frosh, 1994). Woman as fantasy has been elevated to this position in order to ensure the continuation of the fantasy of the sexual relation and the myth of unity. As the phallus she acts as the guarantor of his identity as well as the means of its undermining. Meaning itself operates at the limits of its own failing (Lacan, 1972-3b). Herein lay the conflicting representations of woman as Madonna and whore. Eve embodies both: woman as man’s companion and his undoing.

To the extent that any individual woman takes up the position she is designated, when she becomes the object of that gaze which she solicits, indeed desires, to confirm her value in the economy of phallic exchange - she simultaneously exists and ceases to exist. In becoming the objet a - she becomes only one of many objects, interchangeable and replaceable. ‘She’ is nothing and thus confirms his presence by her absence. This ‘existence’ of hers that he confirms in his gaze is not hers - it is the “Woman as fantasy” whom he confirms. Her elevation to the sublime then serves as the condition for her debasement into the passive object of desire.

The problem of women’s emancipation then is far more complex than identifying men’s gaze as objectifying and casting off the yoke of patriarchal subjection and subordination. As Zizek (1994) points out the Woman serves as the basis of women’s fantasy-identity - the only one that she has or is allowed in the phallocentric model, it:

provides women with the fantasy substance of their identity whose effects are real: it provides them with all the features that constitute so-called ‘femininity’ and define woman not as she is . . . but as she refers to herself with regard to her (potential) relationship to man as an object of his desire. From this fantasy structure springs the near panic reaction - not only of men, but also of many a woman - to a feminism that wants to deprive woman of her very ‘femininity’. By opposing ‘patriarchal domination’, women simultaneously undermine the fantasy structure of their own ‘feminine identity’. (ibid, p. 108)
This is no small problem and one that is returned to later in the chapter and indeed recurs thematically throughout the thesis as a central conflict for women. If women’s feminine identity is the product of masculine fantasy such that woman desires to be what man desires her to be then, in a sense, woman can be understood (in so far as she takes up a feminine identity) to desire precisely that which subordinates her. And what is she to identify with, in turn, if the fantasy structure of her own ‘feminine identity’ is undermined? Clearly, the issue of emancipation is somewhat more complex than resisting oppressive, ‘external’ patriarchal structures.

Such are the implications of a phallocentric production of the woman that are explored in the work of Luce Irigaray to which I now wish to turn. Not only does Irigaray concern herself primarily with what it means to be produced as the subject of phallocentric knowledge but she also seeks to draw out the potentialities inherent in the ‘feminine’. For if femininity is a borderland functioning to uphold masculinity then this position in language is not without its potential for disruption. That is not to say that Irigaray holds to an essential ‘feminine’ (Whitford, 1991) but that the production of the ‘feminine’ already suggests an alternative mode of representation. Irigaray rejects the apparent inevitability of the phallocentrism Lacan implies through the proposal of an alternative mode of signification not based on the phallus and its economy of exclusion. Lacan insisted that women could not speak or be represented even (do not exist) and Irigaray challenges this by making hers a project concerned with precisely the representation of woman. She strategically evokes an alternative symbolic governed by different laws, an alternative metaphysics which is not phallocentric nor based on binary logic and hierarchy (Grosz, 1989; Whitford, 1991). An alternative where woman is not the object of exchange – defined by her relation to the other’s needs – but in terms of her own positive content. Not what she is not, what she lacks, what she is excluded from, what she does for him and what she does not have – but what she is.

2.5 Luce Irigaray

Luce Irigaray’s questioning of Lacanian mastery, particularly of his ejaculations about women and femininity, led to her expulsion from Lacan’s school, The Eccole Freudienne (Irigaray, 1977). In response to Lacan’s rhetorical question of women’s pleasure (since he already assumes they do not know) in “God and the Jouissance of The Woman”, Irigaray (1985a) writes:
The question whether, in his logic, they can articulate anything at all. Whether they can be heard, is not even raised. For raising it would mean granting that there may be some other logic, and one that upsets his own. That is, a logic that challenges mastery.

(p. 90)

Irigaray’s ‘misdemeanour’ was to reject being spoken for and being spoken of. Perhaps, even worse still was that she chose to speak about herself and not him by theorising ‘woman’ without recourse to the masculine. Irigaray’s difficulty with Lacan was akin to that of other feminist theorists mentioned earlier who were critical of Lacan’s insistence on a phallocentric Symbolic that is reified as universal by his refusal to interrogate its terms.

Psychoanalytic theory thus enunciates the truth about the status of female sexuality, and about the sexual relation. But it stops there. Refusing to interpret the historical determinations of its discourse – “…that thing I detest for the best of reasons, that is, History” – and in particular what is implied by the up to now exclusively masculine sexualisation of the application of its laws, it remains caught up in phallocentrism, which it claims to make into a universal and eternal value. (Irigaray, 1985a, pp. 102-103)

It was not that Irigaray necessarily disagreed that Lacan accurately described a particular set of social arrangements prevailing at a given time. It was his refusal to contest those terms that showed his theorising to be trapped in its own privileged terms. Irigaray makes explicit and extends on the implications of Lacanian theory for women’s subjectivity. Where Lacan theorises for women a problematic subject position within the broader theory of language and subjectivity, Irigaray takes up ‘woman’ more specifically and draws out the meaning and consequences of being positioned as ‘woman’ in a phallocentric symbolic. Moreover, she was engaged in the project of seeking alternatives to a phallocentric order in a type of utopian post-patriarchal future. This alternative she built around an analogy of the female body. Finally, Irigaray’s theory had important implications for feminism and what could be said to be the legitimate program for feminism.

Irigaray’s general argument is that ‘woman’ as a category of sexed identity has no specificity within an economy of the same, i.e., a system of binary logic,
based on exclusion, where there is A or not-A, that is, the thing and it’s negation. She does not exist as he does – that is, as having a space that is her own. However, to say that she does not exist in the same way as he does is a far different thing from saying she does not exist at all, as Lacan does. The problem being that within a phallocentric symbolic there is no way of understanding an existence which differs. Therefore within the phallocentric Symbolic woman is only ever explicable as she is in relation to him:

There are three forms that phallocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they are represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are seen as men's complements. In all three cases women are seen as variations or versions of masculinity - either through negation, identity or unification into a greater whole. (Grosz, 1990, p. xx)

In this context of a phallocentric symbolic, feminine identity is in fact, something of an oxymoron since, as discussed above, identity is not a neutral term but a masculine term. The subject of the annunciation is not simply an ‘I’ but is also a masculine ‘I’ in a certain mode. Virginia Woolf (1929) described this in A Room of One’s Own:

Indeed it was delightful to read a man’s writing again…. It indicated such freedom of mind, such liberty of person, such confidence in himself…. But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar; a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’. One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape beyond it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter ‘I’. One began to be tired of ‘I’. –the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all else is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. But…she has not a bone in her body… (p. 130)

This masculine ‘I’ dominates the landscape with its substantiality; whatever is not it, is more difficult to determine; shapeless, unspecified and insubstantial. To be constituted in and through one’s relation to the masculine leaves the female subject devoid of positive content and a degree of autonomy and self-representation, or without a bone in her body.

It also leaves ‘woman’, argues Irigaray (1994), ‘unhoused’ within the symbolic. This puts the problem of feminine identity in terms of a consideration of
space, that is, woman’s space is without boundaries. She provides a home or house for the infant, for “those parts of men’s self that have been given to women for safe-keeping” (Whitford, 1991, p. 163). However, she has no symbolic home of her own. If ‘woman’ were to have a room of her own – it would not be the same room. It would not have the same rules, right-angled walls or look out on the same view. As Grosz (1989) puts it, “[T]here must be room in the sexual relation for women, and not just men’s fantasies of a femininity that conforms to their (oedipal) needs. There must be a space for women as women” (p. 119). Thus Irigaray was concerned with the possibility of an alternative symbolic where woman was not constituted negatively and her ‘basis’ for this alternative representation of woman was the female body, specifically the metaphor of the two lips.

Irigaray’s insistence on sexual specificity has meant that her work has often been criticised as essentialist, (e.g., Moi, 1985; Rose, 1986; Sayers, 1982). However, Whitford (1986) argues that “the idea that Irigaray is proclaiming a biologically given essential femininity in which biology in some unclear fashion simply ‘constitutes’ femininity seems to me quite simply a misreading of Irigaray” (p. 7). She argues, along with others that Irigaray’s work is rather, a discursive strategy or series of deconstructive manoeuvres (see Burke, 1981; Grosz, 1989; Whitford, 1989, 1991) in a by now well established repudiation of charges of essentialism in Irigaray’s work. “Irigaray does not intend to tell us what ‘woman’ is: this is something which women still have to create and invent collectively. What she sets out to do is to expose the foundations of patriarchy” (Whitford, 1991, p. 10).

Irigaray focused on the plurality of feminine sexuality using the analogy of the two lips – we are ‘this sex which is not One’. Not ‘One’ in the sense of the monolithic masculine sexual economy which is based on an either/or logic, rather the feminine could be characterised by an ability to incorporate both.

I love you: our two lips cannot separate to let just one word pass. A single word that would say “you”, or “me”. Or “equals”; she who loves, she who is loved. Closed and open, neither ever excluding the other, they say they both love each other. Together. Between our lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back and forth. One is never separable form the other. You/I: we are always several at once. And how could one dominate the other? Impose her voice, her tone, her meaning? One cannot be distinguished from the other; which does not mean that they are indistinct. (Irigaray, 1985a, pp. 208-209)
However, this ‘both’ is not merger which incorporates or submerges difference. It is not based on violence, oppression or submission. It is incorporation which embraces and allows difference. It is important to clarify that this is based on an analogy of the female body: a metaphor intended to suggest an alternative organisation of sexual difference (i.e., subject-subject not subject-object, a truly mutual exchange) and also a homosexual female economy (that is, in the fostering of relations between women, including between the mother and daughter) (Whitford, 1991).

Contrary to the objection that she is describing an essential natural or innate femininity, unearthing it from under its patriarchal burial, Irigaray’s project can be interpreted as a contestation of patriarchal representations at the level of cultural representation itself. (Grosz, 1989, p. 116)

This metaphor of the two lips is not a literal one that can be reduced to biology but a discursive strategy – the stressing of multiplicity against singularity. It is not intended to be referential or a “truthful image of female anatomy” (ibid, p. 116) but rather a possibility for women’s positive representation in different terms, that is, as multiple, fluid, self-sufficient and connected.

For Irigaray, any alternative for the possibility of women’s representation within the symbolic would require a rearticulation of the maternal relationship. She saw that maternity has functioned to deny the specificity of women’s identities and social positions by equating femininity always and only with reproduction and nurturance (ibid, p. 119). In other words there is a confusion of the maternal function with ‘woman’ as a subject position. Take the Oedipal drama, where the male child separates from the mother and must forever repudiate her to maintain the position of the father, the girl has no such definitive individuating moment. She remains merged with the mother though potentially distinct from her also. “The masculine difficulty in separating from the mother while remaining in contact with her, is matched by the feminine difficulty of becoming a subject at all” (Frosh, 1999, p. 230). This can be understood as a result of the way that the mother is understood and constructed within the discourses of a patriarchal symbolic rather than as an immutable set of natural or biological relations (Grosz, 1989; Irigaray, 1984, 1985a/b). From a phallocentric perspective there is no way of theorising the mother
such that she is separate from “woman”. Indeed, patriarchal discourse enacts a construction of female subjectivity such that ‘she’ is conflated with motherhood. Woman is always already Mother. According to Grosz (1989), Irigaray makes the assertion that:

even (and especially) for those women who are mothers, the maternal function must be prevented from strangling their existence as women. She shows that being a woman is always excessive to maternity. The woman in all mothers, a woman not reduced to the care and preservation of others must be conceived if women are to assert their particularity. (p. 120)

Irigaray advocated a restructuring of mother-daughter relations such that “both mother and daughter can be represented as self-referential subjects and not merely as exchangeable objects for men” (ibid, p. 125). Irigaray would seek a rearticulation of motherhood such that maternity did not curtail the mother’s ability to act as a ‘woman’ thereby being distanced from her own identity and autonomy and providing for the daughter only the ‘mother’ to identify with. In this however, identity need not be seen (for men or women) as:

Definitive separation of the mother and child;…Irigaray’s aim is not to ensure the attainment of an identity for the daughter or son independent of the mother, nor does she maintain the symbiotic closeness between them. She explores an undecidable fusion with and differentiation from the mother which defies patriarchal logic. (ibid, p. 125)

It is this defiance of patriarchal logic that Irigaray was concerned with. For her, we cannot symbolise ‘woman’ positively from within an order of signification which is based on her negation. She is saying that we women need to uncover our own desire, find our own voice, take our own desire seriously. We need to ask – “What do I get? Where’s mine? Women need “a world for themselves”. Which has both never existed and at the same time is already there, repressed, latent, potential” (Irigaray, 1984, p. 106).

In this evocation of what is latent and potential, Irigaray’s work seems to me a gesture towards something largely unarticulable, unthought and (almost) unthinkable. Not the postulation of an answer but the drawing out of a possibility, the contours or outline of an/other woman, another economy. Concerned with
creating the conditions of change she does not claim to know what the future will look like – this is precisely the point. “Any linear development, any teleology would re-enact in the future the scenarios of the present. A genuinely different future cannot be entirely foreseen, certainly not predicted in any detail” (Whitford, 1991, p. 20). The assertion is not that we should necessarily elaborate a theory of ‘woman’ – to pronounce on what woman is – since this is entering into a politics of identity which remains within the masculine economy of presence and rationality. Instead we must insist on “repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject…” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 78, emphasis added)

Clearly then, Irigaray’s point is not that woman has an identity which can be guaranteed by her ‘nature’ but that within a phallocentric Symbolic she has no identity, no positive content. Irigaray consistently moves between the positive and negative: not wishing to say what woman is (that is what men do, Freud, Lacan and so on) – however, insisting that women need an economy, a system of representation, that is their own. Irigaray speaks from ‘within’, the mimetic strategy that is attributed to her, from the side of lack in order to critique but she also sees that we cannot only remain on the side of lack for to do so is to continue to “leave women ‘homeless’ in the symbolic order” (Whitford, 1991, p. 135). Therefore, she also speaks as the prophet of a utopian vision without trying to constrain what that future might look like. Rather attempting to provide a new horizon.

“There is tension between the negative moment and the utopian future moment in which women will be for-themselves” (ibid, p. 136). What they will be cannot be said since it requires – resymbolisation – the very point is that the phallocentric cannot tolerate this woman who is for-herself. Were sexual difference to be rearticulated in the symbolic such that woman could be represented in her own terms there would be truly radical change. Irigaray’s theorising has implications therefore for feminism in that in this formulation it cannot be “merely the extension to women of men’s rights, so that women will be ‘like men’” (ibid, p. 136). The fight for equal rights and the right of control over our own bodies is part of creating the necessary conditions for the real challenge but it is not sufficient.

When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few prejudices; they upset a whole set of dominant values
– economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language in that these are monopolised by men only. They question the very foundation of our social and cultural order, the organisation of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system. (Irigaray, 1977, p. 68)

From an Irigarayan perspective, therefore, feminism should not be about reversing the order of things and accepting the terms of the system as it presently is, since that is to remain within the economy of the same. Women do this, for example, when they carry a double burden in order to be part of the work force and continue to be primarily responsible for child care. A case in point, where “the price paid for equal rights in an otherwise untransformed society can be too high” (Irigaray, cited in Whitford, 1991, p. 185).

“When you stir,” Irigaray (1985a) writes to women, “you disturb their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire. Their world” (p. 207). Otherwise, women may only go ahead with their permission, having what changes they agree to, “adapting yourself to whatever need they have, or don’t have, for the presence of their own image. One step, or two. No more. No exuberance. No turbulence. Otherwise you’ll smash everything” (ibid, p. 208). Irigaray (1984) argues that for women to take up an ‘identity’ will change everything. In other words, “the existence of two ‘kinds’” would have an effect on mankind. If identity is formed by identification with elements in the social/symbolic order, then it means that social/symbolic formations will have to change for womankind to come into existence at all, and this will not leave mankind unaffected” (Whitford, 1991, p. 136).

Should women come into being for themselves man would loose his mirror and Irigaray (1985b) also points out, he loses his ground since woman is herself not-represented but is the basis for representation:

If there is no more ‘earth’ to press down/repress, to work, to present, but also and always to desire (for one’s own), no opaque matter which in theory does not know itself, then what pedestal remains for the ek-sistence of the ‘subject’? If the earth turned and more especially turned upon herself/itself, the erection of the subject might thereby be disconcerted and risk losing its elevation and penetration. For what would there be to rise up from and exercise power over? (ibid, p. 133)
Irigaray asks women to see themselves on the other side of the looking glass of masculine fantasies. “And what about your life?”, she asks, “You must pretend to receive it from them” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 208). Her point is that women need to create their own meaning not be reliant on masculine projections or definitions, not receive their life from him. “Women need to accede to a symbolic representation of their own” (Whitford, 1991, p. 156). Addressing herself to ‘woman’ she says: “Your blood has become their meaning….Come out of their language….Try to pay attention to yourself. To me. Without letting convention, or habit, distract you” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 205-6).

Whilst, Irigaray’s assertion that women must accede to an ‘identity’ that is not reliant on the desire or fantasies of a masculine subject is central to the concerns of this thesis there is a significant point to be made about the psychic cost and difficulty of such a project to individual subjects. In an as yet untransformed phallocentric Symbolic women have the choice of either being ‘like men’, making a masculine identification, or being for-men (a kind of living doll) with all the conflicts of identity and self-respect this brings, or having to forge a tenuous identity against or in the margins of the symbolic (at risk of being socially isolated, or branded as lesbian, feminist, man-hater, witch, virago, or any of the other insults reserved for ‘eccentric’ women). (Irigaray, 1994, p. 153)

How then do actual women negotiate these identifications and how do they resist them? Addressing this question requires, I would argue, a theoretical framework that allows for a more grounded and culturally specific analysis than that offered by psychoanalytic theories, such as that offered by post-structuralism and Foucauldian discourse theory. An exploration of these will be commenced in the following section and conclude the chapter’s discussion of the theoretical framework of the research.

Up to this point, the chapter has focused on psychoanalytic theory, specifically that of Lacan, followed by some of the insights of Irigaray’s post-Lacanian theory relating to the problem of feminine identity. One of the key insights explored relates to the radical decentredness of human subjectivity according to Lacan which exposes the coherence and continuity of the “I” as imaginary. Another
key insight is the explanation of desire as a condition of subjectivity. In relation to femininity, the radical potential inherent in psychoanalytic theory is in its emphasis on the social construction of sexual identity rather than an assumption of its natural coincidence with the body. Also relevant to an understanding of sexual identity is Lacan’s explanation of the phallocentrism of the Symbolic and the difficulty of a feminine subject position that is negatively defined as the Other of identity. Finally, Irigaray’s work explores the implications of an economy of the same where women are not represented other than through masculine fantasy.

However, a reliance on psychoanalytic theory alone for theorising ‘woman’ is somewhat problematic. One difficulty is that Lacan and Irigaray, for all their differences, both present a concept of ‘woman’ that is abstracted from social realities (Henriques et al., 1984). Such a structuralist account can only conceive of a single concept of femininity, thereby having no way to account for the diversity of experience of actual women who are variously positioned in relation to sexuality, ethnicity and class and so on or any way of accounting for historical shifts. This is an artefact of the Lacanian focus on the abstract concept of the Symbolic without reference to any actualities of the social. The implication of this abstract account of the Symbolic, it is argued, is a kind of psychic essentialism, the implications of which are to enact a fixity of the categories of sexual difference (Henriques, et al., 1984; Weedon, 1987). Specifically, Lacanian theory is criticised for its tendency to “collapse into an account of a universal, albeit contradictory, subject who is not situated historically, who is tied and bound by pre-existing language, and is incapable of change because of it” (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 217).

Connected to this lack of cultural and historical specificity that produces a problematic structural stasis is a lack of attention to the relations of power that produce and maintain a given set of social arrangements. For example, recall in the earlier discussion on the phallus that the point was raised of the absence of a critical attitude in Lacan, towards the privileging of the phallus and its coincidence with the penis. There is an implicit acknowledgement that the phallus/penis coincidence is a relation of power however, this is not problematised by Lacan or explored for its own sake. His lack of detailed attention to the power relations that underlie the anchoring of privilege to the masculine means that his theory easily slides into a reification of its own terms. There is no argument that the phallus operates in a privileged way in contemporary Western culture but there must be recognition that it only operates in
this position in so far as it is reiterated as privileged in our social arrangements. Lacan’s explanation of subjectivity and sexual difference has political implications, but Lacan himself was less than concerned with those politics (Frosh, 1999; Irigaray, 1977, 1985a). However, with reference to these problems and criticisms:

The point is not that the whole of Lacanian theory is worthless, but that this description of the construction of the subject in language needs to be contextualised by an account of those power relations which construct the system itself, giving rise to the order of language that centres on the phallus and creates the human subject in accordance with patriarchal law. (Frosh, 1999, p. 240)

It is to this program of contextualising Lacanian theory that I now wish to turn by moving from the Symbolic towards Discourse as a way of grounding an understanding of subjectivity and feminine identity in the specificities of contemporary social practices.

For example, as discussed in chapter 4, in the current Western cultural context, post-feminist discourses of emancipation offer women opportunity to identify as ‘like men’ – operating in the world of work largely untransformed as it for the demands of family and relationship. It offers a sexuality based on a masculine model of voracious predatory appetites unmediated by love and/or tenderness. It also continues to offer the opportunity to identify as a ‘living-doll’ - that is, as being-for men in the portrayal of a sexuality and happiness that is dependant on having the right partner, being sexually available and attractive to men, being the guardian of emotions and relationships. Outside of this it offers marginal positions that represent social isolation, such as lesbianism or feminism which are at odds with phallocentric representations of being either ‘like’ or ‘for’ men. Each of these positions in discourse has its attendant struggles and inhabiting them all, moving amongst them could be expected to require some serious negotiation and conflict. It is this primarily that the research is concerned with, as much as with the question of how we might accede to alternative representations of ourselves for ourselves and on what ground – with what knowledge, might this transformation be realised?

2.6 Feminist post-structuralism

There is a significant lack of historical and cultural specificity in Lacan’s structuralist conceptions of language and the Symbolic (Henriques et al., 1984). The
problem being that a focus on the abstract notion of the Symbolic order means that the ‘actualities of speech are neglected’ (Malson, 1998, p. 25) in favour of a universalising account of gender and subjectivity that cannot allow us to theorise the everyday social practices in which subjectivity is (re)produced (Henriques et al., 1984). The post-structuralist Foucauldian theory of discourse and discursive practices allows us to do precisely this; to ground the Symbolic in the social, in everyday social practices. Drawing on Foucault means we can rethink the “symbolic in terms of the temporal dynamics of regulatory discourse”, and not as a “quasi-permanent structure” (Butler, 1993, p. 22). Consequently, adopting a discursive theoretical framework in addition to a psychoanalytic one allows for the re-theorising of ‘woman’ as a multiplicity of subject positions constituted within varying socio-historical and cultural discourses rather than as a monolithic category of identity.

The remainder of the chapter will discuss post-structuralist notions of subjectivity, specifically Foucauldian discourse theory as a means of theorising ‘femininity’ or feminine identity as socially and historically located.

2.7 Foucault: discourse theory

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. (Foucault 1982, cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 343)

Foucault was concerned overall, with the subtle and complex ways social institutions and practices shape or instantiate the human subject, or rather a specific kind of subject at given historical and cultural conjunctions. Foucault theorises this subject in relation to the concept of discourse. Discourse can be understood variously as the “general domain of all statements” or (more often) it can be used to refer to discourses as “individualisable groups of statements” or “as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (Foucault, 1972, p. 80). Generally, discourses can be understood to be groupings of statements that are regulated and rule-governed. All statements can be said to belong to a discursive framework which gives those statements meaning and regulates their utterance, including who is sanctioned to speak/enact them and in what contexts (Mills, 1997). However, what constitutes the unity of a discourse, in other words, what unites any
particular grouping of statements is only ever provisional. It is never clear cut, “neither uniform nor stable” (Foucault, 1979, p. 100). Overall, we can say that “discourses are those groupings of statements which have a similar force – that is, they are grouped together because of some institutional pressure, because of a similarity of a provenance of context, or because they act in a similar way” (Mills, 1997, p. 62).

An especially important feature of discourse is its theorised relation to the ‘real’ or material objects it speaks of. For Foucault, the ‘real’ is an effect of discourse, a product of discourse (Foucault, 1979, 1980). Discourse does not simply arise from the existence of its objects, that is, it does not refer to any putative extra-discursive or anterior reality, (social or otherwise) but constitutes particular realities. Language is not a transparent medium that simply describes the things it finds, rather it is a social system that “makes things mean” (Hall, 1982, p. 64). In other words, discourse is productive of meaning through the ‘delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories’ (Foucault, 1977, cited in Mills, 1997. p. 51). As Mills (1997) summarises this position, “there is no intrinsic order to the world itself other than the ordering which we impose on it through our linguistic description of it” (p. 52). Moreover, this ordering and structuring, through the effects of power, has regulatory and normative effects. Where discourse functions to constitute the parameters of meaning in general it also acts to constitute some categories of meaning as more legitimate than others.

Discourse similarly produces ‘subjects’ or particular forms of subjectivity. Foucauldian discourse theory suggests that subjectivity is not only decentred as it is for Lacan, but is also multiply positioned and produced. Against the humanist idea of the individual as originating and autonomous, oppressed and corrupted by the operations of the world outside but otherwise in control of its destiny, Foucault poses the inverse (Elliot, 2001; Mills, 1997; Rabinow, 1984). He suggests that the subject is an effect of power and preceded by discursive structures which instantiate the subject as the subject of particular knowledges (see Foucault, 1972, 1979, 1980). Thus, we can move to an understanding of the ‘feminine’ (and ‘masculine’) subject as the effect of discursive constructions which are set in a field of socio-historically specific power relations (Weedon, 1987). There is no essential or natural sexual difference that is not created by the way that we speak of it or enforce it in our
institutions and practices. Moreover, we can see that femininity is not only produced in various ways over time but it will also intersect with other discourses, such as ethnicity or class for example, producing a multiplicity of possible subject positions (Hall, 1996).

A crucial notion for Foucault is power/knowledge (Foucault, 1977, 1979, 1980). “It is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together” (Foucault, 1979, p. 100). So completely imbricated are power and knowledge that Foucault represents them as a single term, power/knowledge.

Power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time a power relation. (Foucault, 1977, p. 27)

Discourses do not circulate neutrally constituting different ‘knowledges’ or ‘truths’ of equal value. Rather power functions in and through discourse by producing ‘knowledge’. As Grosz (1994), explains, “knowledge is what is socially recognised as knowledge” (p. 147). As discourses delimit a field of knowledge and knowledge is produced by power thus it follows that constitution of a particular field of knowledge rules out or delegitimises other possible ‘knowledges’. Knowledge then, is “a major instrument and technique of power” (ibid, p. 148). Foucault (1977, 1979) is clear that power in his formulation is not a monolithic ‘thing’ wielded by some over others, an imposition of ‘sovereign power’ as it is typically understood.

The power at work here is not the power of the absolute monarch, who appears dramatically in the marketplace to display his might. Instead, it is an anonymous and impersonal power that saturates the pettiest and quietest moments of our personal lives, pressing us with what we should be – at the height of its operation, even becoming us. (Mansfield, 2000, p. 63)

Significantly, power is not only repressive in its actions but productive as well, producing knowledge, producing us as subjects of particular knowledges.

In itself the exercise of power is not violence; nor is it a consent which implicitly is not renewable. It is a total structure of actions
brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects. (Foucault, 1980, p. 78)

Foucault (1979) rejects the idea of “power as a pure limit set on freedom” (p. 83). Rather he indicates that its exercise is more acceptable to us if it is seen in this way, thereby “leaving a measure of freedom – however slight- intact” (ibid, p. 86). It is misleading to think of power as something exercised over us and which we may therefore choose to disobey. “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe we would be brought to obey it?” (Foucault, 1979 cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 61). “Power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1979, p. 94). For Foucault, (ibid) because power is not exercised over, but is immanent in every moment, in every relation, mobile and multiple, then the effects of organised or institutionalised power relations are “far reaching but never completely stable” (ibid, p. 95) since, “where there is power, there is resistance” (ibid, p. 102).

Resistance in this sense is not as simple as that implied by revolutionary or liberationist politics. Since liberationist discourse is produced by the very discourse of repressive power that implies that one could reject, or throw off those relations of domination and emerge into a new found freedom. “[T]here is no escaping from power, it is always-already present, constituting that very thing which one attempts to counter it with” (ibid, p. 82). Instead resistances sit in complex relations to the dominant hegemonies they resist. They are neither completely apart or freed from them. Never in a position of exteriority to power, in terms of being out of its reach, nor ever entirely dominated by, or reducible to it. Resistances can exist only, by definition, ‘in the field of strategic power relations’ but they are not merely the passive result of a ‘reaction’ or ‘rebound’ to a more ‘basic domination’ (ibid, p. 97). Judith Butler (1993) puts this as a

Relation of being implicated in that which one opposes, the turning of power against itself to produce alternative modalities of power, to establish a kind of political contestation that is not a “pure” opposition, a transcendence of contemporary relations of power,
but a difficult labour of forging a future from resources inevitably impure. (p. 241)

Resistances are plural, diffuse, mobile and transitory, occurring at different focuses or points. “These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single, locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary” (Foucault, 1979, p. 96).

In conjunction with analyses of power/knowledge Foucauldian theory also urges us to consistently problematise what is currently given as ‘truth’ in the field of knowledge. “Knowledge and truth are what a particular culture counts as true, what functions as true” (Grosz, 1994, p. 147). For Foucault, ‘truth’ is an untenable notion given that it is actually ‘produced’ as the effect of discourse and power. Foucault (1980) states,

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 73)

Consequently, there can be no ‘emancipation of truth’, as if it were buried beneath relations of power waiting to be discovered. The effect of discourse connected to power/knowledge is that it functions as if it were true. Discourses have powerful and ‘real’ effects that relate to the regulation and normalisation of human behaviour (Walkerdine, 1986). Whilst power is certainly productive and reiterative and thus unstable and open to the possibility of change it “also works through the foreclosure of effects, the production of an outside, a domain of unintelligibility that bounds the domain of intelligible effects” (Butler, 1993, p. 22). In other words we might understand the operation of discourse and power/knowledge to institute certain ‘regulatory ideals’, in Butler’s (1993) terms, which are both stable and unstable. Normative injunctions that nonetheless produce their own resistances.

The disciplinary apparatus produces subjects, but as a consequence of that production, it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself. In other words, the law turns
against itself and spawns versions of itself which oppose and proliferate its animating purposes. (Butler, 1997, p. 100)

There are significant implications of Foucauldian theory on power and discourse for the way we understand subjectivity and also agency. As discussed thus far, for Foucault, power precedes the individual and all that we deem to be the ‘individual’ is actually only the effects of this power. “We are the very material of power, the thing through which it finds its expression” (Mansfield, 2000, p. 55).

Identity is rethought as a fabrication, an effect of power wherein power is able to become anchored in subjectivity, what Butler (1997) describes as a “double valence of subordinating and producing” (p. 2). The binary of social and individual collapses so that the individual is not originating and free, set aside from the imposition of external power relations, but is an expression and production of those relations of power in a particular temporal and spatial context. In this way subjectivity must be understood neither as freely chosen nor entirely as determined, for it is clear that post-structuralist theorisation gives a far more complex account of the subject in relation to power (Butler, 1993, 1997; Grosz, 1994; Weedon, 1987). This indicates an ‘agency’ “that is (a) not the same as volunteerism, and that (b) though implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to rival, is not as a consequence, reducible to those dominant forms” (Butler, 1993, p. 241).

The paradox of subjectification is precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power. (ibid, p. 5)

The next section considers power, agency, resistance and gendered subjectivity. It is concerned with the way post-structuralist theorisation builds on psychoanalytic insights into gender and subjectivity at the same times as usefully pluralising femininity and making feminine subject positions context specific.

2.8 Gender, power and agency

Feminist theorists have pointed out the lack of discussion on gender or the exploration of the production of gendered subjectivity in Foucault (see Elliot, 2001;
Grosz, 1994; McNay, 1992). Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of ‘performativity’ offers a way of thinking about the ambivalences of subjectivity and power in relation to the production of sexed subjectivity. Butler (1990) writes, “[I]f the inner truth of gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can neither be true or false but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (p. 337). For Butler, gender is a complete fiction, a performative illusion that is “maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (ibid, p. 300). It is worth quoting Butler (1993) at some length on “performativity”:

The performative dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms. In this sense, then, it is not only that there are constraints to performativity; rather, constraint calls to be rethought as the very condition of performativity. Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance. Moreover, constraint is not necessarily that which sets a limit to performativity; constraint is, rather, that which impels and sustains performativity. …I would suggest that performativity cannot be understood outside a process of iterability, a regularised and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that “performance” is not a single “act” or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (p. 95)

Performativity acknowledges both the reality of gender categories whilst simultaneously disavowing their ‘truth’. Furthermore, it reflects the complex understanding of power in Foucault, that is, we are neither free agents who can choose to be liberated from the effects of power nor are we passive to its operations. Thus, the notion of performativity recognises the force and coercion that accompanies the production of gendered identities and the maintenance of heterosexist norms and also clearly states that gendering occurs as a set of reiterative actions. In other words it is negotiated actively in everyday actions and interactions. This latter point reflects Foucault’s (1980) idea discussed earlier that “the exercise of
power is not violence; nor is it a consent which implicitly is not renewable. It is a total structure of actions…acting upon an acting subject” (p. 78).

That is, power is understood in Butler’s use of Foucault as productive because it is reiterated and repeated consistently and therefore capable of signifying differently at any given point in its (re)production and proliferation. Power also produces an ‘outside’ through the foreclosure of other ways of ‘knowing’ or ‘thinking’. With regard to ‘femininity’, for example, power/knowledge produces the domain of what is intelligible, and thus also produces what is unthinkable; other ways of being or desiring that are not intelligible in that domain, for those who identify as such. In relation to the notion of performativity “what is exteriorised or performed can only be understood by reference to what is barred from performance, what cannot or will not be performed” (Butler, 1997, p. 145). In this way subjectivity is not constrained only by what is sanctioned in its production but also by the constitutive outside of such regulatory effects. “Every formation is constituted through and against a constitutive antagonism” (Butler, 1993, p. 192). Thus, for example, ‘femininity’ can be understood as an identity position or a collectivity of positions (Riley, 1988) that is reasonably consistent given the regulatory and coercive effects of power but which also is inherently and profoundly unstable because this regulatory fiction produces a set of exclusions which haunt its ‘performance’. For Butler (1993), this invokes the psychoanalytic insight that any effort of “discursive interpellation or constitution is subject to failure, haunted by contingency, to the extent that discourse itself invariably fails to totalise the social field” (pp. 191-92).

Thus we return to the notion of resistance and agency and that they arise from what is unforeseeable in the proliferation of the effects of power in its repeated and reiterated production of the subject. Furthermore, convergence of discursive regimes inadvertently produces “complexity [that] undermines the teleological aims of normalisation” (Butler, 1997, p. 93). What is not clear, however, is whether resistance can produce a redirection and rearticulation of the law or dominant modes of signification or only consistently avow its failure to produce completely coherent effects. Can there be radical rearticulation of the status quo or is it a matter of continuous contestation of meaning? These problems of resistance and agency are fundamental to the question of ‘what women want’ since what we want is produced through the coercive and regulatory effects of power. Therefore, what we want as a
woman cannot be understood to be freely chosen but is the result of some degree of force and coercion. Simultaneously, the convergence of discursive regimes we are subjected to means that desire proliferates and crosses over. We do not desire only as a woman and what we desire from other subject positions can be in deep conflict with our ‘femininity’. These alternative ways of conceiving agency and resistance also means that ‘patriarchy’ for example is not something that we can be liberated ‘from’ as though it were simply imposed on us from outside. Rather the very power we seek to oppose is productive and structuring of our very selves.

It is important to point out in the context of this post-structuralist problematising of categories of identity and particularly the insight that woman is only a social category which does not refer to ‘women’ as a social group but produces them as a social group has problematic implications for feminism and in particular, a type of feminism based on ‘identity politics’. Certainly Judith Butler and other post-structuralist theorists (e.g., Grosz, 1994) have argued for a move away from the rigid and reifying politics that take ‘identity’ as a stable and coherent category. Susan Bordo voices her understandable concerns over the implications of what is often seen as a post-structuralist insistence on heterogeneity at the expense of homogeneity:

Too relentless a focus on historical heterogeneity, for example, can obscure the transhistorical hierarchical patterns of white male privilege… More generally the deconstruction on dual grids can obscure the dualistic, hierarchical nature of the actualities of power in Western culture…Certainly, the duality of male/female is a discursive formation, a social construction. So, too, is the racial duality of black/white. But as such, each of these dualities has profound consequences for the construction of experience of those who live them. (Bordo, 1990, p. 87)

Whilst it is a very important concern that the pervasiveness and persistence of some forms of social arrangement should not be obscured, it is not clear that a post-structuralist account necessarily enacts such an obfuscation. The importance of maintaining an understanding that the strategy, of revealing as fictional, certain regulatory ideals (including that of identity) is not imagined to result in any straightforward way in the disintegration of their effects. They are no less ‘real’ for being fictional. The point is both that regulatory and disciplinary practices do have effects (they in effect are us) but that these effects should not be thought of as immutable or
complete, that is, totalising the whole of the social field and instantiating the subject in any mechanistic way. A post-structuralist feminist position acknowledges that various subject positions “have all the force of apparently full subjectivity for the individual” and “are necessary for our participation in social processes and practices” (Weedon, 1987, p. 106). Therefore, post-structuralist theories of subjectivity provide a frame within which to understand that ‘woman’ is both a fictional category as well as a lived subjective reality. As Butler (1990) shows when she states that “the question of being a woman is more difficult than it perhaps originally appeared, for we refer not only to woman as a social category but also as a felt sense of self, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity” (p.324).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter began by looking at Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its radical critique of the traditional humanist subject, indicating that identity and sexual difference are produced at the level of the Symbolic. Specifically, Lacan theorises sexual difference around the pivotal concept of the phallus and maintains that sexual difference arises in what he regards as the fantasy of the sexual relation. This discussion highlighted the way that ‘woman’ is defined by her relation to man and as such has no definitive or distinctive identity within the symbolic (Grosz, 1990; Irigaray, 1977; Rose, 1982). Woman is produced in relation to man, as negative and lacking, thereby forming the constitutive outside of masculine identity. Irigaray’s position was also discussed. Irigaray asserts that ‘woman’ is constructed in and through her relation to the masculine and extends Lacan’s work by elaborating on the implications of this positioning for women’s identity. She also makes explicit that the Symbolic operates on an economy of the same which is only capable of representing one sex and its negation (Grosz, 1989). The other particularly valuable aspect of Irigaray’s work is her suggestion that we must attempt to imagine an other woman who would not be the product of the phallocentric representation (Whitford, 1991). Thus she concerns herself with the question of what subject position women might be able to aspire to as beings-for-ourselves.

Some problems relating to the ahistoricity and universalising tendencies inherent in psychoanalytic theory were also discussed and it was argued that post-structuralist theory, specifically Foucauldian discourse theory offers a means of re-theorising Lacan’s Symbolic “in terms of the temporal dynamics of regulatory
discourse” (Butler, 1993, p. 22). The theory of discourse is “a version centrally concerned with the social interests inherent in particular ways of governing subjects and, as such, has important political implications” (Weedon, 1987, p. 115), hence its relevance to a feminist project. Foucauldian analyses of power assert that subjectivity is always produced, reiterated and articulated in a political field – a field of power relations.

To say that ‘everything is political’ is to recognise the omnipresence of relations of force and their immanence to the political field; but it is to set oneself the barely sketched task of unravelling this indefinite tangled skein. (Foucault, 1979, cited in Mills, 1997, p. 80)

This sophisticated and unorthodox understanding of power as a network of relations is particularly instructive for feminism, shifting analyses from either a simplistic notion of power as exercised over and outside the ‘woman’ (as only oppressive) and therefore opening up the promise of ‘liberation’; or as an affirmation that power is superstructural and unchanging and therefore that one is always already trapped. Foucault theorised neither an unproblematically autonomous and agentic subject nor a subject totally passive to the effects of discourse and power. Rather, his work exposes the complexity of power and the (im)possibility of resistance. In this sense, Foucault’s theory resonates with the feminist adage that the ‘personal is political’.

A Foucauldian post-structuralist perspective shows how subjectivity is produced in discourse and therefore is multiple and complex. This in turn allows for a re-theorisation of femininity as a multiplicity of discursively constructed subject positions rather than as monolithic and universal as suggested by psychoanalytic theory. Using a post-structuralist approach, women’s experience can be analysed in a framework which is capable of grasping the heterogeneity amongst women as well as the homogeneity that is the result of particular relations of domination. For example, all women are subject to negotiating their identity in relation to particular sanctioned constructions of ‘femininity’ and the conditioning heterosexual matrix. However, the way individual women will negotiate their identity in relation to femininity will vary significantly depending on their position in reference to other discourses and the relations of power inherent therein.
Since the body and subjectivity are understood from Foucault as the very effect of power and also the site upon which relations of power are played out, the implication is that the ‘self’ is the site of politics of both domination and resistance. A post-structuralist understanding of the subject provides both challenges for feminism as well as enabling far more sophisticated analyses of the ways we as women acquiesce in our constitution within normative and regulative frameworks and how we resist them. Of course, it must be clarified that resistance which is not complicit in the subordinating effects of power is not what is meant here. This ambivalence is what Butler (1997) describes as a Post-liberatory insight: “how to take an oppositional relation to power that is, admittedly, implicated in the very power one poses”? (p. 101). There is, for example, no way for a ‘woman’ to stand outside the regulative and normative injunctions which have instantiated her. Thus one is always complicit in one’s subordination whilst never completely reducible to it.

If the subject is neither fully determined by power nor fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both), the subject exceeds the logic of noncontradiction, is an excrescence of logic, as it were. To claim that the subject exceeds either/or is not to claim that it lives in some free zone of its own making. Exceeding is not escaping, and the subject exceeds precisely that to which it is bound. In this sense, the subject cannot quell the ambivalence by which it is constituted. Painful, dynamic, and promising, this vacillation between the already-there and the yet-to-come, a reiterated ambivalence at the heart of agency. (Butler, 1997, p. 18)

Since it is not only our constitution as subjects that is of interest here but our production as sexed subjects, it is important amidst this recasting of the Lacanian Symbolic in terms of temporalised regulatory discourse, not to loose the Lacanian insight of the phallocentrism of our signifying practices and the implications of this for the subject who inhabits (however (im)partially) the social category ‘woman’. Simultaneously, I would argue, we must acknowledge that Lacan’s phallocentric Symbolic is not an ahistorical and (fully) permanent structure with its basis in an original or founding coincidence of the phallus/penis. Instead it is an effect of particular social arrangements that persist over time due to a ‘regulatory ideal’ of heterosexuality that compels its repetition. Foucauldian discourse theory does
provide a means for exploring the relations of power that produce masculine privilege in a field of coercive and regulatory power relations.

Foucault has been criticised for his reductionism of the human subject to a discursive position by rejecting the psychic dimensions of human experience (e.g., Butler, 1997; Elliot, 2001). Theorists such as Valerie Walkerdine (e.g., 1986, 1997), Stephen Frosh (e.g., Frosh, 1999a; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2003) and Wendy Hollway (e.g., 1989, 1995), for example, have argued for the need to retain psychoanalytic insights as a way of exploring investments in socially regulated discursive positions without claiming that reference to a psychic reality is in anyway detached from the social conditions of its emergence or production. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler (1997) advocates a bringing together of Foucauldian and psychoanalytic perspectives, not as a synthesis but as a way of illuminating each other and theorising the relation between the social and the psychic. “If we refuse the ontological dualism that posits the separation of the political and the psychic, it seems crucial to offer a critical account of psychic subjection in terms of the regulatory and productive effects of power” (ibid, p. 19). Psychoanalytic theory, especially through the idea of the unconscious, is precisely that which deals with the interpenetration of the social and personal world and the “power of the symbolic structures of society to construct deeply felt identity positions in each human subject” (Frosh, 1999, p. 315). The subject formed by regulatory imperatives who nonetheless exceeds these norms is remarkably reminiscent of the subject conceived of in psychoanalysis. Indeed as Butler (1993) states, the “insistence that every formative movement requires and institutes it exclusions takes seriously the psychoanalytic vocabulary of repression and foreclosure” (p. 22). The psychoanalytic stance can help to explain the psychic arena of discursive regulation without needing to claim that any “arena of personal subjectivity” exists separately from, or “other than as already inscribed in the socio-historical” (Frosh et al., 2003: 39). Certainly, psychoanalysis is not a social theory as Frosh (1999) cautions us to remember: instead

it is a major tool for understanding subjectivity. It reveals the working of society within each individual, it offers a means for directly confronting each person’s emotions and investments in identity positions, and it supplies a set of criticisms of the distortions and despair that are suffered under conditions of domination. (p. 317)
It provides the language of desire, ambivalence, anxiety, investment and fantasy, for example, with which to account for the ‘psychic life’ of power which adheres in the lure of identity offered by normative social categories which at once instantiate the subject as an effect of the category albeit one which is never complete. Especially significant is the idea of investment or the ‘enjoyment’ (see Zizek, 1994, 1997) created by a particular interpellation or discursive position.

