

“You gotta let them know what kind of guy you are, then they’ll know what kind of girl to be”: Gendered Identity and Fantasy in *Mad Men*

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Matthew Weiner’s television series *Mad Men* (2007-) provides a contemporary critique of the gender politics of 1960s middle-class America. Focusing on the theme of fantasy, this chapter argues that the series reveals femininity and masculinity to be highly constructed, performative and mimetic categories that adhere to the coordinates of patriarchal fantasy. The characters’ constructions of gendered identity are situated within a rigid patriarchal ideological framework that imposes severe limitations upon their subjectivities, as a result of which each of the protagonists are shown to be inherently damaged, unstable or lacking in agency. The role of fantasy is ultimately to conceal and overcome this inherent instability through the construction of stable yet fantasmatic identities.

In the title sequence that opens each episode of *Mad Men* a series of visual motifs are used to express this central theme of fantasy. The sequence depicts a silhouetted man who stands in for the series’ protagonist Don Draper (Jon Hamm). As he enters his corporate office, the objects and furniture lose their solidity and begin to fall through the floor. The office itself then disappears and the silhouetted man falls with the other objects towards the ground, passing the skyscrapers with their billboard advertisements of wholesome family life and sexually objectified women. The advertisements appear as mimetic fragments, simulacra of a life-world constructed on ideological fantasies. The falling objects and silhouette point to the illusory and impermanent nature of the world of *Mad Men* and Don Draper’s similarly illusory role within this world. Yet despite the fact that Don and his world are in the process of disintegrating internally, the final moments of the title sequence present us with Don’s silhouette sitting in a relaxed pose with a cigarette. This final image is of a constructed external reality where everything *appears* to be solid and dependable and Don himself is the image of confidence and composure. This title sequence encompasses one of the key ideas of *Mad Men*: beneath the fantasy-construction that upholds reality exists an internal instability that threatens to rupture the American Dream.

This analysis of *Mad Men* draws upon Slavoj Žižek’s (1989:123) definition of fantasy as “the frame through which we experience the world as consistent and meaningful.” In *Mad Men* fantasy is not depicted as an escape from reality, rather, fantasy functions in the Žižekian sense as a suturing mechanism that forms the fabric of social reality. As Žižek (1989: 45) explains:

Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel . . . The function of ideology is not to offer us an escape from reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic kernel.

In *Mad Men* “reality” is structured upon a series of ideological fantasies that are both personal and collective. The function of these fantasies is to mask deep traumas: personal traumas that are repressed by the characters, and social traumas that are repressed by society at large.

By extending Zizek’s psychoanalytic framework from the individual to the social this chapter will argue that the fantasy-construction that is sustained on a personal level by characters such as Don also operates on a collective and cultural level and has major political and ideological consequences. *Mad Men* highlights the oppressive impact of patriarchal ideologies in 1960s America while also drawing attention to the shifts that were occurring in gender roles, largely as a result of the impact of second wave feminism. This chapter argues that the female characters in the series are in different ways a product of the emergence of second wave feminist values and ideals. These ideals promoted new freedoms for women but stood in contradiction to the ongoing dominance of patriarchal social norms. Such contradictory values feature in the advertising of the time and in the series creating an ambiguous and problematic image of femininity for women to emulate. Through a close analysis of the three central female characters, Betty (January Jones), Joan (Christina Hendricks) and Peggy (Elisabeth Moss), I argue that *Mad Men* effectively portrays the diversity of women’s responses to the shifting gender roles in 1960s America. Betty and Joan’s characters prove to be problematic to a feminist reading in that they perpetuate images of the feminine that support patriarchal fantasies of the submissive housewife (Betty) and the sexualized object of male desire (Joan). I conclude that only Peggy’s character provides a viable feminist alternative by offering the possibility of a female subjectivity that cannot be confined within patriarchal fantasy. The final part of this chapter brings together an examination of Don Draper’s personal fantasy-construction with a discussion of the broader collective fantasy of 1960s patriarchal culture (the ‘American Dream’) and suggests that certain links can be made between the two.

Television itself plays a significant role in the formation of fantasy and this chapter will suggest that *Mad Men* provides a fantasmatic frame through which the viewer comes to understand 1960s America. *Mad Men* successfully plays into audience fantasies and desires, creating an image of America that is politically and ideologically regressive, yet aesthetically appealing. The glamorous settings and slick *mise en scene* of *Mad Men* provides an idealised fantasy construction of the 1960s for the viewer. For this reason, discussions on *Mad Men* that examine the series in relation to notions of authenticity seem to miss the point. While many critics have commented on Matthew Weiner’s realistic reproduction of the 1960s (Schwartz, 2007: Online), what the series presents is a vastly heightened and exaggerated (or hyper-real) version of 1960s America. The undeniable aesthetic beauty of the series’ imagery is at times problematic as it risks masking or lessening the ideological critique, and I will suggest that this is especially problematic to a feminist reading in relation to the aesthetisation of female beauty.

The women of *Mad Men*: masquerade, mimicry and feminism

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'What if they [women] want something else, inside,
some mysterious wish that we're ignoring'
– Don Draper, *Mad Men*

As stated above, each of the female characters of *Mad Men* can, in different ways, be understood to be a product of the emergence of second wave feminist values and ideals. These women sit uneasily between the 1950s ideal of the traditional housewife and the emergent figure of the workingwoman who is gaining independence financially and emotionally but is simultaneously repressed by the continuing social prevalence of patriarchal values. These contradictory values feature in the advertisements depicted in *Mad Men*; women (especially middleclass housewives) are targeted as consumers and constitute the core demographic for a vast majority of advertising campaigns, yet these campaigns fail to address women's real needs and desires and instead produce sexist imagery and slogans that replicate destructive patriarchal gender roles.

