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Chapter 4

Paying the Price: *Penoza* - Combining Motherhood and a Career
(in Crime)

Joke Hermes

A lead character can make or break television drama. This actress makes it and turns it into more than what it would seem to be on paper. Powerful and raw, elegant and emotionally pure.' The jury of the film- and television award parade De Gouden Kalveren (the Golden Calves) could hardly have put it more astutely when they lauded Monic Hendrickx and crowned her – quite rightly – 'best actress in television drama.' Because if there is one reason to follow *Penzoza* since 2010, it is Hendrickx playing Carmen van Walraven.

(Maas 2013)

This long quotation from a regional Dutch newspaper does what all Dutch newspapers did: it lauds *Penzoza* (NPO 3, 2010–2015), acclaimed Dutch television crime drama series featuring a strong female lead character. Interestingly, the heroine is an antiheroine. She makes a career in crime, not the first thing one thinks of when reading 'elegant and emotionally pure.' This chapter inquires into what it is that makes *Penzoza* attractive beyond its lead character. The question is a poignant one, given that, contrary to its good press, *Penzoza's* strong woman lead character can be read as a throwback to earlier times rather than a reversal of traditional notions of gender.

From a feminist perspective, women behaving badly invite us to revisit stereotypes and to recombine gender notions. As Buonanno suggests in her Introduction: antiheroines help expand the spectrum of women's perceived capacity to encompass areas of agency that they have long been deemed unsuitable for. At first glance, this is exactly what *Penzoza* does. However, while *Penzoza's* lead actress Monic Hendrickx does an excellent job, her character, Carmen van Walraven, is a woman who seems to live a life that could be set in the 1950s untouched by second-wave feminism. Veiled by the greater audacity of featuring crime from the perspective of a successful criminal family business, the series offers a second layer of rewriting morality that appears to erase feminism in favour of a mythical notion of what makes women strong. *Penzoza* offers an old myth of motherhood as its solution to how to understand the working woman after over a century of struggle over women's rights.

Penzoza's core ideological work hardly touches on the rights and wrongs of criminal dealings; the series offers a different type of 'usable story' (Mephram 1990: 59). *Penzoza* is a story that helps come to terms with how to think about being a woman and a mother in neo-liberal times that favour individualism and ambition. Stories, Mephram argues, are a form of enquiry that helps us as individuals to come to forms of social self-understanding (1990: 60). Television in such cases functions as 'transmodern teacher' (Hartley 1999: 41).

As television's pedagogy is shaped in the trial and error of using and renewing generic conventions, its lessons can be deeply ambiguous. These do justice to the deep insecurities and ideological strife that build societies, a prominent one of which, today, has to do with how to understand and define gender. Television's lessons deserve careful critical attention to untie some of the knots it so brilliantly presents as solutions – which they may not be. Of course such undoing of knots is not without risk. Pitching *Penzoza's* version of how women can be strong against the feminist discussion of motherhood is not a confrontation with a guaranteed outcome.

This chapter discusses *Penzoza* based on an analysis of its reception in newspaper and news magazine reviews, published over its three seasons aired to date (September 2010 – July 2015) and the announcement of a fourth season (to start in September 2015).¹ All major Dutch newspapers, newsweeklies, monthly and a fair number of the regional papers wrote about *Penzoza*, using the array of possibilities print news media have: announcing the new series on its television pages; critical reviews in the media, culture and weekend sections; bylines reviewing television programming and interviews with the actors playing main characters and with the makers of the series. Recurring themes are the quality of the cast and the comparison of *Penzoza* with *The Sopranos*. The novelty of a mother who becomes a gangster and the featuring of a 'strong woman' are major themes, followed by the commercial success of the series (it has been sold to a number of other countries), the series' explicit violence and how 'real' it feels. Morality is hardly a topic at all. The fact that a mother is allowed to employ whatever means she has to provide for her children and to keep them safe apparently is both morally self-evident and self-explanatory.

The Facebook page and Twitter feed initiated by *Penzoza's* broadcaster KRO add fairly little to the newspaper coverage. They do include more criticism, almost absent in the newspapers. There are those who feel *Penzoza* gets to be too violent and that its plotlines become too convoluted and artificial. Overall audience reactions are as positive as those of the reviewers and journalists in the press. Summarizing the reviews and news items, it can be said that 'motherhood' is clearly the most central of the recurring themes that intrigues across different media. This provides the focus in this chapter for the reading of what makes *Penzoza* such lauded and well-watched television.