To be dominated by a power outside oneself is a familiar and agonising form power takes. To find, however, that what “one” is, ones very formation as a subject is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbour and preserve in the beings that we are. (Butler, 1997, p. 2).

Thus, if femininity is understood to be produced through masculine definition, it follows that feminine desire is highly problematic since, in so far as we desire as women, our desire is both alienated from us and yet also very much our own. Masculine power is not only outside of us, instantiated in external structures but it is the very condition of our own existence, providing the trajectory for our desire. Moreover, if we are what we oppose then resistance becomes an obviously painful and profoundly confusing condition.
At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial - and any question about sex is that - one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. . . . . it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping. If not, you will of course throw the whole of it into the waste-paper basket and forget all about it. (Woolf, 1929, pp. 4-5)

3.1 Introduction

The radical and critical revisions of the subject considered in chapter 2 have huge implications for psychology as a discipline and for psychological research (see Henrique et al., 1984, for example) and it is these methodological issues which will be the focus of this chapter. I have explored in chapter 2 the way that psychoanalytic and post-structuralist theories undermine traditional Western discourses of the unitary, rational subject and particularly of the gendered subject. Rather, the individual is seen to be radically decentred, and the product of socio-historically specific practices of social regulation (Henriques et al., 1984). The individual is repeatedly instantiated over time, multiply positioned in the myriad of available discourses and attendant relations of power (Butler, 1987; Foucault, 1979). Furthermore, much feminist theory like psychoanalytic theory highlights the masculine foundations of privileged and dominant models of subjectivity which are based on this unitary and rational subject (Irigaray, 1985; Weedon, 1987). These theoretical insights were addressed in chapter 2 in order to explore the problematic nature of femininity and also to highlight the dilemma involved in enacting or comprehending how change might be engendered where feminist and post-structuralist theory shows us the contingency of any identity category as a possible site for political mobilisation (e.g., Butler, 1992; Hall, 1996). Consequently, identity and liberatory politics are highly problematised and simplistic notions of change as
progressive, linear and continuous are also disrupted. These insights then significantly complicate the ways that the problem of ‘feminine’ identity in the context of patriarchal power relations can be thought of. Particularly, it undermines the claims about ‘change’ and ‘liberation’ produced through post-feminist discourse also. The impact of post-structuralist and feminist theory on the assumptions that underlie mainstream psychological research have been profound.

This chapter will explore critiques, including feminist and post-structuralist critiques, of hypothetico-deductive or positivist methodology that forms the dominant paradigm of mainstream psychology and psychological research. It will then look at the turn towards discourse analysis, such as that promoted by Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Burman and Parker (1993), as a methodology for psychological research and the rationale for utilising discourse analysis in this research project. It will be argued that discourse analysis represents the most consistent and complimentary approach to post-structuralist feminist research. Following this, the chapter outlines the research carried out for this thesis.

3.2. Critiques of positivism in psychology

As a discipline, psychology along with other social sciences has since the late nineteenth century sought to align itself with scientific discourse and its attendant claims to truth and objectivity (e.g., Giddens, 1976; Sherif, 1987). Psychology has been dominated by the experimental, hypothetico-deductive method as a mode of establishing ‘knowledge’ (Flax, 1987; Harding, 1987). This method is characterised by experimentation, control of variables, measurement and quantitative approaches relying on statistical analyses. The aim of such methods is to reduce bias, increase validity and reliability and thereby arrive at ‘objective’ knowledge or ‘truth’. Thus objects are assumed to have a ‘real’ existence which is independent of the perceptions of the researcher or any features of social organisation. “True knowledge represents something “real” and unchanging (universal) about our minds or the structure of the natural world. The “real” is that which has an existence independent of the knower…” (Flax, 1990, p. 30).

Criticisms of logical positivism point out the problematics of these assumptions, generally (e.g., Feyerabend, 1975; Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 1972) and more specifically for the discipline of psychology (Ingleby, 1974; Harre & Secord, 1972; Shotter, 1975). Positivistic and empiricist psychological approaches were
criticised for being reductionist and individualistic, “taking no account of the meanings or contexts of human behaviour nor of human agency or experience” (Malson, 1998, p. 36). For example, it is highly questionable how relevant or generalisable experimentation with animals is to human populations or similarly how relevant the results of laboratory experiments with human subjects devoid of any social or relational context could be. There was also criticism of the individualistic bias in psychology which assumed an individual/social dualism (Henriques et al., 1984) predicated on liberal humanist values which position the individual as originating author of their actions, coherent, stable and capable of insight into its own actions (Flax, 1990).

3.2.1 Feminist critiques
Feminist theorists and researchers raised fundamental challenges to the epistemological and methodological foundations and practices of science and psychology (e.g., Harding, 1987; Jordanova, 1980; Sayers, 1987b; Sherif, 1987; Weisstein, 1971). Similar to other critiques, feminist challenges pointed out that research had a socio-historical and interpersonal dimension that seriously compromised scientific claims to producing research outcomes that were either unbiased by the researcher’s perceptions or universally applicable or generalisable to other groups of people in other contexts (Sherif, 1987). Moreover, specifically, feminist critiques revealed the inherent sexism and androcentrism of psychological theories, methodologies and practice. However, it is important to highlight that feminist critique and research by no means represents a cohesive or unified field that could be characterised by a particular approach (see Harding, 1997; Wilkinson, 1986; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995). “Rather there is a diversity of different feminist critiques and feminist agendas for research” (Malson, 1998, p. 36).

One target of feminist criticism was the myth of the ‘neutral scientist’. Jordanova (1980) argued that since the Enlightenment and the elevation of ‘reason’ as the best foundation for secure knowledge, science was positioned as a uniquely masculine endeavour placing the ‘man of reason’ on the side of culture, scientific progress and mastery and woman on the side of nature and the irrational. She asserted “the historical importance of science, medicine and technology in the promulgation of myths of femininity” (ibid, p. 65). Myths which construe women as not-scientists and as aligned with the natural and corruptible.
The scientist then was not a neutral observer or ‘knower’ but a masculine observer. The qualities of the scientist (psychologist) were those associated with masculinity, including reason and the capacity for abstract thought and disinterested self reflection. The human subject of such scientific enquiry was likewise pointed out as being a masculine subject. The androcentrism of psychology referred to the fact that the ‘human’ being who was the subject of psychological research and theorising was actually ‘male’. Feminist theorists argued along the lines that:

That traditional epistemologies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, systematically excluded the possibility that women could be “knowers” or agents of knowledge; they claim that the voice of science is a masculine one; that history is written from only the point of view of men (of the dominant class and race); that the subject of a traditional sociological [or likewise a traditional psychological one] sentence is always assumed to be a man. (Harding, 1987, p. 3)

A second problem articulated by feminist critiques was that because psychology proceeded on the basis of androcentric assumptions women were frequently excluded from psychological research or produced as a category of deviance from ‘norms’ that had been established on a masculine subject. Moreover, not only women but anyone other than white, middle class males were produced as deviant by these biases in psychological practice and epistemology. Carol Gilligan’s (1982) research on women’s moral development, In a Different Voice was ground breaking at the time precisely because it demonstrated how the androcentric focus of psychology marginalised women as inferior to or deviant from a masculine norm. In this particular case, Gilligan demonstrated how Kohlberg in research on moral development excluded “the data he had collected on women which did not fit the model he was using – one originally developed to explain masculine development” (Gilligan, 1987, p. 57). More problematic still was the fact that the resulting model of development was seen to reflect a normative model and the particular style of moral reasoning used predominately by men was deemed superior to that used predominately by women. Gilligan insisted instead that women’s moral judgement which rested on an ethic of caring was ‘different’ but not inferior or deviant. It was generally argued then that women’s voices (as well as the voices of other groups excluded by a white, middle class male focus) were conspicuously absent from
psychology. Thus a significant focus of early feminist research in psychology was concerned with listening to women’s voices or woman-centred research – research on women and issues felt to be salient to women by women (see Harding, 1987). Many feminists have sought to show how supposedly objective ‘knowledge’ produced about women actually reflects ‘socio-political constructions and practices’ (Malson, 1998, p. 37).

Overall, feminist critique challenged the foundational premises of scientific research, exposing the limits of ‘value-neutrality’ and objectivity as the basis of scientific authority and highlighting the masculine bias of its structuring principals. Feminist theorists also undermined the particular ‘knowledges’ that psychologists (scientists) produced about women which functioned in the service of a patriarchal status quo. These challenges to the alleged objectivity and neutrality of scientific knowledge are reiterated in post-structuralist challenges to scientific discourse which I look at next.

3.3 Post-structuralism and discourse

Post-structuralist challenges to the foundational premises of science and psychology relate in significant part to the impact of Foucauldian theory of discourse and its insistence on the imbrication of power/knowledge (see Henriques et al., 1984). Whilst post-structuralism is not a homogenous category (Sarup, 1993), post-structuralist theory can be said to be based on the critique or deconstruction of grand historical narratives, universals and apparently natural or common-sense categories. Foucault was particularly interested in the rise of the human sciences – or what he referred to as the ‘subjectifying social sciences’ (Hall, 1997). In his analysis of the social sciences he was primarily concerned with power and forms and strategies of governance which related to the rise of the social sciences as a means of social management (Hall, 1997; Henrique et al., 1984). The challenge to science and psychology then is inherent in this – they do no merely objectively describe the objects they study but through the delineation of those objects they produce them in particular ways. As Walkerdine (1986) puts it:

One of the aspects of his [Foucault’s] work on power and the human sciences is that it allows us to examine the productive power of psychological knowledge in the regulation of the ‘social’ itself. Psychology, in this sense, does not distort a set of real
relations (or a real nature) which lurk beneath waiting to be freed; rather because of its effectivity in the regulation of the practices themselves, it helps to constitute what that nature means and how it is lived out and regulated…psychology is productive of the social positions and identities through and by which subjectivity is created. (p. 61)

Knowledge, including scientific and psychological knowledge is produced through discourse and knowledge is entirely enmeshed with power. Discourse “defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about…It also influences how ideas can be put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others” (Hall, 1997). Thus, for example, women do exist but they only become meaningful as a social position or identity through the production of knowledge about ‘woman’ enacted through discourse. Moreover, that knowledge is produced in a set of power relations where certain versions of what woman is are privileged over others and raised to the status of ‘truth’, thereby exercising a greater regulatory effect. This point from Foucault that discourse constitutes its objects seriously problematises the scientific claims to objectivity and truth. ‘Truth’ is an effect of discourse, of the wedding of power to the production of knowledge. There can be no unmediated access to things-in-themselves – since nothing is meaningful outside of discourse (Foucault, 1972). Things are true only in so far as they have the effects of truth. Moreover, that universal truths can be discovered by an appropriately disinterested and rigorous process is undermined by Foucault’s insistence on the historic conditions under which knowledge is produced through discourse. Things are meaningful and ‘true’ only within a specific historical context (Hall, 1997).

Truth isn’t outside power… Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces the regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned … the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

What post-structuralist theory also does is undermine the very foundational object of psychological inquiry – the individual. The ‘individual’ is itself a
discursive construction instantiated in its current form by the human sciences – the Cartesian cogito – transparent to itself, stable, unitary and rational author of its own choices and ideas is entirely the production of modern forms of power and government (e.g., Rose, 1996, 1999). Thus, post-structuralism also instantiates the deconstruction of the category of identity – and of identity categories in general (Hall, 1996; Spivak, 1976). (Chapter 2 discussed these ideas in greater length). Hence, the psychological subject is seriously compromised as a unit of analysis as Henriques et al. (1984) amongst others elaborate in the hugely influential text Changing the Subject.

3.4 Discourse analysis

In view of these feminist and post-structuralist critiques of ‘science’ and ‘the individual’ empiricist/positivist research appears highly problematic, even untenable. Hence, it might be argued, research should then move, first, from notions of objectivity towards notions of multiple and contextual ‘truths’ and, second, from the individual as the site of enquiry to discourse and the production of objects, subjectivities and practices. Discourse analytic methods and approaches have positively burgeoned in line with these challenges to psychology (Billig, 1991; Burman & Parker, 1993; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). There are several types of discourse analytic approaches (see Burman & Parker, 1993; Potter & Wetherell, 1991 for a discussion of this) not all of which are compatible with a post-structuralist framework. There are also extensive discussions about discourse analysis and its compatability with feminist practice (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995 for an example of feminist discourse approaches). Those discourse analytic approaches which are consistent with post-structuralist and feminist epistemologies (very broadly speaking) reject the notion of an anterior reality and focus on the way that discourses construct particular versions of reality and thereby constitute our subjectivity, experience and desire in particular ways.

A specifically post-structuralist approach to discourse analysis is exemplified by the work of Henrieques et al. (1984), Wendy Hollway (1989) Valerie Walkerdine (1986, 1989) and Margaret Wetherell (1995) which are linked in their commitment to a Foucauldian understanding of discourse. This approach is concerned with the ways in which discourses construct particular knowledges or regimes of truth; with relations of power and the regulative function of discourse; and with the socio-
historic specificities of forms of power/knowledge. Therefore, the two empirical studies in this thesis are concerned with identifying discourses themselves and the discursively constituted subject positions and objects as they are manifest in texts and in women’s talk. Emphasis is on the constructive and productive effects of discourse and its relation to materiality (see Henrique et al, 1984; Malson, 1997; McNay, 1992; Ussher, 1997b; Walkerdine, 1986, 2001). Refuting notions of objective truth or reality should not be confused with rejecting experience, materiality or the body *per se*. Rather it is more specifically rejecting the idea of access to a pre- or extra-discursive materiality that is not mediated by the signifying effects of language and discourse. Discourses are social practices where “power and knowledge are joined together” and power “produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (Foucault, 1977 cited in Malson, 1997). Discursive constructions of femininity which constitute women’s subjectivity (in multiple and contradictory ways and along with other discursive positionings) contribute to producing what it is we want, what we value and consequently the choices we make, the actions we take, our relationships with others. These choices, actions and desires are not by any means universal, inevitable or prescribed but they are delimited and constrained by the regulatory functions of discourse. Certainly discourse has very ‘real’ effects that are lived and embodied (Walkerdine, 1986).

Finally, a number of post-structuralist theorists have emphasised the importance of drawing together psychoanalysis and discourse analysis as a means of theorising the complexities of subjectivity and acknowledging desire and fantasy as the relations we have to the truths that are produced about us and for us (e.g., Butler, 1997; Frosh, 1999a; Hollway, 2000; Venn, 1984; Walkerdine, 1986, 1997). This allows for recognition of the way that power/knowledge has what Butler (1997) calls a *psychic life*. In *Changing the Subject*, Henriques *et al.* (1984) propose a changed ‘subject’ of psychology – from the rational, unitary “subject-of-science that classical epistemology has taken to be the ideal representative of *homo-rationalis*” (p.121) to a deconstructed subject, constituted through discourse and in the decentring movements of the very process of subjectification such as those described by the insights of psychoanalytic theory. In arguing for an explanatory and exploratory mode that combines discourse theory and a psychoanalytic stance, Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2003) articulate “one of the many intriguing features of the Lacanian system, which it shares with discourse theory, is the ambiguity of its account of the
social or cultural, which is seen both as regulatory …and productive or constitutive of subjectivity” (p. 40). This combination of approaches allows for an account which focuses on the structuring of subjectivity in accordance with socio-historical forces as well as providing “an account of the way these forces operate in individual’s experience” (ibid, p. 40).

3.5 Feminist post-structuralism

Post-structuralism shares feminist objections to scientific claims to objectivity and truth. It also coincides with feminist concerns about the relations of power that are implicated in the production of knowledge, specifically the production of particular knowledge about ‘woman’ from a patriarchal perspective. However, post-structuralist theory also problematises some aspects of feminist theory and practice by rejecting the idea of a natural or essential feminine experience (Butler, 1992; Poovey, 1988; Riley, 1988; Weedon, 1987). Feminist post-structuralism, is a perspective that maintains the focus on women’s subjectivity and experience taking into account the post-structuralist destabilisation of the category of woman (see Gavey, 1989; Malson, 1999a; Weedon, 1987). Where post-structuralism generally seeks to destabilise and deconstruct categories of truth and claims to universalism, feminist post-structuralism is specifically concerned with critiquing the apparent stability of the category ‘woman’ in favour of emphasising its contingent nature and heterogeneity; and its interconnectedness with other discourses constitutive of identity and subjectivity such as race and class.

Any monolithic concept of woman flattens out the diversity of lived experiences contained within that category and thereby also marginalises those issues and experiences that emerge in the articulation of gender with other (discursively constructed) categories such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, dis/ability and socio-economic status. What has emerged in recent feminist debates then is a re-theorisation of ‘womæn’ as a fragmented, multiple and always socio-historically specific fiction. (Malson, 1999a, p. 142).

Thus, feminist post-structuralist theory is not concerned with discovering an authentic ‘feminine’ experience or voice but in interrogating the way that women’s experiences, subjectivities and desires are constituted and regulated in the context of patriarchal power relations. For example, feminist post-structuralist work has looked
at a wide range of phenomena such as AIDS (Squire, 1993), anorexia nervosa (Malson, 1998), motherhood (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991), madness (Ussher, 1991) and post-natal depression (Nicolson, 1986), exploring how they are constituted in discourse and how their production is informed by various constructions of femininity. How, for example, does a diagnosis of post-natal depression or anorexia nervosa, regulate and constrain the woman diagnosed thus? Or how are constructions of femininity imbricated in a particular diagnostic category? What knowledge and mode of subjectivity is produced through the labelling of a woman’s distress as PMS for example, and what other knowledges or ways of being are occluded?

Post-structuralist theory offers a particularly valuable way to look at the relationship between experience and social power, making new light of the feminist insight that the personal is political. ‘Feminism is a politics’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 1) and the post-structuralist concern with the constitutive and regulative effects of power arguably makes it a highly useful and productive framework for feminist research.

3.6 Research design

The methodological approach I have adopted in this research is feminist in so far as I am concerned with the ways women’s subjectivities and experiences are “discursively constituted and regulated within a patriarchal discursive context” (Malson, 1998, p. 44). It is also post-structuralist, firstly in drawing on Foucauldian theory of discourse and power/knowledge and their regulative and constitutive effects (see Chapter 2) and secondly in acknowledging the inseparability of women’s experiences and desires from their constitution through the discourses that variously produce ‘woman’ and ‘femininity’. I have also discussed earlier in the chapter that I am adopting a discourse analytic approach informed by the post-structuralist theory of Foucault. Broadly speaking, this form of discourse analysis (Henriques et al., 1984; Walkerdine, 1986) rejects the notion of an anterior reality and focuses on the way that discourses construct particular versions of reality and thereby constitute our subjectivity, experience and desire in particular ways.

These approaches are in accordance with my aim in this research which was not to reveal an objective truth about what ‘woman’ is and what she wants. Rather, I wish to elucidate how what she is and wants is discursively constituted and manifest. Firstly, in texts from popular media and secondly, in the talk of women about
women. My concern is also with analysing the way that ‘woman’ is discursively constituted in a particular socio-historic context, which I am identifying as ‘post-feminist’. How do post-feminist discursive constructions of woman regulate women’s subjectivity and define the field of possible actions and shape desire? If ‘particular regimes of truth, bodies of knowledge, make possible both what can be said and what can be done’ (Walkerdine, 1984, pp. 154-155) then what does post-feminist discourse make possible and consequently what does it exclude from the realm of possible actions and articulations?

However, I do not want to focus exclusively on the constitution of feminine subjectivity through discourse without trying to understand something of what this means about the experience of being a woman. As Walkerdine (1986) states, the “variety of ‘regimes of truth’ which have positive and powerful effects” in terms of governing and regulating subjects in their socio-historic specificity, define what is “supposed to be” but the “relationship with ‘what is’ is problematic” (p. 57). It is this relationship, “between what is ‘seen’ and what is ‘believed’ and what we struggle with and against in ourselves” (ibid, p. 57) that I am also interested to understand.

There are two projects which form the basis of this thesis. Study 1 is a discourse analysis of the ways in which women’s lives are represented in popular media that could specifically be called ‘post-feminist’. Study 2 is based on the discourse analysis of interview material with ten women around femininity and their experiences as ‘women’. There were two related purposes for the discursive analysis of post-feminist material in Study 1, the first to critique the particular knowledge it produces in relation to women and change; and the second, was to provide a context for the analysis of the interviews conducted in the second study since post-feminist discourse is widely available to women for making sense of themselves and their experiences. Thus, this discursive context of post-feminism is understood to be part of the contemporary social regulation of ‘feminine’ subjectivity. Consequently, the discourse analysis of the interview material will explore the place of post-feminist discourse in the women’s construction of their experience and identity.

3.6.1 Study 1: A discourse analysis of post-feminism in popular media

The purpose of this study was to map out a general terrain or discursive context of the way women’s lives are represented in the media which can be loosely
understood as post-feminist. Then the aim was to analyse the particular truth claims made in this discursive context and to extrapolate from them the possible implications and effects of post-feminist discourse where it produces certain ‘knowledges’ about how women’s lives are and how they have changed. As such it provides a discursive context in which women make sense of their lives and their experiences. As knowledge is attached to power, such an analysis it was hoped, would also indicate whose interests such post-feminist discourse actually served.

The analysis takes in print, television and film media, including selections of text from newspapers, magazines, television shows and movies. The texts analysed span from 1999 to 2003. The print selections are taken from mainly Australian media sources, though not exclusively, since the particular productions of woman that have emerged as ‘post-feminist’ are of relevance in other Western countries, such as the U.K. and North America in the wake of second wave feminism. Many popular magazines available in Australia originate in North America or the U.K. The print texts are taken from various high circulation daily tabloid and broadsheet newspapers which represent some of the most widely read publications in Australia such as *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Sun Herald* and *The Sunday Telegraph*; the other primary form of print media analysed were from various high circulation, glossy women’s magazines including *New Woman*, *Cleo*, *Elle*, and *Vogue*.

The method of collection was mostly opportunistic, since most of the data is popular media material and is readily available and consumed in day to day life, reading the newspaper, watching television, and so on. This was particularly the case with regard to television programs and movies which in some ways offered themselves for selection because of their sheer popularity and ubiquity in the media. Those television shows selected, such as *Buffy Vampire Slayer*, *Xena: Princess Warrior* and *The X-Files* were selected because of their popularity – all having extensive seasons, being shown in prime-time slots with high ratings – but also because these television shows were frequently referred to in print media where much was made of them being symbolic of women’s progress. The same criteria applied to the films discussed, for example, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* and *Charlie’s Angels* were high-grossing films which were also frequently referred to in print media as being evidence of women’s progress and success. There was a great deal of cross referencing of popular media with clearly identifiable post-feminist themes.
In relation to newspapers and magazines I regularly sampled these sources, selecting randomly on a weekly basis from newspapers and on a monthly basis for the glossy women’s magazines which are monthly publications. Therefore I would collect up to five newspapers from the publications listed previously each week (across weekday and weekend editions) and up to two of the glossy magazines each month. Initially I scrutinised these sources for material that reported on gender change and specifically, change for women. The more data that was collected the more the criteria narrowed as it became possible to identify particularly popular themes and trends in reporting and representing women in relation to change such as women ‘having it all’, ‘returning to femininity’, ‘being like a man’ and ‘girl power’ or the female action hero. These themes and trends form the organising structure for the discourse analysis reported in detail in chapter 4. This analytic process, taking place over an extended period of time and taking in such a broad range of texts as it did, proceeded as kind of feedback loop and was a continuous and reiterative process. In total, between 1998 and 2003, I selected approximately 200 newspaper articles and 40 women’s magazines, that is, 200 separate articles from separate editions of newspapers and 40 women’s magazines that contained a feature, editorial or reference that was relevant to the themes I had identified.

Of course I note the homogeneity of the texts and media I have elected to represent and acknowledge that there are obviously many other representations of women both in mainstream media and non-mainstream media that I have not addressed or which I have consciously selected out. The sample was not meant to identify the range of representations of women available in Australian society but rather to exemplify a particular type of discursive production which I have named post-feminist, that is quite ubiquitous in popular media. What was relevant in the selection of texts and film or television was that the media sources were mainstream, popular and highly accessible. The analysis was concerned with looking at the particular ‘truth effects’ of an identified discourse and the way it constitutes and regulates its female subject (see Walkerdine, 1997, for example). The results of the analysis of these texts in accordance with the post-structuralist style of discourse analysis discussed earlier in this section is presented in chapter 4.

3.6.2 Study 2: A discourse analysis of interviews with women about women

For the second study I conducted in-depth interviews with ten women. They
were selected by convenience and casual sampling. There is by now in qualitative and post-structuralist research a well established acceptance of relatively small, casual samples, even ranging to research with one participant as in-depth case studies (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Kitzinger, 1987; Malson, 1998). Positivist goals such as measuring prevalence or incidence; judging probability or attempting to make statements which are ‘true’ or ‘representative’ of a whole group of people is not at stake here.

The women interviewed were a very homogenous group, white, middle class and heterosexual, aged between 26 and 55 years of age. Again, it was not my intention to suggest that these participants represent all women or to make any universalising or generalising statements about ‘women’ from these participants. Moreover, these participants can be seen as a relatively privileged group whose day to day lives are not significantly impacted by experiences of oppression or alienation connected to ethnicity, sexuality or even poverty. Therefore, in doing this research with a sample of homogenous and relatively privileged women I acknowledge that one of the most significant omissions is the representation of experience of other women, particularly those more marginalised. I cannot hope to say anything about how being positioned at the interstices of discourses of race, sexuality or social class might interact with traditional femininity and post-feminist discourse. The restricted representativeness of the sample was certainly not meant as a statement or unexamined suggestion about the importance, relevance or validity of one group of women’s experience over another’s nor was it enacted as a deliberate exclusion of other accounts of experience.

I made an initial contact either by phone or email with potential participants to ascertain if they would be interested in participating. If they agreed, then interviewees were given pre-interview material in the form of interview prompts (see appendix a) and a set of brief instructions (see appendix b) which asked the interviewees to read the prompts and write down their immediate thoughts and feelings as points of discussion for the interview when it occurred. They were also given an information sheet (appendix c) outlining the research aims and standard ethical issues such as confidentiality, privacy, audio-taping and informed consent and a consent form (appendix d). They were posted or emailed the material prior to the interview being scheduled.

The prompts were a collection of brief extracts which I had selected from
works of fiction, poetry and song lyrics by women that I felt expressed something about desire or constraint. Given my research interest in the way that women’s desire might exceed or fail to be entirely captured by patriarchal productions of ‘femininity’ then narratives of limitation, constraint and excess were deemed to be a relevant frame. Since ‘femininity’ is a substantially broad area of inquiry the interview prompts were provided in order to create a frame and focus for the discussions between myself and participants to take place in but without narrowing significantly the range of responses that might be evoked if I were to have decided in advance on a set of questions to ask. The use of prompts is similar to the utilisation of a ‘guide’ in focus group research where it is suggested that the list of probes, questions or topics should “help channel the discussion without necessarily forcing the group into a pre-determined mould” (Morgan, 1997, p. 48). Thus the prompts were provided on the model of focus group research to impose valuable structure without limiting excessively the range of possible responses (see for example, Morgan 1997; Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996).

Up to a week after I had sent a woman a set of interview prompts, the instruction sheet and information sheet, I contacted them again to make an interview time that was convenient. In all cases I travelled to the women’s homes to interview them. I advised them at the beginning of the interview about confidentiality and again requested their permission to audio-tape the interview. I also reminded the women that they could terminate the interview at any time or withdraw from the project at any stage.

I commenced the interviews by referring the interviewee back to the interview prompts I had sent them. In most cases they had written down something, if not for each prompt then for some. This became the basis for discussion. On average, interviews were approximately one to one and a half hours in duration. They were open-ended and interactive rather than fact-finding and the emphasis was on an informal, conversational style (Marshall & Wetherell, 1989). They were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. (The transcription conventions are attached as appendix e).

The transcripts were then analysed using discourse analysis following the post-structuralist approach outlined earlier. Thus, overall, I was concerned with a more ‘global’ style of analysis of the discourses around femininity and post-feminism or equality, looking at; what discourses were employed; how their use
constructed particular versions of experience and subjectivity; and thereby how particular relations of gendered power were being (re)produced, challenged or occluded. Although the focus was on broadly identifying discourses and discursive resources (e.g., Walkerdine, 1984) that were manifest in the interview texts, at times, the analysis is more ‘fine-grained’. That shift to a more fine grained analysis occurs where I am concerned with the ways that women employ interpretive repertoires or rhetorical devices to position themselves in particular ways in relation to certain discourses, or to negotiate conflict between various discursive positions (e.g., Wetherell, 1998). This analysis is presented in chapters 5, 6 & 7 which together explore the ways in which ‘woman’ is discursively constituted through competing discourses of femininity and post-feminism and the consequent regulation of women’s desire and subjectivity this (re)produces in a patriarchal discursive context.
4

Post-feminism:
A discursive analysis of representations of ‘woman’ and the production of ‘equality’ in popular media.

Parade of the Old New
I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching, but it came as the New.
It hobbled up on new crutches which no one had ever seen before and stank of new smells of decay which no one had ever smelt before.

The stone that rolled past was the newest invention and the screams of the gorillas drumming on their chests set up to be the newest musical composition.

Everywhere you could see the graves standing empty as the new advanced on the capital.

Round about stood such as inspired by terror, shouting: Here comes the New, be new like us!

And those who heard, heard nothing but their shouts, but those who saw, saw such as were not shouting… (Brecht, 1938-1941, p. 323)

4.1 Introduction

The predictions for women’s future have been rosy for a very long time now (e.g., Faludi, 1992; Wilkinson & Howard, 1997). Such predictions and proclamations of women’s triumph in the form of ‘liberation’ and ‘emancipation’ spill from the pages of popular women’s magazines and daily newspapers. The message is very clear, apparently:

The Woman question is answered. It is now understood that women can do anything that men can do. Anyone who tries to stop them is breaking the law. . . . The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should now eff off. . . . (Greer, 1999, p. 4)
And yet material conditions reflect continuing inequality, discrimination and violence against women as represented by the following statistics in Australia at the time of writing: women’s total average earnings are only 66 per cent of men’s (Summers, 2003) and women continue to be concentrated in part-time work in large part because of family responsibilities (ABS, 2001); only 38 per cent of women are covered by paid maternity leave provisions and tax-benefits favour stay-at-home mothers but provide no assistance for those who wish to work (Goward, 2000); sexual divisions of labour remain relatively unchanged despite women’s larger representation in paid labour, with women doing 65 per cent of unpaid household labour and around 75 per cent of child care; also, 23 per cent of all women who had ever been married or in a de-facto relationship reported experiencing some kind of violence (ABS, 1996); it is estimated (given under-reporting of this crime) that approximately 200 women are sexually assaulted every day (ABS, 2002a).

Thus, conditions portrayed by such statistics for women do not seem to reflect any kind of post-feminist utopia of the sort that is being widely proclaimed. We must be suspicious of representations of women’s emancipation and ‘equality’ if we take seriously the Foucauldian insight that it is in discourse that power and knowledge are conjoined. The question that must be asked then is not only what is represented by post-feminist discourses of equality but what is (re)produced by them? In other words, given that discourse is constitutive of its objects rather than simply reflective, then what particular knowledge(s), truths and subjectivities are produced by post-feminist discourses? The Foucauldian notion that the production of truths is related to the field of power relations in which it occurs radically politicises any analysis of what purports to be knowledge at any given time and location. Accepting that ‘particular regimes of truth, bodies of knowledge, make possible both what can be said and what can be done’ (Walkerdine, 1984, pp. 154-155), then what does a post-feminist discourse make (im)possible? What can(not) be said and done with reference to the truth/knowledges it produces?

The research that is the basis of this chapter was concerned with precisely the above questions. An analysis of discursive productions of ‘woman’ available in popular media including, newspaper, television, film and magazines was conducted. I was particularly interested in exploring how ‘woman’ is constituted and regulated in post-feminist discourses. For example, these texts and images are based on an a priori assumption that (positive) change has occurred; rely on an either implicit or
explicit reference to ‘feminism’ as the basis for their intelligibility; and mobilise the language of equality, liberation and freedom as though these are incontestable and incontrovertible truths that have already been achieved. Liberty and equality, for example, are ‘things’ that are understood to have been ‘achieved’ for/by women. The analysis was carried out within a Foucauldian framework where it is not the ‘truth’ or voracity of these discourses that is at issue. Instead the aim was to ask what the truth effects of post-feminist discourse are? What power relations do they insinuate? And in what ways is ‘woman’ constituted within this discursive framework?

It is important to discuss at this point what is assumed in this research about the effects of media in its relation to the consumer given that this analysis takes popular media as having a constitutive and regulative role and given that different forms of media are understood to have different significatory effects. For example, the specificity of women’s magazines as a genre which powerfully (re)produces discourses of femininity has been well-established through work like that of Dorothy Smith (1990) and Marjorie Ferguson (1983). Ferguson writes that women’s magazines as a genre are a significant part of the ‘cult of femininity’, that is they have a large role to play in prescribing, legitimising and regulating the production of normative femininity. The magazines are a part of a ‘cult’ dedicated to “defining norms for what their followers should think, say, do, wear, cook, read, explore, ignore or care about” (Ferguson, 1983, p. 189). Smith’s (1990) Texts, Facts and Femininity also explores the regulatory and constitutive function of women’s magazines as aspects of ‘masculine domination and capitalism’ which use idealisations of feminine perfection to instantiate desire and produce women as consumers of commodities intended to remedy their imperfection in contrast to the ideal. Importantly, Smith also considers the way that readers interact with these texts and the ‘doctrines’ of femininity they prescribe and situates texts “in the structure of social relations in which people are actively at work” (p. 163).

Smith’s contention that women are “active as subjects and agents” rather than passive subjects is not intended to indicate a linear relationship between what women say, do, desire and social organisation nor its inverse. In this way Smith’s work draws on Foucauldian notions of discourse and power to understand the regulative effects of popular media. The impact of the media has often been understood as linear, that is, the familiar premise for example that violence on television if
consumed uncritically will lead to increased acceptance and acts of violence by those who view it. Moreover, as Walkerdine (1997) explores in *Daddy’s Girl*, this constructs the ‘audience’ as massively duped, that is, naïve and ignorant and ‘easily swayed’ albeit capable of making resistant readings if pointed in the right direction presumably by someone who *knows* better. In exploring the constructions of femininity and ‘woman’ in popular media I am not suggesting that women are uncritical or passive readers or viewers. The analysis does however assume that popular media texts such as magazines, newspaper and films have a regulative and constitutive effect on women’s desire and subjectivity.

### 4.1.1 Overview of analysis

Overall, as the analysis that follows illustrates, post-feminist discourse does two significant things: firstly, it constructs a particular (fictional) context in which women are ‘known’ to be equal and secondly, it constitutes ‘woman’ in particular ways in that (fictional) context. I will argue that in a post-feminist context ‘woman’ remains dependent on patriarchal definition. Most problematically for a feminist agenda is that the intactness of the particular relations of domination that are implied by a patriarchal definition of ‘woman’ are denied and occluded in post-feminist discourse by the allegedly ‘new’ ways that ‘woman’ is understood and represented.

In Foucauldian terms, I will argue that post-feminist discourse can be read as part of a patriarchal discursive strategy that is aimed at ‘resisting’ and invalidating feminist resistance and refusing women’s full identification outside the private sphere of the home and motherhood. In claiming that post-feminist discourse is a patriarchal strategy I am drawing on Foucault’s insight that “power relations are both intentional and non-subjective”, and that “there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives” though, “this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject” (Foucault, 1979, pp. 94-95).

Furthermore, I will argue that post-feminist discourse seeks to produce a closure of ‘feminist’ resistances or politics. It enacts a very dangerous evacuation of politics from the field of vision and even in the extreme enables a redistribution of power to a site which it had never vacated. This closing down that it is enacted by post-feminist discourse makes it almost impossible - and if not impossible then extremely problematic - to give voice to dissatisfaction or distress.

It is not that the arguments of this chapter are insistent only that nothing has
changed and that ‘post-feminist’ discourse has uniform or stable effects that are only of the order of reinstating or reiterating patriarchal power. Nor is it the case that I am saying that the positions offered by post-feminist discourse are never enabling of different ways of identifying or thinking. Rather, in the spirit of Foucault’s arguably pessimistic politics (Rabinow, 1984) we should always be suspicious of what is presented to us as self-evident truths (Hall, 1997). In saying that post-feminist discourse represents a strategy aimed at the reiteration of patriarchal power relations is not to argue that there has been no contestation of meaning at all - of course meaning is contested and subverted constantly. However, as Foucault (1980, cited in Rabinow, 1984) cautions “one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis for the functioning of the state” (p. 64).

The analysis of this chapter precedes by way of major themes or preoccupations identified in popular media. It begins by exploring texts which articulate the idea that post-feminism heralds the rise of a ‘New Woman’ and looks at the context that is constructed for this ‘new woman’ and what is available to her as evidence of her emancipation. The claims that she can ‘have it all’, be ‘just like a man’, for example, are interrogated and deconstructed to reveal a less progressivist agenda than is explicitly suggested. This is followed by an exploration of the post-feminist phenomena of ‘grrrl power’ and the huge popularity and commercial viability of ‘touch girls’ or female actions heroes. It is argued that these representations of woman as ‘tough’ and ‘powerful’ are not necessarily signs of women’s breakthrough to power and autonomy but function to occlude ongoing gender power asymmetries. Following from this is an analysis of the production of the ‘single woman’ again in post-feminist terms as emblematic of women’s empowerment. However, it is argued that the figure of the single woman is constituted within the still powerful discourses of romantic heterosexuality and traditional femininity. Her very ‘singleness’ constitutes an anomaly and she serves as a warning to women who eschew the feminine values of home and relationship. Finally, the chapter concludes with an exploration of the way the massive double burden of family and paid work for women is made meaningful within post-feminist discourse as a regretful outcome of women’s own demands embodied in feminism or in economic necessity. It is argued that the explanations offered in post-feminist media texts focus on individual factors and fail to escape a foundational production...
of woman as first and foremost a ‘mother’ and thus broader systemic and organisational features that contribute to women’s unequal burden are made invisible.

4.2 The ‘New Woman’ and post-feminism

The modern ‘superwoman’ or the ‘New Woman’ is a creation of popular media texts that coincides with utopian predictions for women’s future made at the end of the 20th Century, such as the following:

If the latter part of the 20th century was the time when women began to catch up to men, the coming decades will be the period when we just might catch up to them. That’s the belief of a majority of American women as they head into the new millennium. They are optimistic that in the future they will be stronger, richer and more powerful, and that they’ll have more choices and increased self-confidence. (Hickey, 1999, p. 170)

In many respects the new century brings another set of extraordinary opportunities. Just as the pill liberated women in the 20th century so will many new technologies liberate women to better manage their lives and control their reproductive capacities. Within work, the shift to an information and service based economy will mean a continuing expansion of opportunities. In leisure women will be able to explore themselves in new ways, to travel, to take risks and have fun. (Wilkinson & Howard, 1997, p. 18)

These quotes construct a future for women where they have fantastic prospects in every aspect of their lives from work and family to leisure and travel. They emphasise autonomy and freedom by using words such as ‘choice’, ‘liberated’, ‘control’, ‘opportunities’, and ‘powerful’. As such they reproduce liberal humanist discourse which positions the individual as autonomous and originating and thus exercising choice and control over themselves and their circumstances in a direct and unproblematic fashion (Rose, 1996, 1999; Hare-Mustin, 1991). Finally, both quotes invoke a time frame – a sense of the past, present and future and of movement and change. As such the veracity of their claims for continuous and linear change depends on a prevailing commonsense understanding of progress and change as inevitably occurring over time and as being inevitably linked: that is change is always progressive.
Certainly a large part of the persuasiveness of post-feminist discourse is to be found in its reliance on particular narratives of change and progress. Yet as Malson (1999b) puts it, the notion of “progress” has been displaced by “more critical theorisations of socio-historical change, in which unitary linear narratives are disrupted and the values entailed in presenting chronological change as (almost entirely) positive are problematised and particularised” (p. 32) (e.g., Fine, 1992; Foucault, 1972, 1978; Stainton-Rogers et al., 1995). Despite this, by relying on positivist and progressivist notions of change over time post-feminist discourse is able to simply ‘assume’ change to have occurred rather than be at any pains to demonstrate (other than by pointing to its own existence) that change has occurred.

Such threshold of the millennium predictions of a female future that is on the up and up bear little resemblance to where women might actually find themselves since it completely ignores inevitable differences in women’s opportunities and experiences according to ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and so forth. The effectiveness of texts such as these is precisely their assumption of homogeneity, of a normative ‘woman’. Invoking ‘woman’ as a seamless social category of individuals about whom such predictions and claims for equality can be made reinstates the social category as a means of social control. Its aim is not to point out that these predictions are implicitly about middle class, white women. One might imagine it could be less politically effective if the above quote read: ‘a continuing expansion of opportunities for white, middle class women living in societies such as Australia, Britain and North America’, for example. Furthermore, even for white, middle class women circumstances maybe far more circumscribed than these quotes acknowledge.

These discursive productions of utopian conditions are those from which a ‘New Woman’ could, or even logically must emerge, because things have ‘progressed’ beyond what is ‘admitted’ to be a less than equal past into an egalitarian present. The effect of constructing a ‘New Woman’ is to signify that change has occurred, that there has been some break with the old. In discursively producing something as ‘new’, a fictional space or horizon is opened up where what this ‘new’ thing is can be defined. The following section considers some of the ways that post-feminist discourse constructs its central object, the ‘New Woman’, as ‘having-it-all’, being ‘just like a man’ and being free to ‘return to femininity’.

Just briefly, before proceeding it is worth noting that if the ‘New Woman’ is
placed in an historical context it would be more accurate to describe her as the
newest ‘New Woman’. That is, she is more aptly understood as a recurrent and
already available discursive production of an apparently different kind of woman
which has emerged as both the product of and resistance to women’s demands for
‘equality’ at different historical moments. It is not possible here to go into the
history of her production. Suffice to say that the notion of the ‘New Woman’ was
also deployed in response to the Women’s suffrage movement at the end of the 19th
Century and again in the later years of the 1970’s and early 1980’s (e.g., Faludi,
1992; Riley, 1988). Indeed Marjorie Ferguson’s study (1983) of women’s magazines
reports that the late 1970’s and early 1980’s representations of overt change in the
form a ‘new woman’ only ‘concealed the durability of archetypal feminine roles’ (p.
109). And Ledger (1997) notes that the New Woman of the late 19th Century was
primarily a discursive construction and journalistic phenomenon. Where the ‘New
Woman’ of the post-suffrage movement was largely caricatured and vilified and the
1970’s version was both vilified and construed as proudly emancipated, our latest
‘New Woman’ is so equal and emancipated she’s beyond equality so that it seems
there is no longer any point in her being a feminist. She is unlikely to refer to herself
as ‘feminist’ and understands it is passé to even talk about issues of equality, for
women (Fine, Stewart & Zucker, 2000; Riley, 2001).

4.2.1 ‘Having-it-all’

One of the ways that post-feminism is produced is through the discursive
construction of a reality wherein women are said to ‘have-it-all’. Claiming that
women ‘have-it-all’ situates ‘woman’ in a landscape of abundance where nothing is
impossible and nothing is closed to her. The following example is from the glossy
women’s magazine, New Woman (1999, September). It carried an interview with,
“the general manager of two leading Sydney radio stations”, who, according to the
article, “makes superwoman look like an underachiever” (“Power lunch”, p.32).