The majority of products advertised in the series, even those designed purely for women, are marketed towards male fantasy and desire. This becomes most apparent during the creation of the Playtex bra advertisement: "Bras are for men," Paul Kinsey (Michael Gladys) tells Peggy, "women want to see themselves the way men see them" ("Maidenform", 2:6). The complete erasure of female desire and identity in this statement is exacerbated by Paul's explanation of female fantasy: "Women right now already have a fantasy and its right here in America: Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, every single woman is one of them" ("Maidenform", 2:6). Female fantasy and desire are thus narrowed down to two choices, both of which are modeled on problematic patriarchal constructions of the feminine. Don and all of the male executives support Kinsey's idea for the campaign, which clearly adheres to the coordinates of their desires. Don pushes the concept further suggesting that these two images of woman are presented as two sides of the same woman, thus creating an impossible image of woman and realizing an impossible male fantasy. Only Peggy disapproves of the campaign, aware that neither image of the feminine corresponds to her own sense of self-identity or desire. For Peggy, the male ownership of the fantasy is clear: "I don't know if all women are a Jackie or a Marilyn: maybe men see them that way" ("Maidenform", 2:6). The men make an exception conceding that Peggy herself is neither a Jackie nor a Marilyn, but a "Gertrude Stein", which is intended as an amusing and derogatory insult. This "joke" reveals the extreme limitations of male perception of femininity: if women fail to adhere to male fantasy they are simply labeled 'lesbian' and excluded from the heterosexual economy altogether.

Contrary to the limiting definitions of the feminine imposed by the men in the series, through its rich portrayal of the female characters, *Mad Men* gives visibility to the diversity and complexity of female experience within an insidious patriarchal culture. The three leading female characters of *Mad Men*, Betty, Joan and Peggy, illustrate three diverse female responses to the shifting definitions of gender roles in 1960s America. The following discussion provides a close analysis of each character in order to reveal the vastly different strategies that women employ to cope with patriarchal oppression and examines the relative agency (or lack thereof) that these strategies

provide.

Betty: housewife ‘hysteria’

Betty Draper performs the role of the 1950s housewife to perfection, and suffers greatly for it. In Season One she is depicted as a passive figure whose sense of identity is largely grounded in her husband and in her outward appearance. Betty continually refers to the fact that she knows very little about her husband and yet she invests herself in him entirely; Betty admits to Don that she spends her days waiting for the sound of his car to come up the driveway and later when contemplating divorce, she tells Helen ‘Sometimes I think I’ll float away if Don isn’t holding me down (“The Inheritance”, 2:10). This revealing statement indicates that Betty sees herself as insubstantial, incomplete and unstable without the strength and validation of her husband. Helen responds by telling Betty something she cannot yet conceptualize: “the hardest part about divorce is realizing you are in charge” (“The Inheritance”, 2:10).

Betty is also a highly narcissistic character who is completely consumed with her external appearance. She has come to see herself as others see her; a beautiful and naïve childlike doll that Don likes to show off at social events. Betty believes that a woman’s appearance determines her life to the extent that after a minor car accident she tells Don her fear that if the accident had been worse Sally may have sustained a scar to her face which she believes would be worse than death, for Sally would be condemned to a “sad and lonely life” (“Ladies Room”, 1:2). It would be different for Bobby, she claims, for it is only a woman’s happiness that is contingent upon her external beauty.

As a housewife, Betty’s primary domain is within the home. Yet, while the domestic space is essentially gendered feminine, in that it is a space most frequently occupied by housewives and female servants, women nevertheless maintain limited authority and control within the home. Betty is not always free to do as she pleases in her own home, as she must internalize the gaze of her husband and act according to socially acceptable feminine decorum, for example, she is heavily chastised by her husband for allowing a male door-to-door air-conditioning salesman into her house (“Indian Summer”, 1:11). Betty’s frustration at her lack of control over the domestic realm (and over her life more generally) is illustrated when she smashes the dining chair to pieces as she is preparing to host a dinner for Don’s work colleagues (“A Night to Remember” 2:8). For Betty the home is an imprisoning and lonely place.

Throughout the first season of *Mad Men* Betty is clearly suffering from a psychological condition related to her marital discontentment, sheltered existence and repressed feelings of distress. Her numb hands function as a psychosomatic response to the repressed emotions that she is unable to consciously register. Betty’s condition is comparable to that which Freud (1977 [1905]) termed ‘hysteria,’ which feminists have argued was a direct result of the intense boredom and dissatisfaction experienced by middle class women in the early part of the 20th Century. Feminist critic Gail Finney (1989: 8) suggests that ‘sickness was, quite simply, one of the few ways to

avoid the reproductive and domestic duties so closely bound up with women's sphere at the time.' Similarly, Susan Bordo (1993:170) has argued that the condition of agoraphobia, which was reportedly experienced by middleclass women on a mass scale in the 1950s, was, like hysteria at the turn of the century (and anorexia in the late 20th century) a product of ideological constructions of the feminine. For Bordo such disorders are a form of unconscious revolt through parody. Thus psychological conditions that male doctors once thought to be inherent to certain members of "the weaker sex" have been reassessed by feminist scholars and widely acknowledged to be the result of patriarchal constructions of women.

Similarly, I would suggest that Betty's condition can be attributed largely to patriarchal and social factors. Betty has minimal interests or pastimes of her own (aside from horse riding and a brief stint at modeling) and she has a housekeeper to clean the house and take care of her children (or they are told to watch the television), leaving her with an overabundance of leisure time. This excess of spare time and lack of activity leaves her in a state of boredom and loneliness. Her situation is worsened by the lack of understanding she receives from her husband and further exacerbated by an unhelpful and condescending psychologist.