Penzoza has been screened on public television from 2010 onwards by public broadcaster KRO. Like other locally made crime series, it has had reasonable to increasingly good ratings. It is different from almost all other crime fiction produced by the Dutch public and commercial broadcasters. Its main character is a woman and she is a criminal. Without ever intending to become a career criminal, Carmen van Walraven-de Rue, daughter of an Amsterdam mobster, finds herself drawn into the world of crime when her husband is murdered on their driveway in front of their youngest son. Carmen has just asked him to withdraw from the crime empire he has built with two associates who are boyhood friends.

In three seasons shot over five years (a fourth season is to start in September 2015), Carmen changes from a concerned mother who feels it is not safe to become a police

informant into a career criminal who, together with two associates of her own, controls her drug supply lines. While the figure of a woman heading a crime syndicate is not entirely novel, in the Dutch context there is quite a discord between a woman as mother who fights to make sure her loved ones are safe and a criminal mastermind who is implicated in the death of a series of men as well as her own sister. In *Carmen* as mother and criminal who wants to get out, the series has found its golden dilemma. Likened by Dutch director Johan Nijenkamp to the eternal love triangle in a soap opera (*The Bold and the Beautiful* springs to mind), a crime series around a character who has learnt to ignore the dubious morality of a criminal life from childhood onwards but has little other qualifications to earn a living and protect her loved ones could go on forever, especially in a family-focused culture such as the Dutch one. Television critic Beerekamp explains at the beginning of the second season:

Just as *The Godfather II* was better than its original, to everyone's surprise, director Diederik van Rooijen and scenarists Pieter Bart Korthuis and Franky Ribbens outdid themselves with the comeback of crime tsarina Carmen van Walraven (Monic Hendrickx). The premise is that organized crime and a fulfilling family life are hard to combine. This is not so much illustrated by serious abuse, as it is by the way in which family members – wives, children and grandchildren – are involved in abductions and pay-offs. All of that in apparent disregard for how important family relations are to those who love traditional Dutch 'stamppot' (stew).

(Beerekamp 2013)

In an interview, Monic Hendrickx underscores how important Carmen being a mother is:

Her motherhood is what holds the series together. If not, it would be an ordinary bang-bang-you're-dead series. She needs her children to have a safe future; that is what drives her. Her children grow up though, she gets to have empty nest syndrome. How to protect your children when they leave home?

(Takken 2012)

Apparently the fact that Carmen van Walraven never chose to lead a life of crime is important, the television critics agree. Van Gelder characterizes *Penoza* as '(a) series about a woman who has to save her children' (2010). Actress Hendrickx explains again and again what she feels is Carmen's predicament:

(Carmen) does not like the world of the mob, but she does love him (her husband who is a major weed dealer). When he is murdered, she takes control. Of necessity, to protect her children, and perhaps because something in her genes makes her susceptible to an adrenalin high.

(Nauta 2010)

While the death toll mostly consists of men and grows to a considerable number, and children are abducted to be held hostage, Monic Hendrickx's Carmen van Walraven presents the mother as unwitting and initially unwilling career woman. In a sleight of hand move, feminist notions of women's rights and the construction of gender difference as a power and social control mechanism are dismissed. By offering what should be the abject figure of a mother who becomes a wholesale drugs seller as a kind of hero instead, *Penzoza* suggests we never needed feminism to define women's strength. Why would it do so? Is this an easy way out of having to think about where Dutch society stands in regard to gender relations, a return to a fantasized period of unproblematic and clear-cut gender distinctions? Or, does the series mark a historical moment for the Dutch rewriting of motherhood ideology from a romantic to a more feminist or perhaps a neo-liberal one? Is it a coming to terms with the deep Dutch conservatism regarding how children ideally should be taken care of by charting the transition of a stay-at-home mum who after two seasons as unwilling victim decides to embrace the only career perspective she sees?