‘I love work and I love radio’, says O’Connor, 35. ‘That didn’t go
away when I had children, so I saw no reason why I should give up
the professional driven part of myself. If you allocate your time
wisely and make sure every minute counts, there’s no reason why
you can’t have it all.’ . . . ‘I have everything in my life that I want
and for that I’m very grateful’. (ibid, p.32)
Similarly for Ms Kelly, St George Bank’s new CEO in 2001:

Family comes first for new bank chief. She may be Australia’s first female bank chief executive but Gail Kelly is also a mother of four who works 12-hour days and still finds time to eat dinner with her husband. Ms Kelly, 45, who was last week appointed St George Bank’s new CEO, is proof women can have it all – a happy loving family and a hugely successful career. She balances family and career by prioritising and not letting small things worry her. (Allen, 2001, December 16, p. 30)

The construction of the woman as successfully mastering both the public and private worlds, having a successful career and ‘happy loving family’ implies that there are no structural or systemic difficulties to combining motherhood and career. Rather the successful combination of these relies only on the individual’s ability to allocate their time wisely, prioritise and so forth. Hochschild (1989) talks about the way that images of the ‘superwoman’ combining career and family say nothing about the extra burden of domestic labour and childcare women often bear or about men. She talks about the emphasis on women’s personal attributes – time management, competence etc. – thereby obscuring the social factors which have “forced her to adapt to an overly demanding schedule” (p. 25). Hochschild sees the construction of the Superwoman as evidence of a “stalled revolution” (p. 32) rather than a sign of the success of feminist values. The fact that the media message portrayed, for example, in the above extracts is delivered as an interview with a ‘real’ woman makes it difficult to resist its ‘truth’. The reader is expected to understand that if ‘she can do it you can do it too’. The most significant message in this extract is that women ‘have-it-all’ or at least are allowed to in so far as they are individually competent enough. In other words, these quotes implicitly construe an egalitarian ‘reality’ wherein there are no structural barriers to ‘having-it-all’. This directs the reader to understand that not ‘having-it-all’ is not the result of any inequality existing out there in the social structures and is therefore, logically, an individual failure, for example of having poor time management skills.

In another ‘superwoman’ scenario, Vogue (1999, October) magazine features a ‘special’ on a woman who is a journalist and war correspondent (and incidentally a mother-of-three):

It turned out the Indonesian riot police were firing blanks, but the dust up served as a useful illustration of how potentially explosive
almost every story concerning this nation of 220 million people always is. Normally, I pack a gas mask - not much use when they're using water cannons. Once my six-year-old son, Conor, found it in the wardrobe and thought it was a handbag - actually, it often puts me in mind of a Prada accessory. (“Postcard”, 1999, October, p.30)

The article carries the title and by-line: “Post card from the edge: Even through the tragedy of war, foreign correspondent and mother-of-three Linda Duberley can still see the value of an Hermes belt” (ibid, p.30). The signifiers of an ‘ideal’ post-feminist woman are unmistakable; a dangerous, adventurous and independent career usually associated with men on one hand and on the other, motherhood and an appropriately ‘feminine’ familiarity with *haute couture* through mention of a *Prada* handbag and an *Hermes* belt. In effortlessly and unreflexively juxtaposing these signifiers we are invited to read this text as evidence of the way that contemporary women have allegedly achieved the ultimate balance between career and family and thus have-it-all

*New Woman* magazine has been one of the most tireless promoters of the rhetoric of ‘having-it-all’. Their October 1999 issue carries the story, “Get a Life! Perfect partner, Perfect job, Perfect balance”. The article presents a “handy do-it-yourself “menu” for the perfect lifestyle, complete with perfect partner, perfect job, perfect health and a perfect bank balance” (“Get a life!”, 1999, October, p.88). In addition, the article goes on to offer specific advice on how to be the perfect parent, the perfect daughter and the perfect “lady”. For if it is one feature of the ‘New Woman’ that is integral to having-it-all it is that she remains true to her ‘nature’. She is still, after all, a ‘woman’. In the section headed “Become the Perfect Lady - A perfect lady looks good, acts good, is good”. The ‘recipe ingredients’ include fabulous underwear, quality skin products, the right shoes and well kept fingernails as well as the exhortation to “Learn some etiquette” and “Adjust your attitude”:

If you’ve managed to get through your first few decades with a sneer and a dose of cynicism, then get adjusted. Perfect women have pleasant attitudes toward strangers as well as friends. Sullen coolness and aloof rudeness are the signs of a witch. . . . You’ll soon realise how boring and depressing too much attitude can be because without charm, my dear, you're doomed to failure. (ibid, p. 90)

The article is saying that the perfect life is possible, that it is realisable. However, as
the above quote admonishes, no matter how fantastic the future appears one can still be ‘doomed to failure’ if the ‘New Woman’ forgets who she is or has the ‘wrong’ attitude. The ‘New Woman’ then is again constructed as living in a time and place where she is free to choose and where there are no barriers to anything she may want and yet here her success is still construed as dependent on others’ approval in highly gendered terms since she must be charming and likeable. In other words, ‘woman’ is still constructed as ‘good’ and ‘nice’, and constituted through a series of relationships, i.e., wife, sister, mother and daughter, that serve as identities or subject positions in themselves.

I would argue that these signifiers of normative feminine identity should not be read as anachronistic remnants within a discourse that is otherwise committed to progressive identifications or productions of ‘woman’. In fact, having-it-all includes being able to look attractive to men, being pleasant, good and nurturing, for example. ‘Femininity’ and motherhood (largely unreconstructed), in the above examples, are part of what women are allowed to ‘have’.

4.2.2 ‘Just like a man’

In the above extracts women are construed as having-it-all for in a post-feminist context there are allegedly no constraints and no impediments to this. Another of the ways that post-feminist discourse constructs an egalitarian reality for women is to represent women as ‘becoming men’ as in the following examples:

Just like a man: Women have joined the hard drinking, hard working boy’s club. But is this progress? From the beer garden to the bachelor pad women take for granted the sassy, independent lives our mothers dreamed of. In many cases we’re living without men, and like men. (Robinson, 2001, December 2, p. 22)

The women joining men after work at the bar. Drinking after work is a long held male tradition but now women … are following their male counterparts to the nearest pub or wine bar … Socialising after work is becoming a substitute for family. (Lovell, 2000, February 6, p. 30)

Welcome to dating in the new millennium where women, busy with their careers and friends, simply don’t have time to sit and pine by the phone. … Tracey asked Rob out to dinner. (Mackie, 2000, February 13, p. 11)
Physically the signs of a shift away from traditional femininity are obvious. A glance down the street reveals the hourglass figure has all but disappeared. ... And as the physical appearance of women is becoming more masculine, so is their emotional behaviour. (Robinson, 2001, December 2, p. 22)

In the above quotes the ‘New Woman’ has simply become a man. She is described above doing the things that ‘men’ are understood to do, like initiating a dinner date, behaving in predatory sexual ways and going to bars after work. Women are even said to look like men as ‘a glance down the street reveals the hourglass figure has all but disappeared’. These quotes discursively construct women’s emancipation as a reality. The implication is clearly that if women are like men then sexual equality has unarguably been achieved. In this post-feminist production of an egalitarian reality – women are so equal to men they have disappeared as women.

Whilst an egalitarian reality is implied by this andropomorphising move – a closer look reveals little is challenged by this production. To begin with, constructing women as ‘men’ is entirely locked into phallocentric logic.

There are three forms phallocentrism generally takes: whenever women are represented as the opposites or negatives of men; whenever they are represented in terms the same as or similar to men; and whenever they are represented as men’s complements. In all three cases, women are seen as variations or versions of masculinity – either through negation, identity or unification into a greater whole. When this occurs, two sexual symmetries are reduced to one which takes it upon itself to adequately represent the other. (Grosz, 1989, p. xx, emphasis added)

That is, equality is premised on a normalised masculine subject. The only model of a powerful, autonomous, independent subject is masculine and reproduces masculine modes of domination and separation from emotional and familial ties.

Predatory Woman: Their mothers used to warn them that men wanted only one thing. But a new generation of women are playing by male rules. One-night stands, no strings attached sex. Women are beating men at their own sexual games – and some men are running scared. (Jackman, 2001, September 15, p. 43)

It seems somewhere along the line, the girls have turned the tables on the guys. [Young women] are going for the action hero and that means a babe who’s capable of kicking serious butt – just like a man. (O’Neill, 1999, November, p. 85)
In this way, this discourse reiterates little more than hegemonic masculinity. The binary of masculinity and femininity requires that all meaning be captured by its two exclusive poles, thus if one cannot be understood as feminine (i.e., passive, emotional, connected) then one ‘must’ in this exclusionary logic be masculine. What is actually enacted in these quotes is phallocentrism itself – such that ‘woman’ is literally erased and we are left with the monolithic One sex.

Whilst these quotes represent the alleged disappearance of sexual difference (albeit where women disappear) there is not a celebratory tone to them. ‘Is this progress?’ one article asks. The woman produced by these quotes is really a construction of woman as man – a woman who is tough, assertive, career focused, competitive, sexually aggressive, uncaring and who prefers to live ‘without men’ and drink with friends as a substitute for a family. In other words, as a woman (behaving like a man) she is construed as being quite monstrous even whilst in other contexts ‘she’ is construed positively as proof of women’s equality. A sort of moral panic is implicit in these commentaries of something unnatural or gone awry.

A final aspect of the above quotes to draw out here is the way they produce men as ‘victimised’ or ‘feminised’. For example, women are ‘beating men at their own sexual games’ and ‘turning the tables on the guys’ and in the following quote it is a male, Anthony Grant, who must help hardened female executives to ‘soften-up’.

We’re [women] getting so good at building a tough exterior that some experts find they have to teach top female executives to soften up. Sydney-based coaching psychologist Anthony Grant calls it the Margaret Thatcher effect – “the woman who’s really a man”. Assertive, calculating and competitive, these women are clear about what they want and when they’re going to get it. (Robinson, 2001, December 2, p. 24)

It is instructive that it is a woman who is required to soften up but it is hard to imagine top male executives being required or even desiring to soften up. The not at all subtle implication is that if women are becoming more like men, men are consequently constructed as becoming more like women and that feminisation is equated here with victimisation. As one article put it, ‘men have lost confidence as women have gained it’ and are ‘reacting with a lot of confusion about the power shift between the genders’ (Jackman, 2001, September, p. 44). There was an identical reaction to the women’s suffrage movement in the late nineteenth Century where
“Physically masculine New Women in *Punch* were accompanied by correspondingly effeminate men...” (Ledger, 1997, p. 96). Faludi (1992) identifies this as an effect of male fears and anxieties over even the smallest of perceived improvements to women’s rights and asserts that a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (p. 84) is a ubiquitous feature of each period of backlash against female independence. She gives several historic examples of often ‘ludicrous over-reaction to women’s modest progress’ (ibid, p. 86) including a *Wall Street Journal* proclamation in 1949 that ‘women are taking over’ (ibid).

Consider some of the following contemporary headlines and quotes reflecting an apparent ‘crisis of masculinity’:

**Are Men the New Women?** ...Welcome to the new feminocracy…Women are no longer the weaker sex. (Jones, 2000, April 9, p. 20)

The Male Eunuch: From Hero to Ornament. As we wobble towards the millennium, the pulse takers seem to agree that a domestic apocalypse is under way: manhood is under siege. (Faludi, 1999, September 4-5, p. 6)

The Lost Men. (Leser, 2000, March 25, p. 18)

Breaking the Hearts of Men. Men and women are no closer to understanding each other, mostly because the male is such a devalued species. (Weldon, 1999, January 16-17, p. 21)

The Descent of Man… men have been thrown into crisis by a world that offers no such guarantees [lifetime jobs and subservient wives], a world in which their dominance has been so thoroughly undermined. They now find themselves at the mercy of cultural forces that disfigure their lives and destroy their chance at happiness. (Arndt, 1999, September 4, p. 5s)

In reading these quotes one is prompted to ask, as Faludi (1992) does, “what exactly is it about women’s equality that even its slightest shadow threatens to erase male identity? What is it about how we frame manhood that, even today, it still depends so much on feminine ‘dependence’ for its survival?” (p. 87). The question evokes the Lacanian insight of the profoundly unstable state of masculine identity in so far as it relies on the subjugated feminine as its Other to sustain it. Frosh (1994) explains it as follows:
So when the woman does not deliver the goods, when the reality of women is found to be different from the fantasy of ‘The Woman’, this negativity floods back in. … the precariousness of gender identity in the face of feminine recalcitrance – women’s unwillingness to be forced into a position in which they enact men’s fantasies. At its extreme, this makes for violence, for a howl of rage from the man with no Other… (p. 84)

This alleged ‘crisis of masculinity’ is also part of the production of an egalitarian reality where sexism and sexual inequality are denied. It evokes a notion of scarcity, of resources that are unequally distributed as Gavey and Gow (2001) point out:

Inherent in such constructions is the notion of scarcity – that gains for women mean losses for men. The iconic ‘swing of the pendulum’ images a society in which the gender tables have turned to the detriment of men and the unfair advantage of women – the reversal of a patriarchal system. (p. 354)

Via these constructions of a crisis in masculinity the operation of masculine privilege is completely erased and power appears to be positioned with women. What these discourses in combination construct as ‘truth’ is that women’s equality has been achieved and even been carried too far as is evidenced by the seemingly deleterious and destructive effects on ‘men’. bell hooks articulates the way this erasure signals a change of political agenda:

This [insistence on women’s equality] was not just backlash, it was demand for erasure: LET’S ALL JUST PRETEND THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT NEVER HAPPENED! Let’s just act as though women have always had rights and the nation’s most pressing problem was these uppity free women who are so busy harassing men […] that a boy just doesn’t stand a chance. (hooks, 1996, p. 40)

The effect of constructing this version of reality is the closure of any possibility of feminist politics as valid or relevant – i.e. post-feminism. In this context, any sense of a politics based on patriarchal oppression becomes anachronistic, even selfish and ‘bad’. Moreover, it is taken for granted in these narratives that a ‘crisis of masculinity’ is inherently bad where instead it could be conceived that such a crisis if it were to provoke a critical engagement with the limits and constraints of ‘masculinity’ would be as a valuable as feminism’s engagement with the limits of ‘femininity’. Where Faludi (1992) noted that a ‘crisis in
masculinity’ is evoked as a strategy in every period of backlash she also noted it was the “faithful, quiet companion to the loudly voiced call for a ‘return to femininity’” (p. 84).

4.2.3 The ‘return’ to femininity

Unsurprisingly given the alleged ‘crisis in masculinity’, anxieties about gender convergence manifested in a discursive manoeuvre wherein magazines and newspapers triumphantly announced that it is now possible to ‘return to femininity’. That is, as we shall see, an argument is put forward that now that women’s equality has been achieved women may go ‘back’ to femininity rather than imitating masculinity in order to be taken seriously. The implication obviously being that women are now taken seriously in the public domain and can now ‘choose’ to recode themselves as ‘feminine’:

As we count down to the last moments of the millennium, the way women look is changing. We're in the middle of a full-blown affair with femininity and it looks like the mood might last. . . . today's woman is free to trade her power suit for a floral frock and show off (instead of covering up) her most feminine assets. (Goldstein, 1999, July 25, p. 6)

Frilled to bits: Romantic ruffles and feminine frills add a sense of nostalgia to style this summer. They border hemlines and sleeves, cascade delicately down bodices and stamp their girly mark on skirts. (“Frilled to bits”, 2001, July 29, p. 27)

Glamour makes a comeback. It’s official: make-up is back in a huge way for women of all ages. (Soloman, 2000, January 30, pp. 159-160)

The emphasis in these quotes is on the return or comeback of femininity thus drawing ‘femininity’ into the broader insistence on progressive change. Wearing a ‘floral frock’ and showing off ‘feminine assets’ in these accounts signifies women’s freedom to choose. The assumption of the liberal humanist subject is unmistakable and lends an apparent authenticity to the act of choosing ‘femininity’, even positioning the choosing subject as empowered by this choice. The first extract contrasts this ‘freedom’ to be feminine with the implied constraint and oppression signified by the ‘power suit’, as though women are no longer ‘forced’ to wear it. The implication being that women had not been allowed to express their femininity when they were
busy proving themselves to be as good as the men.

Now that women are allegedly equal there is no longer the need to insist on the rejection of ‘femininity’. Indeed, in this fictional post-feminist universe of equality ‘femininity’ is something that, women are allowed to ‘return to’ as well as being taken seriously. ‘Femininity’, we are told, is what a woman wants. In fact, the ‘man suit’ or ‘power suit’ is (re)signified quite explicitly in fashions’ ‘return to femininity’ as virtually misogynist because it represented the restriction of femininity:

After all . . . we’re not even a decade away from one of the most restrictive fashion codes since the 60’s, the ubiquitous power dressing of the 80’s - where women garbed up in mannish pin-stripes with grid-iron shoulder pads designed to show they could cut it in the office. (Goldstein, 1999, July 25, p. 6)

Where there were once minimalist notes and sharp red power suits of women trying to be taken seriously as well as noticed in the office, there are now softer lines and unstructured jackets wrapped in pashmina shawls in baby colours. (Hogan, 1999, July 25, p. 3)

The mannish language used to describe the power suit, with its sharp, minimalist lines and grid-iron shoulder pads is replaced by softer, unstructured lines and baby colours. ‘Power suits’ cue an association with ‘feminist’ discourses and (embarrassingly) self-conscious efforts towards equality or ‘being taken seriously’ or acting mannishly. As a signifier, the power suit is meaningful because of its relation to the social and political struggles broadly understood as belonging to ‘feminism’.

After the women’s movement exhausted all of us with the idea that women should be just like men, dressing and behaving like them, it was refreshing when the pendulum swung back to ruffles. (Dowd, 2001, April, p. 23)

These extracts claim that the ‘New Woman’ need not resort to such props since she does not have to try to be equal according to discursive constructions of an egalitarian present and future. These editorials presume a context where women are ‘taken seriously’ and do ‘cut it’ and therefore are now ‘free’ to throw off the restrictive and mannish suits and return to a ‘natural’ state of femininity that is portrayed here as frilly and soft. The result is that normative versions of femininity
are disguised as liberatory, and proof in themselves of equality, the result of choice and self-expression.

The implication in these texts that femininity – and this particular version of what it means to be feminine - is a ‘natural’ condition for women which was somehow previously constrained and deformed by ‘mannish’ dressing is particularly clear in the following editorial where the ‘return to femininity’ is coded as ‘self-expression’:

. . . the latest looks seem to be saying that today's woman is much less constricted by outmoded stereotypes and societal norms and is free to express herself and her gender in any way she pleases. (Goldstein, 1999, July 25, p. 6)

. . . the new femininity is obviously presenting itself in an uncontained burst of creative expression (ibid, p. 6)

Here, ‘femininity’ is made to signify women’s progress. It acts in this strategy as emblematic of women’s unfettered right to choose. Bizarrely, ‘femininity’ expressed in soft, delicate fabrics, baby colours, skirts and dresses, frills and flowers, winds up being offered as evidence of ‘today’s woman’ being ‘free to express herself and her gender in any way she pleases’! (that is, leaving aside altogether problems to do with ‘choice’ being assumed to operate separately from power relations).

Dorothy Smith’s work in *Texts, Facts and Femininity* (1990) further undermines the editorial’s claim that women are free to express themselves anyway they please. Smith (1990) highlights the importance of the fashion industry in establishing the interpretation of a particular ‘look’. Similarly in the following examples fashion is attached to statements on how women are and what these new feminine fashions ‘mean’:

There does [seem] to be a windshift among women and it has to do with a renewed appreciation of the feminine . . . (Hogan, 1999, July 25, p. 3)

What we’re seeing in life is women being more comfortable with themselves than they’ve ever been, and what we’re seeing in fashion is a reflection of this. (Mackay, cited in Smith, 1990: 184)

These fashion editorials do more than comment on colours, fabrics and styles. They
tell the reader, how current fashions can be ‘read’ and interpreted not merely seen and worn. Smith (1990) explains how the image or appearance [fashion] is read as a text using the interpretive ‘doctrines’ of femininity. Thus images are ‘coded’ and serve as, what Smith terms, ‘documents of femininity’. Women’s appearance – hairstyle, dress, make-up and so forth – are documents which can be (and usually are) read in a manner which may or may not be what the wearer intends. Thus, she chooses (what to wear) but has less control over the meaning ascribed to her appearance through interpretation using texts outside of her control. What is most significant with regard to Smith’s point is that despite the accumulation of changing ‘documents’, underlying doctrines remain largely unaltered. Thus changing images or appearances are interpreted using the same reference to a more enduring discourse of traditional femininity: “Images change while fundamental features of doctrinal organisation, particularly those suppressing the active presence of women as subjects and agents vis-a-vis men, do not” (Smith, 1990, p. 171).

Susan Faludi (1992), shows how the ‘return’ to femininity is a recurrent tactic of backlash resistance to ‘feminism’ that has been in circulation since the Victorian era in one way or another, where ‘femininity’ is given as what a ‘liberated woman’ wants (p. 93). Thus, the woman who chooses femininity can now be produced as ‘knowingly’ performing femininity and simultaneously femininity is posed as a ‘true’ expression of herself as ‘woman’. ‘Woman’ is intelligible in so far as she is bound by normative femininity and femininity is also offered as something which can be chosen.

I have tried to show some of the ways that post-feminist discourse constructs woman as powerful, free and in control, thus making certain claims for an egalitarian reality. In the above analyses, post-feminist discourse produces a fictional universe wherein sexism and sexual inequality is denied. Women may be positioned consequently as free and powerful in this universe but normative versions of femininity are still central to ‘woman’. Femininity is a central part of what is meant by having-it-all. For example, its absence is problematised where women are described as being just like men, and its ‘return’ is exalted and celebrated as evidence of women’s emancipation. ‘Woman’ may signify in this post-feminist discursive production as ‘powerful’ and ‘equal’ but simultaneously continues to be constructed in phallocentric terms.

I have argued that these discursive repertoires that are repeatedly articulated
and re-articulated in popular media make enormous claims about women’s contemporary (and future) circumstances. Drawing on ‘real’ life narratives about the way women are allegedly living and behaving these media texts produce a certain kind of knowledge about women’s equality and freedom. In the next section I look at the realm of fiction and fantasy to explore highly popular representations of women as action heroes or ‘tough girls’.

4.3 Grrrl power/ tough girls

This section explores the phenomena of the ‘tough girl’ or the female action hero genre. Typically, the action hero is male, associated with the characteristics of toughness, self-sufficiency and physical strength via which he inevitably triumphs over others to ultimately prove his domination (see Innes, 1999). The female action hero has been hugely popular spawning high rating, long running television shows, movies and merchandise. As with most of the rhetoric, devices and representations discussed in this chapter, various versions of the ‘tough girl’ have been produced in previous periods of women’s resistance to ‘traditional’ femininity to apparently signal our changing social position. For example, the social and economic conditions during World War II produced Rosie the Riveter, head scarfed and holding up her fist defiantly she was a means of appealing to women to join the workforce due to men’s participation in the war. Second Wave feminism had Wonder Woman and Charlie’s Angels, for example, and it is surely not coincidental that the latter television show has recently been resurrected in a highly successful movie franchise. Contemporarily we have had fictional ‘tough girls’ like Xena: Princess Warrior, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, and more recently film lead characters in Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon, or Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle. In this section I will explore what these fictional characters are said to signify and how a more critical reading of their impact complicates the generally received view that these characters are emblematic of change to women’s status, opportunities and power. In order to do so, I reproduce in full, at some length, the transcript from an episode of the popular television sci-fi series the X-Files, aired in Australia in June, 2000. This is intended as a way of introducing the signifying elements of the ‘tough girl’ genre and representations of ‘tough girls’. These are highly complex signifiers appealing both to men and women in different ways and reproducing whilst they claim to subvert normative ‘femininity’.
The episode called *First Person Shooter* after a style of arcade game features the series’ central characters, FBI Agents Mulder and Scully, investigating a man’s murder in a high-tech digital games development company. The very real-life murder was committed however, in virtual reality by a virtual character with virtual weapons. The murderer, a digitally created (super)woman, Maitraya has escaped the bounds of her cyber-existence to exert real effects:

(High tech room. Flashing red light. Three geeky looking young men, Retro, Moxie, and Lo-Fat are getting ready for battle. They are dressed in futuristic metal vests, pants, and boots.)

**Computerised voice:** T-minus ten seconds to engagement.

(They begin grabbing high-powered weapons off of the wall. Lo-Fat, a rather pudgy individual, is very excited.)

Lo-Fat: Woo-hoo-hoo!

Moxie: Lo-Fat's going off!

Lo-Fat: Going to kill! Going to kill!

(Retro exudes confidence.)

Retro: Just stay out of my way, Geeks. I'm going to the next level today. I'm a death machine.

Moxie and Lo-Fat: Woo-hoo!!!

**Computerised voice:** Status: Combat ready. Situation: Guerrilla units in immediate vicinity of insertion module.

Geeks: Woo-hoo! Woo! Woo!

**Computerised Voice:** (has been counting down from 10) ... 3 ... 2 ... 1 ... Engage.

Geeks: Woo-hoo!

(The door slides up and open. The players run out into a very large area and position themselves behind a metal triangle shaped barricade, Retro at the top of the triangle and the others on either side of him. Night street scene.)

Moxie: You see 'em?

Retro: They're out there, Geeks. Looking to fry your huevos.
(Sound of engines from the far end of the street, then several motorcycles peel around the corner and head straight for the Geeks.)

**Moxie:** Call it, Retro! Call it!

**Retro:** Now!

(The Geeks all open fire on the motorcycles. One after the other, the motorcycles explode in flashes of light. They just barely destroy the last one before it reaches them. They all duck behind the barricade.)

(Ivan and Phoebe are the games creators, they watch from the control room.)

**Ivan:** Whoa! It's a total massacre out there.

**Geeks:** Go! Move out, baby! Come on, baby!

**Retro:** You got me, Moxie?

**Moxie:** Got you covered.

(Moxie fires his machine gun as Retro runs to a side door and ducks inside.)

(In the control room, Ivan and Phoebe watch.)

**Ivan:** Retro's in.

**Phoebe:** Adrenaline redline.

**Ivan:** The bloodthirst is unquenchable.

(In the game, Retro runs and fires his gun. He ends up in a lower level. He slides open another door, then looks around nervously as he hears footsteps.)

**Retro:** Moxie?

(No answer. The footsteps get closer.)

**Retro:** Who's there?

(A woman descends the steps. She is wearing thigh-high leather spike heel boots, and a very revealing leather bodysuit. Basically two strips of leather held together with a string and a thong. Retro lowers his gun and gapes at her as the woman struts confidently to him. She is stunningly beautiful. She holds out her hand. Retro kneels and kisses it.)
Retro: Who are you?

Maitraya: I am Maitraya. This is my game.

(Her right hand morphs. She is now holding a flintlock pistol. She fires point blank.)

(“First Person”, no date [Online])

The episode some time later concludes with Maitraya’s death. She is destroyed by the far more moderate and demurely dressed female agent, Dana Scully when Scully enters the game to defend her partner, Agent Fox Mulder from the murderous Maitraya. So Maitraya is a ‘tough girl’. Is she therefore a feminist or a post-feminist icon? Is she emblematic of the alleged massive changes in Western society to women’s status and gender (power) relations? Is she a materialisation of women’s empowerment and is her merciless killing of men a reflection of anxieties about masculinity as women allegedly ascend to the highest peaks of success and confidence? Is her death a call for moderation in women’s triumphant march forward? In the extract, Maitraya can be read as representing, in fantasy form, women’s own desire to be ‘powerful’, to have our own game as it were – And yet she is both the creation of a woman (the female designer of the virtual reality game) and destroyed by another woman. This desire for empowerment is clearly an ambivalent one conflicting as it does with a ‘feminine’ desire to care for and protect. Agent Scully enacts this ‘feminine’ desire at the end of the episode protecting Mulder with all the ferociousness of a mother protecting her young or a woman protecting her lover. Then of course, the image of a woman protecting ferociously is simultaneously part of and at odds with an image of traditional femininity as more passive especially where she is shown protecting a man rather than being protected by one.

Simultaneously, Maitraya is the ultimate masculine fantasy, easily imagined from the description given above, gracing the cover of Playboy Magazine perhaps, or the star of a porn-film. Meanwhile, her sexualised appearance signals her dangerousness too, positioning her once again in the realm of masculine fantasy as the femme fatale. “Masculinity needs femininity, needs the feminine ideal” (Frosh, 1994, p. 84), hence the threat that women represent if they refuse or resist the positioning of masculine fantasy. “The terror of femininity returns, alongside the uncertainty produced by the masculine need for the feminine and by men’s
consciousness of the precariousness of gender identity in the face of female recalcitrance” (ibid, p. 84). Feminism could thus be reasonably expected to raise massive anxieties around masculinity as already touched on and which I will return to again in later in the chapter. Following this, Maitraya’s ‘power’ and the men’s relative lack of power in the game re-articulates the redistributive anxieties apparent in post-feminist discourse, expressed earlier in the chapter as the alleged ‘crisis in masculinity’. So whilst the female video game programmer might have produced ‘her’ fantasy woman, this woman remains in the masculine imaginary – imitating masculine power in a masculine genre whilst appealing to normative masculine sexual fantasy.

Before exploring these critical readings in more detail it is necessary to establish how these representations are made to signify within post-feminist discourse. ‘Tough girls’, including Xena: Princess Warrior, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, Charlie’s Angels and so on are consistently understood and interpreted in popular media as signalling a breakthrough in terms of what roles are open to women and undermining the conventional portrayal of women in popular media. These women warriors and action heroes are, constructed in a post-feminist context as evidence of women’s emancipation. Headlines such as “Women on the Verge of a Breakthrough” (Munoz, 2000, November 19, online source, no page numbers), “Girl Power” (“Girl power”, 2001, March 25, p. 4) and “Film Favours the Brave: One small kick-butt for Lara, one giant stride for Feminism” (de Pierres, 2001, June 30, p. 32) are indicative of the optimism with which these action heroes are met. Apparently, “new-rage heroines such as Buffy, Xena and Lara Croft have inspired a generation of gung-ho girls who’ve learned that it’s cool to kick butt” (O’Neill, 1999, November, p. 84).

As we shall see in the following quotes a lot of claims are made on behalf of these female action heroes. They are made to signify as evidence of change and their power and independence is said to reflect woman’s contemporary position. The very presence on our screens of female action heroes and their popularity is allegedly sufficient evidence of how times have changed and the extent to which we have accepted changes to women’s status. Some typical commentaries:

Once upon a time, girls were nice. Not any more. The new breed has grown up on Tomb Raider cyber-babe Lara Croft and Alien-killer Ellen Ripley, who both come armed with kick-ass weaponry
and ballistic street-cred…. We’ve learnt that Girl Power means there’s nothing strange about having one foot at a man’s throat and the other foot wherever the hell we want…. The rise of the action hero doesn’t surprise Lee Burton, a lecturer in media at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. “[Girls] are going for the woman action hero”. And that means a babe who’s capable of kicking serious butt – just like a man. “These role models are healthy, active, intelligent and can compete with men on many levels”, says Burton. (ibid, pp. 85-86)

Buffy Summers is capable of slaying vampires, destroying demons and despatching devils back to the hell-mouth from whence they came, all with a few well-aimed kicks and punches, and all before she does her homework. It’s almost unthinkable that not so long ago, the only way that Buffy would have made it onto a vampire show would have been as Dracula’s half dressed lunch. Call it the Eve-olution of television but there’s no doubt it’s the girls who have the power on the small screen these days. (Browne, 2000, January 30, p. 6)

The tough girl plays numerous roles. Her tougher more masculine image suggests that a variety of gender roles are open to women. (Innes, 1999, p. 5)

Lara [croft Tomb Raider] is nothing if not a model of female empowerment as she dispatches bad guys with bare hands. (McCarthy, 2001, June 10, p. 1)

These days the ideals of traditional femininity don’t apply: we’re told that anything we want to achieve, we can – and that sometimes includes beating the boys at their own game. (“Don’t call me”, 2000, March, p. 57)

Here the female action hero encapsulates and represents all the claims made on behalf of post-feminism in relation to women’s emancipation. Through these editorials, we are instructed to read these fictional female characters as symbols of women’s power and specifically, women’s power over men, recalling the ‘crisis in masculinity’. Also women are found to be acting like men and even “beating the boys at their own game” (ibid, p. 57). All these readings employ a progressivist narrative of change – female action heroes allegedly signify how far we have come and how different and better things are today.

It is important to emphasise that Xena, Buffy and Co are fantasy figures. For example: Xena kills entire Roman battalions and travels through time; Buffy is a ‘vampire-slayer’ with magic powers; Lara Croft is a digital image in a computer
game (though she has more recently been incarnated in human form via the actress Angelina Jolie); the female martial artists in the highly successful movie *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* fight in tree-tops and leap tall buildings …in a single bound. These are arguably the modern descendants of *Wonder Woman* with her magic lasso and invisible aeroplane. What desire is being staged on this fantasy scene and whose desire is it? For in a critical reading these characters are not the straight-forward materialisation of women’s emancipation, but represent the staging of desire, both men’s and women’s, through fantasy. Rather than necessarily, or only, inspiring a ‘generation of gung-ho girls that it’s cool to kick butt’ as has been claimed, I would argue that their function is far more iterative and (re)productive than it is radically new and generative. In order to explore the significance of these contemporary ‘tough girls’, firstly, let us explore the claims made for these figures and take a more detailed look at some examples of popular ‘tough girls’.

The women inserted into these hero type action roles are very unambiguously sexualised as ‘feminine’. Take these comments regarding women in martial arts films, sparked by the hype over films like *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* and *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*:

In Hong Kong, tough and attractive women have long been a staple of cinema. … “In the classic martial arts movies, you needed to show not only the soft and pretty side but also an energy. If you only act tough then its like you are a man. Martial arts uses women really well, but you have to make people think you can really fight. You can’t just put sexy bodies there”. (Munoz, 2000, November 19)

Women may be featured in martial arts movies as active but conventional signifiers of femininity such as softness, prettiness and sexiness, still apply (though a ‘sexy body’ is no longer sufficient on its own). They are required to remain intelligible through these signifiers as ‘feminine’, otherwise they simply become like a man. Their attractiveness is an integral part of their success. The point was also made in the same article quoted above that it is easier to find a male martial arts star than uncover the next great female talent because “a man can be ugly and fight well and audiences will still watch him” (ibid). The inference is quite unambiguous. All that keeps these characters from being caricatures of action men is precisely their ‘feminine’ attractiveness. Their femininity, in this instance coded most obviously in their sexual attractiveness, mitigates their ‘toughness’. One journalist, described the
film *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle*, featuring Cameron Diaz, Drew Barrymore and Lucy Liu as “a cross between a video clip, a shampoo commercial, a fashion parade and an action film” (Molitorisz, 2003, June 27, p.4) and pointed out that the promotional poster for the film “simply features a rear shot of Barrymore, Diaz and Liu, for no apparent reason other than it makes for a nice view” (ibid, p. 5). The next quote gives the actors’ responses to questions regarding their ‘empowered’ characters. Their explanations epitomise the confused production of femininity, feminism and empowerment characteristic of post-feminist discourses.

Liu: When *Terminator* came out, if a woman was tough she was cut and intense. Now it’s cool and interesting to see you can be in an action movie and still wear stilettos and still be feminine. You don’t have to shave your head to be tough.

It’s a nice balance between having somebody go and kick arse on screen and also be feminine and look feminine. For us, it’s more about fun, and I think that’s why people enjoy it. It’s eye candy.

Diaz: It’s a different era with feminism too. It’s more about equality than feminism. Women are coming back to having the door opened for them and not wanting to split the meal [sic]. (ibid, p. 5)

These responses enlist an interpretive repertoire like that discussed earlier in relation to the ‘power suit’. Feminism is constructed as an anachronistic movement that prevented women from expressing their femininity. The familiar post-feminist trope apparent here is the ‘return to femininity’. Now that everyone sees that women are ‘free’ to ‘kick arse’ and be in action movies, ‘femininity’ is offered as something which ‘women are coming back to’. Femininity is signalled by stilettos, eye candy, having the door opened and the meal paid for. Markers of passivity and objectification which are in direct conflict with the ‘action’ hero.

Consider the following extract which was written by a fan for *the Journal for the International Association of Xena Studies*:

Some friends started raving about the show and saying how Lucy Lawless [aka Xena] was six feet tall and gorgeous….I was hooked….[Along] came Xena, this bad-ass, kick-ass, Pre-Mycenean chick who was handling the world on her own terms. She showed me that a woman could do all of this and still be sexy as hell. This was empowerment to me. (Frazier, 1998, [Online]. emphasis added)
Xena’s appeal, a least for this fan, is that she handles the world on her own terms whilst remaining ‘gorgeous’ and ‘sexy as hell’. It is through being ‘sexy’ that she continues to be intelligible as a woman. Indeed, the implication is that empowerment includes the ‘reclaiming’ of the ability to be ‘sexy’. In this way, the feminist language of ‘empowerment’ is redeployed within a conservative agenda that constructs the ‘return’ to dominant models of femininity as radical and liberating.

Another case in point is Lara Croft, the digitally designed, missile breasted, cinched waisted heroine of the *Tomb Raider* video games, more recently brought to life by actress Angelina Jolie in the films of the same name. It was widely reported that Jolie wore a padded bra to ensure that her ‘Lara’ approximated the dimensions of the hugely popular virtual version. So lucky for us then that Lara’s creator, Toby Gard “understood the fine line between sexy and sexist” (Clarke, 1999, October 23-29, p. 4). Apparently, according to her creator, Lara was designed to “be a tough, self reliant, intelligent woman. She confounds all the sexist clichés, apart from the fact that she’s got an unbelievable figure” (ibid, p. 4).

The brief cross-section of popular cultural representations considered so far indicate that apparently, all that is needed to radically alter representations of women is to add the qualification ‘tough, self-reliant and intelligent’. We are invited to accept that ‘being sexy’ for example, is for women’s own pleasure, an ‘empowering’ choice, as it were – the result of a choice made by a free, autonomous and unconstrained individual (e.g. Rose, 1999). However, there is no interrogation of why women might derive pleasure from being (hetero)sexually attractive or that such a desire is implicated in relations of power (Hollway, 1995). Thus, woman can continue to be represented as a sexual object of porn star proportions as long as she has a gun in her hand or is doing some martial arts. If femininity cancels out or balances ‘toughness’ to make it less threatening then we are also asked to accept that toughness cancels out or guarantees against objectification. It is hard to conclude that this constitutes any radical resignification of sexual difference.

### 4.3.1 Masculine fantasy and the ‘tough girl’

So far I have sketched out the terrain of the ‘tough girls’. Specifically, the way that her toughness is mediated by her sexualised appearance and simultaneously the way in which that ‘sexiness’ is (re)constructed as evidence of women’s liberation
(from the alleged repressions of women’s liberation as much as from patriarchal oppression). Maitraya’s leather, string thong, Charlie’s Angels ‘rear ends’ and stilettos, Xena’s leather mini skirt and breast plate and Lara Croft’s ‘unbelievable body’ with its huge breasts suggest a representation constructed for or at least within the masculine gaze. In this next section, I will briefly consider the way that these characters can be read, less as evidence of emancipation than as quite conventional products of masculine discourse and fantasy.

Take Lara Croft, the protagonist in the Sony Play Station game Tomb Raider. She has been a phenomenal marketing success for Sony. She was designed by a man named Toby Gard – as his fantasy girl. “Lara with her heaving chest, and orgasmic grunts, was obviously designed to appeal to the lads” (Clark, 1990, October 23-29, p. 4). In the multi-million dollar, male-dominated game industry she was designed by a boy to be played with by other boys.

Stacked is just one of the adjectives attached to her. We know her official statistics – 34D, 24, 35 – as well as her height (a strapping 178m), birthday (February 14, 1967) and even blood group. We know she’s an upper class English archaeologist-adventurer. But we don’t know anything about her inner self. Perhaps that’s the essence of her success. (ibid, p. 4)

Lara Croft ‘action hero’ is described here in terms that are similar to the those that might accompany a model in an underwear catalogue or porn magazine, with a distinct lack of characterisation and the emphasis on her physical dimensions. The following commentaries again make reference to the way that these apparently post-feminist images of women are anchored in masculine fantasy:

At last, technology has succeeded where a battalion of plastic surgeons have failed. Uniform female perfection has arrived, in the guise of the cyber-babe…these man-made new women aren’t just fat-free, they radiate a wanton desire previously found only in pornography. Witness their ever erect nipples, perched like tiny cherries on firm, humungous breasts. To ensure that such physical magnificence remains the primary focus of their achievements, the TDG’s (game designers) have chosen a wardrobe straight out of a Victoria’s Secret catalogue. And in case you’re worried that these virtual maidens herald a return to the bad old days of female objectification, rest assured. They’re being insidiously marketed around the world as the post-feminist solution to empowered women in the media. (Tebbel, 2002, March, pp. 98-100)
… in *Full Throttle*, it’s as if the [Charlies] Angels are cramming every male fantasy into one feature film. Among other guises they dress up as strippers, nuns, fashion models, surfer girls, biker chicks and as women who work at the service station, where every wash’n’wax comes with a free waterfight and wet T-shirt. (Molitorisz, 2003, June 27, p. 5)

These quotes clearly articulate the way that these ‘action’ heroes are highly sexualised and objectified. Recall the description given in the introductory extract from the *X-Files* of Maitraya:

> A woman descends the steps. She is wearing thigh-high leather spike heel boots, and a very revealing leather bodysuit. Basically two strips of leather held together with a string and a thong. Retro lowers his gun and gapes at her as she struts confidently to him. She is stunningly beautiful. She holds out her hand. Retro kneels and kisses it. (“First Person”, no date [Online])

The ‘tough girl’ here is again constructed as sexualised, a pornographic princess. A related reading is that these characters are contemporary incarnations of the endlessly circulating fantasy/fear of the castrating woman – or potentially castrating woman in that if woman as negation is required to shore up masculinity then woman is always and ever dangerous – since she equally has the potential in this formulation to castrate (see Frosh, 1999). This is the familiar vagina dentata – the devouring female. This image is nothing new and ascribes women’s power only through a particular sexuality and these characters are overtly sexualised.

It is not a large leap to make to join the masculine fantasy of the femme fatal with the ‘crisis in masculinity’. These man-slaying, violent and powerful characters emerge within the discursive production of a social/political context wherein power has allegedly been redistributed such that it is women who are powerful and men who are at least relatively powerless. As such, they can be seen as an expression of masculine anxieties about the loss of power and the status of masculinity. As already pointed out earlier it is noticeable that ‘tough girls’ are frequently constructed precisely as fantasy figures – they are magical, time-travelling or virtual – not likely to be encountered round the corner or in the kitchen or office.

What of the appeal to women of the female action hero? In the next section I explore the way that the female action hero of post-feminist discourse articulates a
certain resistance to being objectified and defined by passivity and powerlessness that is traditionally understood to characterise feminine identity. The next section thus explore the way that that ‘tough girls’ can be read as the appropriation of women’s desire for self-definition and ‘power’ co-opted and returned to us as evidence that such autonomy and power has been achieved.

4.3.2 Feminine desire and the ‘tough girl’

To begin with, I want to draw out a dialogue, once again taken from the opening vignette from the X-Files episode featuring the digital, man-slaying Maitraya. It turns out in the course of FBI Agents Mulder and Scully’s investigations that Maitraya was secretly created by a woman, Phoebe, working away we might imagine in the cells of a company such as Sony or Nintendo:

Phoebe: “You don’t know what it’s like – day in day out choking in a haze of rampant testosterone.”

Scully: “I wouldn’t be so sure”

Phoebe: “I mean she was all I had to keep me sane. My only way to strike back as a woman. She was my goddess. Everything I could never be.”

Scully: “But Phoebe, she’s still a killer. I can’t explain it but she is and you put her in that game”

Phoebe: “No! I was creating my own game in my own computer. It was totally secret but somehow she jumped programs and she’s feeding off the male aggression. It’s making her stronger and stronger. I need your help. You’re the only one who can understand”

Scully: “You’ve got to destroy her Phoebe”

Phoebe: “I don’t know how”

Scully: “Well there’s got to be some way. There’s got to be some vulnerability or weakness?”

Phoebe: “She has no weakness any more” (“First Person”, no date [Online])

This dialogue hints at one aspect of the allure of these fantastic creatures. They articulate and constitute a deep seated desire for invulnerability, presence, autonomy.
In other words, an identity not premised on absence, weakness and all other things sugar and spice. Contrary to popular interpretations of these images, I would argue that the appeal of such images is premised on a possibility not that we feel we already are like them but that we desire to be like them in some way. “Wishes and desires are relations which are mediated in fantasy” (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 213). If fantasy is understood as the scene on which we enact the conditions of satisfaction of desire and its constant failure (Zizek, 1991) then, Maitraya, Xena and so forth, do not represent a fait accompli but are instead a repository for desires and fantasies of a life, an identity, not available to us despite the propaganda-like discourse that touts emancipation and change as already accomplished. As Inness (1999) writes in her analysis of the ‘tough girl’ in popular culture,

…the tough women who appear in the media offer a reassuring fantasy. Xena would not be fearful walking in a par after dusk… time after time [tough women] are shown defeating the men who attack them – an alluring fantasy in a society where women are too commonly raped, assaulted, and murdered (p. 8).