Mad Men draws attention to the masculine control and pathologising of female psychological illness through the depiction of Betty's treatment. Soon after Betty commences therapy we discover that her doctor relays their sessions to Don over the telephone, dismissing her unhappiness as "childishness", which Don later replicates in his conversations and treatment of his wife. The misogynist nature of the medical industry is established early in the series when Peggy visits the doctor to obtain the contraceptive pill and is told that if she abuses her "privilege" of being granted access to birth control (by being too promiscuous) it will be taken away "for her own good" ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", 1:1). Such scenes demonstrate the extreme level of control and authority male doctors were able to exert over women's bodies and minds; female reproductive rights, sexual freedom and mental health were all carefully monitored and restricted by patriarchal agendas.

Betty's disempowerment is largely the cause of external factors over which she has limited control, and for the majority of the first two seasons she lacks the capacity to make positive changes or transcend her situation. When she does let out her repressed frustration it is in ineffectual bursts such as when she smashes the dining chair or when she fires a shotgun at her neighbor's pigeons ("Shoot", 1:9). This act is one of maternal protection and defiance against her neighbor who frightened her children by shouting at them when their dog attacked one of his homing pigeons, but on a symbolic level, it is also a manifestation of Betty's repressed emotions. While it is tempting to read the image of Betty in a masculine stance firing a shotgun with a cigarette hanging from her mouth as an empowered one, her action of shooting the pigeons is ultimately futile and displaced. Her feelings are kept silent and the root causes of her frustration and unhappiness remain unexplored.

Betty's realization of her own sense of self is frustratingly gradual and inevitably hindered by patriarchal social factors. However, there are some progressive shifts in Betty's character in the second and third seasons as she slowly attempts to locate a self outside the limits of the patriarchal fantasy of the nuclear family. Betty reacts against Don's infidelity and becomes increasingly active in making her own choices. She actively seeks her own happiness, which culminates in her leaving Don at the end of the Third Season. Yet this decision is perhaps only enabled by the presence of Henry Francis (Christopher Stanley) who replaces Don in the patriarchal role of successful and protective husband. It is therefore questionable as to whether Betty has undergone any real transformation or liberation or simply substituted one life of dependence for another.

Joan: feminine masquerade

Despite her wit, intelligence and social skills, Joan is the least progressive of the central female characters from a feminist perspective. Like Betty, she values herself predominantly on the basis of her appearance and she maintains deeply entrenched patriarchal values and an unquestioned belief in stereotypical gender roles. Joan's views are encapsulated in her advice speech to Peggy in the first episode in which she suggests that Peggy go home and undress in front of a mirror, place a paper bag over her head and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of her appearance. She then conveys her belief in female inferiority, reassuring Peggy that the men who designed the typewriter 'made it simple enough for a woman to use' ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", 1:1). Joan's ultimate desire is to become a fulltime suburban housewife: 'if you make the really right moves' she tells Peggy, "you'll be out in the country and you won't be going to work at all" ("Smoke Gets in Your Eyes", 1:1). While Joan's character does develop and become more likeable across the three seasons, her inability to imagine herself outside of patriarchal constructs means that she is never able to attain sufficient agency or empowerment.

Joan is beautiful, fun and carefree and she provides constant reassurance to the men in the office by boosting their egos and seducing them with playful flirtation. For Joan, flirtation is a feminine strategy that allows her certain freedoms and provides her with a form of empowerment, which is nevertheless fraught with problems. Joan's self-image is based upon a highly constructed and masculine understanding of the feminine that functions as an idealized model of femininity; as Paul Kinsey suggests, 'Marilyn's really a Joan, not the other way around' ('Maidenform', 2:6). Like the iconic image of Marilyn Monroe, Joan's representation of the feminine is a performative and mimetic ideal situated within the coordinates of patriarchal fantasy.

In her famous 1929 paper "Womanliness as a masquerade", feminist psychoanalyst Joan Riviere recognizes the inherently mimetic nature of femininity as a social construct. Riviere (1929: 303) writes of a case study of a successful professional woman who seeks reassurance from men by flirting; she explains that "women who wish for masculinity [masculine success] may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men". Riviere concludes that femininity is constructed according to social codes through which the female subject becomes a

woman by the process of mimesis. She implies that “womanliness” can be assumed and worn as a mask when a woman deliberately adopts hyper-feminine signifiers. While she does not seek masculine success, Joan’s character clearly resembles Riviere’s professional woman; her physicality, clothing and flirtatious attitude all provide her with validation from men and work to alleviate male anxiety.

Riviere’s article is in many ways ahead of its time for 1929 but it falls short of suggesting any progressive or empowering possibilities for women. The woman who adopts the masquerade of femininity conforms to patriarchal stereotypes and mythologies and thus even if she attains “masculine” success her agency is extremely limited. While the feminine masquerade may allow women to attain a limited sense of empowerment (by being the object of male desire), this is ultimately a highly flawed and potentially destructive strategy. The limitations of Joan’s access to female empowerment are revealed most clearly in two instances; first when she is not sufficiently acknowledged for her abilities as a script reader and is replaced by a less competent man, and second when she is raped by her husband in Don Draper’s office. In both instances Joan accepts her subordination; she hides her disappointment at being overlooked for the position of script reader quickly accepting the decision without complaint and she even acquiesces to non-consensual sex.