Penzoza: Quality 'Polder' Crime Drama

Before turning to discussion of the tradition of Dutch crime drama and the continuing strong Dutch allegiance to a conservative notion of motherhood, it is useful to follow the critics in how they offer a frame to understand and value *Penzoza*. The long quotations provide background to the analysis presented here and 'couleur locale' to understand discussion about *Penzoza* and itself. As said, the television critics like *Penzoza*. What they call the 'polder' version of *The Sopranos* (van Rhee 2013b) satisfies all the major requirements for quality drama: 'a stable, intelligent scenario, elegant acting including the smaller parts. And of course, in the demanding lead role Carmen who keeps taking on new colours and emotions: Monic Hendrickx' (Rijghard 2013). In true Dutch egalitarian fashion that values normality and ordinariness above any form of eccentricity or putting oneself above or apart from others, all the praise for the series needs counterbalancing. The title of the series offers a useful handle to do so rather than consideration of mothers-as-drug-dealers. *NRC* critic Limburg is unhappy with the series' 'silly' name:

The title is a real pity. If you are going to copy *The Sopranos* – the mix of crime and family life – why not also steal the name? Why borrow the first name of lead character Carmen van Walraven (an often amazing Monic Hendrickx) from Carmela Soprano, but give the series a silly [...] comedy name. Why not name the series after the family like the Americans did [...]?

(Limburg 2010)

Likening *Penzoza* to *The Sopranos* is something of a heresy, given that it was made on a budget likely less than a tenth of the HBO production. Still, *Penzoza*, although home-grown

television drama, is so good, it deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as international top drama that is in a league all of its own, argues van der Kooi:

Unfair to compare *Penoza* (to *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*) but the first episode vindicated the fact that I tipped the series here unseen, arguing that a top cast (Monic Hendrickx, Fedja van Huêt, Marcel Hensema, Olga Zuiderhoek) does not appear in a crap series. The casting of Hendrickx as mob woman Carmen van Walraven [...] may be surprising, she is grandiose in the first episode in which she is, as is Carmela (!) Soprano, the 'wife of' and not the spider in the web that she will become according to the series synopsis.

(van der Kooi 2010)

Other early reviews follow a similar carefully enthusiastic approach to evaluating *Penoza*. Interestingly, Dutch Carmen van Walraven, who in the narrative holds Tony Soprano's position, is likened to Carmela. Critic Beerekamp's exposé makes clear how Carmen as antiheroine holds a non-position. Easier to understand her as a wife and mother than as the career criminal she will become.

Imagine that Tony Soprano is shot in front of his family at the end of the very first episode of the very first season. And that his wife Carmela is asked by a crime partner to mind the shop because she has 'the brains'. That is exactly what has happened in the first two of eight episodes of the Dutch crime series *Penoza* (KRO). Even if writer Pieter Bart Korthuis and director Diederik van Rooijen were to maintain that the Monic Hendrickx character is called Carmen by chance and that the narrative and décor of Amsterdam and the Vinkeveen lakes are really very different from *The Sopranos'* New Jersey, there are still a number of significant resemblances.

Both series are set against a background of the economies of scale and the hardening of organised crime. Carmen's father [...] was also a criminal but he is a 'chip from the old block' who would never cross certain boundaries. Husband Frans [...] smuggles hash but gets involved in rip deals with hundreds of kilos of coke much against his wish.

Penoza also plays of the tensions between the upper- and the underworld. Children of criminals attend ordinary schools that do not much appreciate when they bring a gun. Carmen and Carmela both would like to live a decent life while knowing that the villas they live in cannot be kept on an ordinary salary.

(Beerekamp 2010)

Later reviews are comfortable in continuing the international comparison and understanding Carmen in a traditional gender frame, while *Penoza* stands the test of being well-made entertainment and possibly more. Longer articles in news weeklies *Vrij Nederland* (van der Jagt 2012) and *Elsevier* (van der List 2013) open with the by now commonplace reference to

The Sopranos. *Penoza* producer Alain de Levita, veteran Dutch television maker of earlier groundbreaking successful crime series, is not afraid to even bring *Breaking Bad* into the *Penoza* equation with blatant disregard for *Penoza*'s gender intervention.

It is a format of a kind. *Breaking Bad* is an example, and *Dexter* and *The Sopranos*. We see anti-heroes, people who end up in situations they cannot get out of and who try to make the best of it. Audience finds it easy to identify. It makes you want to forgive the main characters for their crimes. When someone gets shot, it is in a good cause, to protect the children, or the family.