Buffy, Xena and their cohorts simultaneously engender and are a response to women’s desire for an inviolable feminine identity, a distinctive and autonomous identity that confers power and status. The problem being in the erasure of the gap between our actual circumstances and identification with a fiction of our independence. Phoebe very clearly articulates that Maitraya is a creation who represents all that she can never be. Maitraya is Phoebe’s fantasy of herself able to ‘strike back’. Maitraya is Phoebe’s desire not to be weak or vulnerable.

An article by Margaret Finnegan (2001, January 1, [Online]) explores precisely this idea with relation to the way that advertising and marketing both engenders and appeals to the desire to be an ‘independent, resourceful, kick-butt girl’. She reflects on the way that advertisers during the women’s suffrage movement (c. 1910) and again in the 1960’s and 70’s appropriated feminist rhetoric to sell products to women. She recalls a ‘Virginia Slims’ campaign for women with the slogan “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby” which implied that the buying the aforementioned cigarettes “represented the height of advancement” (ibid). Finnegan (ibid) argues that the marketing and ubiquitousness of kick-butt girls is a ‘co-opting’ of feminist ideals rather than evidence of their realisation:
At least you know what you’re fighting against when you’re pitted head to head with June Cleaver [an American sitcom character who epitomises the ultimate 1950’s homemaker, wife and mother]. The commercial embrace of kick-butt girls breeds a less obvious threat to women’s struggle for equality: the illusion of equality. Feminism has few greater enemies. It breeds complacency. Worse yet, it implies that feminism is obsolete. Who need it? Girls today can do anything. They can be anything. I’ve seen it on TV so it must be true.

Therefore, far from representing any significant subversion – these tough girls (as part of a broader post-feminist discourse) might alternately be understood as fulfilling the function of what Zizek (1997) terms, the *empty gesture*. “What the empty gesture offers is the opportunity to choose the impossible, that which inevitably will not happen” (p.27). This is a gesture made to be rejected, a purely symbolic exchange. The phantasmatic underlies the choice, ensuring we believe that there is the *possibility*, and thus it is the basis of our non-acceptance of closure where closure represents a lack of choice. The empty gesture in the form of fantasy allows for “this vain hope that the Other Thing is waiting for us just around the corner” (ibid, p. 30). Fantasy acts to uphold the status quo whilst simultaneously acting as its transgression. In this way *Xena* and the other ‘tough girls’ are symbolic gestures intended to gratify a desire to be active, independent, invulnerable whilst simultaneously denying the socio-historical and material supports/impediments to the rearticulation of a non-patriarchal femininity.

More simply put, it is considered sufficient that these characters exist. As the next extract again illustrates, their presence is considered a guarantee of a state of affairs (equality) which is completely fantastic.

The mere fact that a woman was the star of an action game confronted many video game cliches. By convention, women in games have been either damsel in distress or the long suffering, barely dressed girlfriend. (Clark, 1999, October 23-29, p. 4)

According to Zizek (1997):

…*possibility* is simultaneously less and more than what its notion implies; conceived in its abstract opposition to actuality, it is a ‘mere possibility’ and, as such, it coincides with its opposite, with impossibility. On another level, however, possibility already possesses a certain actuality in its very capacity as possibility,
which is why any further demand for its actualisation is superfluous. (p. 30, emphasis added)

For example, women can ostensibly be anything they want – this is possible – but women are, for example, under-represented in government and management and our average earnings are still only 66 per cent of men’s, less than they were 10 years ago (Summers, 2003). Women also remain disproportionately victims of domestic violence (ABS, 1996) and sexual assault (ABS, 2002b). This doesn’t seem very Xena or Lara Croft like. One cannot imagine these characters so vulnerable or underpaid. Therefore, a significant allure of the tough girl is that “she embodies women’s desire for power, self-sufficiency and autonomy” (Innes, 1999, p. 24).

There is another insidious effect of our reading of these ‘tough girl’ fantasies as representing emancipation: responsibility for outcomes or the circumstances one find’s oneself in is entirely individualised whilst appearing to be framed within the context of an emancipatory agenda. Circumstances cannot be ascribed to systemic inequalities, to economic structures or institutions but becomes a matter of the individual’s choices and attributes. Finnegan (2001, January 1, [Online]) makes this point specifically in relation to the use of kick butt girls as a marketing tool that taps into our deepest desires for independence and autonomy:

When that next whatever doesn’t change you into Britney Spears, or when you can’t afford that next whatever in the first place, you’re told that it’s your own fault – that you’re flawed, when in reality, the problem lies with a culture that does not distinguish between utopian commercial promises and systemic class and gender inequality. (ibid)

In this section I have discussed the popularity of the though girl and the way that these female action heroes are generally represented as evidence of women’s empowerment. Against this appearance I have argued that in fact the ‘tough girl’ still re-produces ‘woman’ in a phallocentric model as the product of male fantasy or by simply inserting a woman into a traditionally masculine genre. Furthermore, I argued that the ‘tough girl’ represents a powerful fantasy figure for women to identify with but that potentially, this identification has less than emancipatory effects.

From the independent and usually solo, action hero of fantasy, the ‘single woman’ is her ‘real life’ counterpart in many ways, often voraciously sexual and
successful in work. The next section explores the discursive construction of the ‘single woman’ as a post-feminist media production. Once again, as illustrated below, the ‘single woman’ is frequently presumed to be emblematic of radical change and women’s empowerment. However, as the following analysis suggests, representations of the single woman most often carry a warning, a moral fable about the dangers of being too independent, career-focused or self-interested and neglecting or resisting more feminine pursuits such as relationships and family.

4.4 The single woman

The ‘single woman’ is exemplified by television shows, movies and books such as *Ally McBeal*, *Sex in the City*, and *The Bridget Jones Diary*. The single woman is a complex construction. In popular versions of this fiction she is usually confident, successful, ambitious and independent and there is also often an emphasis on her friendships with other women. The single woman is often put forward in an ostensibly celebratory manner: she is having fun, she is successful, she is confident and financially well-off

...single women have been having a damn good time...sassy singles zipping between cup-a-lattes in their day-glo Fiestas, [are] clearly having more fun than their attached peers. Says Sue Ostler... “We’ve seen a massive cultural explosion where an entire education stream is devoted solely to the A to Z of being a smart, sassy single. Our role models are all single – Lara Croft, Charlie’s Angels, Buffy”...Singlydom is no longer the sensible shoes and sour grapes spinster experience it once was. (Wilson, 2003, November 16, p. 18)

And, in other accounts the single woman significantly resembles a single man. This was discussed in an earlier section (see 4.2.2) on the production of the ‘New Woman’ as a pseudo-man, where articles described women’s predatory sexual habits and drinking at the bar after work, for example. However, at the same time, she is never far from appropriately ‘feminine’ preoccupations such as her appearance and finding a ‘man’. Take for example, author Helen Fielding’s (2001) fictional character Bridget Jones, an unmarried London editor who writes in her diary:

Cannot face going to work. Only thought that makes it tolerable is thought of seeing Daniel again, but even this is inadvisable since
am fat, have spot on chin, and desire only to sit on cushion eating chocolate and watching Xmas [sic] specials. (p. 72)

The pages of women’s magazines positively brim with advice on ‘beauty’, relationships and stories about how to find ‘Mr Right’:

‘Get Festive: Get your man. Make sure you meet Mr Right and avoid Mr Nightmare this Christmas. (Isaac, 1998, December, p. 68)

Cosmo’s get-engaged guide. How to get a rock that rocks. 7 signs your way ready. How to get him to ask. (Perron, 2001, June, p. 104)

Why he married her and not you. (New Woman, 2000, May)

So the single woman is consistently marked by ambiguity, after all, she might be successful and independent and having a great time – but she is without a man. It is her very singleness which undermines her ‘outward’ success. As in the case of television series Ally McBeal, where the lead character Ally, single, a successful lawyer in a prestigious firm is continually haunted in each episode by the ghost of a baby she is afraid she may never have because of her career. Ally McBeal’s creator has said of his character in relation to feminism, that “She’s not a hard, strident feminist out of the 60’s and ‘70’s. She’s all for women’s rights, but she doesn’t want to lead the charge at her own emotional expense” (Bellafante, 1998, June 29, [Online]). Here it is explicit that for Ally McBeal as for Bridget Jones and the ‘girls’ from Sex in the City, a focus on career and independence is understood to be costly. The reader/ viewer is warned about the dangers of neglecting a focus on relationship and men in favour of career, friends and independence.

“What could be worse than being alone?” is the plaintive cry of Ally McBeal, the archetypal successful woman who has everything except the one thing she craves – love. (Pink, 2000, June, p. 50)

This is the predicament of the ‘single woman’ as it is promoted and produced by popular media. Such is the focus of an article that appeared in The Sunday Telegraph’s “Sunday Magazine” (Wilson, 2003, November 16). It pictures four women, late 20’s in a Sex in the City style pose: high-heels, long hair, clinging,
revealing, black dresses and confident gazes. ‘Single in the City’ runs the title and the by-line reads:

They’re smart, sassy and looking for love… in vain. Popular culture is obsessed with the plight of the single woman. But has today’s Bridget Jones brought her predicament on herself? (ibid, p. 12)

Indeed, popular culture does seem to be obsessed with the plight of ‘the single woman’ precisely in so far as the single woman is constituted as having a ‘plight’. That is, the ‘single woman’s plight’ is obvious, it is ‘common sense’ – it inheres in the very fact of her singleness. Her plight is dramatically sketched out in the myriad of articles that present women with statistics on the dangers of delaying child-birth for example:

Perhaps the most important factor muddying the issue is biology. The soundtrack to this debate is that of a ticking body clock. (ibid, p. 16)

Expert studies tell us that more than 25 per cent of YSF’s [young single females] will be childless and those with degrees are almost three times more likely to be so. (ibid, p. 16)

Time Delay Babies: Career women freeze eggs. (Williams, 2000, January 29, p. 3)

When the Right Time Turns Out to Be too Late. (Horin, 2000, February 26, p. 13)

All work and no children make Jill as dull as Jack: Women who trade children for a career may find they’ve made a very poor bargain. (Arndt, 2001, February 27, p. 37)

Great at Work. Lonely in Love: Winners at work…but what about love? Are romance and high-flying career compatible? (Pink, 2000, June, p. 50)

In relation to commentaries like these Susan Faludi (1992) exposed them as myths of the backlash in the mid to late 1980’s designed to encourage women to “go home”. It has also been noted that similar responses were produced in the context of the Women’s Suffrage Movement in the late nineteenth century where “Anti-feminist
commentators deployed pseudo-scientific biological discourses against those women who vied for educational achievements, warning that women’s reproductive capacities would be damaged by traditionally masculine pursuits” (Ledger, 1997, p. 18) such as education (see Sayers, 1982). Ultimately the apparent celebration of single women’s independence and success is tolerated in so far as she expresses the desire for marriage and children. Returning to the article mentioned above ‘Single in the City’ (Wilson, 2003, November 16, p. 12) we find that the ‘smart’ and ‘sassy’ women on the front cover of the feature who appear to be laughing confidently into the camera are actually not happy – they are “single and a statistic” (p. 12). The article’s narrator has herself experienced this plight we are told. “As the months of waking alone converged into years. I felt empty and agitated. There was the loneliness” (ibid, p. 12). Being single and a woman is thus constructed as problematic. The implication is that there is something illusory about the satisfaction of a focus on career and self and that this illusion has been promoted by ‘feminism’:

Annie van der Horst, a 37 year old Sydney-based public health consultant who has been mostly single for a decade... Van der Horst is a pragmatic woman. She has travelled extensively, spent most of her adulthood working in foreign countries as a health worker and is an active feminist. But now she admits, “I’ve done the full circle. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I reached a certain age and realised I wanted a real man, the traditional provider. Something in me wanted to feel helpless. (ibid, p. 14)

First of all the use of a ‘real life’ scenario acts to show that the concerns of the article are not just abstracted media concerns but have a correspondence with real-life, with real people. This scenario enacts a curious reversal where the awakening has to do with a ‘return’ to femininity and traditionally feminine desires – to be provided for, to feel helpless. It is notable how this construction contrasts with the ‘tough girl’ presented previously. The reversal proposed here is more akin to the ‘return to femininity’ discussed in an earlier section where the understanding promoted by post-feminist discourse was that now women’s equality has been achieved we may go ‘back’ to femininity rather than imitating masculinity in order to be taken seriously. Similarly, in this construction it is Annie’s travel, activism and career which are taken for granted and the ‘awakening’ consists of realising her desire to be
‘taken care of by a man’ and diminished to dependency. This ‘return’ to a more feminine passivity is the ‘tough girl’s’ appropriate resolution it would seem.

Using the framework from Gavey & Gow’s (2001) analysis of media texts on the issue of rape, it is obvious here how this quote and the construction of the single woman’s ‘plight’ in general constructs a new “orthodoxy” in which women are single, ambitiously career focused and successful. This in turn allows for a ‘return’ to the desire for marriage and children to be cast as revolutionary.

In trying to understand how she and apparently many other women came to be in such a predicament (being single, successful, accomplished but unmarried), the author of ‘Single in the City’ (Wilson, 2003, November 16, p. 12) finds her feminist schooling and herself to blame for “assuming too much, demanding even more” (ibid, p. 12). It is not her emancipation that we are invited to celebrate – her success and independence are taken for granted – rather it is this ‘emancipation’ we are to understand as being to blame for her plight:

> Relationships between men and women have changed dramatically for our generation. Women grew up to be focused on career and having their own interests away from family and to be forthright and bolshy; our teachers and mothers drummed this into us because that’s what they fought for but didn’t always get. But it doesn’t really work and things get skewed. No one knows how to act. It’s insane. (ibid, p. 16)

The claim here that ‘women grew up to be focused on career and having their own interests away from the family is again a device that constructs a particular ‘orthodoxy’ about the success of the feminist movement and women’s identification outside of the family. The effect of these constructions of an utterly illusory degree of participation in public life for women (linked to the detachment from family) is to present any problems of equality as having disappeared. In the place of the problem of discrimination and sexism is a new problem which women’s ‘feminist emancipation’ has created: that is, the disappearance of femininity. Of course, what is implied or explicitly suggested is a return to normative discourses of femininity that constitute women exclusively through heterosexual relationship, motherhood and family. Another way that the ‘orthodoxy’ of women’s independence and equality is produced is by the simultaneous construction of ‘disempowered’ men:
Relationships have never been more complicated and ...women’s mixed messages are making the situation an emotional quagmire, particularly for men. “Men have lost the confidence in the mating game because relationships for many young women have become a lifestyle option. And on the one hand women want to call the shots, but on the other they want men to do the courting.” (ibid, p. 16)

“It’s true men are lost,” says Dan Spooner, 36, a single guy who has followed the single woman’s plight with sceptical interest. “But I can’t help think women have created this mess. It’s like, be careful what you wish for before you start messing with the way things have always been done.” (ibid, p. 16)

In line with the ‘crisis in masculinity’ discussed in an earlier section (see 4.2.2) of this chapter, the understanding is produced here that ‘single women’ are single because their power and independence (the ‘reality’ of which is taken for granted) alienates potential male partners. Thus, women are invited, in a by now familiar ‘return to femininity’, to allow themselves the fairy tale ending of boy meets girl with its implications of domestic bliss. ‘Single in the City’ ends with a very fairy-tale like list of ‘happy ever afters’, finally culminating in the narrators’ own resolution of her previously lamentable single life:

serially single Sex in the City author Candace Bushnell, now 44, recently gave up her lament and married a ballet dancer 10 years her junior. Likewise Sylvia-Ann Hewlett who put the fear of blocked fallopian tubes into any woman over 35 with her book Baby Hunger, [gave] birth at 51, while Helen Fielding who brought us Bridget Jones, is engaged and about to have a child.... And me? I recently moved from Melbourne to Sydney and met this bloke… (ibid, p. 18)

The article literally fades out at this point as in a movie or story book, encouraging us to read this ending as happy. It does not suggest that there are many other reasons that women may not be in relationships and that one of them might be a resistance to normative romantic, heterosexual relationships for the way that they position women as wives and mothers. Where woman is constructed in a phallocentric (heterosexual) discursive context she is not intelligible on her own unless we understand that she is ‘looking’ for a man or has (lamentably) looked and not found one.

There is indeed a very fairytale like quality to the resolution of single women’s plight into traditional heterosexual coupledom. As in all good fairy-tales
with appropriate heroines, in the end they ‘get their man’. But also like all good fairy-tales the story ends there. We do not hear of the day to day domesticity of Cinderella and her Prince, the allocation of chores, and child-rearing responsibilities. That is not the ‘intention’ of this discourse on the single woman however. It is concerned with reproducing woman within patriarchal romantic discourse. For those of us wondering how the story continues we need to turn to what is popularly referred to as the work/family collision. So we move from considering the lamentable single whose ‘predicament’ is to be without a male partner or children to her presumably happier counterpart, the working mother. Recall that at the beginning of the chapter working mothers were portrayed as ‘superwomen’, they represented the alleged ability of women to have-it-all in this post-feminist age. The next section highlights the myth of the ‘superwoman’ and ‘having-it-all’ by exploring the conflict of the working mother.

4.5 Work/family conflict: The working mother

Nowhere is the fiction of ‘having-it-all’ more thoroughly exposed than in the earnest discussions in policy circles, academia and popular media of the burden and conflict of the work/family collision:

these mothers are finding that ‘Having It All’ includes bags under the eyes, a crotchety partner, a heap of local takeaway menus by the phone, and a multilayered guilt complex. (“Career & kids”, 1999, September, p. 70)

Superwoman dies from overwork. (Bachelard, 2001, May 12-13, p. 8)

Can Working Mothers Have It All? Can women experience the joys of motherhood and a rewarding career? Research shows it is the single most important question for working mothers. (Hewett, 2001, July 15, p. 26)

A mother’s burden. Child care drop offs, freezer meals and little time for chit chat…are modern mums better off than their own mothers? (Cox, 2000, April 16, p. 6)

A family, a career, a problem. The clash between work and family is increasingly eroding our relationships and loading us up with guilt. (Horin, A. 2003, May 31-June1, p. 27)
Superwoman’s mission impossible: The myth of the superwoman who easily combines family life with a successful career has been exploded. (Frith, 2000, June 13, p. 9)

It is important to point out that the work/family collision is a genuine crisis for many women with the cost measured in quality of life, relationships, guilt, stress and exhaustion (Pocock, 2003). I am not arguing here that there is not a real dilemma for women in combining work and family commitments, just as being alone might be expected to cause ‘real’ anxieties for some women, as discussed previously. What is of interest is the way that the work/family collision is constructed in discourse, how it is made sense of, what its causes are attributed to and what are implied or suggested as its remedies. All in all, the work/family collision might be more accurately defined as a discourse on (working) motherhood. Much is at stake in this debate and the way it is formulated since motherhood within a patriarchal discursive framework is one of the primary ways ‘woman’ is constituted (Malson & Swann, 2003).

In referring to the quotes above, the most striking aspect of the work/family debate is that it is unambiguously represented as a ‘woman’s’ problem. The problem of work and family is not a generic problem in these accounts, it is a ‘mother’s burden’. It is mother’s going to work that is causing a strain on women and their families. It is mother’s ‘having-it-all’ which is not possible or is possible only at great cost. There is no question here about whether men can have it all – work and family. The other striking point is that the terms of this debate are framed as a binary wherein work/family are dichotomous opposites which simply cannot be reconciled. Obviously, this mirrors the division of labour along gender lines in a patriarchal society mapping onto other discourses, masculine/feminine, public/private, thus remaining within phallocentric logic and a patriarchal field of power relations. Consequently, such either/or logic implies that some sort of choice between work and family must be made. By women that is. Moreover, as we shall see from the commentaries on this issue in the media, this is a ‘choice’ with strong coercive and regulative force. Not choosing family is often posed as a moral issue or a perversion of the natural order resulting in all sorts of social disorder and decay. (Caplan, 1989; Phoenix, Wollett & Lloyd, 1991). Furthermore, because the terms of this debate imply a conflict between two worlds – the world of work and the world of family –
there is a significant discursive battle being staged to capture, co-opt, and definitively pronounce on what ‘women really want’.

An article, from *The Sunday Telegraph* (2003, February 23) by Angela Shanahan, boldly titled “Freud gets answer on what women want” is just such an example. Shanahan’s article is based on the research of English academic Catherine Hakim (2000), author of *Work – Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*. The article’s primary message is that research has now discovered what ‘ordinary mothers’, such as the author, have always known: “…that far from the feminist ideal of work being the centre of women’s lives, their families preoccupy their minds and hearts” (Shanahan, 2003, February 23, p. 95). She overtly makes the claim that the ‘ideals’ of feminism (her grasp on these is dubious though commonplace) have nothing to do with what women want - what women want is to stay at home with their children.

For 20 years, we’ve been told by feminists that women want to work and affirm their identity as productive individuals rather than be “just wives and mothers”. However, this blithe assumption is starting to look pretty shaky. Many prominent women from supermodels to ABC presenters, challenge this view. Ordinary mothers, such as myself, have opposed the pro-work view, despite feminist ire and sneers such as ‘doormat’. (ibid, p. 95)

Two striking claims in this extract are that women want to stay at home with their children and secondly, they have been diverted from this by coercive feminist ideals which invalidated this choice. Moreover, the posing of feminism as coercive and oppressive allows a reversal in the ‘appearance’ of where power is, therefore positioning Shanahan’s rather conservative and reiterative statements as liberatory and emancipatory – almost revolutionary as it were. Moreover, the idea that women have only wanted an identity separate from that of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ because feminists made them feel bad about ‘staying home’ does not acknowledge the possibility that that the feminist movement arose from actual women’s own dissatisfactions and unhappiness with their limited opportunities and identity as it was limited to ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ (French 1978; Friedan, 1962). Feminism is very clearly identified in the next extracts as being to blame for subverting women’s allegedly ‘true’ and ‘natural’ desire to stay at home with their children:
Women, Crittenden argues, have been misled. We have been tricked into believing we could have it all, only to discover we don’t have much of anything that matters. Our feminist foremothers taught us to pursue independence at all costs. And one of the biggest costs, she maintains, has been our children, whom we dump into day care centres for others to raise, while we head to our office cubicles racked with guilt and misery. (Laskas, 2000, April, p. 88)

[Feminist advice has disadvantaged many women – unlike the neutral policies advocated by Hakim to support women’s choices in managing work and family lives....
Suggesting the government pursue neutral policies supporting all women has meant I’m branded as conservative in the eyes of feminists who resent any mothers caring for their children. (Shanahan, 2003, February 23, p. 95)

These profoundly conservative accounts produce a certain knowledge about feminism: that it is to blame for our ills, that it has damaged our children and that it resents any mother who cares for her children. Also, the final quote uses rhetorical devices characteristic of conservative backlash discourses. First, it positions its speaker as vulnerable and under attack (that is, affecting an appearance of powerlessness) one whose articulations are made under duress and at the risk of being ‘branded’. Secondly, it positions the speakers own argument as ‘neutral’, benign and positions the ‘enemy’ by implication as ‘political’, that is, as having an agenda where the speaker presumably has none except supporting women’s choices. Finally, she positions her ‘opponents’ as irrational in the ludicrous final statement on ‘feminists who resent any mothers caring for their children’. This is clearly a wilful and outrageous misrepresentation on the Arndt’s part rather than a reflection of what ‘feminists’ actually think (as if that were something homogenous anyway).

In other renderings of the work/family problem women are still understood as wanting to stay home with their children but economic necessity is given as the reason they return to work:

The notion of a father who works and a mother who stays at home to care for the children applies only to those who have sufficient income to support it, or where the benefits of working are outweighed by the costs of child-care. (Wills, 2001, August 19, p. 87)
…significant numbers of women do leave children at home out of genuine necessity, whether for reasons of poverty, divorce, failure to marry in the first place or low educational attainment… By definition, however, those mothers have left those children reluctantly and would do otherwise if they could so choose. (Eberstadt, 2001, July 14-15, p. 10)

Fewer mums at home. …mothers often return to work because of money pressures, Australian Family Association spokesman, Damien Tudehope said. “Most mothers feel regret and would, if circumstances were different, prefer to stay at home… The high cost of living, mortgages and other debts mean that women cannot afford the luxury of staying home.” (Koch, 2002, July 14, p. 9)

Economic necessity, not ambition, is driving women back to work. Karensa Duffy has spent a blissful six months at home with her first baby Paige. Next month that will end…. She’s steeling herself for the wrench of parting with Paige, but there is the rent to pay on their small North Bondi unit… (Wills, 2001, August 19, p. 87)

In these accounts the ogre of economic necessity, rather than feminism, is what pries a mother away from her child/ren and forces her to put them into care. Of course, I am not denying that many women are forced to return to work because of economic necessity who would rather remain at home for longer, or altogether. The point is that, whether it is feminism or economic necessity, women’s return to work is an occurrence in need of an explanation. In this way, through these constructions of the work/family bind the dominant construction of woman as fulfilled through motherhood can remain intact despite the overwhelming material fact that more women than ever and more mother’s than ever are in the workforce (ABS, 2001). The myth of motherhood remains safe when some coercive force is posed to account for women acting out of the strict regulative requirements of that discursive position of domestic ‘stay-at-home’ motherhood.

What the above accounts do not acknowledge or articulate is that many women report satisfaction and pleasure associated with working. Barbara Pocock’s (2001, 2003) research has found that women frequently mentioned the social benefits of work before mentioning any benefits arising from earnings. Indeed, many women will return to work even where the cost of care might amount to their total wages (ibid). Similarly, Arlie Hochschild’s (1989) research found many women got more satisfaction and pleasure from work than home because of the stimulation, independence, order and feeling valued for their contributions.
But the pleasures of work are closely matched in all accounts by the guilt it induces as well. Guilt features heavily in the accounts of the experience of working mothers:

A family, a career, a problem. The clash between work and family is increasingly eroding our relationships and loading us up with guilt. (Horin, A. 2003, May 31-June1, p. 27)

mothers are finding that ‘Having It All’ includes bags under the eyes, a crotchety partner, a heap of local takeaway menus by the phone, and a multilayered guilt complex. (“Career & kids”, 1999, September, p. 70)

There are many challenges facing women returning to work and simultaneously mothering. Not the least of which is the physical and emotional loss a female feels when she leaves her child. (Koch, 2002, July 14, p. 9)

Tired and guilty women are paying a price for their jobs. (Horin, 2001, May 12-13, p. 15)

Susan Young took just eight weeks off after having her first child…. Young says she feels “the normal guilt” about the impact her work has had on her family life… (Koch, 2002, July 14, p. 9)

Interestingly, guilt is never explained in the articles and interviews with working mothers. The fact that it is largely unexamined indicates some sort of taken for granted assumption about working mothers’ guilt. Indeed, it is described in one of the quotes above, as ‘the normal guilt’ as though everyone would understand what that refers to. I would suggest that we are to understand that the source of this guilt is obvious – mothers’ feel guilty when they work. Guilt is inevitable for the working mother and serves to indicate something natural about mother – child bonds and evidence of something unnatural about the breaking of them.

Of course, the point to be made here is not whether working mothers do or do not experience guilt, but that guilt appears as inevitable precisely in so far as the conflict between work and family is structured as inevitable for women. A working mother comes up against her investment in the discourse of the ‘good mother’ (see, for example, Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) and a good mother is selfless and sacrificing (Irigaray, 1985; Marshall, 1991; Sayers, 1991), finding her own fulfilment in the fulfilment of her child/ren. Thus by definition a working mother cannot be a
‘good mother’. Hence, guilt can be attributed significantly to patriarchal discursive constructions of ‘motherhood’ in general and the ‘good mother’ more particularly.

Compounding and reinforcing the conflict for women of work and family must surely be those commentaries which attribute all manner of social ills to the absence of the good mother (i.e. the existence of the working mother) and reinforce the primary status of the mother in ensuring children’s well-being (Sayers, 1991; Urwin, 1995; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989):

Maria Miller, head of Nursing at the Australian Catholic University’s school of midwifery says the first year of a baby’s life is a significant period for growth and development.

“There are radical changes and it is important for the mother to be there and be involved,” Ms Miller says.

“By six weeks the mother is well and truly established as the significant person in that little one’s life. If you separate them there is a degree of anxiety in the mother and guilt. Babies know their mother’s smell, and their mother’s voice”. (Wills, 2001, August 19, p. 87)

...this latest killer was one more unsupervised motherless boy. (Eberstadt, 2001, July 14-15, p. 10)

There have been losses accompanying the gains [of mothers’ entry into the workplace], and these losses have fallen disproportionately on the shoulders of children. (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 121)

Our feminist foremothers taught us to pursue independence at all costs. And one of the biggest costs … has been our children, whom we dump into day care centres for others to raise. (Laskas, 2000, April, p. 88)

New class of street kid: After school crisis as parents forced to dump children. (Wood, 2001, July 29, p. 7)

What Leunig has been hearing from child-care workers, from parents, from ordinary folk are stories of neglected children, of indifferent care offered by underpaid, unskilled carers, the children who react very badly to being away from their mothers, stories of “creched-out” attention-seeking children. (Arndt, 2000, April 29, p. 43)

In all these accounts women who work are constructed as neglectful, selfish and perhaps wilfully harmful to their children. It is also clear that it is women’s work that is presented as results in such terrible outcomes in terms of children’s wellbeing.
and development. There is no suggestion that father’s have the same degree of responsibility for these outcomes or that they could suitably care for their children. These horror stories of how children’s emotional and psychological development is allegedly compromised by mother’s who work is effectively functioning as a warning or moral fable.

In the preceding discussion on the difficulty for women of combining work and family there is, I would argue a profound inability to grasp the terms of the problem in anything but a patriarchal framework. The underlying assumption is that combining work and family is an inevitable conflict for women. However, this conflict is only inevitable because of prevailing norms that relate to the sexual division of labour. These articles construct feminism - and less frequently economic necessity - as the cause of the problem of women’s double burden and in doing so they occlude other explanations. Yet as Arlie Hochschild (1989) argues it can also be viewed as the result of a stalled revolution, the failure of men to change and adjust to women’s demands and desires for fuller participation in public life. Feminism did not cause this conflict by coercing women to seek autonomous identities outside the home thereby putting them at odds with their natural femininity and the priorities of child rearing. Rather, discursive constructions of family, work and motherhood converge to create the conflict. It reflects the failure to achieve radical social change such that women could combine work and family without profound conflict. As Pocock’s (2003) research found,

Australian households reveal not only unchanging patterns of domestic and care work that remain largely the work of women, but also unrenovated models of motherhood and fatherhood, and workplaces that still have at their centre an ‘ideal worker’ who is care-less. (p. 1)

In this last section of analysis of this chapter I have tried to show how post-feminist discourse has capitalised on women’s often problematic experiences of combining work and family as a way of reproducing reiterative discourses on motherhood and blaming feminism, choice and freedom for engendering the crisis. These texts, I have argued deploy a range of discursive strategies which are aimed at reinforcing women’s status as secondary wage earners and primary carers. What they conceal are the greater systemic problems wherein institutions and structures
have refused to alter to accommodate women’s participation in the workplace and conversely, men’s shared parental responsibility (Hochschild, 1989; Pocock, 2003; Summers, 2003). In doing so, women are forced to negotiate their problems, emotional and practical, in private ways as if they were private issues.

The benign and politically-neutral sounding ‘work/family debate’ is actually a battleground over women’s place, status and opportunities. Discussions of the problems and suggestions for the solution are, as the above analysis illustrates, almost invariably either overtly or implicitly to do with women. The media coverage of the work/family debate does not acknowledge that this conflict for women might be the result of a failure to radically alter sexual relations and offer women genuine choices. Instead, the conflict is discursively constructed as the result of feminist pressures toward work and away from motherhood. The solution then emerges as a reification of women’s identity around relationship and mothering rather than a radical rearticulation of these things.

The response to the work/family conundrum has not been to truly challenge notions of family, motherhood and ‘woman’ or to challenge the bias of the workplace towards a masculine subject who has someone behind the scenes to look after everything or more particularly everyone. These would have been truly radical challenges that could lead to truly radical changes. Women have simply been ‘entitled’ to tack work (on a masculine model) onto their primary function which has been left largely uninterrogated. Another way of putting it is that women have fit into a public sphere that has not changed to accommodate them except in the most superficial ways. Whilst these things remained unchallenged so does the opportunity for genuine choice and any genuine sense of having open to us other possibilities for identity.

4.6 Conclusion

In the above analyses of media text I have sought to illustrate how in a post-feminist context feminism is deemed to be redundant. There is a presumption of a cultural context in which women are equal, power has shifted and thus a ‘return’ to femininity can be posited as a genuinely radical proposition (e.g. Gavey & Gow, 2001). It would be incorrect to assert that the meaning of ‘woman’ had not expanded, that there are not now new ways of negotiating ‘woman’. But equally, it would be incorrect to say that this represents a revolution or radical shift in power
relations from phallocentric dominance and the consequent framing of ‘woman’ by femininity. A traditional patriarchally-defined femininity continues in the representations of woman considered in this chapter to define the boundaries of normality and acceptable performance. Moreover, whilst post-feminist discourse represents the nature and degree of socio-political change as a taken-for-granted equality, there is a largely ignored but considerably body of empirical evidence on the material conditions of women’s lives which completely nullifies such claims (see Summers, 2003, for an overview). In short post-feminist discourse in the media can be read as re-instating a very traditional and normative version of femininity that is nonetheless ironically re-presented as new.

In advocating the ‘return to femininity’ and constructing it as a radical choice, post-feminist discourse is reifying a traditional and constrictive version of woman before any alternative has been constructed wherein the language of ‘choice’, however limited it must always be, could be genuinely meaningful or relevant. The argument is not that nothing at all has changed. Rather it would be more accurate to sum up the position taken as proposing that a lot goes on and nothing happens. Foucault’s rendering of power as mobile and diffuse (1977, 1979, 1980 and see Chapter 2) enables us to understand that neither continuity nor discontinuity should be privileged in the analysis of relations of power.

It used to be that the power exercised over women was more repressive … it said, No! No you may not work, no you may not vote, no you may not have control over your body, no you may not enter certain places or professions. However, we should not be uncritically accepting of this apparent shift to yes, yes, yes. As Foucault (cited in Rabinow, 1984) has so famously said, “If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it?” (p. 61). In this way, “social regulation can function, not only in a sense through overt oppression, but rather through defining the parameters and content of choice, fixing how we come to want what we want” (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 219). This contemporary political shift to uncritical liberalism which insists on the neutrality of the individual masks the continued power asymmetries that structure gender relations. Post-feminist discourse acts in the tradition of neo-liberalism exhibiting a lack of concern with or attention to power and accordingly erasing ‘woman’ as a politically significant site (Fine, 1992; Hare-Mustin, 1991). In this process equality has been (re)defined as a relationship between
persons with no history.

Ferguson’s (1983) analysis of editorial content in women’s magazines of over two decades ago drew a similar conclusion. The editorials shifted in emphasis according to Ferguson, towards “greater self-realisation, self-determination and the presentation of a more independent and assertive femininity” in response to the “social, cultural and economic changes of the 1970’s” (ibid, p.98). However, her conclusion was that ‘the cult of femininity’ at the turn of the decade, 1979-1980, had undergone changes that were far less than revolutionary. Instead, what emerges from the analysis in Forever Feminine is that ‘overt change conceals covert durability of the archetypal feminine roles’ (ibid, p. 109).

Many aspects of the cult’s beliefs and practices were changing on the surface, but not a lot was changing underneath. They [women’s magazines] show how the importance of the totem, Woman, was enhanced, but the principal roles, goals and values used to define femininity to the audience were not so different from those of earlier decades.
What was different was the expansion of their cultural and structural framework in terms of the dominant themes from which they emerged. (ibid, p. 117)

Certainly it would not be true to say that ‘femininity’ has not been contested over the past decades but discursive shifts are always susceptible to reversal. Whilst we may be used to thinking of reversals or shifts in power in terms of resistance, resistance in this case is a counter-tactic. It is resistance to resistance. From second wave feminism’s subversive contesting of ‘femininity’ as a patriarchal term that supported subordinating constructions of ‘woman’ it has been reclaimed – or renormalised by dominant patriarchal discourse in a strategy which implies that this re-normalisation of ‘femininity’ is actually subversive and radical. In Ferguson’s (1983) terms “the impact of changing social conditions on the cult [of femininity’s] message is one of plus ca change…Everything changes and nothing changes” (p.190)

In talking about change it is important to come back to the problem of desire. As discursive categories and regulative practices produce subject positions they also produce desire, ‘fixing how we come to want what we want’ (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 219). And what we want will ultimately vary given our positioning across a multiplicity of subject positions over time. The point is not about whether women ‘truly’ want to be mothers, want to be married or want to dress in pretty and feminine
clothes – what is uninterrogated in mainstream media texts is the nature of desire.

Feminine positions are produced as responses to the pleasures offered to us; our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us. These are the experiences which make change such a difficult and daunting task, for female desire is constantly lured by discourses which sustain male privilege. (Coward, 1992, p. 18)

And I would argue these desires are not ‘natural’ but shaped within the constraints of certain productions of woman/femininity that are constituted within a patriarchal discursive context. In other words, these things that we desire are imbued through and through with relations of power. However, we also know that women do get pleasure from other things which do not sustain male privilege or reinforce the status quo as women’s movement into the workforce attests to (Hochschild, 1989; Pocock, 2003). I would argue that what is consistently produced in the texts explored above is a resistance to this ‘subversive’ desire or pleasure many women find ‘outside’ the home.
Heterosexual femininity and post-feminist subjectivity: a discourse analysis of women’s talk

E: Do you think it’s important to feel feminine?
JULIE: [...] I think it’s important to be feminine cause I am female and if I didn’t feel feminine it would be, not good (yep)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter, as well as chapters 6 and 7 present the discourse analysis of Study 2, which was based on interviews with women (see chapter 3 for a detailed methodological description of study 2). This chapter is concerned with the construction of heterosexual femininity and post-feminist subjectivity. It explores the interviewees’ talk about lesbian sexuality and the way that non-heterosexual women are discursively used to mark the boundaries of ‘proper’ femininity. It also examines the way taking up a post-feminist subject position construes woman as equal and empowered and thereby occludes the presence of discrimination, sexism and constraint of choices.

The conflation of femininity and woman is apparent in the above extract from Julie’s interview. It is as though my question to Julie is slightly incomprehensible. A question after all indicates that the terms of its inquiry are not somehow self-evident. So Julie’s response communicates a certain bewilderment. Yes, femininity is important and it is important because one is female. The implications being, that to be one without the other is not just difficult to conceive of but also, Julie says, ‘not good’. So there is some moral imperative implied here as well. Dollimore (1999) talks about connections that we think we know about because they are so commonplace but which quickly bewilder us the moment we begin to think about them. In other words, the commonplace becomes confusing when we are asked to consider that it may not be natural. Or in other terms, what is understood to be universal and true is instead arbitrary and contingent.
Thus, the coupling of woman with femininity becomes highly confusing when we seek to tease out the relationship between the terms. Importantly, this highlights the function of the commonplace as a kind of disavowal, occluding and making visible at the very same instant. Despite a popular understanding that gender roles have been exposed to such scrutiny and that we have all learned to question so many taken for granted assumptions about sexual difference (see the discussion of post-feminism in chapter 4), Julie’s response indicates that the conflation of femininity with woman remains a commonplace. All sorts of essentialist notions are implicated in this kind of commonplace. Julie’s quote also tells us something about the centrality of femininity in women’s construction of our identity.

This chapter considers some of the ways that the women interviewed construct themselves as feminine subjects. Accounts of femininity or the place of ‘woman’ in constructing one’s identity are given directly at times and at other times they can be gleaned from responses to the interview prompts or from the women’s accounts of the concrete circumstances of their lives. From the analysis, a few conclusions emerge with some clarity: a) what we might refer to as traditional femininity is alive and well; b) ‘proper’ femininity in these accounts is constituted as heterosexual and being a woman is very much constructed and experienced in relation to men; and c) post-feminist discourses sit somewhat confusingly along side more traditional discourses on femininity such that inequalities in gender-power relations are both made explicit and occluded or glossed over. As I progress through the analysis my aim will be to demonstrate how femininity, or identifying as a ‘woman’ are taken up in very ambiguous and complex ways and yet are always taken up and always have a central place in the women’s identity work. I will also consider the implications and effects of an investment in femininity as it is constructed along the broad lines indicated above.

Early sections of the analysis look at the way that femininity is signified by particular elements of physical appearance, such as being pretty and small. However, femininity is a complex performance and the participants talked about it in terms that showed they understood this and that their relationship to that performance was ambivalent and varied. The analysis also looks at the way femininity or ‘woman’ is constituted through the exclusion of the ‘lesbian’, where lesbianism is seen to represent
the absence of any relation to men. Thus ‘woman’ takes it meaning within the heterosexual matrix and the organisation of women’s desire around men. Finally, the chapter looks at several ways that post-feminist discourse constructs woman as equal and ‘free’ and how the structuring of identity around this post-feminist production of woman leaves no space for complaint or interpreting conditions of ‘inequality’ or ‘constraint’.

5.2 On ‘femininity’

Femininity has been constructed in many ways over time (e.g., Ussher, 1997) but one of the particularly prominent ways it was recognisable in the interviews was in the very familiar aspect of femininity as linked to appearance, that is, prettiness, make-up, hair, clothes:

TESS: mmm (...) Well when I think of feminine, I think of um, typical female, um long hair, pretty, delicate, little features, um nice slim body (...) just petite and small and dainty.

CATE: The first thing that comes to mind is like ballet dancers (ok) and all the sweet kind of pretty things.

In these quotes femininity is signified by association with physical attractiveness and feminine attractiveness is small, dainty, petite, delicate – fragile and graceful like ballet dancers. In Helen Malson’s (1998) post-structuralist theorising of anorexia, she shows that one of the ways the anorexic body signifies femininity is through its construal as ‘small’ or ‘petite’. It is also notable that the ‘typical female hair’ that Tess refers to is white women’s hair which indicates how race intersects with constructions of femininity (hooks, 1983). And her comment thus raises the question of what relation to femininity or the performance of femininity does this place other women? The practise of hair straightening popular among African American women, for example, indicates an attempt to emulate an ideal of beauty tied to ‘femininity’ which in turn reflects on the subjects ‘imperfection’ in relation to that discourse.
Tess’s mention of long hair is the first in a string of responses to mention hair. In reading the interviews I was impressed by an idea of femininity as a kind of shampoo ad:

ANNIE: It’s probably whether I feel light of step. (right, yeah.) Um, my hair is bouncy because I laundered it the day before or um, um, what I may have grabbed to put on. (yep) A combination of all those things.

One can almost see the filters on the lenses, the digitally enhanced glossy hair glistening in the sunshine as our appropriately lovely and wholesome beauty wanders amongst mountain scenery and Alpine flowers …Speaking of which:

PETA: This vision of this (…) gypsy girl with like long flowing hair and this long flowing skirt and she’s dancing barefoot in a sort of big green field. It’s this warm summer day and there’s like a soft breeze which is gently blowing her hair, it’s caressing her face and she’s looking up at the sky, she’s laughing (yep) and she feels totally happy and the sun’s shining on her face. And she’s dancing and twirling barefoot in the grass (yep). And the grass is/feels luxurious and sensual (yep yep) to her, against her feet.

Peta’s vision was a specific response to one of the prompts: “dance with me, take of yr [sic] shoes and dance with me” (Levy, 1993, p. 27). Her invocation of freedom and sensuality in answer to the prompt is embedded in a freeze frame from a Hollywood movie or shampoo commercial. Her gypsy girl calls to mind films like *The Sound of Music, Heidi, The Red Shoes* and with them a multitude of stereotypes about femininity as that which is pretty, good and wholesome and close to nature. The feeling – ‘luxurious and sensual’ – that the prompt evokes is expressed at its most exalted for Peta as a highly stylised image of femininity. It is almost difficult from her prompt to imagine how else it might have been expressed. Exaltation and freedom can be imagined but only within the terms of an already available script, as if it were available only to those who have long hair and wear flowing skirts? If we were that person would we be, ‘laughing and totally happy’ as in Peta’s vision?
And finally in Julie’s interview – hair makes another rather conspicuous appearance when I asked her about whether it was important to feel feminine and what made her feel feminine:

JULIE: […] just being able/being feminine wanting to dress myself and (yeah) you know, (yep) the image that I create I want it to be feminine. (yep) I hate the thought, you know [Julie laughs] these people who have their heads shaved (yep) I think oh god, I need my hair.