Joan reveals her inner frustration only once over the three seasons of *Mad Men*: when her husband Greg (Samuel Page) is passed over for chief resident he selfishly tells her ‘You don’t know what it’s like to want something your whole life [and not get it]’ (‘The Gypsy and the Hobo’, 3:11), at which point she hits him over the head with a vase. Like Betty’s shooting at the pigeons, this uncharacteristically violent move is one of silent and desperate revolt. It is a moment in which the smooth running of the symbolic fantasy ruptures momentarily through the presence of female violence, yet the violent action is ultimately ineffectual. In this moment Joan lashes out physically but fails to grasp the opportunity to verbally articulate her frustration, to make her husband see that she too has lost what she has wanted her whole life (to be a housewife with a successful husband). Greg’s line is reminiscent of Pete Campbell’s (Vincent Kartheiser) equally selfish and naive statement to Peggy that, “everything is so easy for you” (‘The Inheritance’, 2:10). Peggy’s reaction in this comparable situation is notably different to Joan’s and serves to highlight one of the key differences between their characters. Peggy does not respond with futile anger or aggression but calmly explains to Pete that he is wrong in thinking that others don’t experience similar difficulties in their lives; “It’s not easy for anyone, Pete” she replies (‘The Inheritance’ 2:10). Three episodes later, Peggy finally tells Pete that he fathered her child who she gave away. Peggy doesn’t reveal this shocking fact to hurt Pete or to selfishly prove that she too has endured painful experiences. Rather, she vocalizes the truth to explain the kind of person she is and to make Pete understand what she wants in life; she says, “I had your baby, and I gave it away. I wanted other things” (‘Meditations in an Emergency’, 2:13). Peggy thus articulates her subjectivity in a manner that is seemingly inaccessible to Joan.

As Season Three concludes, Joan has returned to work as office manager at Sterling Cooper Draper Price at the behest of her strongest ally Roger Sterling (John Slattery). She is clearly a significant member of their team who possesses the vital practical abilities required to set up the new business. This narrative offers some hope that Joan may discover her true value and happiness in the workplace. As her temporary stint in the role of script reader revealed, Joan is an intelligent and competent worker who thrives on being given more significant work to do. Joan's lack of empowerment is therefore largely self-imposed which is precisely what renders her the least progressive character from a feminist perspective. More than any other female character, Joan conforms to the patriarchal fantasy of femininity and becomes trapped within that fantasy. Where Betty is imprisoned within patriarchal definitions of the feminine, Joan is aware of an alternative yet chooses to acquiesce to the status quo.

While on a narrative level the character of Joan provides an interesting insight into some of the problems affecting women in the workplace in the 1960s, on a visual level her character reveals a potential problem with the series' aesthetisation of female beauty. Much popular commentary surrounding *Mad Men* centres upon the character of Joan on account of her physical appearance and impeccable fashion sense. She is a favorite character of both male and female viewers alike, yet as demonstrated above, she is the least progressive woman depicted in the series. Thus Joan offers little appeal as a point of identification, and great appeal as an object of fetishisation and erotic contemplation. In the words of feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1989: 837), Joan can certainly "be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*". From a feminist perspective, the voyeuristic pleasure the viewer gains from watching Joan on screen can be seen as problematic. In all respects the production of *Mad Men* is aesthetically pleasing, yet this glossy aesthetic becomes a potential issue for feminist viewers when it serves to enhance and encourage the scopophilic gaze. Joan's disempowerment within the context of the narrative is thus exacerbated by the fetishistic gaze of the camera and spectator.

Peggy: mimicry and feminism

Peggy's development over the three seasons is far more dramatic than that of the other female characters. In Peggy one can observe a burgeoning feminist consciousness that by the conclusion of Season Three is largely realized. Peggy's character is therefore instrumental in articulating the feminist values of the second wave and in illustrating the possibility for a considerable level of female empowerment within an oppressive patriarchal social order.

The opening episode of Season One introduces the viewer to Peggy as an outwardly naïve secretary who is eager to please and who believes that to succeed in her job she must acquiesce to the expectations of others. Peggy is initially very ill at ease in the corporate environment. In the office of Sterling Cooper gendered differences are constituted in and through spatial networks in a manner that has especially oppressive consequences for the female employees. While the male executives occupy private offices around the periphery of the building, the female secretaries are permanently on display in the central open plan area, rendering them objects of constant

visual pleasure for the male employees and clients. Shortly after commencing employment as Don Draper's secretary Peggy becomes acutely aware of her position as sexualized object of the male gaze. In a slow motion sequence depicted from Peggy's perspective, countless men critically observe her as they walk through the office. This omnipresent critical male gaze, combined with the endless commentaries on her appearance from her female colleagues, force Peggy (initially at least), to value herself on the basis of her looks and her ability to construct her appearance according to a highly regulated model of femininity.

Despite her best efforts, Peggy continually "fails" in her attempts to adopt the persona of a feminine servile secretary; her dress sense is too dowdy (she doesn't "show enough leg"), she doesn't know how to respond adequately to male "flirtation" (chauvinism), and her attempt to seduce Don Draper on her first day is awkward and inappropriate ("Smoke gets in Your Eyes" 1:1). That Peggy fails to fit the feminine mould is initially frustrating to her, but it proves to be one of her great assets as it gradually gains her the respect of her male colleagues. As Roger Sterling observes when he asks Peggy for advice about his daughter: "you're the only one around here who doesn't have that stupid look on your face" ("Love Among the Ruins" 3:2).

During Season Two Peggy gradually alters her appearance to be more in line with the feminine ideal so admired by men and advocated by women such as Joan. Like Joan, Peggy learns to model her appearance and behaviors upon a constructed ideal of female beauty. However, I would argue that unlike Joan, Peggy's sense of identity is not bound up with the masquerade. Thus, while Joan adopts a damaging feminine construction as an intrinsic aspect of her subjectivity, Peggy's mimicry of the feminine is a highly conscious act and a strategic one that allows her a certain degree of agency that is not afforded to Joan.