(Onkenhout 2013)

Mostly though, *Penoza* is complimented for its realism. As the new man in Carmen's life, played by Eric Corton, in an interview says: '*Penoza* is about real problems' (van der Heuvel 2014). In an earlier article, series writer Korthuis is quoted as saying that *Penoza* has 'couleur locale': 'To make it realistic I set store by detailed Dutch scenery. There is a coke transport that has the coke in the fish. Or the coke is stored in a shed that warehouses flower bulbs. There is a bit of a joke when Carmen has to do duty inspecting for head lice in school' (Takken 2012). *De Volkskrant* (Onkenhout 2013) offers a similar quotation from Korthuis: 'This is not a fake American series. You can feel it is the Netherlands.'

Recognizing scenery, musical references, jokes and turns of phrase is something audiences appreciate. Throughout television's history, this approach has assured the success of local drama produced relatively cheaply (compared to international drama). *Penoza*'s production crew and actors underline that *Penoza* does more than most and is careful and spot-on in its referencing. At least as important a factor in *Penoza*'s increasing success in the ratings seems to be the series' 'emotional realism'. The term was coined by Ien Ang (1985) in her study of prime-time glamour soap opera *Dallas*. While as far from realism as *Penoza* (the Netherlands does not boast a huge number of female top criminals), the oil millionaires in *Dallas* presented human dilemmas and problems that felt real according to those who wrote to Ang about what they felt made watching *Dallas* worthwhile.

Ang (1985: 42) is critical of reflective notions of realism and suggests we need to understand 'emotional realism' following the work of Barthes (1984) at the level of connotation.

It is striking; the same things, people, relations and situations which are regarded at the denotative level as unrealistic, and unreal, are at connotative level apparently not seen at all as unreal but in fact as 'recognizable'. Clearly, in the connotative reading process the denotative level of the text is put in brackets.

(Ang 1985: 42)

Going back to her *Dallas* letter writers, Ang finds that in order for them to experience *Dallas* as 'taken from life', they abstract from the denotative level of the text. While concrete situations and complications are regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences – all

of which clearly are in the realm of the emotional rather than the cognitive – *Dallas*, Ang goes on to argue, becomes meaningful in a tragic structure of feeling. It is its psychological realism that viewers find convincing rather than its scenery or settings (Ang 1985: 43–50). It is one thing to suggest that a soap opera appeals to the ‘melodramatic imagination’ (Ang 1985: 61) and quite another to suggest that the popularity of a crime series depends precisely on such a structure of meaning. When *Penzoza* is cited as being real, the critics mostly applaud its cinematography and scenaric choices. Actors Corton and Hendrickx however appeal precisely to the emotional realism of *Penzoza* as that which draws in and hooks viewers: *Penzoza* presents ‘real’ people with real problems, no matter that the circumstances of their lives may be somewhat far-fetched.

Understanding the becoming meaningful of a television series via Barthes’ (1984) notion of myth, which follows up from the levels of denotation and connotation, is useful in explaining how and why Carmen being a mother is given such airplay. Before coming to a short discussion of motherhood mythology and feminism’s historically uneasy relation to it, it is useful to situate *Penzoza* in the (relatively short) Dutch tradition of television drama production. It is meant to argue two points. The first is the Dutch preference for dark and tragic drama; the second is how femininity and feminism especially in the crime series – and perhaps partly as a result of this predilection – are fraught with uneasy tension.

Dutch Crime Drama

The Netherlands belongs to a small language community. Its history of television production is limited when it comes to drama and of global importance when it comes to format trade. Both these characteristics are directly linked to the advent of commercial broadcasting in the Netherlands in 1989. Half a century of a highly mixed television diet, consisting of home-made productions and a vast number of international series and shows, has apparently made the Dutch a very good – because impatient – test audience. To succeed in the Netherlands has become a mark of quality (Benjamin 2012). Relevant here is that expertise gained in soap production (one of the innovations the new commercial stations brought to the screen) was used half a decade later to make the first of a range of successful Dutch crime series, delivered by both the commercial and the public broadcasters. Alain de Levita, producer of *Penzoza*, started his career making the first of these series called *Baantjer* (RTL 1995–2006).

Making soaps is mostly about budget control while hooking a loyal audience. The first Dutch soap series to be made was *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden/Good Times, Bad Times* based on an Australian script and Australian production expertise. Compared to the German version (they started producing their own *Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten* based on the same original script), O’Donnell (1999) is amazed to find a great preference for tragedy and very little humour in the Dutch one, which is a lot jollier. As if its reformed protestant tradition informs Dutch television production rather than the equally important

but less uniquely Dutch catholic tradition the country also boasts, *Penzoza* is both dark and relatively cheap in as far as its production cost is concerned. In interviews, De Levita, *Penzoza*'s producer, and Korthuis, its writer, underline the dexterity with which budgets are controlled.