Ok. Ok. So it would seem hair is pretty significant in signifying femininity.

In some other accounts, however, the idea that femininity is signified by things to do with appearance, such as hair, is derided as superficial in the context of a more ‘knowing’ understanding of ‘woman’ as signified by power and independence. For example, in Cate’s interview, when asked what femininity meant to her she responded in a deriding tone that:

CATE: […] the first thing that comes to mind is like ballet dancers (ok) and all the sweet kind of pretty things. (yep) […] all of that on the softer side as opposed to the doing side. (right. yeah) […] I guess I guess that would be the surface superficial way to think to think about it but um, um, yeah and if somebody was described as being feminine or masculine then that would be I guess the picture I would make in my head.

Her derision can be seen as evidence of progress in terms of gender stereotyping – making fun of the idea that femininity equals sweet and pretty. She tells me that these are ‘surface’ or superficial’ ways to think about femininity. So can we read in Cate’s derisive comment about traditional femininity that she does not subscribe to or invest in that discourse which she ‘knowingly’ recognises as superficial? Judging by the comments that follow it seems unlikely we can ascribe to her such an uncomplicated position. It may be de rigour to deride such superficial accounts but they are not displaced in this act. Dismissing the banality of the association between femininity and sweetness does not necessarily mean that the association does not function as a regulatory fiction. As Cate says above – those pretty, superficial qualities would still be ‘the picture I would make in my head’ were someone described to her as feminine.
Interestingly she includes masculine in the above quote even though masculinity was not mentioned nor were any attributes traditionally associated with masculinity raised. It is as though, the spectre of one raises the spectre of the other. To think of femininity is to invoke its alterity.

Cate’s response to femininity has another element. After her comment on ballet dancers and sweet things she says:

CATE: After that I think it means/ is about intuition and about um um emotional connection (ok) um and rapport and relationship (yep) Um, um and strength I guess […] And resilient too I think (mm) flex/ I/ you know that kind of strength where you know, you’re feet are planted but there’s lots of movement (yeah) […] Strong on an inner life.

Cate’s response reveals another traditional construction of femininity, that is, as emotional, relational, and intuitive. So both the derided appearance aspect of femininity and the alleged psychological traits are linked together and both are highly normative. Cate signals that she ‘knows’ that there is more to ‘femininity’ than appearance but what she constructs remains a highly normative and ‘traditional’ version of femininity as intuitive and emotional (e.g. Bem, 1974).

An example of the relevance of a ‘feminine’ appearance is an exchange between Julie and I where I had asked her about everyday associations of activity and sport with masculinity. I was wondering what it meant to her, if anything, to be a very active woman involved in sport at a highly competitive level. She replied:

JULIE: It’s interesting. In our basketball team, after the basketball game the girls’ll go and have a shower and get changed and do our hair and put on make-up and there wasn’t really anybody who was very butch, you know, and yet we were a really good team, you know.

Here the function of Julie’s remark appears to be to indicate that despite the ‘masculine’ context – and its associations with competition, aggression and so on – she and her team mates were able to remain feminine, so after the basket ball game [we] ‘do our hair and put on make-up’. Furthermore, Julie points out that though the team was feminine, i.e.
not butch, they were still a really good team. The implication is that ‘femininity’ and say competence at basketball are ordinarily understood to be incompatible – hence the ‘need’ to assert that in this case the two go together. Julie then goes on to say how her team mates are ‘quite happy about being feminine but being very physical’. In both these instances the disjunction between femininity and physicality is both denied but maintained.

Then as though Julie were wishing to indicate just how little importance notions of gender appropriateness have for her and reflecting a more general lack of relevance for such notions in this post-feminist gender neutral culture where equality equals sameness (Edley & Wetherell, 2001; Fine, 1992), she begins to discuss how much easier it is being tall now:

JULIE: ... you don’t see too many of them {young girls} stooping where once, you know, you had this, girls weren’t meant to be tall and they had to... (yeah) but, now, you know I look at my niece Ella and she stands tall and proud and she’s six foot one, you know, so, I mean, I’m only five foot ten. I’m short. [laughter]

Again, as discussed earlier, one of the ways femininity is signified is as smallness. Here Julie enlists a progressivist trope to indicate that tall girls need not ‘stoop’ to achieve a diminutive stature more appropriate to their femininity but are able to ‘stand tall and proud’. Nonetheless, Julie’s finishes by saying that in comparison to her niece ‘I’m short’. Thus returning herself to a more appropriate size.

Throughout Julie’s narrative above, on women in basketball, ranging from it being ok to be ‘physical and feminine’ to it being ok to be tall, the relevance or centrality of femininity is not disrupted. That is, it is not its disappearance or irrelevance that we are discussing, but the way that it can be stretched to accommodate tall and physically competent women. The end result being that the importance of the performance of femininity (putting on make-up, doing hair) and ‘not being butch’ remains central to being able to be very ‘happy about being feminine but very physical’ as we saw in the discussion of post-feminist representations of ‘tough girls’ in chapter 4.

In a similar negotiation between ‘post-feminist’ knowledge about change and a discourse of traditional femininity, Tess said:
TESS: mmm…Well when I think of feminine, I think of um, typical female, um long hair, pretty, delicate, little features, um nice slim body, just petite and small and dainty. (yep) Don’t ask me why, I mean I guess that’s just the way that I’ve grown up (yep) but really it doesn’t mean that at all. Does it? Um, I think now days femininity means a strong, assertive woman. (mhm) Um, (...) I guess, um, (...) um, I think it’s started to lean more that way (yeah) whether people like it or not. You see a lot of people throw around the feminist word a lot don’t they (yep) in a derogatory manner. Um, (...) yeah, I I think it’s starting to be more powerful to be feminine rather than physical attributes (I see, yeah, ok) it’s mental and strengths and ability.

Tess’s narrative tells a story that has a past and a present and thus it can be positioned within a discourse of progress. Subordinating stereotypes of femininity (as appearance) are construed as belonging to the past and the alignment of femininity with power and strength belongs to the present and future. ‘Now days’, Tess says, femininity equals ‘strong’ and ‘assertive’ though her initial response was that it meant ‘petite, small and dainty’. She goes on to say that femininity was becoming more associated with mental strengths and abilities rather than physical attributes. However, in the very next breath she also says:

TESS: I think I probably feel my most feminine is when I actually put on make-up (ok) and do my hair and get dressed up. (yep) ‘Cause I never do. (yeah) Never wear make-up and very rarely go out anywhere so when I do I guess I really do feel feminine. (yeah) And that’s important. I couldn’t go out like without make-up strangely enough, whereas I can spend the whole day, like days and days not/without wearing it but if I was going out like to a club or something (yeah) don’t know, just looking/ like I couldn’t wear this {referring to what she’s wearing – i.e. track pants and a jumper} like out or anything, (yeah) you know, wanna look nice and (yep) and have people think that you look nice (yeah) stuff like that, that’s important.

In the previous quote Tess nods her head in the direction of post-feminist discourse, grrl power and kicking butt and recognises the multiplicity of ways that femininity might signify but her account falls back into a traditional rendering of femininity as she
experiences it and as it is important to her sense of self, her identity. Tess’s narrative seems to indicate that she is more caught up in an act of wishful thinking in relation to the alleged power that women now have than actually being able to tap into any concrete alternative for feminine identity. Are things changing or are we simply told they are changing? Tess’s narrative like Cate’s, indicates the struggle between competing accounts of femininity and competing identifications with these accounts.

It also indicates a kind of orientation wherein femininity is lived and felt as being both fixed and fluctuating. Fluctuating in the sense that it is seen to be changing over time and also in its aspect of performance or production (Butler, 1993). Another example of this simultaneous experience of fixity and fluctuation is evidenced in Annie’s transcript:

ANNIE: I mean I can feel feminine sometimes when I’m um, in the daggiest clothes out in the garden. (yep) Filthy, dirty, sweating. (yep) Um, and I feel a different kind of feminine when I’m dressed up, I’m wearing a skirt and I can feel it all bouncing around my legs (yep) and I’m going out and I put on the make-up and (yep) you know, transforming myself from the the mountain slob into the city femme (yeah. yeah) fatale, you know. Um, and I feel kind of feminine then in a different sort of way. (yep) Um and again it’s it also has to do with my feelings of um, vulnerability at the time, (right) ah, and that can be different, um, yeah I can feel really strong and not at all vulnerable when I’m dressed up and looking feminine (right) and I can feel really feminine and vulnerable when I’m digging the garden or walking the dogs.

In Annie’s account femininity is both a look and a feel. It is signified by a particular kind of appearance but it is also signified by a particular kind of feeling ‘vulnerability’. Thus, here femininity is construed as both innate and a performance. On the one hand, it is something she just feels even ‘in the daggiest clothes out in the garden’. But it is also something she can produce - a look – as when she transforms herself into the ‘femme fatale’. Not only does Annie’s account demonstrate movement between different discursive constructions of femininity but she also states elsewhere in her transcript – ‘sometimes I feel feminine, sometimes I don’t’, indicating a sometimes absence of sexed consciousness which corresponds to Riley’s (1988) notion of the temporality of inhabiting ‘woman’ as a position of identity.
Femininity is thus multiply constructed and one of the ways that the quotes indicate it is constructed is as appearance, or masquerade. In psychoanalytic theory masquerade is ‘the very definition of ‘femininity’” (Rose, 1982, p. 43; see also, Lacan, 1958a; Riviere, 1929). Thus, given the importance of appearance in the texts discussed so far, there is an element of work involved in producing femininity. In both the preceding quotes from Tess and Annie, they describe a Cinderella like transformation from home and garden to going out. Each woman’s account acknowledges a performative or work element that brings ‘femininity’ into being or produces the subject as ‘feminine’:

JULIE: [...] just being able/being feminine wanting to dress myself and (yeah) you know, (yep) the image that I create I want it to be feminine.

‘Femininity’ is produced by the work of the subject but it is not always reducible to that work at the same time, as Annie indicates where she says that she can feel feminine prior to the transformation when she is in her daggiest clothes in the garden. That is, it is not ‘simply’ a performance. Certainly for Tess, something compels her to produce herself as the appropriately feminine subject as she describes ‘I couldn’t go out like without make-up strangely enough’. So whilst Tess acknowledges the production and work that she puts in to ‘feeling feminine’ it also seems slightly mysterious or ‘strange’ to her that she should feel compelled to do so. Thus in Butler’s (1993) terms we might understand the element of the performative in sexed identity as ensured by a powerful element of proscription and constraint:

... “performance” is not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualised production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (p. 95)

The performance or achievement of an appropriate degree of femininity is important for women to be accepted in many of the places that they might find
themselves in today’s post-feminist context. It may be the case in this allegedly enlightened day and age that women can do anything but it that maintaining an ‘appropriate’ ‘traditionally feminine’ appearance remains a key signifier of femininity. This was explored in the media representations of ‘tough girls’ in chapter 4, where post-feminist productions of female action heroes were found to maintain a strong focus on attributes of femininity such as appearance and physical attractiveness. Overall, the extracts of interview text considered in this section have shown the way that ‘femininity’ is produced by association with ‘prettiness’, smallness and being less active and that these signifiers of femininity coincide somewhat uneasily with more post-feminist productions of woman as ‘equal’ or powerful. The production of woman as ‘feminine’ is also shown to contain an element of performance and contingency. For example, an appropriately feminine appearance can be used to mediate where a woman is particularly active and potentially at risk of being read as masculine. These elements of femininity are what is traditionally understood to be included by what feminine discourse constructs but there was also a strong emphasis in the interviews on what is excluded from the production of woman and femininity and this is explored next.

5.3 ‘Lesbianism’ at the boundary of ‘woman’

Julie's remark earlier, that none of the women in her basketball team were ‘butch’, leads to another key aspect of the construction of ‘femininity’ and ‘woman’ that appeared in the interviewees’ narratives. As I will show in the discussion that follows there were a conspicuous number of unsolicited references to feminism and lesbianism. Furthermore, ‘lesbians’ in these accounts were almost invariably constructed as being both ‘butch’ and also as ‘hating men’ whilst feminism was associated with lesbianism and stridency. Where the previous narratives illustrated the ways in which appearance is a key signifier of a range of feminine characteristics, what follows are constructions of femininity through what is disavowed. Collectively, in the narratives that follow, the spectre of the ‘militant, man-hating lesbian’ haunts the limits of ‘femininity’ and ‘woman’.

From the specific way lesbianism is constructed by some of the interviewees it is possible to read the constitutive elements of ‘femininity’ and ‘woman’. Of interest for
the analysis is the way that a certain construction of lesbianism is utilised in the interviewee’s talk to position themselves within a normative heterosexual framework. The constitutive constraint of the heterosexual norm produces lesbianism (indeed homosexuality in general) at its constitutive outside (see Butler, 1993; Kitzinger, 1987). That constitutive outside consequently functions as the ‘limit to intelligibility’ (Butler, 1993) hence, lesbianism is produced as the effect of the coercive regulative norm of heterosexuality.

Marie’s response to the following prompt exemplifies the chain of associations which link the central issues, those being, feminism, aggression, lesbianism and man-hating. The prompt was:

at my crust  
I’m violent

right down deep  
I’m violent

at my fingertips  
I’m violent

in the glands of my breasts  
I’m violent

in the shield of my cervix  
I’m violent

in my feral womb  
I’m violent

Fear me fear me fear me  
I’m violent. (Porter, 1994, p. 167)

And Marie’s response to this was:

MARIE: I didn’t like that one. (really? Yep) Ah, I thought it was a bit crude, aggressive and violent. (…) I think that was too much. (yeah?) It’s odd isn’t it? (In what way?) Um, I thought it was/ in a way it’s a feminist passage but a negative one. (ok) Um, I think there are great great ideas in supporting women and there are some
specific feminist views which are great. But sometimes you’ve got
the excessive people which will give this idea a bad image.

Marie asked where the quote came from and I explained that the poem was part of a
detective murder mystery which intertwined with a lesbian romantic sub-plot. She
interjected with:

MARIE: That’s interesting you’re saying lesbian because I think
that comes back to what I was saying it’s a feminist view that’s
probably what I meant is sort of a negative one if she’s male hater. (ok, ok) You know, male/ I don’t know whether she is like
that (mm) but she obviously, she’s got issues with that, (yep)
doesn’t like men particularly.

Significantly, Marie says the poem’s author is a ‘male-hater’ and ‘doesn’t like men’ in
the absence of any reference in the poem to men whatsoever. The poem certainly
threatens and menaces but it does not address that threat to anyone, nor any gender, in
particular. Here I would suggest that we can posit a chain of associations that began
with the violence and aggressiveness in the prompt which connected with a construction
of ‘lesbian separatist feminists’ which in turn constructed the poem’s author as a ‘male
hater’. This is then retracted – ‘I don’t know whether she is like that’ – and immediately
reinstated – ‘but she obviously, she’s got issues with that, doesn’t like men particularly’.
We can see how a certain chain of (heterosexist) associations can account for Marie’s
assertion and indecision about the author being a ‘male hater’: the quote is strident and
‘excessive’ … therefore feminist and lesbian …therefore the author is lesbian …
therefore a man-hater. Only since the poem doesn’t once mention men or a man this
assignation is at once obvious to Marie from the discursive associations and yet difficult
to explain by appealing to the manifest content of the poem itself. The final statement
reflects this double reading and confusion of the manifest and latent content and
discursive associations of the poem: ‘I don't know if she is like that but she obviously,
she’s got issues with that, doesn’t like men particularly’. This is an assertion about the
author which is difficult to make without following the chain of associations as outlined
above.

Lesbians are also described as ‘man-hating’ in Annie’s account:
ANNIE: I’ve got - a lot of gay people live up here - I’ve got a number of lesbian friends as well as you know, gay men friends and I and I’m learning that there’s a lot of factions (yep) within the lesbian community. (mhm) And there are man-hating lesbians (yep) and I find it 
{end of side of tape} 
while I am turning over the tape Julie ahs given a description of ‘butch lesbians’, what they wear, and the utes that they drive} with those covers over the back and put all their dogs in there and and they they kind of move like men. (mhm) And I find it really fascinating that they hate men and yet why do they emulate men? (right) I find that really interesting. (yeah) Really interesting to me. (emphasis added)

ANNIE: Yeah. I suppose the women - I think they call them bull dykes - well let’s call them bull dykes the group that I was just describing. I suppose what they don’t want to do is look like a feminine woman. (yeah) That’s what they don’t want to do so they’re probably trying to find you know, their own kind of um, sexual identity. (yep) Saying well, I’m not like that mob that wear their hair like this and I don’t like men but I’m going to wear you know, so where do I go? There’s nowhere for me to go so I’m going to take a kind of middle path. (yep) (emphasis added)

Annie’s comments clearly set up a difference between lesbians and feminine women. And I simply have to point out that hair makes an appearance again on the side of the feminine: a butch lesbian does not want to be like ‘that mob that wear their hair like this’ – presumably either long or with hair at all (i.e. not shaved). Recall Julie’s comment earlier that she could never be like ‘these people who shave their heads’. Leaving aside the obsession with hair now, Annie asserts, as though it were a matter of fact, that ‘butch lesbians’, ‘hate men’. Annie states she finds it confusing that since ‘butch lesbians’ hate men they should want to look like them but supposes that they even less want to look like feminine women. The confusion here is at the level of discourse, there is no intelligible framework for accommodating identities which sit outside of the heterosexual matrix, such that “lesbian sexuality is produced as a perpetual challenge to legibility” (Butler, 1993, p. 145). ‘Bull dykes’ perform a confusing disruption of binary oppositions – feminine and masculine cannot find their ‘right’ places in Annie’s account and nor can they be neatly reconciled such as occurs in much post-feminist discourse where equality is produced as sameness.
So far we have a construction of lesbians as ‘butch’, as hating-men and conflated with a certain stridency and excessiveness. All of which are rejected or differentiated from femininity. Thus what is being made sense of is femininity through the invocation of a particular construal of lesbianism. In Cate’s interview, the rejection of excess and aggression is given in this very sense of being differentiated from femininity:

CATE: [...] mainly just embarrassed by all that feminist stuff, the militant feminist side of things I just found embarrassing when it was around and so I and so I never took much notice of it. So I guess that I always thought that feminism was the exact opposite of being feminine in some way. (emphasis added)

When I asked Cate in what sense she found it embarrassing she replied that she ‘thought it crass and overly aggressive’. Certainly this fits a post-feminist production of feminism as intolerable and unfair in an allegedly gender neutral culture where men are ‘victimised’ by women’s excessive demands. Post-feminism is, as the name suggests, very much about being past feminism – feminist is the one thing a post-feminist woman cannot choose to be. Of course, this has the effect of undermining any calls for change and perpetuating a pervasive cultural blindness to continuing structural and systemic inequalities (see Hare-Mustin & Maracek, 1990; Fine, 1992; Peace, 2003).

Clearly ‘lesbians’ and ‘feminists’ function in these accounts to set the parameters of femininity. Indeed, if ‘woman’ is constructed and made sense of within a heterosexual framework in relation to ‘man’, then as Wittig (1992) argues, ‘woman’ must cease to have any meaning outside of the heterosexual matrix. In other words, to be “‘lesbian’ and ‘woman’ is thus viewed as a contradiction in terms” (Ussher, 1997, p. 457). As Wittig (1992) somewhat emphatically states, “Lesbians are not women” (p.32). Certainly, what is clear from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory on the phallocentric nature of the Symbolic is that what makes ‘woman’ intelligible is ‘man’, thus a woman not perceived to be in any relation to man, is not ‘woman’.

This assertion when applied to the construction of a certain type of heterosexual femininity makes sense of the disavowal of a lesbian subject position that is occurring in the narratives cited above. It illustrates too, a narrowing of the space from which the women interviewed are able to speak if they are not to be identified as man-haters. It
seems that the disavowal is less about lesbian sexuality than with the association that lesbian sexuality carries in its perceived non-relation (or man-hating) to men. Woman is not woman where she exists outside of male control. As Butler (1993) says, there is a presumption that “lesbianism is acquired by virtue of some failure in the heterosexual machinery…According to these views,…lesbianism is nothing but the displacement and appropriation of men, and so fundamentally as a matter of hating men” (p.127).

Therefore there is a sense that perhaps one must police oneself to avoid being positioned as a man-hater. Wittig (1992) states:

The discourses which oppress all of us, lesbian, women, and homosexual men, are those which take for granted that what founds society, any society is heterosexuality. …These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. …[t]heir most ferocious action is the unrelenting tyranny that they exert upon our physical and mental selves. (pp. 24-5)

What Wittig calls “the obligatory social relationship between “man” and “woman” (ibid, p. 27) has a powerfully prescriptive effect on the space from which women may speak. This has implications not only in terms of how ‘woman’ is constructed in some of these narratives but also for how women thus constructed may talk about men, may (or may not) voice their complaints or address their demands. Within this discursive framework the ‘good’ woman cannot slight or damage the male ego which she has been entrusted to care for. As Ussher (1997) points out, “since the first wave of feminism, ‘lesbian’ has stood as a term of abuse for any strong minded woman” (p.461).

5.4. Resisting ‘irrationality’

Recall that both Cate and Marie rejected a seeming ‘excessiveness’ or ‘stridency’, Marie stating that the ‘I’m violent’ prompt was ‘too much’. Peta, in response to the same prompt stated that she didn’t like it, that it was ‘too female’. This might be read as a refusal to be too sex-identified – too sex-saturated, especially when the attribute in question – that is, excess and violence - is considered negative or derisive. Excessiveness and stridency raise the spectre of the ‘hysteric’, the irrational woman, a production of femininity as excessive and uncontained; the outside of reason.
Woman then is both produced as a category of normative heterosexuality but also as an outside or limit where femininity is constituted as ‘irrational’ and the ‘domain of the less than rational human bounds the figure of human reason’ (Butler, 1993, p 49). The figure of human reason is a masculine figure, the ‘I’ of discourse.

Irigaray claims that women in the public sphere are in disguise, she is not there as a ‘woman’ (see Whitford, 1991). In order to speak, or access the public, they are required to be ‘like men’, pseudo-men (ibid, p. 137). The women’s rejection of excessiveness and the irrationality it implies then, is part of the logic of – ‘if you want to be good enough you must be like a man’ (of course there is no such thing as an entirely rational man but the logic is not interrupted by this fact) – which requires that one repudiates certain attributes in order to avoid a negative definition of oneself. Hollway (1984) talks about the ‘being as good as men’ logic which she states “necessitated a negative definition of myself as woman ….Women were a group I put myself outside of. When I made generalisations about women (almost always derogatory), I did not include myself in the group I was talking about” (p. 229).

One alternative way then of avoiding this problematic of putting oneself outside the group ‘woman’ which the women interviewed clearly were not attempting to do, could be to displace the irrationality again – onto lesbians, feminists, those other women who are improper ‘woman’. The displacement of undesirable qualities; being visible, strident, outspoken, not sweet and nice (uncomplaining and accepting) onto those ‘improper women’ functions to allow the women interviewed to both disavow and accept an identity as ‘woman’, as feminine. In other words, to negotiate a subject position which must remain in relation to men but refuse the designation of irrationality or excess in that relation to them and thereby maintain one’s position as a speaking subject.

It is important to emphasise that there is a distinction drawn in the interviews between being ‘irrational’ and being ‘emotional’ though presumably we might understand the latter to be always in danger of collapsing into the former or at least of being construed that way in a patriarchal discursive context. As discussed above, the women discursively aligned themselves with the rationality required of phallogocentrism but also, throughout the interviews, constructed femininity and ‘woman’ through an
alignment with ‘emotions’ or ‘feelings’. This point is elaborated on specifically in chapters six and seven on the gendered allocation of emotional labour that follows from the construction of ‘woman’ as nurturer and mother.

5.5 Liberated (from) woman: resisting that ‘name’

I have discussed so far some of the ways that the interviewees constructed femininity and the way these constructions indicate the importance of femininity to being a woman and the relevance of woman as a category of identity – perhaps these could be described as ways that the women recognised themselves in that name – albeit not always completely, unproblematically, or without conflict. There were also a few specific instances where the aim of the interviewee seemed to be to overtly reject the centrality of ‘woman’ as a point of identification. That is, they articulated a rejection of that category as being meaningful to their experience or identity.

SABINE: I knew you were going to ask me questions about being a woman and what it was like and um, it’s not something that I stand still at. More being/ maybe other roles I would, like being a Mum or being a friend or being a sole parent but I very rarely think about being a woman (ok).

CATE: I guess I think about what it is to be a person first (ok) and what kind of person it is I want to be and then I guess, so lower down than that comes being a woman and I guess I don’t think about it very much until I come up against something, like some kind of prejudice or something would be the time when I’m directed to think that way […] but it’s not the first it’s not the first way I would describe myself.

LISA: when I read some of them [interview prompts] I did relate to in terms of being a mother (mhm) Not so much being a woman at all (ok) but being a mother, that’s what came across the strongest just the feeling of entrapment (ok) Um, the invisible hands, not being able to get away, free yourself when you want to, when you need mo/when you need to most and (yep) of course you’re needed more and, and you’re constantly in need, you’re constantly called, ah called upon to support other people (yeah) And so you lose your identity for a time being as a mother – just in those first initial years (ok) Um, but as/ um/ but being a woman, No, I’ve never felt I’ve/oppressed um, at the hands of any man or in any relationship
(ok) or if ever there was a time when I did I always did something about it – something positive.

I wish to look at various ways of reading the interviewees’ resistance or attempts to distance themselves from ‘woman’ as occur in these quotes. First there will be a more general discussion of the relevance of Riley’s (1988) work on the category of ‘woman’ and post-structuralist theory in general to making sense of these quotes. Afterwards, the discussion will return to each of the quotes above for a more detailed examination arguing that liberal humanist and post-feminist discourses are particularly relevant for understanding the women’s statements.

5.5.1 “Am I that name?”

Denise Riley (1988), in ‘Am I that Name?’, gives an account of ‘woman’ as a category of identification wherein one is ‘at times a woman’ (p.6). Riley refers to differing temporalities of ‘woman’ meaning that woman as a category has a historical specificity which must be recognised along with its continuity. Furthermore, for Riley there are ‘always different densities of sexed being’ (ibid, p.6) which relates to the temporality of the category and the impossibility of inhabiting any classification entirely, at all times.

The question of how far anyone can take on the identity of being a woman in a thorough going manner recalls the fictive status accorded to sexual identities by some psychoanalytic thought. Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror? How could someone ‘be a woman’ through and through, make a final home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia? (ibid, p.6)

Certainly Sabine and Cate in the extracts above state that being a woman is not something they think about often, indicating that they do not live their lives ‘soaked in the passionate consciousness of one’s gender at every single moment’ (ibid, p.6). Indeed, it could also be said that being a woman is something that one might not ‘wish’ to think about too often. In other words, I would suggest that it is ‘the degree of horror’, in Riley’s terms, involved in fully inhabiting a gender that is kept at bay in the
interviewees statements by denying the identification as ‘woman’ is a significant one for them. Thus, a level of resistance can be implied by the act of denying the significance of the name, that of a resistance to the descriptiveness of the category.

Hence the numerous refusals on the part of “women” to accept the descriptions offered in the name of “women” not only attest to the specific violations that a partial concept enforces, but to the constitutive impossibility of an impartial or comprehensive concept or category…. This violence is at once performed and erased by a description that claims finality and inclusiveness. (Butler, 1993, p. 221)

Thus the very act of refusing the category of ‘woman’ illustrates the illusory nature of the category’s claims to ‘finality and inclusiveness’. Of course it must be reiterated that no position of being ‘outside’ of that ‘name’ is guaranteed by the speaker’s act of refusal since no simple act of voluntarism ensures one’s ‘freedom’ from the regulative effects of power and discourse no matter how much one cherishes the fantasy of such liberation (Butler, 1997; Foucault, 1980).

As suggested earlier, Riley’s (1988) framework for understanding densities of sexed being incorporates a notion of temporality, that is, any given woman’s identification with ‘woman’ will fluctuate from moment to moment and also, ‘woman’ and what is meant by that ‘name’ fluctuates socio-historically. Thus, the choice to take up an identification or to recognise one’s self in a category will have something to do with ‘the state of current understandings of ‘women’, embedded in a vast web of description covering public policies, rhetorics, feminisms…’ (ibid, p. 6). Accepting that the ‘state of current understandings’ of woman could be described as post-feminist (with its liberal humanist underpinnings) there is likely to be a discursive compulsion away from overtly sexed consciousness as a meaningful frame of reference. That is, post-feminist discourse with its insistence on women’s emancipated status and the crisis in masculinity carries the implicit message that ‘woman’ is no longer a relevant political category and that to insist on it would be unreasonable. Riley describes a similar phenomenon occurring at earlier historical junctures following significant social and political gains for women, e.g. suffrage, during WWII as paid and voluntary workers.
‘sex consciousness’ and ‘sex-antagonism’ were deeply pejorative terms in 1918, and became so again in a second wave of revulsion in 1945 at the threatened resurrection of feminism. …hadn’t enfranchisement done away with the need for women to dwell so tediously upon their sex? …the reiteration of ‘women, women’, became unbearable. (ibid, pp. 59-60)

Furthermore, the ‘reiteration of woman’ denotes a ‘narrowness’ and ‘a selfish antithesis to ‘the social’” (ibid, p. 59). This rejection of ‘sex consciousness’ is rearticulated in post-feminist discourse with its strong foundations in liberal humanism. Because post-feminist discourse insists on women’s emancipated condition, consequently, being a woman can no longer be understood to have any relevance in accounting for disadvantage or differential opportunities. In turn, this vacates the field for liberal humanist discourses wherein sexual difference is denied in favour of the view that we are all just people first. Recall Cate’s statement that she ‘thinks about what it is to be a person first’.

5.5.2 ‘Woman’ as arbitrary and fixed

The following quote taken from Cate’s interview, illustrates a contingent relationship to ‘woman’ as an identity category.

Cate: I guess I think about what it is to be a person first (ok) and what kind of person it is I want to be and then I guess, so lower down than that comes being a woman and I guess I don’t think about it very much until I come up against something, like some kind of prejudice or something would be the time when I’m directed to think that way […] but it’s not the first it’s not the first way I would describe myself.

Here being a person comes first and being a woman further down the line if at all, illustrating precisely Riley’s (1988) notion of temporality and densities of sexed being. Thus, one is conscious of one’s sex at some times and in some contexts and to varying degrees. Furthermore, Cate’s acknowledgement that one is ‘that name’, in Riley’s terms, when one is ‘directed to think that way’ by experiences of prejudice reflects an implicit construction of woman as a target of discrimination. Later Cate says that she
thinks it is unproductive to define oneself in terms of gender. When I questioned her further on that point she stated:

CATE: I guess pretty opposing views about it. On the one hand I think it’s a crazy way to make distinctions and on the other hand I guess I celebrate exploring the feminine side in its fullest, you know, rather than trying not to be that way. (ok) you know (yeah) Yeah. I don’t think there’s any sense in trying to be androgynous, you know. (yep. you don’t?) Not particularly. (ok) I think it would be very dull. (ok) [laughter] you know […] So I guess that’s really opposing views really.

Cate’s quote indicates that she is positioned at the site of competing and conflicting discursive constructions of identity and sexual difference. The categorisation of all people into ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ is, according to Cate, a ‘crazy way to make distinctions’ thus constructing gender as arbitrary, heterogeneous and imposed – the effect of ‘making a distinction’. Conversely, Cate says she ‘celebrates exploring the feminine side in its fullest’ thereby constructing femininity as ‘real’. Furthermore, saying that one would have to ‘try’ not to be feminine or ‘try’ to be androgynous implies a fixity of gendered experience and expression but simultaneously signals that gender is also open to be ‘worked’ upon.

The conflict and ambivalence expressed by Cate reflect the very conditions of identity as it has been understood in post-structuralist feminist theory. That sexed identity is in fact an effect of discourse and power rather than reflecting an underlying reality that can be guaranteed by a body that precedes the interpellation of the social. However, the regulative effects of discourse constitute the subject and have ‘real’ effects. ‘Femininity’ then is both a lived experience with a degree of homogeneity and yet it is also a category which consistently fails to completely determine the field it constitutes. The idea that we could ‘try’ to be otherwise as Cate articulates, is reminiscent of Butler’s (1993) concept of ‘performativity’ in that it is in the very fact that subjects are formed through the repetition and reiteration of norms that the possibility for the proliferation of performances and thus subversions and resistances exists.
5.5.3 ‘Woman’ as ‘equal’ and/but ‘victim’

I have looked so far at two ways that post-structuralist theory can account for apparent resistances to the centrality of the category of woman expressed in the interviews. This and the following section look at the way that post-feminist discourse impacts on the relevance of ‘woman’ as an identity category and a category of political relevance, starting with this quote from Sabine:

SABINE: I knew you were going to ask me questions about being a woman and what it was like and um, it’s not something that I stand still at. More being/ maybe other roles I would, like being a Mum or being a friend or ..being a sole parent but I very rarely think about being a woman (ok).

It is, I would argue, very curious that Sabine separates being a ‘Mum’ from being a woman. Lisa’s text in the following section enacts the same odd distinction. At this point I wish only to flag this point as one which I will return to later but for the moment want to engage with Sabine’s claim that she rarely thinks about being a woman. In the next quote Sabine gives an explanation for why she thinks this might be, attributing her lack of ‘sex-consciousness’ to growing up with egalitarian assumptions. From this, she says, she learnt to take for granted that she would have the same opportunities as men:

SABINE: I think that trying to explain it to myself I wonder if that’s the product of my history and my social background […] there was already a lot of assumptions that we were equal. […] and maybe also partly it’s sort of like an innocence, I think I was very innocent about it just making those assumptions and demands – well I’m a woman and I have got just as much choices as men, I can choose whatever career I want to do and the world’s my oyster and I can go anywhere I want to go and I can have as many relationships as I want and I’m as sexually liberated as, you know, my male friends.

Woman is implicitly constituted as a category with which one would only identify if discriminated against, as in Cate’s account, so whilst explicitly constructing a context of equality her account nevertheless clearly links ‘woman’ with inequality. The claim that one does not need to identify as woman in an egalitarian context produces ‘woman’ as a
non-identity category with a very interesting resonance with the Lacanian theorisation of woman as a non-identity in phallocentric context. If what is meant by ‘equality’ is the disappearance of sexual difference that is equated with the disappearance of ‘woman’ this retains the universal humanist subject as ‘male’.

Sabine gives a familiar rendition of post-feminist discourse – *I am free to do anything I please*. In her account, being a woman makes no difference to her opportunities and nor does it constrain her in any other ways. But there is an profound tension in this account between the explicit construction of a context of equality and the implicit construction of woman as a position linked to inequality; a tension which becomes more apparent with Sabine’s next set of statements where she gives an account of being clearly confronted with ‘being a woman’:

SABINE: And there was certain times when I was confronted with being a woman um, but I took that on board as well that’s inevitable, like dealing with people who were maybe more traditional (mhm). When I started working in computers we still had the old, you know, the old genre of men who would go – ‘do you know what you’re doing love’ – (right) you know, and that sort of thing but I expected that and I just thought well that’s going to happen anyway and also, um, maybe in public like being harassed- sexually harassed- or even, I was sexually assaulted twice or um, I sort of thought well that’s just because I’m not as strong as men, or you know, more likely to be victim and it was sort of like I’ve got to learn to live with that and I’ve got, you know, you find ways to deal with that (right)

In this account ‘woman’ is a category that one identifies with (only) when one is the target of discrimination or violence thus constituting ‘woman’ precisely as a category instituted through patriarchal power relations.

In Sabine’s former account she articulates a ‘knowledge’ that she was equal and that being a woman was not relevant to her experiences or opportunities. Her former account is thus in the vein of post-feminist constructions of reality. This is, however, in direct contrast to the latter account which reveals a significant power differential that is directly to do with being a woman. Moreover, in the former account Sabine’s account is of expectations of equality such that it would not occur to her that she would be treated differently as a woman. Again, by contrast, the latter account offers the opposite
expectation, that it is indeed ‘inevitable’ to be confronted by prejudice and assault that differentiates one as a woman. As I will highlight shortly, the posing of prejudice as ‘inevitable’ functions to naturalise and downplay the significance of sexist and violent behaviour towards women.

In other words, two constructions of woman compete here in Sabine’s accounts. Woman is constructed as ‘equal’ and thus any insistence on that category is rendered politically irrelevant, whilst on the other hand, woman is clearly constructed as the inevitable victim of discrimination and violence and thus as vulnerable. In investing in a post-feminist discourse which constructs woman as equal but which also denies the relevance of the category because of that alleged equality, Sabine is perhaps opting for an identity position which aligns her with strength rather than vulnerability. Perhaps, it is in ‘woman’ as vulnerable that she does not wish to recognise herself. Of course, post-feminist discourse discourages women’s identification as ‘victims’ preferring to constantly position them as empowered.

The effect of taking up a post-feminist discourse has served to override concrete circumstances and leaves Sabine with no way to understand them as being related to imbalances in power if she invests in a discourse which says that she is equal. Moreover, it is precisely the way that post-feminist discourse co-opts women’s desire to be identified as powerful and autonomous that makes it so successful. But wanting to believe that one has the same opportunities does not simply make it so. In Sabine’s account sexual assault and harassment are ‘naturalised’ by structuring an explanation in terms of men’s greater physical strength. But sexual assault does not derive from the simple fact of some people (women) being less strong than other people (men) but from a patriarchal culture where masculine power is valorised and dependent on a constitutive subordination of ‘woman’ to act as support to that power (Gavey & Gow, 2001). However, a post-feminist discursive investment which denies ‘woman’s’ sometimes-vulnerability appears to entirely cut Sabine off from any legitimate anger which would politicise rather than naturalise acts of violence and discrimination. Alternatively it occludes acts of violence and discrimination by assigning them to an allegedly now-irrelevant past. Occluding the fact of sexual difference has a way of occluding the effects of sexual difference as well and thereby concealing inherent power relations.
5.5.4 ‘Woman’ as free to choose

The following discussion looks at the way post-feminism and liberal humanist discourses impact on Lisa’s construction of herself as ‘free’ and agentic and her relationship to the category of ‘woman’. In the following quote, Lisa articulates a loss of identity and distress connected to being a mother but she very explicitly separates this experience from being a woman. This is the same curious distinction as occurred in Sabine’s earlier quote.

LISA: when I read some of them {interview prompts} I did relate to in terms of being a mother (mhm) Not so much being a woman at all (ok) but being a mother, that’s what came across the strongest just the feeling of entrapment (ok) Um, the invisible hands, not being able to get away, free yourself when you want to, when you need mo/when you need to most and (yep) of course you’re needed more and, and you’re constantly in need, you’re constantly called, ah called upon to support other people (yeah) And so you lose your identity for a time being as a mother – just in those first initial years (ok) Um, but as/ um/ but being a woman, No, I’ve never felt I’ve/oppressed um, at the hands of any man or in any relationship (ok) or if ever there was a time when I did I always did something about it, something positive.

LISA: words I suppose like the invisible hands and trying to free myself, just certain words pop out (yep) you know, that that really relate to me at the moment (yep) Um, yes. But like I said not not as a woman – its just the situation I think. Even though I’m in the situation I still feel really strong as a woman, you know (ok) I’m not being oppressed as a woman (mhm) by any means – it was all my choice. It was my choice to be married have children (yep) so (...) you know no one’s, you know, put me in this position except myself (mhm) you know so that’s why I don’t think it relates to me as a woman (ok) Yeah.

Lisa’s quotes indicate a strong investment in liberal humanist and post-feminist discourse co-existing with an equivalent investment in highly normative discourses of ‘mother’ and ‘wife’. She repeatedly constructs her explanation for her ‘feelings of entrapment’ and what she describes later in the interview as a ‘horrible, horrible situation’, in ways which consistently position her as retaining control, as being free of external power despite her reporting that she feels trapped. Above, she articulates a
‘feeling of entrapment’, of ‘not being able to get away, free yourself when you want to’ and so forth, but very clearly rejects ‘woman’ as a category which is relevant for making sense of that experience. In a particularly curious rhetorical manoeuvre she dissociates mother from woman. Thus, she relies on ‘mother’ as the identity category which will carry the weight here of accounting for her experience. I would suggest a possible reason for this is Lisa’s strong investment in a liberal humanist/post-feminist discourse which positions her as the originating author of her choices and therefore not ‘oppressed’. Nothing is being ‘done to her’ there are no circumstances about which she does not have control or which she did not choose. In Lisa’s construction, ‘mother’ emerges as a more ‘appropriate’ category for the purposes of producing herself as an autonomous subject in control of her life because ‘motherhood’ can be construed as something which she has chosen – ‘It was my choice to be married have children (yep) so (...) you know no one’s, you know, put me in this position except myself’.

By implication then, being a woman is constructed here as a more essential category, that which one is and has no choice about in contrast with being a wife and mother. Consequently, however, ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ are, by virtue of being ‘chosen’ identities, not assumed to be oppressive or coercive even whilst they function as categories which ‘explain’ her lack of freedom. From the next quote we can see that Lisa situates herself at the site of highly normative versions of mother and wife wherein the practical contingencies of child care are primarily the woman’s responsibility:

LISA: I can’t go and do what I want to do and be me (yep) I’ve just got to be this nurturing person you know, that’s there for the children, that’s there to keep the house for my husband and it’s it’s a it’s an ok situation (…) it’s not my ideal situation/ I’m not a very maternal person (yeah) but you know, it was my choice to have children so that’s fine.

There is a strong investment in discourses on motherhood and ‘wife’ which compels her performance of being a wife and mother in highly regulated and constrained ways. Lisa says she has ‘got to be this nurturing person’, looking after the children and her husband. Her talk does not reflect any sense that there is room for negotiating the way that mothering and being married are done outside of this highly gendered performance
(Dryden, 1999; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). However, whilst Lisa constructs her experience as highly regulated by normative constructions of mother and wife she still frames herself as a ‘liberated’ subject – ‘but you know, it was my choice to have children so that’s fine’. Was it not her husband’s choice also? One could argue that it is absolutely not ‘fine’ the way that patriarchal definitions of ‘motherhood’ relieve men of the burden of care and insist on women’s sacrifice. But the oppressive construction of mothers as primary carers and as sacrificial is occluded by Lisa’s insistence on separating mother from woman and positioning ’mother’ as what a liberated and free subject simply chooses. There can be no acknowledgment from this position that the way that we ‘choose’ to mother is highly regulated and circumscribed. “Social regulation can function not only, in a sense through overt oppression, but rather by defining the parameters and content of choice, fixing how we come to want what we want” (Henriques, et al., 1994: 219).

Lisa is positioned within normative and oppressive frameworks of wife and mother but seems to defend herself against the engulfment and suffocation produced by these subject positions by positing a separate identity, a ‘me’, a strong woman who is not oppressed, who is not a ‘very maternal person’, someone who at some point will escape these stifling confines. Lisa’s desire is structured by patriarchal discourse of mother and wife but it also escapes that close regulation. In the following quote she constructs a future in which she will escape and ‘be me again’:

LISA: And I can see/ I know, you know, that it’s all going to get better and I/ and, and I’m going to come through it and I’m going to be me again, (ok) you know, and I’m going to go and do what I want to do but at the moment… it’s just a horrible, horrible situation but I don’t see it as that because um, you know, it’s it’s going to be alright.

Lisa’s responses illustrate her positioning as woman/mother and thus as being-for-another (her explanation of having to be nurturing and be there for her children and husband show her desire as constructed along patriarchal lines) and a simultaneous though conflicting desire to be-for-herself – as she says ‘to be me again’ to have something of her own that pulls her from being mired in the lack of existence signalled by being responsive only to the desires and needs of others.
A significant regulatory impact of post-feminist discourse is indicated in this final quote from Lisa where it seems that in constructing herself as a free individual she is thus unable to even allow herself to voice her distress as a legitimate complaint, much as in Sabine’s narrative earlier. Lisa’s desire to be free and equal is co-opted by post-feminist discourse which constitutes that ‘freedom’ as reality thereby closing the site of a significant and distressing personal reality based in patriarchal relations of domination. Above, Lisa says it is a ‘horrible, horrible situation’ but immediately denies the assertion ‘but I don’t see it as that’ - since to acknowledge it would compromise her investment in constructing herself as being in control. She chose but also does not choose this ‘horrible, horrible situation’. It seems that since ‘woman’ is not something Lisa says she has a choice about but is who she is then it must be kept separate from the situation she finds herself in. Thus she can say ‘I still feel really strong as a woman, you know (ok) I’m not being oppressed as a woman’.