We can further differentiate between the characters of Joan and Peggy and their relative agency through an examination of the vital distinction between the strategies of masquerade and mimicry. As discussed above, feminine masquerade or mimesis, as described by Riviere, is ultimately a flawed strategy that provides limited empowerment and no real agency. In contrast, feminist theorist Luce Irigaray has reconfigured mimesis as mimicry and argued for a more active and strategic engagement with the historical and social construction of femininity. Irigaray (1985:76) states:

There is an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into affirmation and thus begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject," that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference.

Importantly, Peggy does not demand to speak as a masculine subject by 'becoming one of the boys,' rather, she maintains her female specificity and uses her femininity to her advantage. As Season One progresses, Peggy's male superiors concede that a woman's perspective is

valuable on certain accounts, and it is largely because she is a woman (and because she is clearly capable) that Peggy is given the job as copywriter on Belle Jolie lipsticks, and later on the “Relaxerciser” and Clearasil.

Once Peggy begins to be valued for her intelligence and abilities, she becomes both less and more concerned with her physical appearance. As she comes to realise that her success and happiness are not dependent upon her looks, her sense of identity becomes disconnected from her external appearance. At the same time, she recognises that within a patriarchal society, women are in a position to attain certain advantages by using their external appearance to good effect. Thus Peggy makes the best of a bad situation. She “assume[s] the feminine role deliberately”, and thereby effectively “convert[s] a form of subordination into affirmation” (Irigaray, 1985:75). By appropriating feminine mimicry as a strategy, Peggy is able to occupy a dual position in relation to patriarchal fantasy; her sense of identity remains outside the constructs of the fantasy yet she is able to embody and exploit the fantasy from within.

Interestingly, and despite her own disempowerment, Joan plays a central role in Peggy’s realisation of her own agency. As an iconic representation of successful femininity that Peggy witnesses on a daily basis, Joan provides the model upon which Peggy may construct her own feminine mimicry. This is made explicit when Peggy watches Joan successfully flirting with a group of men in the office and appropriates Joan’s line (“it’s so crowded in here I feel like I’m on the subway!”) in a bar later that evening (“Love Among the Ruins” 3:2). The witty line attracts the interest of a Brooklyn College student who Peggy appeals to further by downplaying her job and pretending to be a secretary. Despite this seeming acquiescence to patriarchal norms, this instance may be understood as one in which Peggy displays active passivity. By feigning passivity, Peggy is able to gain active control of the situation and get what she desires. In the scenes that follow, she returns to the man’s apartment with him but refuses sexual intercourse suggesting that, ‘there are other things we can do’ and later in the night she quickly dresses and leaves telling him “this was fun” (“Love Among the Ruins” 3:2). A woman’s desire to “have sex like a man,” articulated by Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* in the late 1990s (“Sex and the City” 1:1), is thus realised by Peggy at a time in history when such a concept was unimaginable.

Joan is also instrumental in providing the advice to Peggy that is the turning point in her pursuit to attain power in the workplace. In response to Peggy’s frustrations at being continually excluded from the decision making processes of her male colleagues, Joan tells her: “You’re in their country, learn to speak their language”, and then insists, “You want to be taken seriously? Stop dressing like a little girl” (“Maidenform” 2:6). This conversation clearly resonates with Peggy and when she overhears that her male colleagues and their clients from Playtex are going to the Tom Tom bar to watch “girls in their underwear”, she decides to turn up uninvited. She arrives at the bar elegantly dressed as a “woman”, embodying a male imposed definition of femininity. The sequence at the Tom Tom bar signals Peggy’s entry into the male world and her first successful attempt at feminine mimicry. Here Peggy adopts a feminine mask: she dresses seductively, sits

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on the lap of one of the Playtex executives and laughs flirtatiously. Her mimicry is a success and she gains the approval of the men, with the exception of Pete Campbell who looks on disapprovingly (partly because he knows Peggy too well to be convinced by her performance and partly because he has imposed his own desire upon her to be a different kind of woman). As a woman, Peggy cannot gain direct access to masculine discourse, thus “learning to speak their language” consists of playing with the feminine in a mimetic manner without being reduced to the role she is performing. As Irigaray (1985: 76) states:

To Play with Mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. . . It also means “to unveil” the fact that if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere.*

Indeed, when Peggy “plays” the feminine at the Tom Tom bar she does not allow herself to be reduced to patriarchal discourse (or fantasy), or resorbed in the function of mimesis because her sense of identity remains ‘elsewhere.’

Peggy’s progression from the first to the second season can be viewed in terms of a shift from initial compliance to the feminine masquerade to a conscious and strategic employment of feminine mimicry. However, it is her characters’ shift in the third season that is the most significant for two key reasons, firstly she learns the coordinates of male fantasy and how to exploit them, and secondly (and most importantly) she gains agency and a voice as she begins to actively vocalize her position on equal rights for women.