What does it cost?

Alain de Levita: 'In the Netherlands we are not very good at making film, but we are in television. We belong with the best television countries in the world. Budgets are low, we spend our money adroitly. A *Penzoza* episode will cost two tot two-and-a-half hundred K. [read: thousand Euros]'

Pieter Bart Korthuis: 'In Denmark they spend an enormous amount of money on series. That is why they make only one a year. For one episode they spend a million.'

Alain de Levita: 'With *Penzoza* we come really close to the Danes. The Americans felt the quality was really high [note: the *Penzoza* remake rights have just been sold to ABC in the United States]. When they heard what we spend on making the series, they would not believe it. They use our total budget to make one episode.'

(Onkenhout 2013)

Other newspapers also underline international success and low production cost (Groenier 2013; Valk 2013). The regional newspaper *De Gelderlander* adds that director Van Rooijen has his cast improvise more than is usual. Given the quality of the actors, this may also be a clever way of cutting cost while boosting quality (Flier 2013). By summer 2015, the series had been sold to seven other countries (van der Jagt 2015).

There is one other element beyond being cheap and relatively dark that may have contributed to *Penzoza*'s success. The series has an interesting pedigree. It was initially commissioned by Talpa for a commercial broadcaster and became collateral damage when Talpa begged out (eventually the John de Mol production house was sold to ITV). Public broadcaster KRO eventually expressed an interest in *Penzoza*. From the 1990s onwards, KRO had been branding itself via signature crime series (mostly imported) and a number of locally made series that never managed to get the ratings the commercial series realized in the same period. With *Penzoza*, they appear to have managed to combine popular appeal of the commercial crime series with the kind of quality KRO likes to see in its drama series, ensured by high profile stage actors and an undercurrent of tragedy.

Korthuis developed and wrote *Penzoza* initially for Talpa who were looking for a longer running series. That he eventually ended up with KRO, he saw as an advantage. 'I never wanted to make a bam-bam-you're-dead series, and public broadcasting allows for far more emphasis on characters and less on action.'

(van der Jagt 2012)

The long and the short of it is that *Penzoza* more and more became serious drama and steers away from comedic interludes. In the early days, the references to Carmen's father's criminal activities allowed for some levity. Director Van Rooijen answers the observation of the *NRC* interviewer by suggesting that initially a little humour was felt to be in order:

The series is not without humour. Witness the young man who at his wedding is introduced to his new in-laws and mentions to his bride: 'Harm S., Johan M., there are seriously little people with last names in your family.'

Van Rooijen nods: 'You need to be able to laugh from time to time. The criminal milieu has its own amicable codes, and that opened the backdoor to a little comedy. As viewer you will have to deal with a lot of misery the coming weeks. But the humour had to come from those people themselves. We did not want to make the Amsterdam mob ridiculous. We have tried to make it as credible as possible.'

(Van Gelder 2010)

The host of Dutch crime series that preceded *Penzoza*, produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, screens a remarkable number of women, including station chiefs and senior detectives. Women's emancipation is implied to be a good thing – something of a surprise, given that motherhood ideology remains strong in the Netherlands, as shall be discussed in the section below. The best explanation for the high number of women in these series seems to be in the extraordinary emphasis on the group of policemen and women as a work family. This is underlined by the high number of sibling relationships in police teams, the occasional (divorced) couple and by the meal served by the senior detective's wife in their big live-in kitchen in *Baantjer* at the end of each episode. After the team has enjoyed a good dinner, the senior detective, in true father figure style, explains how he broke the case. In less flagrant examples, too, the police teams in the Dutch series underline Ella Taylor's (1989) assertion that families (whether real or work families) are a key element in television fiction (see also Hermes 2005: 45–46). While vastly different from these police series, *Penzoza* offers an even stronger emphasis on family ties, now elevated to storyline level and couched in terms of loyalty and betrayal and a mother's obligations to her children.