Where Sabine and Lisa both separate mother from woman, there is an unmistakable resonance with Irigaray’s insistence that women must not continue to be reduced to the maternal function if there is to be a female symbolic (see Whitford, 1989). As discussed in chapter two, Irigaray argues that there must be a way of representing the mother-daughter relationship which “allows the mother to be both a mother and a woman” (ibid, p. 117). The implication of what Irigaray poses however, requires a ‘female imaginary’ and ‘female symbolic’ the point being precisely that these are what is missing in an economy of the same which takes the masculine as the only term and the feminine as merely what is not-it. Thus, in a patriarchal order women are hindered from having a subject position that is separate or distinct from the maternal function. That is, woman is a function (in several senses as discussed in chapter 2) not an ‘identity’ as such, since identity belongs to a masculine economy which cannot represent ‘woman’.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with some of the ways that the women interviewed constructed their relationship to the category ‘woman’ and the significance of ‘femininity’ to that category. The interview texts showed that the discursive
production of femininity includes ‘prettiness’ and other attributes of physical appearance and attractiveness. Femininity is also given as something that one ‘feels’ as other-worldly and ethereal but also as something that one can ‘produce’ and which is therefore active and agentic, performed by a knowing ‘actor’. This latter aspect of femininity can be seen to be emphasised by post-feminist discourse also with its emphasis on the evidence of empowerment that accompanies women’s ‘choice’ to produce themselves as ‘feminine’. Being a ‘woman’ is shown here to be produced as both essential and constructed, fixed and fluctuating.

The chapter has also explored the way woman is produced within the heterosexual matrix, as shown by the particular constructions of lesbianism in these interview texts where it acts as a constitutive outside of ‘woman’. Thus, ‘woman’ is meaningful through relationship to the category of ‘man’. “If femininity is a performance which takes place primarily within the theatre of heterosexual sex and romance, ‘woman’ is inevitably situated in relation to man” (Ussher, 1997, p. 105). By implication, certain behaviour, such as aggression or even assertiveness are produced as unfeminine or as signifying something other than ‘woman’. Undoubtedly this must impact on the ways women have available to us to express themselves or, in particular, to articulate their demands. I would suggest there is some evidence from the analyses of this chapter of a quite limited context from which women may (or may not) speak about what they want. For example, if part of the construction of femininity is that we cannot 'hate men' and being strident and aggressive (read visible?) is also outside of the parameters of acceptable femininity then it follows that not only our space for speaking but our manner of speaking is pretty constrained.

On the issue of constraint, the latter part of the chapter looked at the ways that constraint, that is, the regulative and coercive functions of particular discursive constructions of ‘woman’, is occluded by post-feminist discursive productions of ‘woman’ as equal and as ‘free’ to choose. One of the effects of post-feminist discourse with its strong foundations in liberal humanism is to produce the belief that that ‘woman’ is no longer an identity category with any specificity, or any relevance therefore, to understanding instances of discrimination or equality. ‘Woman’ is produced as the apparently ‘neutral’ but actually masculine category of ‘individual’.
Where equality is linked to the erasing of sexual difference such that we are left with a universal and ‘neutral’ liberal humanist subject (read male) the insight that a phallocentric discursive framework is only capable of representing one sex and its difference is clear. It is understandable that we would choose to invest in those discourses which offer us the opportunity to position and understand ourselves as active and agentic – as able to choose freely and be the architects of our own futures and circumstances. Post-feminist discourse certainly co-opts and engenders women’s desire to see ourselves as powerful, strong, agentic and safe. However, “a humanist position offers only false hopes on the basis of false theories” (Mitchell, 1982, p. 25). As the interview texts showed, woman also continues to be constructed as the target of sexism and discrimination and still significantly regulated by the traditional discursive constructions of mother and wife. Significantly, the effect of post-feminist discourse is to make these latter forms of regulation invisible – by rendering them as freely chosen positions. Thus, I would argue, women’s ability to recognise themselves as embroiled in the mechanations of power is made particularly difficult.

This central theme of the way that post-feminist discourse flattens and denies issues of power are again apparent in chapter 6 and again the analysis is focused on the way that woman is constructed through various discourses. In particular it explores the way that ‘woman’ is constructed as ‘home’ and associated with the private and domestic against the construction of the public domain as masculine.
6

It’s a man’s world:

femininity’s association with the private world of heart(h)

and home

The containment of women within a dwelling that they did not build, nor was even built for them, can only amount to a homelessness within the very home itself: it becomes the space of duty, of endless and infinitely repeatable chores that have no social value or recognition, the space of the affirmation and replenishment of others at the expense and erasure of the self, the space of domestic violence and abuse, that space that harms as much as it isolates women. (Grosz, 1995, p. 122)

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter had focused on some of the broader ways that woman and femininity were constructed in the interviews. This chapter deals frequently with the ways that the participants constructed masculinity as well as femininity, consequently drawing out how these constructions of masculinity in turn position women in particular ways. In chapter two, in-depth consideration was given to the theoretical insight of Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis that ‘woman’ is a subject position constituted as the negative of the masculine. A subject position constituted to shore up masculine identity. Thus woman is contained in man’s ‘self-reflecting representations’ (Grosz, 1989, p. 109). What woman is, in these interview sections, can be derived from how men are talked about and constructed.

The focus of this chapter is on the way that femininity is constructed by association with the internal, private and domestic while the public is associated with masculinity or masculine values. Sexual difference is consistently reproduced and reiterated through the interviewees’ constructions of men and women that follow a binary logic. One aspect of post-feminist discourse, the insistence on gender convergence and equality as sameness (see chapter 4), is certainly not reflected in the discursive constructions of man and woman to be found here. What emerges in the analysis that follows is the positioning of men ‘outside’ in the world of work and
thereby, outside of the family and the world of emotions. Thus, woman is associated with the ‘inside’ world of feelings, and located in the private and the domestic – a woman’s place is in the home. The first section of analysis looks at the way that interviewees constructed masculinity as emotionally restricted and femininity as emotionally expressive and explores the ways in which these constructions are implicated in the re-production of particular gender power relations. The second section illustrates how interviewees reproduce a construction of masculine identity as based in work and being the ‘breadwinner’ and ‘provider’. These, constructions of masculinity which place men, in various ways, on the ‘outside’ of the home represent them as apparently disadvantaged or victimised. They also re-produce sexism through the continued exclusion of women from the public sphere. They imply a domestic idyll for women represented by the Home. Finally, it is argued that the construction of woman that positions her in/as home is only another version of woman as masculine fantasy, literally holding masculinity in place. The feminine ideal embodied by ‘woman as home’ functions, I will argue, to create a space of safety and haven for men but not for women. For example, the construction of home as domestic idyll for women does not reflect the reality of domestic violence. I conclude by arguing that in fact, as woman is the condition of Home for the Other she has no space of her own (Irigaray, 1984).

6.2 ‘Woman’ as emotional

A common way that femininity was constituted within the interviews was by association with what is ‘soft’ or emotional (see also chapters 4 and 5) and by contrast with a construction of masculinity as barred from the expression of emotion (see Fischer, 1993; Lupton, 1998). Moreover, this is construed as something positive, an asset of being a woman. Marie gives it as one of the reasons why one would prefer to be a woman:

E: […] you were saying you wouldn’t be a man, you definitely wouldn’t want to be a man? And why is that?
MARIE: (…) I don’t know. I like being um, soft and having emotions (mhm) and um, men can do that too but being able/being allowed to. (mhm) I think a man who cries or is soft or whatever is not um, regarded - although I think it’s a real quality - it’s not necessarily regarded that well in society.
In this quote, men and women are understood to differ in their emotional expression. Woman is constructed thus, as the opposite or compliment of man. Marie constructs woman as being ‘allowed’ to have or to show emotions, where by contrast, men are not. The implication of this construction is that masculinity is constituted by and through a coercive norm that restricts the expression of emotion or more particularly, certain emotions. Marie’s quote illustrates that what is understood by emotion is quite limited here to ‘being soft’. Also, Marie is quite specific about what a masculine norm excludes, which is crying or other emotions associated with ‘softness’ and presumably therefore with ‘woman’. There is no sense that emotion here is understood to refer to anger, for example, which numerous researchers have shown to be a socially sanctioned emotion with respect to normative masculinity (e.g. McMahon, 1999).

The following quotes also reproduce normative versions of femininity and masculinity, signified respectively by emotional freedom versus emotional restriction.

CATE: I think it {being a woman} means/is about intuition and about um um emotional connection (ok) um and (...) and rapport and relationship (yep) Um, um and strength and (inaud). (yep) But I s’pose all of that on the sor/ on the softer side as opposed to the doing side. (right. yeah)

TESS: And I guess, I mean we can express our feelings. That’s another thing that’s really important. I could not imagine, you know, not being able to cry. (yeah) I mean just/ especially like when you’re shitty, just had enough just walk around the house bawling. (yeah) Imagine not being able to do that? (yeah) I mean I still must admit, Andy he’ll cry if he has to, if he needs to. (yeah) But a lot of men don’t do they? (Exactly) And that’s not good I think you need to express your emotion and if there’s a problem you talk about it (yeah) whereas men kind of -‘I’m going, I’m going, I’m getting out of here’.

JULIE: So, um, and um, being feminine gives me more um, allowance to be more emotional (right. yep) you know, um, that’s good. […] Um, and um, I’m just even/ like I’m just aware that like emotionally men don’t get as much permission as women (right), you know. (yeah) We’re a lot freer with our emotions . . .
An interesting feature apparent in the examples above is the use of terms like – ‘permission’ ‘allowance’, ‘freer’ and ‘able’. That women are associated here with emotion is constructed as an advantage by virtue of the way women are described as being ‘freer’ and having more ‘allowance’ to express emotions. Whereas, by contrast, men are held back from emotional expression; it is not acceptable for them, they have ‘less permission’. The implication, in light of women’s apparent ‘advantage’ in this matter, is that men are conversely disadvantaged.

The other implication is that the interviewees are not maintaining that men don’t have feelings as it were but that they are hindered in expressing them. Men are not constructed as unfeeling or unemotional necessarily, but rather as restricted by social sanctions from expression of emotion. The lack of emotional expression is not incumbent on men but on society. Where women are constructed here as free to choose emotional expression, men here are constructed as having no choice or less choice and are consequently implicitly construed as not responsible for this state of affairs as in this quote from Pam:

PAM: […] in some sense you can see that that these men that we’re referring to, {violent and aggressive} these sort of men (mm) have obviously got some some major psychological things going on [laughter] obviously there’s some great issues here and that there’s a problem there because, um, you know, have these men been able to deal with those? I mean you know, it’s been the thing for them where you know, one can’t show these various sorts of emotions and this and that and the other and you know, in a sense I can sort of see, well really how easy has it been {for them}

Masculine inexpressiveness and the consequent positioning of femininity as emotional are discursively constituted subjectivities that can be read as functioning within a matrix of patriarchal power relations. The construal of masculine inexpressiveness within a purely ‘psychological’ or ‘individual’ framework occludes other means of understanding this feature of masculine subjectivity. For example, another way in which masculinity defined by emotional inexpressiveness could be understood is that it is produced through the denial and projection of ‘weakness’ and ‘dependence’ on to ‘woman’. Thus, masculine inexpressiveness would, in this alternative formulation, be turned from a psychological insight to a political one. It is in this sense that Seidler (1989) can claim, “Masculinity is an essentially negative identity learnt through defining itself against emotionality and connectedness” (p. 7).
This does not “suggest something filled with phallic power but something built around a flight from something else” (Frosh, 1994, p. 99). Thus, as Frosh argues, emotional inexpressiveness is related to masculine domination and autonomy – the desire not to be controlled by things ‘inside’ but to control ourselves – to be masters of mind and body. The fantasy of masculine mastery does not include emotions which are conflated with the body and considered unruly and uncontrollable. “Masculine ideology idealises the life of the rational mind, …moving forward, making progress, thrusting with force into the future, untrammelled by emotion, liberated from the confusions of womanly feeling, balanced, critical, self-assertive, free” (ibid, p. 103).

There has been some thought given to what might be invested in identifying with a version of masculinity that excludes emotional expression which mostly links it with male privilege and domination (Acker, 1989; Benjamin, 1988; Dryden, 1999; Hollway, 1983, 1984; McMahon, 1999). The general consensus in most of this work is that men have an investment in withholding their emotions which has to do with maintaining power or advantage by avoiding being positioned as vulnerable. According to Hollway (1984) an investment in the construction of masculinity that involves the repudiation of emotion also allows men to displace their fear of vulnerability and excessive emotions onto women in heterosexual couple relationships and thereby create the appearance that it is she who is dependent, vulnerable or needy. More recently in analysing media claims of increasing gender convergence and women’s liberation McMahon (1999) pointed out the numerous ways that understandings of masculinity that assume a repudiation of feelings normalise men’s appropriation of women’s domestic and emotional labour to free men up to do other things. He also highlights the way that this assumption allows ‘man’ to be constructed as a victim (of social sanctions against men expressing emotion) thereby functioning to further secure the continuation of women’s emotional labour and represent a means of resisting women’s demands for change.

Certainly the quotes above indicate a sympathy for men’s alleged predicament of being unable to express their feelings. It is repeatedly stated that it is both good and important to express one’s feelings, as in Julie, Tess and Pam’s quotes. Furthermore, to be unable to do is described as a ‘problem’. McMahon (1999) sees this construction as psychologising rather than politicising a masculine reliance on emotional inexpressiveness as part of larger systems of gender power.
relations. Indeed, in Pam’s quote this ‘problem’ for men of being ‘unable’ to show their emotions means they cannot deal with ‘psychological issues’ they have. This in turn, according to Pam, leads to an inevitable outburst of violent or aggressive behaviour. Such behaviour is justified then (accepted) as an inevitable outcome of the way that men are (seemingly cruelly) denied permission to express their feelings.

These constructions of masculinity and femininity construe the masculine as being at a disadvantage in comparison to the feminine. They imply that woman is not alienated from her needs or feelings and that men are. However, as McMahon (1999) aptly suggests “Rather than being in touch with their own emotional needs, women are in touch with the needs of those they care for” (p. 201). This highlights another point, that constituting femininity as ‘emotional’ and ‘soft’ positions women as carers and nurturers (of men and children) - as doing ‘the work of intimacy’ (Giddens, 1992, p. 125). As we shall see in this chapter and the next this has the function of securing women’s emotional and consequently domestic labour.

6.3 Breadwinners and providers versus heart(h) and home

As has just been highlighted, emotion signifies femininity and positions woman as carers and nurturers. The latter being qualities that are associated with family and the domestic sphere. These next texts taken from the interviews also produce a version of femininity aligned with the domestic by constructing masculinity by association with the public sphere. Again, woman is meaningful as the Other of man. All the extracts I consider in this section reproduce a traditional construction of masculine identity which is predicated on work, status, power and a role as provider. Dryden (1999) identifies this as a discourse of male sacrifice where men are seen to ‘do it tough’, toiling under intolerable burdens. Against this woman is counter posed as ‘having it easy’. In this construction woman is understood to be provided for, safely cosseted in the intimacy of the domestic, her work and burdens made invisible by the ‘visibility’ of men’s work (Hunt, 1980).

The following quote explicitly associates being a man with work, pressures and responsibility which is given as a reason why the interviewee says she would rather be a woman:
CATE: I don’t think I’d like to be a man. (yeah?) I think it’s/ I think it carries too much responsibility. (alright) Like that pressure of having to/ having to you know, that business of having to be the provider and having to having to be known by the the work that you do and all that kind of (ok) I just don’t think I’d like to have to be a man. I quite like/ have notions sometimes of being looked after in some way. (ok) You know, of not having to be the one that um, / I think I think I’d feel too pushed. (right) Yeah.
E: And so you don’t feel that you have those pressures?
CATE: Ah, I do but I think that they’d be worse. (ok) [laughter]

Cate constructs masculinity here as ‘being in the world’. Masculinity is signified by the words ‘pressure’, ‘work’, ‘provider’, ‘responsibility’. This is a traditional discourse of masculinity that positions man as ‘the breadwinner’ and provider, the ‘head of the family’. The symbol of man as ‘protector’ is also implicated in this discursive construction. Cate explicitly invokes this when she states she has, ‘a notion sometimes of being looked after in some way’. The man is constructed, as he has frequently been in both the past and present as “one that cares for thee, / And for thy maintenance commits his body/ To painful labour both by sea and land/ To watch the night in storms, the day in cold/ Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe.” (Shakespeare, 1593/1970, pp. 132-133). By implication woman is constructed as free of worldly pressures and responsibilities. A ‘woman’ is kept ‘safe’ from such pressures and protected by this fictional man (see Sayers, 1995). But there is a significant tension between Cate’s construction of masculinity and femininity and her actual circumstances that is apparent in her statements. Cate is a private counsellor, she is also a corporate personnel trainer and studying for a Masters degree and, as a divorcee, she lives on her own, taking care of herself. There is a good deal of evidence in her quote that her construction of masculinity and femininity owes much to her investment in a romantic domestic fantasy that allows her to position herself as someone who could be cared for. As she says, ‘she has notions sometimes of being cared for in some way’ (emphasis added).

The fiction of a man’s world that is somehow separate to and tougher than a woman’s world is highlighted by Cate’s answer to my question and also her laughter that followed. She is unable to maintain that her experience of work and public life is free of the pressure and responsibility that she has earlier attributed only to men. She admits that she does have the same pressures but is able to maintain continuity with her earlier proposition by saying she thinks these same pressures would be
worse if she was a man. I read her laughter as recognition of the contradiction of this position. Initially she effectively says that she would rather be a woman so that she doesn’t have the pressures and responsibilities and so she can be cared for although she is a woman who has those pressures and responsibilities and is not ‘provided’ for nor ‘protected’. Here her investment in ‘woman’ as a subject position allows her to believe she can or will be cared for.

This myth of cosseted femininity and a domestic idyll has a long history. In Victorian times, it was expressed as the Angel in the House. This was a feminine ideal coinciding with the psychoanalytic insight of woman’s idealisation as that which supports and fulfils man. Showalter (1978) gives an excellent account of the Angel in the House:

[Ruskin] emphasised the physical and psychological boundaries of “woman’s true place,” the Home. While men labouring in the outside world are “wounded” and “hardened”, to use his sexually loaded rhetoric, women intact in the home – “the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from injury, but from all terror, doubt and division” – are secure in themselves and havens of safety for the threatened male. Ruskin makes it clear that the Home is not a concrete place, with walls and a roof, but a mystical projection of the female psyche, something a woman generates through her femaleness alone: “Wherever a true wife comes, this home is always around her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot, but home is yet wherever she is” (p. 184)

Thus a masculine dependence on woman is denied by constructing woman as ‘safely’ in the home owing to male sacrifice which places him in the outside world – for her, as it were. And yet the containing fantasy of ‘woman as home’ is a masculine fantasy that reflects his own repudiated needs for succour and nurture. Another implication of the complimentary constructions of femininity and masculinity situated in a heterosexual romantic fantasy from Cate’s quote and indeed the myth of the Angel in the House is that man is again positioned as someone to be pitied or sympathised with. He is the work-a-day warrior facing the tough world. He will require care when he returns home from facing those pressures. A job that women, already constructed as ‘emotional’, are obviously well-equipped for. However, following are some anecdotes from Cate’s interview that describe also a pretty tough world:
CATE: I’m I’m quite fearful/I was mugged about three years ago in a car/ I was a passenger in a car one night. (yeah)… we stopped at traffic lights and two guys came and ripped/just attacked the car from both sides, pulled the doors open and this guy dive in between my legs and he and I fought over a handbag… and I’m quite fearful on my own at night (ok) if I have to walk anywhere. (yep. No, I can understand) And and I’m not sure that that/that would be/ I think/ I tell myself that that would be different if I was a man.

CATE: Buying new cars! [laughter] There’s those kind of challenges (yep) of how to be taken seriously in those environments. (yes) I went to a car yard and I I was going with a friend who’s a guy (right) we were going to meet together and look at this car and um, and but we were going to meet at the car yard and so we both arrived separately, didn’t know the other one was there, both got two completely different sales people to quote us a price on this particular car […] He was quoted $2500 less than I was! […] I was furious. (yeah) Absolutely furious. (yeah) And then I felt so powerless I guess.

CATE: […] often I know that if I was a man I wouldn’t have to work so hard to persuade. (ok) Um, initially (yep) you know, that I would have more credibility the first time. […] I think that if you get a , you know, like an expert that’s a male or an expert that’s a female and you put them next to each other I think would probably in general think that he was more an expert than she is. (yeah) Even even in our profession {counselling} which is all women, you know. [laughter] (yeah) But you know, you get the lone man and he’s the one that’s the key note speaker. [laughter]

In some ways it is not surprising given a construction of the public domain that aligns it with masculine values that a woman should find it hard going out there. However, this makes the claims of post-feminist discourse of women’s equal status problematic to say the least. Constructions of masculinity as relating to the exteriority, the larger world and femininity to the interior and domestic sets a framework in which experiences of discrimination, violence and fear described above, could be understood as near-inevitable outcomes. That is, if the public sphere is a man’s world then it is going to be harder for women out there. There is something, that is if not presented as acceptable about being vulnerable to violence and prejudice, then is at least construed as inevitable. A point which is highlighted and extended in another transcript where Sabine describes an understanding, also
quoted above, that being a woman meant it was inevitable you didn’t feel safe or would expect to be disadvantaged:

SABINE: And there was certain times when I I was confronted with being a woman um but I took that on board as well that’s inevitable, like dealing with people who were maybe more traditional (mhm). When I started working in computers we still had the old, you know, the old genre of men who would go “do you know what you’re doing love” (right) you know, and that sort of thing but I sort of expected that and I just thought well that’s going to happen anyway and also, um, maybe um in public like being harassed - sexually harassed - or even, I was sexually assaulted twice or um, I sort of though well that’s just because I am not as strong as men or you know, more likely to be a victim and it was sort of like I’ve got to learn to live with that and I’ve got, you know, to find ways to deal with that (right) um . . I had to learn to deal with the fear and I had to learn to deal with walking on the streets um, and feeling uncomfortable and I just took precautions. I just had to take precautions and adapt very protective behaviour (ok)

If the public sphere is understood and accepted to be operating on masculine values of strength and dominance then it is inevitable that women should encounter difficulties, be fearful, have to learn to live and adapt on the ‘outside’, as it were. She is ‘more likely to be a victim’. Sabine’s quote naturalises women’s ‘powerlessness’ in the public sphere by describing it as a feature of men’s superior physical strength. But physical strength is not meaningful in itself; it does not inevitably lead to the exercise of power over another. Again, in Sabine’s quote we are returned to the Angel in the House, to the idea that a woman’s place is in the home, safe from the fear of walking on the streets – protected by that fictional man-warrior.

Lisa in the following quote again returns us to a version of masculinity premised on work and providing. It is worth bringing up here the circumstances of Lisa’s family at the time of the interview. She was caring full-time for their two young children. Her husband was out of work, he had been made redundant some time ago and had as yet been unable to find work again at the time of the interview.

LISA: Yes. Yes I would {feel bad about returning to work whilst her husband was out of work}. Because I would um, I’d jeopardise his work. (right) I would um, jeopardise his maleness (right) of
probably um, you know, having to give up something that he felt very strong about that/ and that would be that he works five days to support his family/ I’ve would be taking some of that away (ok) and taking it from him and said well I can do it (yep) just as good as you and I’m going to prove it (yeah) Um, so it’s sort of like I’m competing with him (right) in that. And um, and that is a male thing, you know, whether they, they say/ whether he/ you know, they say it is or not - it is, (yeah) you know, every man wants to support his fam/ well most/ I mean, if if you’re in a situation that is a good situation (yeah) a good marriage, every man wants to support his family, you know, (yeah) I’m not talking about separated families – obviously that’s different (yeah). Um, but they do so I’m taking that away from him. Um, I’m just being/ I’m being selfish putting him into a Tuesday, Wednesday slot where I think he can care for the children when he doesn’t know anything about their routine (right) or what they get up to during the day.

Masculinity is signified by work and the ability this confers to be the provider. The domestic is constructed unequivocally as a woman’s domain in this quote. In fact, to go out and work and ask her husband to position himself as primary carer – to literally locate himself in the home – is seen to emasculate him. Staying at home would literally ‘feminise’ her husband. It seems neither she nor he, according to this account, would be comfortable with positioning him in such an unmasculine way. Moreover, Lisa’s account positions her as ‘responsible’ for the care of his masculinity such that it is something she must help him to maintain. If she went out to work, she would, she explains, be ‘jeopardising’ his maleness, taking it away from him. It would be ‘selfish’, she says, were she to ask him to care for the children. He is constructed as incompetent and incapable of working out how to care for them. This is not his domain. Lisa’s construction here highlights the position of woman as entrusted to ‘care’ for man’s emotional well-being. She understands she is not to act in any way that would jeopardise this.

Furthermore, recall that in chapter 5, Lisa was featured speaking about how unhappy she was to be restricted to full-time, stay-at-home mothering. Despite all this, the injunction to maintain her husband’s ‘masculinity’ and her investment in the discursive constructions of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ appear to have stopped her from taking up the option of going out to work. These versions of woman reflect a ‘strictly phallocentric constriction of women as men’s others’ (Grosz, 1989, p. 109). Clearly this effects a structuring of Lisa’s desire along lines that compel her to uphold her lack of identity in order to uphold ‘his’. Nonetheless, as suggested in the following quote
there is a painful and irreconcilable tension between an investment in patriarchal representations of woman and an autonomous identity not limited to being the Other.

LISA: I can’t go and do what I want to do and be me (yep) I’ve just got to be this nurturing person you know, that’s there for the children, that’s there to keep the house for my husband and it’s it’s a it’s an ok situation – it’s not my ideal situation/ I’m not a very maternal person (yeah) but you know, it was my choice to have children so that’s fine. (…) And I can see/ I know, you know, that it’s all going to get better and 1/ and, and I’m going to come through it and I’m going to be me again, (ok) you know, and I’m going to go and do what I want to do but at the moment (…) it’s just a horrible, horrible situation but I don’t see it as that because um, you know, it’s it’s going to be alright.

In this extract Lisa is unable to articulate an identity that is not this ‘nurturing’ ‘maternal’ person. At some indefinable point she is simply ‘going to be me’. The masculine imaginary that places woman as the ‘home’ “prevents woman from acceding to her own separate being” (Whitford, 1991, p. 153). The symbolic division of labour that places women in the home and men in the public domain “prevents women becoming-for-themselves” (ibid, p. 152).

In Julie’s interview, she also positioned men as subject to greater expectations than women and adds that women’s increasing emancipation is making ‘being a man’ even more difficult:

JULIE: No. I don’t I wouldn’t like to be a male, um I think there’s a lot more expectations as I said and even though um, things are changing (yep) I think that it’s becoming difficult for men because women do have a lot more freedom and are achieving a lot more (mhm) than they have in the past and that, that it’s making it difficult for men because um, there’s this um, society’s slow - like you know, the image or the stereotyping of men (yep) is slow to catch up with what’s actually happening (right) (…) I don’t envy him (mhm) in anything that he does. (yep)

Again, here is the idea that men have a lot more pressures and expectations to cope with than do women. Hence, Julie reasons she would not want to be a man. Women, thus, are constructed as subject to less expectations and pressures. She juxtaposes this with women’s increased freedom and attributes men’s difficulties to this alteration in women’s circumstances. Her account thus resonates with post-feminist discourse on
the ‘crisis in masculinity’. It also articulates a similar assumption to Lisa’s that if women are free and achieving men are somehow emasculated by this or at the least it poses a difficulty. And why should women’s achievements and freedom pose a difficulty unless ‘woman’ as a subordinate position was not required to shore up hegemonic versions of masculinity as dominant? There is also the implication in Julie’s quote that men are victimised by the ‘stereotypes’ under which they labour. Julie very adamantly states that she does not envy her husband at all. These constructions of masculinity effectively suggest that not only do women not have the pressures that men have but they are not subject to ‘stereotypes’ which restrict them in any way. In other words, women are construed in these accounts as ‘free’.

Julie talked more about pressure in response to this interview prompt: “But a woman is forever hedged about. Always she feels the pull of some desire or the straining pressure of some social restriction” (Chopin, 1899, p. 73). She stated:

JULIE: True, I guess, not unlike men but their desires and pressures are different. (...) Well I guess it means that we all have restraining pressures on us. (yep) Um, I guess that I don’t feel necessarily that’s/necessary ’cause you’re a woman, although in some ways I probably juggle more (ok) because I’m a woman, than my husband does. He might disagree, but in many ways I think I probably do. (yep)

The first notable point is that when given a prompt that refers to women, Julie immediately raises men. As previously, it as though one cannot be thought without the other but also as though there were some danger in speaking only about women, isolating women as a field of inquiry. Certainly post-feminist discourse represents any politics based on women as “having no place in a society where ‘women have gone too far’ and disempower men” (Peace, 2003, p. 175; see also Edley & Wetherall, 2001; MacPherson & Fine, 1995).

Furthermore, there is a real conflict between discourses of gender difference and gender equality in this response. Her response suggests that men and women are different in that they have different pressures and desires, but they are equal in that “we all have restraining pressures on us”. It seems the intention of her response is to deny there is any more disadvantage, restriction or pressure around being a woman than there is being a man. So there is a tension in the passage between discourses of sameness and difference. However, after having initially said that being a woman
doesn’t mean one has any more to contend with than a man she says “although in some ways I probably juggle more because I’m a woman, than my husband does”. In Julie’s case this juggling involves management of a large and high profile research centre and heavy family commitments. A by now recognisable distance between equality as rhetoric and principle and the reality of everyday circumstances opens up here. A ‘reality’ which Julie asserts but simultaneously undermines both through her claim that “we all have restraining pressures on us” and through her suggestion that her husband “might disagree” she has any more than him to deal with.

Two more examples highlight the ambivalence which seemed to be inherent in holding to a position that construes the ‘man’ as provider and the ‘woman’ as provided for:

MARIE: Men have got a lot of um, pressures I guess. They’ve got to succeed, it’s all social again (mm) they’ve got to look after the family, you know (yep) and all this nonsense (yeah) because like we can do that as well.

TESS: Um, I guess that they have a lot of worries I suppose with you know, finding enough money to support everything/ everybody and/but I worry about money a lot more than he does.

Both Marie’s and Tess’s quotes reflect dominant constructions of masculinity which produce man as being out in the world beleaguered and beset by pressure and worry. In both cases men are constructed as the head of the family, the breadwinner and the caretaker but expressly in a practical and financial capacity. Through this role their connection is with the public world of work and employment. In Marie’s quote, men are seen to be labouring under restrictive social pressures, again with the implication being that women labour under no such restrictions of their identity.

However, both women simultaneously resist and undermine this construction of the male provider as well. Neither seems entirely convinced of its ‘truth’, so to speak. Marie says it is ‘nonsense’ because ‘we can do that as well’. And Tess queries her own assertion when she says that she actually worries about money more than her husband does anyway. In fact, Tess actually goes on to say quite disparagingly:

TESS: He kind of is very blasé and we’ll be right. (ok) She’ll be right. That’s going on his gravestone – ‘She’ll be right’. And I don’t
know why he hasn’t learnt because if something does go wrong I’ll be at him and bloody hell and yelling, yelling and screaming. (yep) And he still hasn’t learnt not to spend so much money or not to buy this when we don’t need it.

This latter description is hardly resonant of the powerful, masterful, practical head and protector of the family. It gives more the impression of a wayward child and its exasperated mother than a woman looked after and protected by her worldly partner. The fantasy of masculinity (see Sayers, 1995) is operative simultaneously with this conflicting account of how her husband actually behaves, thus mediating the way that his behaviour can be interpreted and read. Again the construction of woman as protected and without the worldly worries of the man is in clear conflict with Tess’s and indeed all the interviewees’ experiences as they retell them in these accounts. It is perhaps in an attempt to minimise this contradiction that Cate says that the pressures in her life are the same but imagines if she were a man they would be worse. Similarly, Julie says there is no difference despite believing that she juggles more than her husband. Marie says that she does not want to be a man because of the pressures on men but also says that is nonsense since women are capable themselves of providing for and supporting their families. And Tess can say that one of the reasons she wouldn’t want to be a man is because they have a lot of worries and in the next breath explain that her husband doesn’t worry about anything and is bad at managing the family’s finances. In short, femininity is constructed as an ‘ideal’, a fantasy position that supports an equally fictional masculinity as the tensions explored in the interview accounts attest to. And this ideal has been shown in the extracts above to be in conflict with other aspects of women’s accounts of their experiences.

6.4 Conclusion: domestic bliss?

The culturally commonplace split between private and public constructs the home and domesticity as a world of safety and comfort, love and nurture against the realities of a harsh outside world that operates in the currencies of power, domination and competition. And as the above analysis has suggested this public/private duality is distinctly gendered such that femininity is equated with home and masculinity with the outside. What this construction occludes however is the reality of relations of power that are also played out in the home. The interviewees talked about
experiences of powerlessness that they locate in the public domain which I have briefly included only a sample of in the preceding analysis. And as the above analysis illustrates they also included accounts that suggest at the very least that as women, their home lives are often far from easy. If the outside world is not safe from bullying and violence we certainly cannot allow romantic constructions of cosseted domesticity to occlude the reality of violence against women perpetrated in the home. The last time a national survey gathered information on the incidence of domestic violence was in 1996, the data gathered showed that 23 per cent of women who had ever been married or in a de-facto relationship had experienced at least one incidence of violence (ABS, 1996, p. 50). This does not include women in less stable, short-term relationship arrangements. Nor does this figure account for the under-reporting of experiences of domestic violence. At best it reflects minimum levels in the community (Mulroney, 2003).

Home then, is not necessarily a place where women are protected and provided for, nor safe. These facts together with the above analysis illustrate that women’s association with the home is not for their protection, as the ideal of the ‘angel in the house’ appears to suggest. Rather, the construction of ‘woman as home’ considered throughout this chapter is a fantasy that holds masculinity in place. “The woman, as an image and a wish, is excluded from the masculine order but operates as its anchor, both as ideal and as a concentrated point of darkness” (Frosh, 1994, p. 84). In this case ‘woman’ can be read as an ‘ideal’ form – a symptom of a masculinity that “uses the woman as contrast or limit, but always as something that will make the man feel safe” (Frosh, 1994: 122). Having said it is a fantasy is not to say it does not have real effects (Walkerdine, 1986) as it is a fantasy with which the women interviewed clearly have some relation and investment in themselves. This positioning of the ‘woman as home’ reflects a conventional discursive construction of space and time as gendered concepts where:

…the feminine because of the womb and the maternal function, is associated with space, in the sense of both a place from which something is produced, and one in which something is received, enclosed and held. The masculine dimension, however, is active: the male does things, creates history, writes books and speaks words that have an effect. (Frosh, 1994, p. 129)
Irigaray (1984; 1985) saw woman as being without a home in the symbolic because she had not the means of self-representation but only existed through patriarchal representations and reflections. Being ‘unhoused’ in a phallocentric symbolic, ‘woman’ as a category creates a home for man. As Whitford (1989) puts Irigaray’s position: ‘the fundamental ontological category for men is habiter (dwelling), whether in a figural or literal sense: men live in “grottoes, huts, women, towns, language, concepts, theories, etc”’ (p. 112). Thus the association of woman with/as Home represents a polarity between ‘maternal containment’ and ‘paternal power’ (Frosh, 1994, p. 138).

The complementarity of these constructions of men and women that map on to the binaries of inside and outside, private and public, reflect the theoretical insight of a phallocentric economy where ‘woman’ acts as a support to masculinity or is a ‘symptom’ of the masculine imaginary (Zizek, 1991). Yet the interview texts articulate an individualisation of events and experiences. There was very little sense that the ‘personal is political’ as the participants’ talk reflected an uncritical acceptance of normative versions of masculinity and femininity. This ‘privatisation of politics’ (Elliot, 2001, p. 158, emphasis in original) reflects, I would argue, the post-feminist lack of concern with the operation and immanence of relations of power. As MacPherson and Fine (1995) put it “In this post-feminist movement, with a suppression of gendered differences and a profound sense of entitlement to ‘equality’ comes a denial of hetero-danger and a muting of women’s critical subjectivities” (p. 196).

Chapter 7 continues to explore the implications of these dominant constructions of masculinity and femininity. One of the key consequences of women’s association with domesticity and almost complete alignment with the values of nurture and caring is found to be the appropriation of women’s emotional and domestic labour as mother’s, wives and partners. Of significant concern is the conflict this engenders between women’s absorption in caring and nurture to the exclusion of other modes of being. Finally, in the midst of these constructions of a domestic idyll for women there is a glaringly obvious omission that has to do with the material fact of the significant number of women in paid-employment. Chapter 7 explores the pressures on women to sustain work or career and family commitments and the way this pressure is thoroughly depoliticised by being consistently framed as a matter of individual ‘choice’.
7

The labour of love:
‘woman’ as being-for-another

...because the man, by virtue of his effective participation in public exchange has never been reduced to a simple reproductive function, the woman for her part, owing to her seclusion in the “home”, a place of private property, has long been nothing but a mother. (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 83)

Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it …And so then, she concluded, addressing herself by bending silently in his direction to William Bankes – poor man! who had no wife and no children, and dined alone in lodgings except for tonight; and in pity for him, life being now strong enough to bear her on again, she began all this business, as a sailor not without weariness sees the wind fill his sail and yet hardly wants to be off again and thinks how, had the ship sunk, he would have whirled round and round and found rest on the floor of the sea. (Woolf, 1927, p. 96)

7.1 Introduction

In To the Lighthouse (Woolf, 1927) cited above, Mrs Ramsay is the embodiment of ‘femininity’: beautiful, thoughtful, kind and gentle, and most of all, embroiled and preoccupied by care and responsibilities for others – her husband, her children and also the many friends they entertain and take into their home. Against the shape of Mrs Ramsay, Woolf poses Mr Ramsay, the patriarch: intellectual, self-contained and self-absorbed – impatient with the everyday detail of life and relationship, while Mrs Ramsay is mired in it. After all, Mr Ramsay is a writer and thinker – he is connected firmly to the world and his mind must be free for the ostensibly more important tasks to which he must apply it. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir reiterated Woolf’s earlier
observation when she wrote in *The Second Sex*, how women were mired in the
immanent while men were on the side of the transcendent.

We have already seen in the previous chapter the ways that woman is signified
by emotional expressiveness and associated with the ‘home’. This chapter of analysis
extends those themes to explore the ways that the interviewees talked about their
experiences of caring for others. I will argue that the women’s accounts position men in
a way that they can be seen to benefit from women’s primary engagement with the work
of care and nurture. In other words, men are freed by women’s overwhelming
responsibility for relationship and care and from the material work that can be seen to
stem from or be inherently part of that responsibility of, for example, housework and
childcare.

The Lacanian and post-Lacanian theoretical insight that woman is a position
devoid of positive content is most forcefully borne out in the interview material that
makes up this chapter. An extensive discussion of the position of woman as ‘being-for-
another’ is contained in chapter two. The central point arising from the following
analysis is that a still-contemporary culturally dominant construction of femininity is
constituted through relationships. Care for others, particularly men and children, is
central to the production and regulation of feminine identity (e.g., Irigaray, 1984; 1985;
Sayers, 1986, 1987; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Secondly, the oppressiveness and
restriction that such a subject position produces is achingly apparent in the interview
material. There is a conflict that arises repeatedly in the interview texts that confirms
the psychoanalytic claim that ‘woman’ is an impossible designation. On the one hand,
as the interview texts also illustrate, women’s desire can be read as fixed along
patriarchal lines as a desire to service the needs and wants of others whilst she herself
‘does not exist’ as one who might have desires of her own, for herself. But it is
impossible to exist as erased. The interviewees thus simultaneously expressed desires
for ‘something else’ that is represented in the interviews as autonomy and independence
– an identity or specificity that would enable her to desire for herself.

Moreover, these desires for autonomy and independence (of identity) are, I
would argue, actively engendered by liberal humanist and post-feminist discourse which
respectively, produce individuals as free and rational agents of choice and woman as just
such an emancipated (masculine) subject, no longer the target of discrimination or inequity. Thus women’s subjectivity is produced at the nexus of (at least) these two contradictory subject positions: woman/ (masculine) ‘I’. Highly problematic is the fact that post-feminist discourse actively produces the occlusion of the continuing constitution of women through the regulatory norms of femininity and thus masks the inequities thereby instituted by the association of femininity with care, nurture and reproduction.

I am going to refer to women’s responsibility for care and relationship as emotional labour as a means of designating it as work. It has mostly been unpopular to take love relationships and apply to them analyses of labour, production and capital (Delphy, 1984; Hochschild, 1984; Oakley, 1985). But not to do so is to conspire to maintain a myth that what women do is natural and moreover pleasurable and costs them nothing to do. Or, even more to the point, it is to conspire to keep what they do invisible (Dryden, 1999; Hochschild, 1983,1989; Oakley, 1976). As I have discussed previously (see chapter 6) constructions of masculinity as ‘being in the world’ as opposed to the feminised space of ‘home’ has the function of making men’s work highly visible. Consequently women’s unpaid work is frequently not understood to be work.

When Arlie Hochschild (1989) first coined the term, emotional labour, the great significance of her contribution was to name (and therefore make visible) as work what women do in caring for others, specifically within the family. She argued against care and the emotional demands it entails being considered simply as the ‘natural arts of women’ (p. 3). She was by no means the first or the only one to argue that women’s labour within the home was undervalued and exploited. A raft of feminist writers, notably Ann Oakley (1976) and Christine Delphy (1984), had also actively pursued this agenda particularly in the 1970’s, during second wave feminism. Similarly, Irigaray (1985a) has argued that the mechanisms of market, state and economy are built on the woman’s body. Just to ground these kinds of analyses contemporarily, it is worth noting that in Australia in 1997 the unpaid sphere amounted to 48 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (ABS, 2000) and women do the majority of unpaid work – on average twice as much as men (ABS 1999).
To name women’s caring as a kind of work is to subvert the seeming naturalness of it and all that that implies, i.e., woman as the well-spring of self-sacrifice and goodness, ever giving and satisfied in this role. What I do seek to problematise with the following analysis is not the idea of care per se but a culturally dominant construction of woman in which ‘she’ is almost completely identified with care and responsibility for it. A significant aspect of problematising the construction of woman as carer, that I am concerned with here, is to highlight what it costs women to inhabit a category which requires their erasure.

7.2 Relational Responsibility

‘Woman’ is repeatedly signified through the qualities and work of nurture and care across all the interviews. A construction which supports Irigaray’s assertion that in a patriarchal discursive context woman is indistinguishable from mother, that is, ‘there is only the place of the mother, or the maternal function’ (Whitford, 1991, p. 80, emphasis in original). Just as she is ‘home’ and ‘place’, according to Irigaray, she is also variously a container, vessel and envelope (see Irigaray, 1984). That is, she is that which enables others, holds others but which is not allowed to be-for-herself. Cate articulates this positioning of woman in the following interview quote:

CATE: I guess I think that women um, should be considerate, you know that’s part of being a woman and having consideration and other-centred, other-centric. And so and I guess I think that being ‘I’ centred is more unacceptable for women. And that’s stronger when I’m in relationship.

Cate’s quote explicitly constructs woman as a subject position that is oriented towards others, that is, as she puts it, ‘other-centric’. As Irigaray (1984) puts this, “woman always tends toward without any return to herself as the place where something positive can be elaborated” (p. 9). The implication of this is a difficulty in acceding to a positive identity as represented by ‘I’ in discourse. As has been previously discussed, this difficulty is complicated by the fact that ‘I’ taken as the universal subject is not in fact a neutral subject position but a masculine position (cf. Lacan, 1977). Whitford (1991) articulates this problem as exposed by Irigaray, questioning, ‘how women can assume
the ‘I’ of discourse in their own right and not as a derivative male ‘I’? (p. 42). What Cate’s quote also highlights is that there is an inequality in this positioning as well, the implication of her statement being that ‘I’-centredness’ is more acceptable for men. Indeed ‘I’ is constructed as their domain and woman as its other. Simone de Beauvoir articulates this well:

Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being...She is simply what man decrees... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 18).

Finally, Cate concludes by stating that this positioning is more pronounced when she is in a relationship. Angie Burns (2000) explored men’s and women’s narratives and noted the distinct emphases on romance and work respectively that could be found in those narratives. She concluded that the fantasy of romantic (heterosexual) love was a primary discourse for regulating gender inequality that functioned to position women as responsible for ‘love’ and ‘relationship’ thus freeing men to accede to an identity based in work and the public sphere.