Throughout *Mad Men*, male desires and fantasies are revealed and crystallized through the advertisements created by the male executives at Sterling Cooper. The theme of male fantasy comes to the fore again in Season Three in the creation of the ad campaign for Patio diet soft drink (later to become Pepsi diet cola). The inspiration for the campaign is Ann-Margaret’s saccharine rendition of “Bye Bye Birdie” which appears to enchant each man who views it but strikes Peggy as a phony performance by a girl with “an ability to be 25 and act 14” (“Love Among the Ruins”, 3:2). Given that the soft drink is to be marketed to figure-conscious women, Peggy suggests that the fantasy depicted in the advertisement should be a female one. In a conversation that recalls those surrounding the Playtex bra campaign in Season Two, Don’s response is to dismiss the notion of female fantasy as entirely contingent upon male fantasy: “Men want her. Women want to be her” Don says to Peggy, “I’m sorry if that makes you uncomfortable” (“Love Among the Ruins”, 3:2). Despite Don’s convictions, Peggy perceives that the advertisement will fail as it can only be an empty simulacrum of the already mimetic original, and she is later proven right when the men from Patio reject the campaign. However, the experience of being present during the creation of the advertisement is valuable as it provides Peggy with a unique opportunity to observe and understand male fantasy from within.

In the second key instance of feminine mimicry enacted by Peggy, she performs her own imitative

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version of “Bye Bye Birdie” in front of her mirror in her nightgown. The performance is awkward and grotesque in its failure to capture the feminine masquerade achieved by Ann-Margaret, but this failure reveals the grotesquerie at the heart of the feminine masquerade itself. Throughout her private performance, Peggy reveals her acute awareness of the imitative and constructed nature of the feminine gender as well as an understanding that this construction adheres to a collective male fantasy. Through the performance she is learning the coordinates of male fantasy and playing at embodying them.

Interestingly, when Salvatore Romano (Bryan Batt) performs his imitation of “Bye Bye Birdie” at home in his pajamas for his wife, the performance is far less grotesque and takes on vastly different connotations. Despite the fact that Sal must imitate a woman to enact the performance, thereby essentially performing an instance of Drag, his inner belief in the truth of femininity (and perhaps a desire to *be* feminine) renders his performance far more ‘real’ than Peggy’s. Where Peggy’s performance is ludicrous in its exaggerated constructedness, Sal’s is tinged with sadness in its revelation of repressed homosexual desires. Sal’s wife is notably shaken by this revelation, which remains unbeknownst to Sal who is entirely absorbed in his effeminate performance.

By Season Three Peggy has developed a firm feminist consciousness and she conveys a familiarity with the ideals of second wave feminism beginning to be espoused in the mainstream press in the early 1960s. When Peggy goes to Don to ask for a pay rise she cites the recently passed equal pay act of June 1963: “I don’t know if you read it in the paper but they passed a law where women who do the same job as men will get paid the same thing. Equal pay” (“The Fog”, 3:5). At the start of Season One Peggy earned a mere \$35 a week as Don’s secretary. She received a \$5 a week pay rise after getting her second copywriting assignment, and presumably earns something in the vicinity of \$100 as a copy writer given that she tells Don that her secretary doesn’t respect her because she earns \$71 more a week than her. Don’s initial condescending response is to propose that ‘maybe we need to get you a cheaper secretary.’ Peggy rightly points out to Don, “Paul Kinsey does the same work as I do and not as well sometimes” (“The Fog”, 3:5). While we don’t know Kinsey’s earnings, we do discover that Ken Cosgrove (Aaron Stanton) earns \$300 per week and that Harry Crane (Rich Sommer) earns \$225 per week after being granted his pay rise. Don Draper similarly has no hesitation in demanding a pay rise and is successful in attaining a staggering \$45,000 per year (or \$865 per week). Thus Don’s refusal to support Peggy’s request for a pay rise due to budgeting is highly inadequate, sexist and demeaning. Later, when Peggy makes her desire to be on the Hilton account known to Don he snaps at her ‘You have an office and a job that a lot of full grown men would kill for. Stop asking for things’ (‘Seven Twenty Three’, 3:7). This reference to “full grown men” renders Don’s subconscious thinking clear; despite his belief in her talents, as a woman Peggy cannot be seen as equal to her male counterparts.

Peggy continues to fight for her rights and when Don orders her to follow him to his new firm

by simply telling her to be there on Sunday to help them collect accounts, she makes a stand. “You just assume I’ll do whatever you say”, she says to Don, “just follow you like some nervous poodle”. “I’m not going to beg you” Don replies, to which Peggy responds, “beg me, you didn’t even ask me . . . I don’t want to make a career out of being there so you can kick me when you fail”. (“Shut the Door. Have a Seat”, 3:13). Her vocal claim to independence is precisely the slap that Don needs to rethink his treatment of her, and despite his protestations, Don does later beg Peggy to come with him to Sterling Cooper Draper Price thus acknowledging her value and finally granting her the respect she deserves. “What if I say no?” Peggy asks in response to Don’s offer, to which Don replies, “I will spend the rest of my life trying to hire you” (“Shut the Door. Have a Seat2, 3:13). While throughout the three seasons, Don provides vital assistance in helping Peggy achieve increasingly more senior roles in the workplace, it is ultimately Peggy who attains her own success first through a combination of strategic feminine mimicry and finally through an active assertion of women’s rights.

Betty, Joan and Peggy make vastly different choices in response to the limited roles available to middle-class white women in 1960s America. Of these, I would argue that only Peggy’s feminist response allows for the possibility of genuine agency. Where feminism, in its pursuit of equality and change, is progressive on both an individual and a social level, hysteria and the feminine masquerade are both inner-directed, narcissistic responses that continue to define female subjectivity in highly limited and stereotyped ways. Betty and Joan correspond to two diverse yet dominant images of 1960s patriarchal fantasy and both characters are ultimately trapped within that construction of the feminine. In contrast, by gaining insight into the patriarchal fantasy structure, yet refusing to be defined by it, Peggy demonstrates the potential for female empowerment within a repressive patriarchal social order.