The Housewife Legacy: Motherhood in Dutch Culture

According to Korthuis, *Penzoza*'s main writer for season 1 to 3, the secret of *Penzoza*'s success might well be that it has found a way to portray a female criminal who is neither too hard nor too soft and is therefore convincing: 'She is hard and soft. In her criminal activities and in her relationships, she is a vulnerable woman' – something American series have never managed to achieve, nor was handled well in the American *Penzoza* remake *Red Widow* (ABC, 2013), which was not a success (Onkenhout 2013). The Dutch television reviewers like Carmen

for being 'strong and independent, a power woman but also vulnerable' (Maas 2014). The feminist monthly *Opzij* describes Carmen as 'fragile and hard' (van Wiggen 2012). Actress Monic Hendrickx perceives her character as an interesting set of contradictions.

'Carmen is not a strong woman. For instance, she does not find a balance between her temper and her emotions, she has no overview. She enjoys the good life provided for by the shady dealings of her husband. Her children, in the end, make her vulnerable.'

(Nauta 2010)

In a later interview, Hendrickx adds that Carmen has become addicted to adrenalin and excitement (Onkenhout 2013). She is a lead character with a negative goal (she wants to escape from the life of crime that also draws her in). Korthuis therefore quits after three seasons: 'How long can you go on with a main character who is negatively motivated?' (Onkenhout 2013). In another interview Hendrickx remarks that Carmen becomes more extreme in the third season and more vulnerable. She turns into a hardened criminal and her children start to revolt (Groenier 2013). Others also remark on how Carmen in season 3 decides to no longer be a victim, but head for a position of power and influence. She will start doing business with a Colombian cartel on her own. As *Algemeen Dagblad* points out: 'Carmen is no longer innocent, she becomes immoral' (van Rhee 2013a). *De Volkskrant* too now calls her an amoral choice (Onkenhout 2013) – an epithet not given earlier. Despite Carmen now pursuing a criminal career, her motivation never changes. As *De Gelderlander* has it: She is a mother who has no choice but to keep going in the criminal world to protect her children (Flier 2013). As in the earlier seasons, her very choices will consequently endanger her children. This is proof not of the faulty logic of her choice, but of the strength of her feelings as a mother even when she starts to sense the strength of very different feelings to do with wielding power in a dangerous world, of being a career woman par excellence. A perfect mix according to series writer Korthuis in a long spread in *De Volkskrant*:

Pieter Bart Korthuis: 'One of the people involved in the American remake said that countless attempts have been made to narrate a crime series from a woman's perspective. It never worked, he said, because these women were always too masculine. They were a mafia mum, a butch, or the equivalent of a soccer wife. A main character that has motherly feelings and penetrates into the world of crime (and secretly likes the high that gives her) is a combination they had not seen before.'

(Onkenhout 2013)

While Carmen gets addicted to being in charge, the series fares well by steadfastly presenting Carmen as a mother. Doing so muddies any attempt to present the life of crime (or crime fighting for that matter) as clean or clear-cut, as 'professional' activities that do not touch the core of the characters involved. It makes for strong (crime) drama. As a feminist invested in the gender trouble, an antiheroine might raise *Penzoa* is most of all a piece of popular fiction

that tells a story of what it might be like to be a woman today: to be a mother, to become a worker and, by season 3, a professional. The telling of that story involves querying and rewriting dominant ideology regarding motherhood and professionalism. It is what makes popular fiction such a fascinating domain; it is ultimately a mirror, be it a somewhat distorting one, that helps understand contemporary culture and society, including the options open to individuals, whether women or men, young or old to rewrite what is expected of them conventionally. Writer Korthuis feels he is playing with fire here. He loves how the series transcends conventions and dislikes it at the same time. As noted earlier, he quits the series because of Carmen's negative motivation. In the long extract below, he tries to explain 'the beauty' of *Penzoza*:

Writer Pieter Bart Korthuis wonders whether viewers will remain committed to Carmen now that she is wittingly making wrong choices. 'The idea is that she feels safer on top of the ape rock. She transforms from a semi-innocent woman into a criminal. She has become her husband. She doesn't do what she does for the fun of it or for the money but simply because it has become her world.'

'*Penzoza* 1 and 2 were really flight stories with Carmen as victim. Now she becomes a leader, it is dancing on a tightrope. I mean: the audience does not necessarily have to sympathize with her. As long as they understand why she makes her choices and oversteps the boundaries. That is the challenge for season 3. What is new also is that problems are increasingly created by her own environment rather than by outsiders, for instance her lover John [Eric Corton] who starts sticking his nose into her business. And the way she has raised her children will come back to her like a boomerang. While she was involved in dirty business, she always held on to the illusion that she could keep all this from her children. But of course she did do damage to them by exposing them to the mores of the underworld. And when they follow their mother's example and run of the rails, we see that she has failed. That is *Penzoza's* extra layer. All parents will recognise that phase of trouble in raising one's children. The beauty of it is that you see Natalie, Lucien and Stijn grow up in front of the cameras because we had considerable time lag between the series. That is really rare in Dutch series.'