In another interview, Annie also gave an example of this construction of woman as a position that is once again oriented toward others, especially in heterosexual relationships. She says of women:

ANNIE: That we are all the time thinking of others. (yes) Is that, is that a feminine thing, you know? I know when I was in a relationship I would always be considering ‘oh yeah, I can’t do that’ I mean I would/ I wouldn’t consider if I was doing things when I know my partner was was not going to be around (mm) and I’d love that. (mhm) God and I’d relish the times when they were away on business or something and you know, it was fabulous. Yeah it was fabulous. [...] You know, I find that really fascinating, you know dichotomy for for women because then they’re not free. (no) Men are free, but women are not free. And then when the children come they’re really not free. They’re really not free.
Annie illustrates the way that an orientation to others, specifically a male partner implies some disappearance or difficulty of acceding to one’s own desire when one is a woman. That is, oneself can only be considered in his absence. The construction which she articulates here of woman as place and container for others (men and children) underscores this problematic of women’s desire as it is regulated by and through the needs of others.

Once again, there is a stark inequality constructed here in connection with relational responsibility and emotional labour – ‘Men are free, but women are not free’ states Annie. Her account can be read as again, echoing the insight that femininity is constructed as the ‘base’ for masculinity (Irigaray, 1985a/b) – the ground upon which it is constructed, thus enabling the conditions under which men accede to the public domain. As Whitford (1991) puts it, woman “does not accede to the public sphere to which man has access because his particular needs are looked after in the family” (p. 120). It also highlights that the appropriation of women’s emotional labour through their conflation with ‘mother’ and designation as ‘place’ extends to the appropriation of their domestic labour. Consider the following quote from Tess:

Tess: ‘I’ve often thought, jeez it’d be nice just to come home and eat my dinner, on the table, all ready for me. (yep) Then just flop on the lounge and not do anything. (yeah) Jeez that’d be good. And not to have to always have in my head – better change nappy, um better put that away, better do this, better put the kids to bed now. (yeah) ‘Cause it’s like it does not enter his head. I’m the one who thinks of all the little shit. (yep) Like we’re going to a friend’s place. I pack the nappy bag. I get the extra clothes if a pair get dirty or wet. I get the food. He’s just, ‘come on’, got the keys let’s go. I say, oh jeez it’d be nice not to have to get everybody else ready and just get ready myself. … Yeah, it’d be nice to just not have to worry about anyone but yourself.

Tess’s response is at the crux of the matter. A head full of other people. The one who has to think of everyone else’s needs. Stretched thin across the people she must care for while her husband stands somewhat aloof – involved but separate. Holding the car keys and waiting to go. An inviolable entity not thronging with the needs and demands of others. One might assume from this narrative that going to a friend’s place is not the same experience for Tess as it is for her husband. Her quote also suggests how
domestic labour associated with care may also be profoundly unequally distributed in this and perhaps other instances.

Yet there is a distinct contrast between the above extracts and the production of ‘women’s experiences’ in a post-feminist discourse of equality found in the popular media over the last two decades:

Women will no longer put up with the lion’s share of responsibility for making male/female relationships work and for nurturing the children. Even if women wanted to make the old compromises, the gap between being assertive at work and a doormat at home is too great for the modern female psyche. (Slipman, 1995, cited in McMahon, 1999, pp. 3-4)

The days when a man could expect to come home to a pipe and slippers and snooze in the easy chair are well and truly over. Now, whether they like it or not, when the paid working day is over, the second shift awaits them. Cooking, cleaning, childcare, all manner of tedious tasks previously shouldered by willing wives, are now out for tender. (Arndt, 1989, cited in McMahon, 1999, p. 3)

I include these media references to extend on the critical work of chapter 4 aimed at countering the depoliticising effects of a post-feminist discourse that insists that change has occurred and women are now ‘free’. The ‘reality’ constructed in these quotes from interviewees is quite different to the ‘reality’ articulated by these media commentators. Inequality in terms of who is primarily responsible for emotional and, by extension, domestic labour is a fundamental feature in the narratives of all the women interviewed. Arlie Hochschild (1989) in The Second Shift concluded that despite the rhetoric of gender equality there had been a stalled revolution when it came to childcare and housework. Caroline Dryden (1999) in her research with couples on the construction of gendered identity through marriage also found evidence of massive inequality in terms of emotional labour and domestic work between the men and women she interviewed. Again, as recently as 2003, Barbara Pocock’s research similarly found women continued to carry the bulk of the burden of childcare and housework even where they were in paid employment too. The most recent available compilation of statistics on the distribution of unpaid labour shows women, despite massive increases in their share of paid work:
continued to undertake 65 percent of unpaid household work, and
do more of all kinds of household activities than men, with the
exceptions of gardening, lawn and pool care and home
maintenance. Women undertake around three quarters of unpaid
childcare work, and two thirds of housework. Women in couples
or single parents do much more domestic work than men,
regardless of their participation in paid work. (ABS, 2000, p. 2,
emphasis added)

Julie, a working mother of three children explained how she actually has more ‘freedom’
at work than she does at home:

JULIE: I probably have more freedom at work than I do at home in
some ways. (yeah?) Because I think at home, because my time is
limited, I don’t have as much freedom in what to do with that time
because of my responsibilities. Yeah and I need to do, I need to get
certain things done. (yep) Um, but my work gives me a lot more
freedom because basically, I mean I do have certain responsibilities
but then I make choices all the time.

Here, in contrast to the culturally dominant myth of domestic bliss that was explored in
the previous chapter, Julie’s quote construes work rather than home as a source of
freedom – home is a place of restricted ‘choices’ and diminished freedom rather than a
safe and idyllic harbour from the harsh world. Much has been made of the conflict
women face between home and work and the so-called second-shift (e.g., Pocock, 2003;
Summers, 2003). That is, despite the movement of women into the workforce in
significant numbers men have not responded by taking up more of the domestic duties or
childcare. “As they have entered paid work, mothers have had to devise their work,
labour and emotional strategies without a compensating shift in men’s fathering and
caring patterns” (Pocock, 2003, p. 99). As one woman I interviewed put it:

SABINE: so now there’s a whole new era where women who have
decided to be this multiple personality (yep) you know, having
motherhood, a career, personal interests, a relationship, a social life
…we’re now trying to find ways of well how can you mix that all
together without losing your sanity? (right) And still be confronted
with issues that you’re still doing most of the housework, and you
are still responsible for all the relationships in the household and
um, you’re also expected to financially contribute and to run the household and to invest emotionally in running everything.

Sabine’s quote construes a ‘reality’ in which women’s movement into the public sphere has not mediated their positioning as primary carers. Her account thus converges with the research cited above in which women continue to bear the brunt of domestic work despite our increased participation in paid labour. This is a problem that will be reiterated in the interviews throughout this chapter. Irigaray understood this to be the problem of the “liberal assumption that feminism is merely the extension to women of men’s rights” (Whitford, 1991, p. 136). Where the public sphere is constructed as masculine and the private as feminine then women may accede to the public sphere ‘like men’ but remain simultaneously regulated by their designation to the private and domestic. Hence Irigaray’s assertion that the “price paid for equal rights in an otherwise untransformed society can be too high” (cited in Whitford, 1991, p. 185). What gives cause for particular concern in Sabine’s account is that this massive burden she outlines is constructed as women’s ‘choice’ – ‘women have decided to be this multiple personality’ she says. Thus, other ways of construing these huge pressures are excluded, specifically those which would emphasise structural or systemic constraints and relations of power.

Undoubtedly, this construction as ‘choice’ owes much to post-feminist discourse which emphasises women’s expanded opportunities to enter the public sphere and couches the combination of work and family in positive terms as ‘having-it-all’ (see chapter 4). Thus, post-feminist discourse has a particular (de-politicising) way of making meaning out of the double burden (conflict) that women face between work and family. Rather than constructing it as an unacceptable consequence of the continued regulation of women through the domestic and the failure of workplace structures to accommodate family responsibilities (Pocock, 2003; Summers, 2003; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2003), post-feminist discourse constructs it as evidence of women’s emancipation that she can ‘choose’ to ‘have-it-all’. Thus, if she chooses to have both work and a family the consequences of that are her personal responsibility rather than a social responsibility. Similarly, in Sabine’s quote the burden and conflict is
acknowledged but largely depoliticised. This work/family dilemma will be returned to at other points in the analysis that follows.

I have been concerned with establishing from the interview quotes thus far the point that feminine identity is dominantly signified by qualities associated with care and nurture. This position of being-for-others has profound implications which have been touched on here. Significantly, the designation of woman as ‘place’ (see chapter 6) and the conflation of ‘woman’ with ‘mother’ is connected to the appropriation of her emotional and domestic labour. There continues to be profound inequality between men and women which is directly signified by the work and home respectively. This is the case despite post-feminist rhetoric which functions to occlude this continued inequality and to depoliticise the conflict and tension entailed in women’s lives between femininity and ‘identity’. In this sense identity is understood to represent a positivity – that is in contrast to the construction of the ‘maternal-feminine’ as container or vessel-like with no particular content, except to be for others (Irigaray, 1984, 1985). The construction of ‘motherhood’ from the interviews which is central to this construction of femininity is explored in the following section.

7.3 Mothering children

Motherhood, in the interviews, undoubtedly represented the most comprehensive site of women’s erasure and self-effacement. As I will attempt to illustrate in the following analysis talk about child-rearing is consistently constructed as women’s responsibility. Father’s are literally or effectively absent from the work and responsibility of child-rearing in the women’s accounts. These findings are entirely compatible with statistics and research that shows, in direct contravention of post-feminist claims of equality, that gendered divisions of domestic labour, which includes childcare, have not changed in the past 20 years (Baxter, 2002; Pocock, 2003). Inequity in the division of labour around paid and unpaid labour, that corresponds to the gendered division of private and public continues to be massive. Women are responsible for three quarters of unpaid childcare work and two thirds of domestic chores (ABS, 2000). Moreover, it is through the dominant construction of motherhood and specifically, the patriarchal fantasy of the ‘good-mother’ (Coward, 1992; Marshall, 1991; Riley, 1983;
Urwin, 1985; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989; Weedon, 1987), that some of the most violent and oppressive restrictions of woman’s identity and erasure of her desires is enacted. Consequently, as the participants’ interview texts illustrate, motherhood is also the site of profound conflict and ambivalence. The patriarchal ideal of the ‘good mother’ enacts the erasure of the speaking subject positioned by that fantasy – the actual woman. The women interviewed bear the pressures of that fiction of self-sacrifice and erasure, desiring to be ‘good mothers’ yet finding themselves to be ‘failures’, for example if they work, with the ensuing guilt that brings. They also speak of suffering profound distress the more closely they attempt to approximate the ideal.

7.3.1 Child-rearing as woman’s work

Consistently in the interviews, the women constructed child-rearing as a woman’s/ mother’s primary responsibility in ways that frequently represent this as an inevitable outcome of biology. Fathers were not positioned as having the same level of responsibility or even understood to have the appropriate capacity and skills for raising children. Not only is child-rearing constructed as primarily a woman’s responsibility but it is a responsibility she must carry out within the parameters of the construction of the ‘good mother’. As explored by Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) in Democracy in the Kitchen the discursive production of motherhood in particular ways is taken here as “one of the central aspects of the regulation of women” (p. 21). This next quote from Hannah articulates the magnitude of the burden of motherhood, that is, at least implicitly here, constructed solely as women’s responsibility to be carried out in particular sanctioned ways:

HANNAH: Yeah, yeah cause I even look back at things ‘cause Mark’s so shy and I look back at how paranoid I was when he was first born like, you know, oh and wrap wrapping him in cotton wool (yep) and um, I think now I, you know, look what I’ve created he’s so shy and so you feel, yeah, like responsible. As though it’s your, you know, sort of mistake that’s done that (yep) because it is all (yep) you just learn by, yeah, you know, learn by just feeling your way and [laughter] I read many reference books on raising children.
One of the most significant aspects about Hannah’s quote is that it undermines the ‘naturalness’ of mothering by constructing it as something you have to ‘learn’ and about which ‘reference books’ must be read. Whilst Motherhood is something that women are allegedly naturally equipped to do (Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd, 1991) it is nonetheless produced as something which they must also ‘learn’ to do – implying that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of doing it. Much has been made in feminist analyses of the way mothers are produced as being responsible for ‘normal’, ‘healthy’ development and subsequent outcomes (Marshall, 1991; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991b; Urwin, 1985; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Thus the space is opened for women to consequently get it ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ – for mother-blaming (Caplan, 1989; Nicolson, 1993). Indeed Hannah is found in this case blaming herself for her child’s shyness – it is something she has ‘created’ she says, the result of some ‘mistake’ she has made. The ‘Mother’ is dually produced in this way as ‘omnipotent’ (e.g., Featherstone, 1997) – thus her ‘mistakes’ have the (negative) power to harm or damage in some way – and simultaneously as ‘powerless’ in that she must be instructed in this task by ‘experts’ who write instructional books (Marshall, 1991). Paula Nicolson (1993) described this construction of the mother as a ‘patriarchal myth of maternal power’, in so far as the mother is set up as omnipotent, responsible for nothing less than the ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ development of her child and yet she is simultaneously constructed as inadequate in this central role.

This dual positioning has several effects. As Hannah’s next quote shows, the construction of ‘mother’ as singularly powerful in relation to child-rearing functions to excuse/exclude men from the work of child-care. At the same time the positioning of the ‘mother’ as needing instruction produces in her a lack of confidence and fitness for the task which in turn one can presume allows for her more thorough regulation. She becomes prey to the constant suspicion that there is something she is not doing ‘right’ (Nicolson, 1993). “Even while mothers are accorded overwhelming responsibility for their children’s development, their authority is all the time circumscribed, subjected as they are to the critical gaze of a network of social structures” (Parker, 1997, p. 35). The following quote more specifically refers to the difference in responsibility taken for child care between Hannah and her husband:
E: There is some sense in which I guess, that ah, that a partner, like a father (mm) is less, is kind of absent from what you were saying? (oh yes) Do you know, um what I mean? (yeah) He doesn’t seem to come into it?

HANNAH: Oh yeah, yeah. No that’s that/ no I didn’t/ No, I’ve never thought that way. Like, that (yep) any of it’s Mike’s responsibility. [laughter] none of it. No. Which could be quite arrogant of me, you know, in a way I I was very controlling at first (yep yep) so part of it was my, you know, No/ and cause you know, he’s a little bit clumsy [laughter] (ok) No but yeah, all of that I think I sort of [pause] yeah, no, its just / doesn’t / I don’t know why, it just, yeah very much feels it’s all here. (E: It’s all you) Yeah. Which is probably quite controlling and I was very controlling when Alex was first born, I was a control freak (yeah) you could say. Yeah. I was very much, um/ and I guess maybe cause you just feel/ because you carried them too, you know (ok) there’s, I don’t know how that translates but it was very much about um, sort of, this is how it’s going to be done (ok) um, even though I didn’t know what I was doing. (yeah.) No I didn’t even think that some of it might be Mike’s responsibility [laughter]

Hannah positions herself in this extract as the only one who can know how it is done and also as not knowing what to do. Moreover, she does not attribute this sense of responsibility to the social regulation that sets the parameters of her experience significantly through producing her as a ‘mother’ in particular ways. Instead, she attributes the taking on of this massive burden and the exclusion of the father from it as a personal or psychological trait or the result of biology. Hannah says she is ‘arrogant’ and a ‘control freak’. Her husband’s relative lack of responsibility is depoliticised and she blames herself for the huge responsibility she has ‘consented’ to carry. The coercion is made invisible. Perhaps this owes partly to the biologism that underpins the culturally dominant construction of motherhood – that the sacrifices and greater sense of responsibility that mothers make is a natural function of the fact that they carry and bear children as Hannah certainly proposes as a reason for the difference between her and her husband. Thus, the burden of responsibility Hannah evokes is both individualised and naturalised.

The following quotes clearly illustrate the significant difference in responsibility between men and women in relation to the work of child-rearing that Hannah’s quote
has introduced. They evidence particularly the relative freedom that consequently attends men’s exclusion/ exemption from child-rearing. We shall hear from Tess first and then later Lisa:

TESS: Because I think – I mean he’s a good father and husband – but there’s still, I don’t know, a lot of selfishness. Oh not selfishness but they just kind of think of themselves. (mhm) And I don’t know whether it’s ‘cause a mother’s instinct or what it is but the moth/ they’re the people who do this do that – everything. Do everything. And the husband will just say, oh, I’m just going down the shop for a minute. (yeah) Whereas I’ll have to say – is it ok if I just go down the shop – can you look after him do this and or do you want me to take/ (yeah) I’ve got to do all this rather than just saying I’ll be back in a minute. (yep) It’d be so nice.

Tess assures me (or herself?) that her husband is a good father and husband although there is a lot of selfishness on his part. As I shall explore in the next section of analysis a mother is constructed as self-less. It would be impossible for a selfish mother to be a ‘good mother’ and yet it seems this is possible in the construction of ‘father’ here. As Phoenix and Woollett (1991a) comment “it is still possible for men to be seen and to see themselves as ‘good father’ without being closely involved in childcare or spending much time with their children” (p. 4). Once again, Tess proposes that the differential level of responsibility between her and her husband is ‘natural’ – the result of a mother’s instinct. Thus, the fact that women bear children is understood to carry the weight of explanation for the fact that ‘they’re the people who do everything’, occluding other possible explanations. Tess’s quote is particularly articulate and moving on the way her freedom is so significantly restricted in comparison with her husband as a function of her responsibility. ‘It’d be so nice’ she says at the end, just to be able to walk out of the house without thinking of everyone else in it. Tess is positioned here as a being-for-others while her husband is enabled by this to continue being-for-himself.

The next extract from Lisa also shows how she must negotiate a far more limited space than her husband as well. For her this is in the context of having to limit her own aspirations and desires to do something outside of the home:
LISA: Um, yeah but post-marriage and children, def/ it’s much harder (yep) It’s much much harder. It’s much harder for me, you know, to say to Jack, look I want to study this year (yeah) And would you mind organising some babysitting for the kids Tuesday and Wednesday while I go and do it (yep) or you get off work Tuesday and Wednesday and stay at home (mhm) and let me go and do my [inaudible] That’s something you don’t um, get to do (ok) (...) It would be selfish. Yeah. Yes. Yes. Certainly. That that/ and um, that’s being um, not in a position to be able to go and say well this is what I want to do. (right) But that’s just um/ and that’s just being, like I said, a mother and the prime carer. I haven’t got, I haven’t got that flexibility (yep) to be able to do that, whereas if Jack said I want to go and study tomorrow, I’m I’m going to start my course, then then fine (mhm) Then/ why / there isn’t any reason why he couldn’t do it (ok) Um, but, that’s, that is the way it is (ok) That’s just the way it is (yep).

As Lisa has put it here, it is simply not negotiable for her to do what she wants to do – being a mother she is not in that position. She explicitly states that the mother is the primary carer in a way that indicates this is not even questionable. It is ‘just the way it is’. In this reiteration of the construction of child-care as woman’s responsibility Lisa positions herself as being ‘selfish’ if she were to do what she wants to do which is not surprising given the way that women’s desire is largely constructed as being satisfied in service of others. By extension, in this account, there are no reasons why Lisa’s husband can’t go and do as he wants and in this context it is even seen to be unreasonable to ask him to assist or support her in any way to pursue interests or desires not attached to the family.

7.3.2 Motherhood as the disappearance of the self

The above analysis illustrates a construction of the mother whereby her desire (for herself) is prohibited or erased, being only sanctioned as a desire to care for others. Here the quotes that follow all construct the experience of motherhood as involving the erasure of identity or ‘self’. Following Irigaray, the proposition that “maternity has functioned to elide the specificity of women’s identities and social positions by equating femininity always and only with reproduction and nurture” (Grosz, 1989, p. 119) is vividly represented by these extracts which poignantly express the burial of the ‘woman which any mother is’ in maternity:
SABINE: you’re so, ah needed and so many demands are placed on you you really lose a sense of who you are (ok) and you become ah, a vessel, you know, you’re the feeder and the carer and (yep). Your partner wants still to be cared for and wants attention and your baby wants attention and um, people ring up and they forget to ask about you they ask about the baby.

Sabine’s account here is similar to those of the other women who were also mothers, portraying motherhood as a position in which, ‘you really lose a sense of who you are’. Her use of the term ‘vessel’ recalls Irigaray’s (1984) various references to woman as vessel, container, envelope, that is, she is (no)thing in itself but that which permits and enables the other to exist. “The maternal feminine remains the place separated from “its” own place, deprived of “its” place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other …” (Irigaray, 1993, pp. 10-11, emphasis in original). Sabine’s account of her own erasure, and the competing demands of child and partner, resounds in the following statement:

She may be a container for the child and for the man. “But not for herself”. Obviously she cannot contain the child and the man in the same way. She is not the same “vessel”.... There is a competition among:

- the container for the child,
- the container for the man,
- the container for herself

In that competition, the first place is virtually the only place. The second is merely a sort of perforation aiming toward the first… The third is something forbidden or impossible. (Irigaray, 1993, p. 41)

In the next quote Hannah also describes ‘erasure’ as a process that begins “when you first become pregnant”. What is stark in this extract is the way that the body features as no longer the woman’s own but a container used for a greater purpose. It also highlights the aspect of the social management of pregnancy as preparing the woman for her status as ‘mother’:
HANNAH: Yeah, and it, well it starts when you first become pregnant (right) because people then go And how’s bub? Before they say to you, right. And it’s all, you know, oh when’s?/ and you find even strangers come up and touch your belly which is really freaky. Yeah. And then it and then even going to the mid/ the prenatal classes its about don’t you take pain killers, you know, don’t you be taking those. (yes) Its about baby, its almost this indoctrination into, like you are now, you know, the mother and you don’t really exist any more. And then even, yeah so, even when you ask for pain relief during child birth people scowl at you. Yeah. Just take a hot shower! And then once you have baby it is all about, you know, people ring up and how’s bub and so it just becomes a, you you go into the back/ I see it as you sort of going into the background, (ok) yeah being very much in the background (yep)

Hannah describes a body construed by others as a public rather than private body. This body is one which strangers feel comfortable to touch without permission as if in becoming a ‘mother’ she inhabits a generic body reduced to its reproductive capacity. Hannah describes the social management of pregnancy as ‘indoctrination’ preparing her to ‘accept’ the replacement of her ‘distinctive self’ with a generic subjectivity of ‘mother’ who does not exist for herself but whose only desire is to do the best thing by her unborn child. To this extent, she is no longer ‘allowed’ the same rights over her own body as others, for example using ‘pain killers’. “She has to be sacrificed and sacrifice herself to this task, at the same time disappearing as this or that woman who is alive at the present time. And she must disappear as desire, too, unless it is abstract: the desire to be wife and mother” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 21). Once again, we see as earlier the ‘omnipotent’ mother is simultaneously circumscribed by regulatory apparatus intended to ensure her compliance with a patriarchal version of motherhood.

From the moment of conception the social management of pregnancy and birth imposes a contradictory sense of impotence on a mother. She is in other people’s hands yet feels herself to be responsible for producing a healthy baby with a good birth experience. (Parker, 1997, p. 35)
In the next quote Lisa discusses also the loss of identity she experiences as both wife and mother (indicating the collapse between these phallocentric versions of femininity) very clearly articulating a distinction between mother and self:

LISA: I’m finding at the moment, like I’ve sort of lost a bit of my identity – I’m the mother of Jessica and Sam (yep) or I’m the wife of Jack at the moment (…) Not me as a person - me in a situation, in the situation that I’m in at the moment being a mother and being a wife but not me as a person because I can, I can cut myself off from myself and put myself in this situation which I don’t like (ok) but/ because I can see outside of it (oh Ok) And I can see/ I know, you know, that it’s all going to get better and I/ and, and I’m going to come through it and I’m going to be me again, (ok) you know, and I’m going to go and do what I want to do.

The most striking implication of Lisa’s quote is that ‘mother’ is not a ‘person’, nor presumably is ‘wife’. Moreover, Lisa is very clear that this erasure of maternal identity is a situation she does not take pleasure in. ‘Mother’ and ‘wife’ are central, culturally dominant signifiers of ‘woman’ and here they are explicitly articulated as being other than ‘identity’, that is these signifiers of ‘woman’ are given as distinct from and at odds with ‘being a person’. And yet in the following quote the clear gender politics of this are occluded by dislocating woman from mother, such that it is not women per se but specifically (only) mothers who are oppressed or erased:

LISA: Um, probably because when I read some of them I did relate to in terms of being a mother (mhm) Not so much being a woman at all (ok) but being a mother, that’s what came across the strongest just the feeling of entrapment (ok) Um, the invisible hands, not being able to get away, free yourself when you want to, when you need mo/when you need to most and (yep) of course you’re needed more and, and you’re constantly in need, you’re constantly called, ah called upon to support other people (yeah) And so you lose your identity for a time being a mother.

Thus curiously, mother is a designation that signifies entrapment. Woman however is free, presumably to ‘choose’ to be a mother. And being ‘freely chosen’ its oppression appears depoliticised.
This burial of ‘woman’ in maternity that is enacted by the masculine fantasy of the omnipotent mother has real effects on the actual women buried under that fantasy. “What is ‘seen’ and what is ‘believed’ and what we struggle with and against in ourselves is not some tabula rasa femininity. On the contrary, we live out the effect of those fantasies and struggle with them everyday of our lives” (Walkerdine, 1986, p. 57).

Women spoke of boredom, lack of stimulation, feeling trapped and for two of the women interviewed the constraint that motherhood represents was experienced as ‘post-natal depression’. In Sabine’s case her anger and sadness at the restriction of her life culminated in self-harm.

Some examples of the women talking about their experiences follow simply to represent in their own words the expression of their distress:

HANNAH: when I was home with Mark I thought I’ve got to go back to work cause I’m going mad, not mad but just, like that first one [interview prompt] (yeah) that boredom (yep). You’re busy but you’re bored (right. ok) and that’s when I started reading HR text books [laughter]… And um, and um, yeah again, I must have reached a low point when I was home with Jessie and Mark (yeah) and I was um, and just/ um, I just knew, I said one day to Patrick I said I cannot be a stay at home Mum. I just/ I know I should be and I know its/ you know what you should do but yeah, I just went I need something more (yeah) Yeah.

LISA: Um, but it’s it’s certainly not enough but that’s what I’m saying that’s why I feel trapped as a mother (yeah) And I have nothing, really, I can’t say there’s anything really stimulating me that drives me on, I’m just in a situation (yep) which is the now (yeah) but it will pass and then, and then I can go for it and then I’ll be stimulated (ok) up to the hilt

SABINE: And so I think that when I developed my depression after the birth of Simon, I think that was an expression of anger (right. yep) and I just didn’t know what to do with it so I turned it inwards, I turned it to myself (right. yep) And um , I had this whole period where I was into self-mutilation like big time/ I actually wanted to tear the skin off my legs you know, I would just be sitting there trying to just/cause I was so frustrated and so angry and I didn’t know why (hmm). […] how come I’m not enjoying motherhood, this is something I should be enjoying, how come it’s not happening? How come I feel like I’ve been put in this spot and I haven’t asked to be put here? (yep) um, how come I feel like I’m in
a prison? Um, how come I feel guilty that I feel these feelings? […] I’m not going well, I’m not enjoying it. I think it’s a pain in the neck. What’s the fun of, you know, looking after this dependant child all the time? I just couldn’t see the enjoyment in it at all. And he [Sabine’s ex-husband] would go off, he started to do theatre, he was away most evenings and I would be stuck with the kid. And he had shift work and I would be stuck with the kid and he was out and having a life and I didn’t have a life and that used to make me so angry (yep).

These accounts span a spectrum of feelings engendered by dominant (middle class) constructions of motherhood (Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd, 1991) which prescribe women’s complete immersion in child care. Feelings such as boredom, anger, depression, entrapment and imprisonment, described above, are rarely represented in the accounts of mother-infant bliss and maternal fulfillment propagated for example in television advertisements and child-rearing manuals (Marshall, 1991). The failure to enjoy motherhood, as Sabine put it, when it is constructed as woman’s fulfillment, leaves women no way of accounting for feelings of dissatisfaction or unhappiness related to mothering, other than pathologisation and the positioning of themselves as ‘unnatural’ or ‘bad’ mothers. This:

effectively ignores consideration of the social context of mothering which can lead to feelings of depression. These include dissatisfaction with the treatment received in hospital, difficulties with employment prospects, financial situation and the extent to which a woman’s partner…are able to offer support and get involved in childcare. (Marshall, 1991, p. 72)

Again, as Marshall suggests, structural and systemic explanations are occluded in favour of an emphasis on individual success or failure that functions to depoliticize culturally dominant constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘motherhood’.

7.3.3 Beyond the home: the working mother

The way that the women who had children talked about work poses the counterpoint to the loss of identity and restriction associated with being ‘mother’ that was just explored above. I wish to point out that whilst work is constructed in these interviews as a form of fulfilment, identity and satisfaction, I do not intend to imply
from this sample that ‘work’ or ‘career’ are ultimately the answer to ‘woman’s’ freedom or the unequivocal answer to what she wants. Undoubtedly, women’s relation to work and domesticity is substantially impacted by sexuality, ethnicity and class (hooks, 1990; Rossiter, 2002). Thus, it has been argued that domesticity is not a simple site of oppression and work not a simple site of freedom and that this distinction is more meaningful for some more materially advantaged groups of women (hooks, 1990; Rossiter, 2002). Overall, I do not suggest that ‘work’ is the only means, or even for all women at all times, an effective means of securing an identity distinct from say those of ‘wife’ or ‘mother’. In this sense, work is a secondary issue here, relevant in terms of the way women speak about the opportunities it offers them to identify with something other than ‘wife’ or ‘mother’.

There is a distinctiveness between the subject positions (and lived experiences) of wife/mother versus worker. In other words, what is problematic is that the term ‘working mother’ is something of an oxymoron given that ‘mother’ and ‘worker’ are constituted, practiced and regulated as very separate, ‘full-time’ occupations or positions. Moreover, for the white, middle-class, heterosexual women I interviewed it was constituted as the dominant means of acceding to a more autonomous sense of self. Hannah in the following quote talks through some of the things she misses about working:

HANNAH: Um, ok. It was um, the Hannah who’s not someone’s Mum. (ok) Like, it was being different, it was just being/ it was. What did I give up? Um, even just having your own money (yeah) Like I’m lucky, Patrick’s not/ like he doesn’t (yep) know where any money goes or anything (yep) like that (yeah). So there’s no this is yours and mine sort of thing (yeah) like its not I get an allowance or something. But it’s just that/ just um, just even you know getting dressed up in your suit, you know, just going in to work and then just sort of/ also the mental stimulation (yep) So it’s something um, other than just day in day out stuff. And also just having uninterrupted conversations and having adult conversations (right) that stuff that doesn’t involve/ you know cause that stimulation I couldn’t get that (yep) when I tried to do the mother’s groups or things like that (ok) because it was all about the kids. So its just about that that um, individual identity.
Hannah speaks here about financial independence, mental stimulation, uninterrupted adult conversations and an ‘individual identity’ as being the things she gave up when leaving work to become ‘mother’. Work then is construed here as offering not only social and mental stimulation lacking at ‘home’ but it is constructed here as being associated with an ‘individual’ identity. Hannah is able to be ‘Hannah’ at work, rather than ‘someone’s Mum’. Again this highlights the lack of identity that the generic category of ‘mother’ engenders. Moreover, that the ‘mother’ feels herself to be both mother and someone else not encompassed by that (non)identity.

Lisa’s quote further illustrates the distinction made between ‘mother’ and self and similarly connects the possibility of realising that distinction through work:

LISA: [...] before I had Jessica, so when Sam/ah I was working. Basically I I think , you know, and that’s, that’s when you really become your own person again when you’ve got something of yourself (yep). So I was working my three days - I was being the wife, I was being the mother - but I was also you know, doing something I wanted to do (ok) which I loved. And um, and it was all under control – everyone was happy, everyone, you know, Jack had his job and he was happy, Sam had her little life {Sam was at day-care 2-3 days a week} and she was happy (yeah) and then I was able to just live mine, you know (ok) and that was good.

Work is given here as that which enables Lisa to become her ‘own person again’. Significantly, being ‘the wife’ and ‘the mother’ are set alongside this being ‘yourself’. Mother and wife are constructed here as generic ‘things’ that Lisa was being and, moreover, it was tolerable to be these things that other people require in so far as she was also doing something she wanted to do and loved doing. However, the implication illustrated in this account is clearly that for a woman/mother to do what she wants to do, those for whom she cares must not be jeopardised. Hence, Lisa stresses Jack’s and Sam’s well-being as well as her own. That is, she can only have something for herself as long as those she is positioned to care of are taken care of first. Thus, even though work is talked about as offering a space in which one can have something of one’s own it is not easily taken up. Thus the advance of women into paid work
is seriously undermined by society’s inattention to the questions of care, its redistribution…and its (in)compatibility with market work as it is currently organised…essential accompanying changes on the household, personal and institutional front have been puny, fragile and energetically resisted. (Pocock, 2003, p. 8).

The following extracts consider the conflict between others’ needs and the mother/woman’s own needs as they are represented in this case by work. As we shall see the discursive insistence on collapsing the category of woman into that of mother produces for the mother/woman feelings of guilt and selfishness at the intersection of conflicting desires around femininity and independence or autonomy. As Walkerdine et al. (2001) sum up:

The feminist discourses and economic necessity through which women as ‘workers’ has been constituted clash badly with older discourses that have powerfully formed feminine subjectivities. The expectations of and desire for independence can conflict with a deep-rooted desire to take time out to have children, to stay at home to rear them and to be ‘looked after’. (p. 81)

Hannah has been featured above talking about feeling that she was unable to be a ‘stay-at-home mum’ and discussing the things she missed about work. However, in the following extract she talks about the guilt attached to going to work, highlighting the conflict between maternity and independence for the mother/woman:

E: Did you feel it was legitimate of you to want to do something other than/
HANNAH: No. No. I felt it was/ I felt really um, bad in the sense that like there’s people who really want kids and can’t have them, you know what I mean? And I I felt as though I was so lucky to have/ and that I should I should be fulfilled, I should be happy, just you know, that, yeah doing that (yep) And um, so and then when I’d drop them off at care I’d feel terribly guilty too (yep) you know, like there’s that. Um, just, yeah, and yeah feeling that you’re one of those mother’s that take their/ you know, cause there’s a real stigma sort of (about?) About um, that you know, (leaving your kids in care?) Yeah, when financially I didn’t have to go it wasn’t like I had to go back to work financially (yeah) it was just/ I felt quite selfish (right) Yeah. Like what about me. (yeah)
The extract shows that Hannah feels ‘guilty’ about feeling unfulfilled by motherhood. So even before she might consider taking the step of returning to work, the fact that she even desires to is already constituted here as cause for guilt. If woman and mother are collapsed in the way Irigaray suggests then it follows within this discursive context that a woman ‘should’ be entirely fulfilled as a mother since the two categories are understood to be indistinguishable. Marshall (1991), in looking at the construction and regulation of motherhood represented by parenting and childcare manuals also concluded that mothering is constructed as being a woman’s ultimate fulfilment, characterised as natural and based on special ‘maternal bonds’ (p. 76). Yet, as I have sought to show throughout the analysis so far this is not necessarily the case. Nonetheless, the social regulation and production of woman as mother has very real effects. We are produced to ‘want’ to be ‘good mothers’ and do desire to be good mothers (Marshall, 1991; Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991; Urwin, 1985; Walkerdine, 1986, 1989). And ‘good mothers’ as constructed in Hannah’s quote do not desire anything other than to be available to their children and they certainly do not ‘drop them off at care’ for other people to look after. To do so, especially in the absence of a financial necessity is construed as ‘selfish’. Thus, we are returned to the idea that a ‘good mother’ is literally self-less (see Sayers, 1987; 1991). As Hannah’s last statement shows, ‘me’ or ‘I’, does not figure where woman is collapsed into mother. Where selflessness is constructed as the ideal, feelings of guilt are easily engendered. In her research with women in the early 1990’s, Coward (1992) similarly observed that ‘women seem to suffer acutely from the belief that achieving or doing things for themselves is potentially damaging to other individuals’ (p. 107). She also added that in addition to the proscription to be entirely and always available, the attribution of total culpability for children’s developmental outcomes also contributed massively to women’s guilt – there is a conviction that ‘in leaving their children, women are thereby running the risk of retarding their development’ (ibid, p.107) or damaging them in some way by their absence.

In the following extract, like Hannah, Sabine talks about guilt and selfishness because she works and her son goes to day care:
SABINE: I mean, society can provide childcare, can provide equal employment for women but what happens in the social interactions you can’t change (mm) with policies (right) and that’s sort of like, ‘So um, your child goes to daycare FIVE days a week does he?’ You know, and even if you don’t . . even if they’re not saying it that way there’s always that sort of sense of guilt. (mhm) ‘I’m after my career I’m not at home’ and ah, I’m not one of these terrific mother’s that stays part-time and sticks at home and cooks cakes and looks after the children and only send their kids two days a week to daycare (right, yeah, yeah). No I’m selfish.

Sabine says that it is possible to provide childcare and equal employment - in other words to make things possible that were not possible before – but she says, you cannot change what happens in the social interactions, she says. Although it is important to note that quality child-care remains hard to access at least in Australia – there are simply insufficient places and child-care has not been an Australian, Howard government funding priority (Pocock, 2003; Summers, 2003). Additionally, work-places remain without adequate maternity leave provisions or flexible working arrangements that would enable a career to be maintained or pursued in combination with family commitments of the magnitude that women continue to be responsible for (Pocock, 2003; Summers 2003). Structurally women are still fixed as primary carers where ‘work’ continues to be constructed through masculine values and assumes a ‘masculine’ level of ir/responsibility for family commitments. These structural inequalities of a masculine workplace mirror the continued construction of woman as mother and of mothers as self-less. According to Sabine’s report of her experience, post-feminist rhetoric about women being ‘free’ to ‘have it all’ again appears to be a little out in its assertions. Sabine claims she is subject to a disapproving ‘gaze’ that sees, in the fact of her child’s attendance at day care five days a week, a ‘not-good-enough’ mother (see Winnicott, 1958).

Sabine describes that there is “always that sort of sense of guilt” attached to her perceived failure to be a terrific mother – that is, one who is not after her career and stays home and bakes cakes instead. As Pocock’s (2003) research concluded, ideals of the self-less mother have not shifted despite the massive movement of women into paid work that has occurred in the past 20 years. According to her findings, the working mother cannot be a ‘great mother’ since a great mother is constantly available, nurturing
– she introduces no competing demands to vie with the needs of her children for her complete attention.

Sabine in this extract shows she is acutely aware of her ‘failure’ to approximate the fiction of the self-less mother. As Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) so eloquently summed up “we are made to bear the brunt of these fantasies. No wonder we experience both the desire to live them out and guilt at their failure” (p. 150). Women’s guilt (Coward, 1992; Pocock, 2003) is one of the more endemic emotional costs of these conflicting desires and impossible ideals of ‘femininity’. The conflict here between work and home is a source of distress for Sabine. It is not a conflict only between two different demands on her time but also between two inseparable versions of herself – the woman/mother. Career is important to Sabine – it is a significant part of her identity. But so is being her son’s mother. She pays for having desires that are outside the parameters of what is appropriately ‘feminine’ with ‘guilt’ and self-recrimination.

So far I have explored the ways that guilt and feelings of selfishness are engendered in relation to the desire to work and have something independently of one’s children. At various points I have briefly touched on the structural impediments that remain against women’s (mothers’) fuller participation in the work-force. The next quote from Hannah specifically brings this problem into focus:

HANNAH: I think you’re damned if you do and you’re damned if you don’t I’ve been on both both sides of it when I’ve been/ you go out and people go what you do, ‘oh I look after the kids’ oh right. Right? And then I’ve been on the other side of when I’ve been at work and someone says something and um, a couple of times you get comments like, well who’s getting the kids, you shouldn’t still be here, you know (right) its sort of, both situations you feel you’re not (yes) doing, you can’t do either properly. (right) Like, so you’re doing them both sort of half-arsed if you try and do both and it’s as though, you have to make a decision about which one you’re gonna do and go well I’ll do that one properly (yep) cause if you try and work the kids’ll get sick (yep) cause they do get sick a lot in care (yeah) and so so then its like, um inevitably a) I would want to go because I wanted to make sure they were alright (yeah) so it wasn’t as though I could say to Patrick you go and get them (yeah) cause then you feel / well when they’re sick/ you know when you’re sick when you’re a kid you want your Mum (yeah) so that’s/ and um, but then you’d be letting down work cause you’d be doing
something that had to be finished so then your always/ I always got at work a) because you’re part time there’s different sort of/ people look at you different ‘cause ‘oh you go and have your nice short week’ (yeah) Yeah. So that sort of stops you career-wise anyway (yep) and um, and also just you’d have the judgement from people, oh, you’ve got two young kids and oh so, who looks after them and that so yeah (yeah) its um, and then people would make comments, like women want so much these days and you know.

Hannah’s description of the bind that work and motherhood poses illustrates how women’s social regulation reinforces and reproduces the identification with home and care as primary. Firstly, Hannah’s desire to be a ‘good mother’ means she wants to be available to her children when for example they are sick. However, her presence in the public domain is already taken to signal a certain failure to achieve the ideal of ‘good mother’. If women are at work who is looking after the kids? Effectively,

how can one be a “woman” and be out “in the street”? That is, be out in public, be public… We come back to the question of family: Why isn’t the woman, who belongs to the private sphere, always locked up in the house? As soon as a woman leaves the house, someone starts to wonder, someone asks her: how can you be a woman and be out here at the same time? (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 145)

Secondly, since work is a masculine domain (Irigaray, 1985; Pateman, 1988; Sayers, 1982) it is a space that systemically discriminates against women/mothers. Having family commitments mitigates or diminishes one’s value as a worker since ‘work’ is constructed around a masculine subject who is freed from such responsibilities by the positioning of woman as ‘home’ as has already been discussed (see chapter 6). Thus, the working woman is produced here as neither good mother nor good worker owing to the inherent conflict between femininity and paid work as they are currently dominantly constituted. This tension is completely at odds with the post-feminist production of the ‘superwoman’ who can allegedly ‘choose’ to ‘have-it-all’ as described in chapter 4. In contrast to this, Hannah describes feeling that she cannot choose to have-it all but must choose one or the other. This is a profoundly significant and oppressive choice when we remind ourselves that the women interviewed have spoken of the option to work as not only to do with financial necessity or relief from boredom
and so forth, but as the means of acceding to a sense of ‘self’. The choice between work and family translates then to the choice between being-for-another and the opportunity to be-for-herself. Why should it be that it is wanting too much not to be coerced to make this kind of choice? “Within the popular ‘women can have everything’ discourse, what gets lost are the emotional costs of combining caring for a family with a professional career” (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 73). This is particularly salient where “Australian households reveal not only unchanging patterns of domestic and care work that remain largely the work of women, but also unrenovated models of motherhood and fatherhood, and workplaces that still have at their centre an ‘ideal worker’ who is care-less” (Pocock, 2003, p. 1). That is, a masculine worker.

7.3.4 The ‘potential’ mother

Whilst the collapse of mother/woman is particularly salient for women with children, Irigaray’s point is that woman is a position that is always collapsed into the maternal function. Thus, the following extracts from Marie are illustrative of the way that a childless woman is nonetheless always-already a mother and is circumscribed by the constructed limitations imposed by the centrality of reproduction to definitions of woman (Malson & Swann, 2003; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991a). Again, these issues seem to become visible in the context of the dilemma of combining work and family. In the following few extracts Marie, who had no children at the time of the interview, is found talking about discrimination against women in the workplace that is directly produced by women’s assignation to reproduction and the domestic:

MARIE: I was very negative towards how things were/ how they couldn’t be bothered with women because they always (…) /unexpected, something’s going to happen and they’ll have a baby […] And I said this is what women have to face in any single profession when you reach a certain age before they hire you they look at you and think are you going to dump us? Get pregnant? (yeah) And I, I, you know/ (yep) And I hadn’t thought about it and I’m thinking, oh probably next time I want to get a job this is what’s going to happen to me. (mhm) ‘What you’re 30 and you haven’t got children and you’ve got someone?’