Don Draper and the ‘American Dream:’ personal & collective fantasy

“We’re supposed to believe that people are living
one way and secretly thinking the opposite – that’s ridiculous!”
– Salvatore Romano, *Mad Men*

As discussed above, in *Mad Men*, femininity is depicted as an imitative and performative construct that has no inherent ‘truth’, but rather adheres to the dictates of patriarchal fantasy. Similarly, the representation of male identity reveals that masculinity is constructed within the highly restrictive parameters of patriarchal ideological structures. While the series presents us with a range of masculine constructs, it is the character of Don Draper who provides the most compelling and complex case study for a discussion of masculinity. Just as Joan represents the feminine ideal, to all appearances, Don Draper functions as the embodiment of masculine perfection. Yet beneath Don’s perfected exterior lies an unstable and somewhat traumatized subjectivity that reveals the essential failure of the constructed masculine identity. Through an examination of the depiction of Don Draper, the final section of this chapter will further analyse the role of fantasy in the construction of individual and collective identities, arguing that the personal narrative of Don

Draper in *Mad Men* works to mirror the broader social and political realities of 1960s America.

Like Peggy, Don possesses the ability to model his image upon a patriarchal fantasy of gendered identity while maintaining a deeper sense of self that remains distinct from the fantasy-construction. This “other” Don Draper/Dick Whitman is largely concealed from the other characters but gradually emerges for the spectator over the course of the three seasons. For both Peggy and Don, the need to uphold an external identity based upon patriarchal fantasy is vital, as these identities work to conceal personal traumas. Traumas such as Don’s abusive childhood and Peggy’s unwanted pregnancy are erased from the character’s social realities and personas so that the fantasy-construction can be sustained. Yet these traumas maintain a highly destructive impact upon the characters in their repressed state and continually threaten to destabilize or destroy their social realities. Thus the characters are forced to continually implement protective mechanisms in order to safeguard the borders of their realities that are constantly under threat. For example, when Don pays his estranged half-brother Adam five thousand dollars to disappear from his life, he does so to protect and uphold his fantasy-construction: “I have too much here”, Don tells Adam (“5G”, 1:5). Don is generally very successful at upholding his fantasy-construction and forgetting his traumatic past, and his life is for the most part the embodiment of the American Dream. As a white male heterosexual subject he is the personification of patriarchal power and privilege, as Peggy observes: “I look at you and I think, ‘I want what he has.’ You have everything – and so much.” Don concedes that this is probably true, and yet despite his immense advantages in life, Don cannot attain true happiness for he is never able to repress his traumas entirely. Although his childhood memories are never recalled with conscious effort, they continually arise as Proustian involuntary memories that are initiated by external triggers. These memories function as traumatic breaks in Don’s fantasy-construction that threaten to tear holes in the fabric of his symbolic reality.

The notion of fantasy being defended here does not assume conscious fictionalization on the part of the individual responsible for the fantasy-construction; rather, fantasy is equated with social-reality itself. Thus, while Don’s surface identity is in some ways fictional, in that the name he uses isn’t his own, his lived experience as Don Draper is very much a reality, and therefore also a fantasy. The fact that this fantasy/reality is essentially illusory does not render it any less “real”. Indeed it is imperative that the fantasy construction does feel “real”, for without a belief in his reality, Don’s ontological security would fall apart.

In this sense, while he provides the most interesting and complex case study for this discussion, Don Draper is no more or less a construction than the other characters in the series. Pete Campbell fails to realize this when he becomes outraged at his discovery of Don’s fraudulent identity. Pete clearly has his own selfish motivations for attempting to undermine Don by revealing his ‘lie’ to Bert Cooper (Robert Morse) but he also believes an injustice has occurred and attributes Don’s success in part to his invented history and identity. Bert Cooper, however, is largely indifferent to the revelation, and seems to understand that a fictional identity is no less valuable to the

company than a 'real' one. As an advertising executive, he understands that making the fictional believable is far more important than authenticity.

The patriarchal fantasy-construction intrinsic to Don's sense of personal identity also operates on a social level as an ideological suture to underlying cultural traumas. The collective fantasy-construction depicted in the series is that of the 1960s 'American Dream,' a stable bourgeois existence dependent upon the ideological structures of capitalism and patriarchy. Such structures are supported by the advertising culture of the 1960s that features in *Mad Men*; the advertisements created by the executives at Sterling Cooper promote wholesome family values, explicitly promise lifestyles of affluence, independence and freedom and implicitly advocate a social symbolic premised on white male dominance, racial and sexual intolerance and female subordination. The collective fantasy-construction is in part supported and maintained by the advertising industry and the advertising industry is in turn reliant upon the continuance of the social fantasy. For example, a collective belief in the values of patriarchy leads Don to advocate a Mohawk Airlines ad campaign that taps into the male fantasy by giving "just the hint of a woman's thigh" ("For Those who Think Young", 2:1). Similarly, an understanding of the ideological appeal of the nuclear family underpins Peggy's reworking of the ad in which a child is saying, "what did you bring me Daddy" ("For Those who Think Young" 2:1).