(van Rhee 2013a)

It is interesting that Korthuis moves away from motherhood and motherhood ideology by framing *Penzoza's* narrative as about parenting rather than as being about motherhood. *Penzoza* will remain ambiguous on whether women should try to become professionals. At first (and second) sight, *Penzoza* argues the opposite case. Not many of the women characters are portrayed primarily other than in their relation to family members while most of the men are portrayed in their professional capacity (a police inspector, other career criminals). When Carmen does decide to become a professional in season 3, she will get shot at the end of the season, by the look of it lethally. Being a professional comes at a price.

It is fascinating that Carmen as a character is an unapologetic reference to the archetypal mother: She does anything for the children – and she makes a mess of it. Her daughter

Natalie is a disturbed girl suffering from some kind of depression. Because of her, mother and children return from their exile after having given evidence against the family (the murder of Carmen's husband was an inside job) and land in a new series of dangerous complications in season 2. Boris, the youngest, brings a gun to school to defend himself against bullying, which is not appreciated by the school. The older brother experiments with drugs and will get his girlfriend killed. And this is not counting her children rebelling against Carmen and Carmen's views on life and how to live it. While wholly unrealistic at a denotative level, Carmen invites our sympathies at the connotative level, at the level of emotional recognition. The emotional realism *Penzoza* achieves depends, so it seems, on the deep contradiction at the heart of the myth of motherhood wrought by feminism. Lodged painfully as a result of half a century of second-wave feminist debate around motherhood that may well have produced one of the deepest divides in the movement and may be part of how feminism never came to fully convince so many women and men. The 'problem' of motherhood is central to the next (and last) section of this chapter.

To understand the appeal of *Penzoza*, one needs to understand Carmen as a mother struggling to make a living and, from season 3 onwards, struggling to be a professional and to build a career. Carmen becomes such a recognizable figure because she so utterly fails in what she feels that she must do and yet keeps on doing it: try and protect her children by crossing any number of boundaries to do with danger, violence and loyalty. Carmen's children are not her Achilles' heel, they are who she is but they cannot define her to the point of containing her when she has to decide on how to survive. This might well be a result of the unique Dutch historical background to the series. Not in reference to what may at some point may have been the tolerance of the Dutch for diversity but its more poignant dark and repressed side: its dogmatic insistence that normality is good and that to stand out is wrong. For women, this translates into strong motherhood ideology. Children need their mothers to take care of them. To send them to day care was long seen as a selfish act of abuse. This changed towards the end of the twentieth century but, as *Penzoza* shows, has remained a sore point: what are mothers obliged to do for their children? How far does their responsibility go?

Fraught Feminist Heritage and Two Myths of Motherhood

The Netherlands has traditionally had unparalleled low labour market participation of women. In 1985, 40 per cent of women between 15 and 64 worked, which changed somewhat in the 1990s, but the higher percentage directly relates to a vast increase in part-time workers, the majority of whom are women (Van Nimwegen et al. 2002: 21). 'Champions of late motherhood' in Europe, one out of three mothers stops working after the first child while a majority of the other two-thirds change to working part-time (Van Nimwegen et al. 2002: 22). Researching career success of Dutch fathers and mothers, Van Engen et al. (2009) point to the importance of motherhood ideology in the Netherlands. While the authors

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distinguish between traditional and modern motherhood ideology (the latter allowing for the possibility that parents of either sex are able to 'mother'), the overall picture is that the Dutch feel children need to be cared for by their parents rather than in institutional arrangements. The antiheroine has her work cut out for her. She needs to challenge not one but two mythical notions that together tie women firmly to their homes and children rather than allow them careers and that have taken root across centuries: children need to be raised at home and women are best equipped to do so.