Once again, post-feminist rhetoric of equality for women is contested in this description of Marie’s discussion of how she will be discriminated against or at least
considered with suspicion because she is of a child-bearing age and in a heterosexual relationship. It is women’s reproductive capacity that is the basis for discrimination in this case where woman is positioned as always already a mother. Woman does not escape the maternal designation: in this case, she is positioned as a ‘potential’ mother. What this scenario represents is a workplace which is alien to women’s needs and which is structured around the expectation that Marie as the mother/woman will be primarily responsible for care of any children she is expected to have. As women, we are constituted as imperfect workers owing to our constant association with reproduction which is at odds with the construction of the worker as a masculine subject. Thus,

Women’s life courses are very different from those of men, and decisions about the gaining of qualifications, setting up an independent home, having children and taking care breaks all have an immense and far reaching impact on women’s lives and the choices open to them in the future. (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 73)

In the next extract Marie talks about how work and family are incompatible for women but significantly, not for men:

MARIE: we {Marie and her partner} had a discussion about this last night – Dan and I – about um, you know there was a woman on/ we watched The Panel [a TV chat show] last night and this girl was in the Roulettes {Royal Australian Air Force aerobatics squad} (yes. yes.) And I asked/ I said I guess she wouldn’t have a family. (mhm) And and Dan didn’t understand and we know another friend um, Rick, who’s in the Roulettes as well – he {Dan} said ‘well Rick’s got a wife and a baby and a business’ and I turned around and I said ‘Rick didn’t have to have a year off because he had to um, to bear the baby, you know, to carry the baby. (exactly) And Dan had not thought about that one second. (yep) Um, so we sort of discussed it because I thought well look, you know, (yeah) um that’s why I’m saying she doesn’t/ she can’t have had two years off or a year off (mhm) at least, you know – I don’t believe in this three months off – to um, to do that while she was doing it/ she must have worked really hard to get there.

In this scenario Marie articulates the dilemmas for women in combining career and family and that face women thinking of having children as Marie was. Here, following
from the construction of woman as the primary carer, maximum disruption to her career is expected by the arrival of children. It is indeed the case that “Mothers and fathers follow very different paths of transition around children. Men’s patterns of participation [in paid work] barely waver, while women’s shifts very significantly” (Pocock, 2003, p. 74). The taken-for-grantedness of the primacy of maternal care – that looking after children is women’s work as discussed previously – leaves very little room for solutions to the work/family dilemma. Certainly in Marie’s extracts she simply assumes that she will be responsible for care and will have to give up other things to accommodate that responsibility. For example, the possibility that both parents might prioritise and share the arrangements for caring for their children as a joint responsibility that would require compromise at work for both parties is not easily imaginable within the limits set by the discursive production of a sexual division of labour along private and public lines.

One of the consequences of this unequal division of domestic labour being that women’s decisions around family and work are profoundly more complex and difficult than men’s and moreover, are undertaken ‘individually’. These include decisions like when to have children, whether to go back to work, how to go back to work and in what capacity, whether to have more than one child and so forth. Given this, it is salient to consider post-feminist rhetoric and alarm around falling birth-rates, increasing numbers of childless women and the later age of women having children. Whilst it is the case that women are delaying childbirth and having fewer children (ABS 2002c) and more women than previously are opting not to have children at all (ABS 2002d), post-feminist discourse attributes this to women’s ‘emancipation’. In the framework of post-feminist discourse, women having fewer children is produced as evidence of their freedom to choose. Moreover, this ‘choice’ is made to be meaningful as ‘alarming evidence’ of the effects of a feminist agenda that has eroded family, love and home by pushing women to work and be more like men (see chapter 4). Thus, women’s contribution as mother’s wives, homemakers is revalourised and reasserted while women who identify outside the home are variously demonized, pathologised or pitied (see chapter 4). Alternatively, I would argue, it is far more likely that women’s changing decisions about when, whether and how many children to have are in fact effected by the lack of choices that face them in both work and family contexts. The scenarios that Marie described above, the
awareness of the major disruption to work and the massive responsibility of primary care, unmediated by increased participation from fathers, adequate access to childcare or flexible and accommodating workplaces is another possible reason for changing patterns of childbirth.

To step up the professional career ladder, work must assume a central place in a young woman’s life. The possibility of having children is therefore seen as the greatest threat to straight-forward progression through education and up the career ladder. (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 172)

It must be pointed out that it is not my intention to suggest that all women want to work though many do (Pocock, 2003). Economic circumstances mean many women do work and social structures have not have altered significantly to accommodate this fact. Moreover, women, it should be noted, are concentrated in part-time work making up 71 percent of the supply of part-time labour in Australia (ABS, 2001) so are not necessarily climbing career ladders. And obviously this has much to do with the way that their work opportunities are circumscribed by the culturally dominant place allocated to reproduction in signifying woman. If women have to or choose to work, they must be able to do so without the massive double burden they carry and without substantial sacrifice or guilt. Unfortunately, the problem that post-feminist rhetoric poses is that ‘women’s issues’ are believed to be a thing of the past. It is difficult to see how demands for significant change can even be articulated where the political visibility of women as women has been erased and “…gender equality comes to be understood as women taking their place alongside men in an economic, social and political battle of each against all” (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p. 454).

7.4 (M)Othering men

This section bears on how the phallocentric construction of the ideal ‘mother’, as patriarchal fantasy which I have discussed so far in relation to mothering children, is played out in heterosexual relationships and more generally, where women can be found to be mothering men (e.g., Hollway, 1983; 1984). This ‘mothering’ manifests in several ways and essentially has been the subtext for the previous chapter (6) and the discussion thus far on relational responsibility and mothering children. It is a fundamental part of
the sexual division of labour as it is constituted in contemporary patriarchal culture (Delphy, 1984; Grosz, 1995; Irigaray, 1984; Sayers, 1982). Sociologists, Duncombe & Marsden (1995) dubbed women’s investment in the care and maintenance of their male partner’s emotions “The Third Shift”.

Indeed the very existence of a masculine fantasy of maternal containment and nurture implies the constitution of woman as that which exists to maintain masculinity and patriarchal interests. As his (m)other, she takes care of him by taking responsibility for relationships, by being ‘home’ and caring for children, by safe-guarding his masculine identity and meeting his needs for care and nurture. In all these ways discussed in the previous and present chapters of analysis, woman is constructed by and for man. In this sense, she (m)Others him. The aim of offering the following quotes is to illustrate some of the ways that women talk about ‘taking care of men’, starting with Annie, who employs a familiar discursive construction of heterosexual relationship where “the man takes the woman as a substitute for his mother while the woman simply takes he mother’s place (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 31):

ANNIE: I was having a conversation with my wonderful neighbour the other day (yep) about um, men and their desire and need of the breast [...] And when um, a boy child is hurting (mhm) you know, a mother takes the child to the breast (mhm) um, for comfort, for nurturing, ‘there there it’s ok’. (yep) Women traditionally do this through life with men (yep) with males, forget the age of that male. (yep) Now women as we grow older if we’re heterosexual women, we’re not taken to the breast for nurturing (...) But the man is taken to the breast (...) And it doesn’t just stop at the breast it then goes on possibly to become a sexual relationship, not with the mother but with this other substitute mother or, (yes) you know, the girlfriend, the who ever it happens to be. (yeah) Whereas women are told that you grow up and you know, have children and you take people to your breast but you are not taken to the breast. (yep)

Explicitly, woman is constructed here as a site of nurture and comfort – a nurturing breast to be specific, that men always have access to. The woman in the relationship is understood to become/replace the mother for the adult male. Hollway (1984) found in her research with heterosexual couples that the ‘signifying chain from mother to Other is historically unbroken for men, although, savagely repressed’ (p. 251).
Annie’s text is also very clear that there is an asymmetry – women nurture, they do not expect to be nurtured or ‘taken to the breast’ themselves. Seidler (1989) called men’s expectation that women do their emotional work for them an aspect of ‘invisible female domestic labour’ (p. 162). Anthony McMahon (1999) argues that the widespread perception that men are not nurturant comes not from the fact “that men cannot nurture others, but that they do not engage in a great deal of routine nurturing behaviour. Men are themselves the objects of nurture, and gain the freedom to engage in other kinds of practices” (p. 190, emphasis in original). This can occur because ‘sensitivity to feelings is designated as women’s work par excellence’ (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p. 128).

Peta’s quote below, highlights precisely the way in which the ‘belief’ that men lack a certain capacity for emotional and relational labour frees men, in this instance her brother, from the demands of caring for others:

PETA: Absolutely, my relationships with my mother, with my brother, with my father are most definitely loaded for me with feelings of sacrifice (and resentment), responsibility and dependence. I will talk about my mother here. When I look at her relationship with my brother, I see a very different dynamic to the one I have with her. As a male, I think for her my brother is allowed to get away with more - the “well men are like this” kind of logic which seems to excuse them from having to “be there” emotionally and in other senses. I think that there is more credit and respect given to my brother’s working life than mine. For example, if my brother and I are both at work I am always the one who is expected to down tools at any if that was needed eg. Driving my mother around if she doesn’t have a car…the list could go on and on […] And, I think what hurts me most about this is my life, my feelings, my thoughts - ME as an individual - doesn’t seem to ever really count. But this kind of demand, these expectations aren’t put on my brother. {note: this extract was a written response by the participant sent to me after the interview, hence the absence of transcribing conventions}

Not only is Peta expected to be the one who drops everything but in this sacrifice something about her disappears – “ME as an individual” is irrelevant, once again echoing Irigaray’s assertion that her specificity, the possibility of being-for-herself is erased in this immersion and exclusive association of woman with care – with the qualities of the ‘good mother’. So although Peta is not a mother the maternal role is
imposed upon her nonetheless in caring for her own mother and in the benefits that accrue to her brother as a result of her taking that responsibility. Note too, that it is not some abstract demand for care that is at issue either, emotional labour has a material and practical aspect too. That is, it includes doing things for others.

Peta also mentions feelings of sacrifice and resentment in relation to this burden of emotional responsibility and that she bears. The equation of femininity with caring produces the desire to care for others but the structuring of our desire thus, profoundly constrains our ability to recognise or articulate those desires we have which are at odds with the production of an appropriate femininity. Feelings of sacrifice and resentment can be understood then as an expression of the conflict produced where the very construction of woman is at odds with what it means to be a ‘person’ (de Beauvoir, 1949; Hollway, 1984). Women, Sayers (1987) argues, “are brought up…both to exercise their individual rights as people and to subordinate these rights as women to those of their children and other dependents” (p. 203). As Sabine’s quote shows below, for some women the only way to negotiate the conflict of that discursive positioning and avoid the sacrifice of one’s own needs or the obfuscation of one’s own desires by the desire-to-be-for others, is to be alone:

SABINE: I will always have to live with that {being unfulfilled}, um or otherwise if I am going to fulfill every need that I have its going to be a really big price to pay. One thing is I would have to stay single for the rest of my life (why?). (...) Because in a relationship you have to sacrifice so much of yourself (E: you have to?). (...) If you want to maintain that relationship. Now I’m thinking of Lizzy who has made conscious choices, she’s what she calls celibate single [laughter]. She’s made that choice (yep) - and said ‘No, I’m not going to make those sacrifices ever again’ (mm). Um, because you do as a woman, you end up carrying most of the burden of the relationship (yeah) [inaudible] and sacrifice/or silencing those nagging needs.

What stood out for me in Sabine’s and Peta’s extracts was the language of sacrifice and availability that echoed the talk of the women with children in the earlier section. For Sabine this is explicitly in the context of heterosexual relationships where women take on the burden of relational responsibility and for Peta caring, nurturing and so on are things women are expected to do and which men are excused from by their association
with work. Woman here continues to occupy the place of the mother: available, nurturing, responsible, burdened and erased – as Peta puts it, “my life, my feelings, my thoughts – ME as an individual – doesn’t seem to ever really count”. Sabine is clear also that the desire to be-for-others that regulates feminine subjectivity within heterosexual relationships means ‘silencing those nagging needs’. In some sense it means not even being able to recognise them at all. Recognising that women might have other desires, desires that cannot even take clear shape within the possibilities produced by heterosexual(ised) ‘femininity’ is a profoundly difficult endeavour, especially in the context of gender-inequality produced in heterosexual relationships (Burns, 2000; Dryden, 1999). Something else that stands out about Sabine’s quote and the ‘choice’ she articulates to be alone is that it implies ‘recognition’ of something problematic about being positioned as a ‘woman’ in heterosexual relationship. It does reflect a ‘choice’ not to be in relationship and be positioned thus. However, the choice is a limited one as it consists primarily of a refusal. The lack of any other storyline for Sabine to know how to ‘be’ in a relationship if it is not in this ‘feminine’ mode as well as the lack of change in the masculine sense of entitlement to women’s emotional labour leaves Sabine in the position of saying ‘no’ without any apparent alternative to say ‘yes’ to. The script for an egalitarian relationship, the discourse of woman in which she could make sense of herself in relationship in other ways is seemingly unavailable. Nonetheless, it is here in the refusal, the resistance that some hope possibly exists for creativity – there is a disturbance here where the cracks between what is ‘supposed to be’ and ‘what is’ are presumably to great to contain. As Davies (1992) puts it,

To get out of the romantic narrative…I need to understand the story itself, how it draws me in and how others position me within its terms. I need as well to imagine new story lines in which the problems inherent in the existing narrative are eliminated…the task becomes one of looking for and generating new story lines. (p. 69)

In the next quote the conflict between appropriately feminine ‘desires’ to nurture and care for men and the desire for space, autonomy and independence is also clear. Angela, in what follows, unambiguously constructs her husband as child-like by calling him a little boy and later saying that his actions are akin to those of a 5 year old:

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ANGELA: Because Lou’s very much the little boy who needs attention. (right) He’ll come in and say/sitting here yesterday, I was in the middle of writing a letter, I try to tell him there are some things I don’t want to be disturbed. He comes in and says ‘I’m going to take a sleeping tablet tonight’, comes in at 2 o’clock in the afternoon to tell me. It’s something a 5 year old would come in and say {Angela mimics Lou’s statement about the sleeping pill} [laughter] I wouldn’t go and find him in the back yard to tell him I was going to take a pill or something.

Again, the description of the relationship positions the male partner as a child and Angela by implication as the Mother. The continuity between this construction of men’s position in the relationship and a mother-child relationship of female nurture is highlighted. Angela’s anecdote about her husband drips with sarcasm and wonder at her husband’s dependence on her. It is also weary. And it subverts common assumptions about women’s neediness and men’s invulnerability. This emotional ‘dependence’ on women does not fit with what is readily assumed about masculinity – that men are powerful, rational, in control and autonomous (Hollway, 1984). However, it has been argued that men’s emotional dependence is powerfully camouflaged by the discourse of femininity which positions women as needy and independent thereby enabling masculinity to maintain the ‘appearance’ of independence and control (Hollway, 1984; Orbach & Eichenbaum, 1983). In Angela’s quote woman is very much constituted as (m)othering men.

Later Angela told me of how she has to fight for her own space now that her husband has retired. She gave an anecdote in this context of having to fight for space since he is at home all day, she describes specifically how she tries to avoid the routine of preparing lunch for him:

ANGELA: I’ll make my own [lunch] and not his (ok). I do feel mean at times, I can’t tell you (do you?) Yes. But I, I don’t, you know, (but you need to do it to secure your own space?) Yes. Cause if I did it a few times running, it’d be expected (ok) you know, so, there’s the fridge, you know what’s in there, you know what you want (mm) So I get away/around it by saying I’m having fish, cause he can’t bear fish [laugh] so he stays away. And that’s the other thing, sometimes you get/I get a little cross that I have to
be devious and (ok) you know, and that sort of /and I don’t/really that’s the the best way of working with Lou. Coming in from the side, with him not knowing.

She begins quite solidly telling me that she simply will not make his lunch but within a few lines she actually explains how the issue isn’t quite that straightforward. In fact she says that she chooses a food that he doesn’t like to eat so that ‘he will stay away’. This gets her out of a peculiarly ‘feminine’ bind. She is able to secure her space but without doing so explicitly, in other words, without directly confronting him with her own desire to be alone. She thinks about the possible impact of her actions on him and modifies her behaviour to protect him. She is able to meet her own needs only by a complex process by which she avoids hurting his feelings by saying – ‘leave me alone’ – and also avoids feeling bad herself.

Gender inequalities are very much reinforced and reproduced in the accounts of heterosexual relationships I have analysed here. Dryden (1999) in her research on gender inequalities produced in heterosexual relationships, specifically marriage, concluded that one of the particular threats to tackling change in that area was ‘post-feminism’. The notion that the relationship is supposed to be enshrined in the values of democracy and equality and where women are allegedly ‘equal’ and spoilt for choice is not reflected in women’s accounts of their relationships. The “awareness that [the] personal reality does not seem to match societal ideals could become a kind of ‘guilty’ secret … When it comes to marriage and heterosexual relationships, we certainly cannot afford to become post-feminist yet” (ibid, pp. 150-151). This observation is congruent with the analysis of this section where interviewees accounts constructed woman as responsible for the care of men and thus as (m)othering men.

7.5 Conclusion

Once again, woman is shown throughout the interviews analysed here to be produced within phallocentric parameters and collapsed into the maternal function. It must be stressed how this production continues to constrain and regulate women’s subjectivities, experiences and desires despite the claims of ‘post-feminist’ discourse (see chapter 4). I have sought to show throughout the analysis of this chapter the way
that femininity is signified by qualities of care, nurture and love and assigned to the domestic. In this assignation it is her overwhelming responsibility to ‘take care of’ others’ needs. Thus the culturally dominant subject positions imposed upon her and consequently her desire has been structured and premised on the effacement of any specific desire that she might have in relation to herself, or for herself. To desire as a ‘woman’ then is to desire to be-for-others. And yet as the analysis shows, the desires women participants articulated exceeded this.

Consequently, it follows that woman is positioned as responsible for relationships and child care. In both cases, requiring the erasure of herself in order to accommodate the needs of those she is entrusted to care for. Women’s designation to the domestic and the work of care has very material effects, resulting in a highly robust and resilient sexual division of labour. Women’s primary identification with the home and assignation to child care literally frees men from the restrictions of the domestic and enables their full-participation in the public sphere in a way that is not possible for women. It is hoped that the analysis has made “explicit the ways in which …the father and husband exploit from and profit by the mother’s burial in maternity” (Grosz, 1989. p. 124).

Significantly this is in direct conflict with the production of an allegedly ‘free’ and unconstrained woman that is effected by post-feminist discourse. Instead, what unfolded here was a picture of women restricted in their choices and overburdened by a network of social structures which continue to enforce their primary identification with the home and their responsibility for care and nurture. Despite massive increase in the past 20 years of the number of women in paid employment (Summers, 2003) men have not responded by increasing the amount of child care or housework that they shoulder, work places continue to reinforce the ideal of a (masculine) worker who has no responsibility for care, and the fantasy of the ‘good mother’ as ever-present and available has barely shifted resulting in continuing negative attitudes towards working mothers and inadequate provision of public child care (ABS, 2000, 2001; Pocock, 2003; Summers, 2003).

I am aware that I have not spoken in this chapter of the pleasures that women might gain from their relationships with partners or from caring for their children.
Partly, that is because the women rarely spoke of these in the context of these interviews, and given the prompts they read (see appendix a) that is not surprising. However, more particularly I have not focused on the pleasures of relationship because I have been concerned to counter the prevalence of a construction of woman as satisfied and fulfilled by her emotional labour and relationships where those things demand sacrifice and selflessness. Where heterosexual romance and motherhood are often represented as idyllic, I was interested in showing that this discursive production continues to conceal another story, that of the exploitation of women’s labour and women’s bodies. It conceals massive inequalities in housework, child care and relationship maintenance. It conceals, financial dependence, erasure, boredom, conflict, loss of confidence and identity. Clearly, care is not incompatible with degrees of pleasure. It is certainly true that we often gain a measure of pleasure – how great or small depends on a myriad of things – from caring for others. That does not mean there cannot be exploitation involved in the manner in which that care is appropriated or indeed that it can be shown to benefit others at our own expense. Exploitation and the joy or pleasure derived from care work are not mutually exclusive. Why should women be solely identified with and burdened with this work in a way that excludes them from a certain relationship to their own desires and pleasures that is not dependent on anyone else? It is the inequity of the division of labour and the sacrifice it entails that is at issue not caring for others per se.

What I have sought to highlight in the analysis of this chapter then is a culturally dominant construction of woman in which ‘she’ is almost completely identified with care and responsibility for it. At the same time I have also been concerned to show the way that the construction of woman as carer and mother produces the effect of erasing or prohibiting her desire (for herself) and even the erasure of identity (‘self’). The analysis, particularly relating to the working-mother, shows how post-feminist discourse actively produces the occlusion of the continuing constitution of women through the regulatory norms of femininity and thus masks the inequities thereby instituted by the association of femininity with care, nurture and reproduction.
8

Conclusions

Through taking up as her own the discourses through which femaleness is constituted, each woman thus becomes at the same time a speaking subject and one who is subjected or determined by those discourses. That subjection is generally invisible because it appears not only to be natural…but also to be what women want, a result of free choice. But women’s desires are the result of bodily inscriptions and of metaphors and story lines that catch them up in ways of being/desiring from which they have no escape unless they can reinscribe, discover new story lines, invert, invent, and break the bounds of the old structures and old discourses. (Davies, 1992, p. 58)

Discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle is the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist. (Weedon, 1987, p. 41)

personal politics and the politics of social change are inextricably entwined. (Henriques et al., 1984, p. 118)

So, to return to the question that this research project was founded on, “What does the woman want?” Women have been constructed to want nothing for themselves, to desire their own erasure, to want to be reduced to a function, that is, in being reduced to a function the position of women is ascribed a desire only to fulfil that function. Women’s desire is constituted as a desire-to-be-for-others (Irigaray, 1985; Lacan, 1977). This manifests in the desires that lead many women to immerse themselves in romantic heterosexual relationship and child rearing. In one way that is a partial answer to the question of “what does the woman want?” But of course women are people too. She also wants, as one interviewee put it, to be ‘me’ or another woman talked about ‘not just being someone’s mum’. This is not particularly surprising given that no one could actually inhabit that place so full of absence that designates feminine subjectivity (Riley, 1988) and there is always “The potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation” (Butler, 1997, p. 131).
Women are brought up to exercise their rights as people and to subordinate these rights, as women to those of their children and other dependents (Sayers, 1987, p. 203)

As women we can strive to be ‘people’ and ‘women’. Logically there is no contradiction. However, because ‘person’ actually consists of all the attributes which are meant to be characteristic of men, there is an underlying contradiction. (Hollway, 1984, p. 230)

Woman is one that is for the other and in exile from her for self. (Irigaray, 1984, p. 146)

A woman’s self-sacrifice typically involves suppressing her own needs, limiting her sphere of action, and diminishing her sense of self. (Golden, 1998, pp. v-vi)

Thus, it was this conflict at the heart of feminine identity that I have attempted to explore. Moreover, the contemporary context of women’s lives does not, if it ever did, support this complete erasure. We have become visible in the public sphere although not in any unproblematic way. Feminist and liberal humanist discourses provide alternative ways of identifying which make other experiences possible and instantiate different desires. For example, the desire for equality and freedom from constraint are powerfully produced by the regulatory effects of liberal humanist discourse (Giddens, 1991; Rose, 1999). Thus, this conflict between being-for-others and contemporary individualised self-hood could be predicted to increase for women in the context of other discourses which support (at least in part) women’s identification outside of the home. Therefore, it was with a critical attitude toward extravagant claims of women’s emancipation and equality that are not borne out by the material conditions of women’s lives that I began this work. My aim was to explore how some women negotiate identity within the parameters of contemporary heterosexual femininity and to look at what happens at the intersection between heterosexual femininity and post-feminist discourses of emancipation.

The theoretical basis for the research questions are outlined in chapter 2. That chapter considered desire and the problem of ‘woman’ from a Lacanian perspective, specifically outlining the implications for women and feminine subjectivity of Lacan’s (1972-3a) (in)famous statement that “there is no such thing as The woman” (p. 144). The theoretical insights of Lacan and post-Lacanian theory of Irigaray are combined in this chapter with post-structuralist and feminist theory as a
means of grounding the more abstract positions of psychoanalysis and to provide a means of understanding subjectivity as it is situated in discourse and engendered through relations of power. The research questions are explored empirically through two studies, first, a discourse analysis of post-feminist discourses in popular media and, second, a discourse analysis of in-depth interviews with women on their experiences and views of ‘femininity’ and gender-power relations. These studies and their methodological bases were described in detail in chapter 3.

In chapter 4 through analysing post-feminist discourse I argued that ‘post-feminism’ produces a feminine subject who understands herself to be ‘emancipated’, to have the same opportunities as men and the same ‘choices’ whilst simultaneously pushing conventional versions of femininity. Its double movement is to insist on women’s equality (which equates to likeness) with men whilst also reproducing dominant patriarchal versions of femininity. Meanwhile, whilst post-feminist discourse insists on women’s ‘equality’ the gendered division of labour remains breathtakingly unscathed (Dryden, 1999; Pocock, 2001, 2003). There is a sense in which ‘allowing’ women to be honorary ‘male’ citizens and take their place in the public domain (albeit precariously and with less status or prestige) is taken to be reward enough for their (feminist?) efforts. That is the victory that post-feminism proclaims – “… the feminist battle has been won. That is not an issue. Of course, a woman has a right to a career. Of course, women are as good as men. Of course, they are entitled to the same promotion and they can do it as well” (Hewett, 2002). Patriarchal power seems to be saying it has conceded that much… women may be allowed to mimic men and be recognised as being as good as men (although this will not occur in practice because of the constraints represented by women’s continued immersion in the domestic and relational). In other words, the equality that is much talked of is a largely an empty gesture (Zizek, 1997), an acknowledgement without any actual substance. It is profoundly misleading and misrepresentative where broader structures of gender inequality, such as an unequal sexual division of labour remain unchallenged. However, where post-feminist produces ‘woman’ as an emancipated subject no longer the target of discrimination or inequality then how are discrimination and inequality to be recognised or challenged? If post-feminism presents a ‘version of reality’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) in which sexism no longer exists, how can we see it?
The discourses which constitute the woman as ‘worker’ and as ‘mannish’ present ‘new’ ways of identifying that are open to women – ‘new’ ways that ‘woman’ is meaningful. Of course, they are not actually entirely ‘new’. Social and economic necessities have required women’s labour in the past, for example, during WWII and thus various discourses arose which constituted the woman as ‘worker’ then also. Nonetheless, these meanings and modes of identifying are in powerful conflict with “older discourses that have powerfully formed feminine subjectivities” (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) as domestic and nurturing. It should not be implied that these ‘older’ discourses are in some way simply petering out, being replaced or somehow are only relevant to a particular generation of women who still live out their anachronistic regulative fictions. These ‘new’ productions of women have not altered the way that ‘woman’ signifies as (m)other. That means feminine subjectivity continues to be powerfully formed in relation to masculine ideals and fantasies. The continued regulation of women’s desire along these lines ensures that many women ‘choose’ to continue to do what ‘women’ have always done despite the ‘possibility’ apparently offered in other constructions of woman, as worker, for example. Increasingly, she chooses to do both (ABS, 2001).

The analysis of in-depth interviews presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7 showed some of the ways that feminine subjectivity continues to be regulated by patriarchal fantasies and ideals of ‘woman’. These chapters all showed the regulative power of the fantasy of woman as ‘home’ and as ‘ideal mother’ to constrain the interviewee’s experiences, choices and desires. Chapter 5 examines the construction of heterosexual femininity and post-feminist subjectivity. From the analysis I argued that primarily, being a woman is discursively constituted as being in, or having some relation to men or ‘man’. In chapter 6 I argued that the regulative fantasy of woman as ‘home’ continues to be highly relevant and positions ‘woman’ on the side of the domestic and private, whilst simultaneously aligning masculinity with work and the public sphere. In the final chapter of analysis, extending on the association of woman with ‘home’ and the domestic, chapter 7 highlights the overwhelming responsibility that women carry for emotional labour and care work. It explores the way that women are significantly defined by their relational capacity and draws out the way ‘woman’ is buried under the maternal function in a patriarchal culture following Irigaray (1984, 1985a/b). Thus, a masculine ideal of femininity as selfless, nurturing and caring emerges from the interview transcripts where women’s
erasure is demanded in the process of serving the needs of others. In each of these
chapters, the impact of post-feminist discourse has been shown to be significant for
the way it occludes and depoliticises these highly regulative patriarchal fictions of
‘woman’.

The post feminist insistence that woman is no longer bound by anachronistic
expectations or outmoded stereotypes – being a woman only represents limitless
choice and possibilities (Faludi, 1992). Hence “Feminism’ is dead in the water, we
are post-feminist because there is no longer any inequality. Society understands
women can do anything and women themselves understand they can do anything,
“that is accepted” (Hewett, 2002). “But nothing is more obscure than the idea of
possibility – for only realisation gives indubitable proof of what is possible” (de
Beauvoir, 1949, p. 39). And yet, this insistence that everything is possible means
people are deemed to be accountable for their own outcomes.

modern individuals are not merely ‘free to choose’, but obliged to be free, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice. They must interpret their past and dream their future as outcomes of choices made or choices still to make. Their choices are, in their
turn, seen as realisations of the attributes of the choosing person – expressions of personality – and reflect back upon the person who has made them….competent personhood is thought to depend upon
the continual exercise of freedom, and where one is encouraged to understand one’s life, actually or potentially, not in terms of fate or social status, but in terms of one’s success or failure acquiring the
skills and making the choices to actualise oneself. (Rose, 1999, p. 87)

In this sense, the modern subject is constituted as free and autonomous with the
ability to self-actualise in the context of limitless choices and possibilities. This
subject is obliged to see itself as free from constraint and not to understand itself as
‘subject to’ fate, power or any other forces beyond its control. Consequently,

discriminated gender) inequalities and power asymmetries are occluded. What is
political is utterly personised and the personal – unequal divisions of sexual labour,

for example, the Superwoman syndrome – cannot become politicised in this
discursive context. The feminist discourse available for politicising it has been
delegitimised by the post-feminist, neo-liberalist version of reality. Post-feminist
discourse is fully implicated in this neo-liberalist production of the individual with
‘woman’ as its particular target. I obviously could not argue that nothing has
changed for women – but I am arguing that change has been stalled and it even threatens to be reversed because the power asymmetries that continue to structure gender relations are being so heavily obfuscated. Certainly the analyses of chapters 5, 6 & 7 highlighted the way that inequalities in relationship or sexist behaviour experienced in the public sphere could not be accounted for as inequality or sexism. Post-feminist subject position precluded women from recognising features of their lives and experiences as being structured by relations of power or the regulative effects of patriarchally defined femininity.

For example, take Hannah’s description, explored in chapter 7, of a conflict between her desire to return to work for the sense of independence and identity it provided and her desire to be a good mother which is completely individualised. The inherently conflicting constructions of selfhood connected to the discursive positions of ‘mother’ and ‘worker’ produces significant conflict and guilt. Hannah’s text describes how she initially chooses to subordinate those desires which are not ‘womanly’ and live with the depression that ensues. When that condition becomes intolerable, any solution that she finds to meet at least some of her needs in returning to work are negotiated individually. She then describes finding herself in a situation where there is little support for her attempt to return to work; i.e., quality day-care is not readily available or affordable, her work-place cannot accommodate her as a woman when she is called away for a sick child and her husband’s routine continues unchanged. Under the guilt and the time pressures and the workload, Hannah explains that she returns home again and nurses the yearning for something else. These struggles of Hannah’s and many other women, are discursive battles around the signification of woman of which as Weedon (1987) states, “the individual is an active but not sovereign protagonist” (p. 41).

From this vignette of Hannah’s experience it is clear what the problems of ‘liberatory’ style politics are as they are elucidated by post-structuralist theory, particularly Foucault. “Foucault suggested that the point of modern politics is no longer to liberate a subject, but rather to interrogate the regulatory mechanisms through which “subjects’ are produced and maintained” (Butler, 1997, pp. 31-32). Post-feminist claims of a decisive victory of women (over men or male power) are, I would argue, largely illusory as the deconstruction of progressivist historical narratives suggests (Foucault, 1980; Malson, 1999). Transformations and shifts in power are transient, piecemeal always open to (re)contestation or reversal.
According to Foucault (1980), “one can perfectly well conceive of revolutions which leave essentially untouched the power relations which form the basis of functioning for the state” (p. 64). Obviously, this raises questions for feminist politics given the undermining of simplistic notions of power and resistance and the deconstruction of ‘identity’ (see chapter 2). “There is no simple manageable way to leap outside phallogocentrism, nor any possible way to situate oneself there, that would result from the simple fact of being a woman” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 162).

Of the issues raised in the preceding analysis of participant’s interviews I must acknowledge that a significant limitation of the research is in its capacity to address or even get some insight into how the regulatory impact of traditional femininity and post-feminist discourses intersects with other discursive positions such as ethnicity, sexuality or social class for example. The homogeneity of the participants who were white, middle class and heterosexual means there is a quite restricted representation of the experience of a particular group of women who are arguably reasonably privileged. I wonder how does post-feminist discourse potentially further marginalise all but white, heterosexual, middle class women given that it is very much a discourse which constitutes the female subject as white, heterosexual and middle class? How is this discourse which celebrates women’s success often in terms of status and economic reward experienced by more socially disadvantaged women with fewer opportunities to achieve such ‘successes’ or who may measure success in completely other terms?

What I am left with is an understanding that seeking ‘answers’ to questions like ‘what does the woman want?’ is part of the problem. Whatever a feminist program is “it is not an attempt to arrive at a final once-for-all truth beyond patriarchy, but is a continuous process of critical engagement” (Whitford, 1991, p. 19). One must not take anything for granted, adopt a constantly critical attitude and ask instead, “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints?” (Foucault, cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 46). Therefore, in the matter of femininity what cannot be dispensed with then is a rigorous interpretation of the phallogocentrism such that we can find ourselves in it – discover how we have been silenced and spoken about – and also find where we exceed it – what possibilities there might be for an “operative sexual difference” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 159).
This hints at the question which haunts this work throughout – it is an excessive question with no answer, about how women accede to representations that are not produced through masculine definition. What other ways of being could we create or aspire to that would allow other ways of thinking and doing? Again, the point is that what that might be cannot be articulated in any specific way from what we are. A critical analysis of and reflection on our limits will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is possible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think. (Foucault, cited in Rabinow, 1984, p. 46)

We are obliged to use existing concepts, despite their inappropriateness to us and actively contest their foundations in the hope that something different can be produced (Butler, 1992; Irigaray, 1985). That something different must be created in the struggle with our limits, in daily moments of resistance and conflict.

In refusing to seek answers, and in continuing to pose questions as aporias, as paradoxes, - that is, to insist that they have no ready available solutions – is to face the task, not of revolution, ie. overthrow of the old (whether capitalism, patriarchy, binary oppositions or prevailing modes of radicality) but, less romantically or glamously, endless negotiation, the equation of one’s life with struggle. (Grosz, 1995, p. 6)

I have in closing this work a pessimism about change in the context of post-feminist productions of woman as ‘equal’. This particular ‘regime of truth’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 73) seriously impacts on our ability to critically engage with issues of power as they relate to gender inequality. An understanding of the ways that woman is constituted in patriarchy indicates the scale on which change would need to occur for women to emerge from phallocentric definition is greater than that imagined by for example, liberal feminism. This is the ‘painful realisation that “liberation” from external authorities does not suffice to initiate a subject into freedom’ (Butler, 1997, p. 33).

Simultaneously, I hold the hope that there must be and can be change. As Frosh (1994) states, “If it is the case that masculinity and femininity are constructed positions, and that sexual difference is something which is built rather than given,
then alternative constructions must be available, at least in principle” (p.143). I did not begin this work with very much hope but that I close it with some is a fortune I owe to the women I interviewed for this research, to the women in my life, the women I have met over the years of thinking through what alternative stories could possibly be told and what alternative ways could possibly be found to live and comprehend one’s self. It is both necessary to share with each other as women, our experiences and our struggles, our small victories and breakthroughs and also for each woman to negotiate daily her own conflicts and notice her own changes.

Creativity arises out of the situation of human beings engaged in particular relations of force and meaning, and what is made out of the possibilities of that location. These minor engagements do not have the arrogance of programmatic politics… They are cautious, modest, pragmatic, experimental, stuttering, tentative. They are concerned with the here and now, not with some fantasised future, with small concerns, petty details, the everyday and not the transcendental. They frequently arise in ‘cramped spaces’ – within a set of relations that are intolerable, where movement is impossible, where change is blocked and voice is strangulated. And, in relation to these little territories of the everyday, they seek to engender a small reworking of their own spaces of action. (Rose, 1999, pp. 279-280)

Other stories, even one’s which vary only minutely are written everyday and will continue to be written by courageous and resourceful women together and alone.
References


Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002b). *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey*. (Cat. no. 4714.0), Canberra: Author.


Appendix A. Interview prompts for Study 2: a discourse analysis of interviews with women about women

**Interview Prompts**

1. “this trapped tyranny of watching nothing and conjuring violence from the magic powder of boredom” (Levy, 1993, p. 31)

2. “I am suffering from absence point blank hon there's a hole in my heart . . .” (Levy, 1993, p. 44)

3. “All the fancy words - adaptation, maturity, sublimation - all they really meant was learning that the empty gaping need in you was never going to be filled . . .” (French, 1978, p. 122)

4. “dance with me take off yr shoes and dance with me” (Levy, 1993, p. 27)

5. “maybe you'll leave the light on just in case I like the dancing I can remember where I come from” (song lyrics, Tori Amos, *Little Earthquakes*, 1991)

6. “An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, a mist passing across her soul's summer day.” (Chopin, 1899, p. 14)

7. “Meanwhile the desire to express myself grew. The few signs I used became less and less adequate, and my failures to make myself understood were invariably followed by outbursts of passion. I felt as if invisible hands were holding me, and I made frantic efforts to free myself.” (Davidson, 1971)
Appendix A.

8.  
_Fear Me_

at my crust  
I'm violent  
right down deep  
I'm violent  
at my fingertips  
I'm violent  
in the glands of my breasts  
I'm violent  
in the shield of my cervix  
I'm violent  
in my feral womb  
I'm violent  
fear me fear me fear me  
I'm female  
(Porter, 1994, p. 167)

9.  
“Who blames me? - many no doubt and I shall be called discontented. I could not  
help it: the restlessness was in my nature, it agitated me to pain sometimes.”  
(Bronte, 1891)

10.  
“But a woman is forever hedged about . . . Always she feels the pull of some desire,  
the restraining pressure of some social restriction.” (Chopin, 1899, p. 73)

11.  
“She felt her wrists, her arms, rubbed her hands over her breasts, her belly, her  
thighs. She was warm and smooth and her heart beat calmly, fine pulsing energy  
was being driven through her, she could walk, she could talk, she could feel, she  
could think. Alive . . .”  
(French, 1978, p. 85)
Appendix B. Instructions for participants in Study 2: a discourse analysis of interviews with women about women

Instructions

You have been given a collection of texts written by women. I need you to read these and to note down for yourself your responses to them. There is no correct or expected response to the material. It may be feelings or thoughts that are triggered by the texts. They may remind you of something. There might be specific pieces that you find more striking than others or it might be something about the collection as a whole. Absolutely anything at all is appropriate. Your responses are valuable precisely because they are yours. You will not have to show me what you write but I will ask you to draw on it as the basis of our interview discussion later.

For this task it will be necessary to read and respond to the texts in an environment where you are relatively free of distractions and when you have sufficient time not to feel rushed.
Appendix C. Information statement for Study 2: a discourse analysis of interviews with women about women

Information Statement

Hello! My name is Emma M'Cormack and I am currently undertaking my PhD research within the Centre for Critical Psychology at the University of Western Sydney Nepean. My contact details are listed at the bottom of the following page.

About the research:
Through the research I wish to conduct I am interested in finding out about a particular aspect of women's experience as reported by women. I have collected a set of accounts from women's writing which are very emotionally powerful and seem to express a common element. I am interested in exploring the meaning of these accounts in collaboration with you and other women I will speak to. To do this I would be interested in finding out what your own responses are to these experiences and feelings as expressed by other women in their writing. I will be looking at your responses for what they could help me reveal about the meaning of these accounts and the conditions from which they emerge. There is no correct response in these circumstances - it may be that you do not find the accounts relevant, that you cannot identify with them or have never experienced what they speak of. Your responses are valuable to me precisely in as much as they are your responses.

What you'll need to do:
What you will be required to do if you agree to participate is to read 11 short pieces of text ranging from about two sentences to a short poem which is the longest piece. I would need you to read these at some time when you were relatively free of distractions and able to give them reasonable attention. You would also need time to be able to write or note down your most immediate responses, including any feelings or thoughts you have. This may be to the collection of pieces as a whole or to specific individual pieces which strike you more than others for example. Again, I would like to emphasise that there is no correct or even expected response.

When you have done this you would need to contact me so that we could arrange a convenient time when I could come and speak to you about the texts and your responses. This interview/discussion will be dictated largely by how long we want to spend but would not exceed two hours. I would expect on average that the interview will take about an hour of your time.

Information you should know - privacy, your rights and my responsibilities to you:
Interviews would be audio-taped with your permission of course. This tape will then be transcribed. Neither the audio-tape or the transcript will be labelled by name or any other obvious identification. Both the transcripts and audio-tapes will be securely stored for a period of 5 years after which time they will be destroyed - this is simply an average period required for retaining research data. A copy of the transcript can be made available to you on request. You should be aware that parts of interview transcript may appear in the research once it is written up. Obviously, it is my obligation to report data responsibly so as not to include information by which you could be identified.
Appendix C.

It is not my intention that you would experience this research as invasive, inconvenient or unpleasant. To this end, I should note that the texts which you will receive and be required to respond to are strongly emotive pieces and could be expected to stir up equally strong emotional responses on your part. Whilst it is not expected that this will be experienced as distressing it is necessary that you are aware of any potential effects of your participation.

You should understand that you are in no way obliged to participate in this research and if you do participate you have the right to discontinue your involvement at any stage should you change your mind. There are absolutely no penalties or consequences for you should you decide to withdraw from the research. If you signal your agreement to participate you will be asked to sign an informed consent statement which will outline my responsibilities to you and your right to discontinue or withdraw from the research at any stage. Informed consent once given can be withdrawn.

As principle investigator I am responsible for this research and I would like you to feel that you could contact me should you have any queries, concerns or problems regarding the research or arising from your participation in it. Also, if in the future you would like to follow up the research or just get some information on its progress, please do not hesitate to contact me. My contact details are:

Emma M'Cormack:

Ph (Office hours): (02) 4929 2692
Email: e.mccormack@scholar.nepean.uws.edu.au

* For your own reference, please retain this information sheet or let me know if you need another copy at any stage.

I look forward to working with you.

Cheers

Emma M'Cormack

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Nepean Human Ethics Review Committee. The registration number allocated to this project is HE 99/095. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (tel: 02 47 360 169). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix D. Statement of informed consent for study 2: a discourse analysis of interviews with women on women

Statement of Informed Consent

I have received an Information Statement which contains the following information:
• The nature of the research
• What is expected of me as a participant
• Issues of privacy and confidentiality regarding the data I contribute
• Warning about possible implications and consequences of participation

I have the relevant contact details for the researcher and I understand that I am encouraged to contact her if I have any queries or problems relating to the research or my participation.

It has also been explained to me in the Information Statement and I understand that I am not obliged to participate and that I may withdraw my consent at any stage in the research without penalty or consequence to me.

Any questions that I have had have been answered to my satisfaction

Being in possession of all the above information then, I give my consent to participate in this research:

Name of Participant: .................................................................
Signature of Participant: ............................................................
Date: .....................................................................................

Researcher Statement:
I have explained to the participant the aims of this research and what their participation would entail including any risks involved with research participation. I believe that the participant understands that their involvement is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time.

Name of Investigator: Emma McCormack
Signature of Investigator: ..........................................................
Date: .....................................................................................
Appendix D.

Note: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Nepean Human Ethics Review Committee. The registration number allocated to this project is HE 99/095. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through the Research Ethics Officer (tel: 02 47 360 169). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

* Please retain your signed copy of informed consent for your own reference
Appendix E. Transcription conventions

(…) indicates a pause.

(ok) indicates my brief interjections and responses within interviewee’s text, for example, (yeah) or (alright). Otherwise, more lengthy statements of the interviewer are designated by the initial E. and start on a separate line.

[…] indicates that part of the transcript has been omitted

/ is used to indicate a half-said word or incomplete sentence in the flow of talk. For example, where the speaker does not complete a sentence and begins a new one immediately.

[ ] are used to indicate where, for example, there is laughter.

{ } are used to surround explanations to the text that are added to clarify meaning. For example, ‘you don’t see too many of them {young girls} stooping.’

Sounds such as um, and ah, are transcribed phonetically. As far as possible the transcript adheres closely to the flow of talk, including repeated words, stutters and so forth, thus the text is not always grammatically correct and punctuation is used to assist with readability.