Like cinema and television, advertising does not merely reflect social fantasy but actively *creates* the desires of its consumers. For advertising to work effectively it must simultaneously resonate with prevailing social ideas and values while giving rise to new values. Such values are inevitably tied to ideological notions of identity, conformity and security, as Don acknowledges when he tells the Lucky Strike executives that happiness is "the freedom from fear; it's a billboard on the side of the road that screams with reassurance that whatever you are doing is okay. *You are okay*" ("Smoke gets in Your Eyes" 1:1). Later Don's own identity becomes the focal point in his campaign pitch for the Kodak Carousel ("The Wheel", 1:13) In a brilliant sequence that intertwines Don's personal family memories with the function of advertising and the American Dream, Don gives an emotive speech to the Kodak clients describing the Kodak Wheel as a time machine that "takes us to a place where we ache to go again". "It's not called 'The Wheel,'" he continues, "it's called 'The Carousel.' It lets us travel around and around and back home again" ("The Wheel", 1:13). His pitch is illustrated with a slideshow of family photographs including Don with his newborn baby, his family on Christmas morning and an image of Don kissing Betty on New Years Eve. While all those in the room are moved by his presentation, the greatest impact is felt by Don himself, who, upon seeing his own fantasy-construction materialized in front of him, seems to suddenly grasp its importance. His photographic reenactment of a fantasmatic past initiates a fantasy of the future: as he rides the train back to Ossining, he imagines himself arriving home to a loving family where Betty tenderly watches him picking up the kiss and kissing them on their heads. The fantasy, however, fades to reality as Don arrives home to find the house empty. In this emptiness of his own making, Don is struck with despair as he sits on the stairs with his head in his hands. This final episode of Season One reveals the tentative nature

of Don's fantasy-construction. His personal narrative and family history are inevitably unstable given that they are built upon the lie of a fictional identity, yet this lie functions as Don's only real "truth", just as the American Dream itself is premised on a series of ideological fictions misperceived as 'reality.'

This instability of "The American Dream" is revealed most forcefully in the Third Season with the assassination of President Kennedy. The presence of this historical event within the series effectively situates the characters' lives within the cultural and political realities of 1960s America and enables certain allegorical links to be drawn between aspects of the character's personal narratives and the broader political context. Kennedy's death, which functions in the series (and in American culture) as a metaphor for the death of innocence and rupturing of the American collective fantasy-construction, mirrors the partial collapse of Don's personal fantasy-construction. Throughout the Third Season, Don Draper gradually loses his authority and his position of unquestioned privilege in both the family and the workplace: Betty tells him she no longer loves him and he discovers that she is leaving him for another man; the paternal figure of Conrad Hilton expresses disappointment in Don's abilities, he is coerced to begrudgingly sign a contract after which he learns that Sterling Cooper is being sold to McCann Erickson where he will become just another cog in the wheel. Don's loss of authority and the disintegration in his sense of (constructed) identity parallels the collapse of the patriarchal symbolic that results from JFK's premature death.

It is fitting that Don's personal disintegration coincides with that of the American symbolic order given that Don is a patriotic figure with a strong personal investment in the American Dream, which is conveyed especially through the advertising campaigns he creates, as discussed above. The construction of Don Draper's identity is thus intertwined with the American symbolic itself; he is a product of the American Dream and requires its continued existence to sustain his own personal fantasy-construction. Don's fantasy is further dependant upon the incorporation of others, and specifically women, into his sense of self. Betty's ability to perform her role as ideal housewife and mother is pertinent to maintaining his position within the American symbolic as the patriarchal figure within the nuclear family. Similarly, Don projects his fantasies and desires onto each of the women with whom he has an affair, allowing them to reflect different aspects of his own subjectivity. When he begs Peggy to come with him to the new agency, Don openly admits that he has been seeing her as an extension of himself ("Shut the Door. Have a Seat", 3:13), and this is arguably how he sees all women. The potential and actual loss of these women from his life in the third season therefore threatens to undermine his own identity.

As Don's fantasmatic frame begins to disintegrate, he starts to lose his stable sense of identity and his belief in the American Dream. Here the vital function of fantasy in sustaining reality is apparent, as Zizek (1999: 51) explains:

fantasy is on the side of reality – that is, it sustains the subject's "sense of reality": when the

PREVIOUSLY ON

phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'unreal' nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not "pure fantasy" but, on the contrary, *that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.*

In the final episode of the third season, Don very briefly conveys that he perceives this "nightmarish universe" during his somewhat cryptic answer to the question of why he doesn't want to go to McCann. He tells Peggy: "There are people out there who buy things, people like you and me. And something happened, something terrible, and the way they saw themselves is gone, and nobody understands that – but you do, and that's very valuable" ("Shut the Door. Have a Seat", 3:13). While this statement could be dismissed as merely a sales pitch to Peggy, it can also be understood as an acknowledgement of a deep cultural loss, and a personal identification with that loss. The "people out there", who Don he refers to are the American public but they are also people "like him" who have experienced a terrible, nightmarish, loss of reality and loss of identity as a direct result of a disintegrating and unsupportable cultural fantasy. Don and Peggy's shared ability to see the loss of reality perhaps stems from the traumas they have both experienced that remain at the heart of their subjectivities. They understand the vital role of repression and the importance of maintaining the phantasmatic frame to mask the 'something terrible' that exists beneath the façade. Thus Don very quickly sutures over the loss: he creates the new advertising agency and as he tells Peggy, he is moving on. If Don seems to momentarily grasp the nightmarish universe, he is also aware that he cannot allow "the phantasmatic frame" to disintegrate entirely. For Don, as for the American symbolic order itself, fantasy is the vital support mechanism required to uphold reality.

The final sequences of Season Three work to conceal and overcome the sense of personal and cultural loss that has for the most part permeated the season. The chosen team from Sterling Cooper are assembled and relocated in the temporary office space of a hotel room, and there is a strong sense of hope and possibility for the future. This sentiment is strengthened as Roy Orbison's *Shahadaroba* plays over the closing credits, the Arabic word meaning "the future is much better than the past". "Face the future and forget about the past" the lyrics implore. Thus, the series ends with the successful repression and masking of personal and collective traumas, the renewal of the fantasy-construction and the continuance of America's patriarchal symbolic.

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