In his study of the Dutch Golden Age (the seventeenth century), Simon Schama (1988) points to the then unique notion of childrearing in the Netherlands, which was based on love. While more can be said about the particularities of this notion, the Dutch apparently have long set excessive store on good parenting (Dekker 2008; Dekker and Groenendijk 1991). Now that government policy favours higher labour market participation of women and stimulates childcare arrangements, individual couples tend to hesitate before starting a family. It is felt to be serious business, an enormous responsibility that will demand that at the very least one of the parents give up on their personal ambitions and devote themselves to the child or children. Traditional motherhood ideology, which prescribes that women should preferably be mothers and fathers should pursue a successful career to provide for the entire family, remains strong, even though from the 1970s onwards it is accepted that mothers will also work (Van Engen et al. 2009).

While international examples have served the Dutch well in making emancipated crime drama featuring an unusual number of interesting women characters (Hermes 2005: 45), other media have set decidedly less favourable examples. In a study of motherhood myths in magazines, Johnston and Swanson have concluded that the messages in them are contradictory (2003: 23). At least in the United States the most popular magazines for women in the childbearing age appear to be solely populated by white and non-employed mothers. The magazines suggest moreover that mothers would be happier if they were more competent across their three major roles of providers, protectors and playmates (2003: 30). Clearly a self-serving message (why else buy the magazines?) but also a reminder that feminism has not offered much of an alternative for (neo-)traditionalist notions of motherhood.

An antiheroine worth her salt thus needs to take on the idea that women are 'naturally' best suited to caring for children and feminism's less than heroic history in understanding and possibly changing motherhood as well. Given the fraught discussion of motherhood in twentieth century feminism, this is easier to say than to do. To wit: according to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1996), feminism essentially ignored women's roles as mothers for a long time. Noteworthy exceptions are Adrienne Rich's (1977) *Of Woman Born*, in which she distinguishes between the oppressive institution of motherhood and its sometimes enriching experience, or Roiphe's (1997) *A Mother's Eye* that likewise pleads the case of motherhood. Feminism's theoretical impasse regarding motherhood dates to the 1960s and 1970s when to have children was taken by some as a sign of a lack of commitment to the feminist cause (Simons 1984: 350). This line of argumentation can be traced back to Beauvoir's (1989)

rationalist assessment of what motherhood did to a woman's life. Betty Friedan's (1982) *The Second Stage* is the first to take issue with feminism's 'egoistic individualism' and the predominant anti-family, anti-male and anti-life attitude she observes (quoted in Simons 1984: 355). The book (i.e. Ruddick 1980) is part of the early 1980s massive offensive to stop separating women and mothering. While an important moment, given the division second-wave feminism had created between white women and women of colour exactly over motherhood and mothering, motherhood will remain deeply problematic.

Feminism after all set out to break both the taboo surrounding those who mother in a patriarchy and those who are not mothers, argues Ann Snitow (1992). In order to do so, early second-wave feminism produced a number of 'demon texts' (that understood motherhood as betrayal to the cause) for which feminists have been apologizing ever since (1992: 34). Shulamith Firestone's (1970) position that pregnancy is barbaric is just one of them. Such overly strong statements were part of what Snitow calls the harsh feminist self-questioning in the 1970s to do with taking motherhood for granted (1992: 37). To illustrate: 'family', according to Barbara Ehrenreich and others, was a grave in which the more autonomous word 'women' got buried (reported in Snitow 1992: 40). These strong sentiments run into a major backlash by the end of the 1980s. They leave Snitow wondering in 1992 how feminism might stand to gain by privileging motherhood. After all if the first wave of feminism from the end of the nineteenth century onwards is about the vote, the second wave was about the right to abortion (1992: 43).

Although 20 years later, and a continent apart, Snitow's reconstruction remains elucidating. Clearly, neither feminism nor for that matter what was then called 'patriarchy' managed to wholly contain motherhood in one single myth. As Snitow reminds us, after the 'demon' texts, feminism did break the taboo of discussing the experiences of mothers: the joy and fascination in mothering (even in a patriarchy) as well as the pain, isolation, boredom and murderousness (1992: 34). These seem a more relevant frame than the later romanticization of supermom to understanding why *Penzoza's* Carmen offers an emotionally realist reflection on motherhood. While disconcerting in her unwavering allegiance to her own idea of what a mother should do (rather than actually wondering whether her particular type of mothering is doing much for her daughter and sons), Carmen's fight with criminals is a fitting projection of the struggle that motherhood is.

There is an alternative interpretation for Carmen's motherhood to be the most referenced quality of the character in the press reviews of the series that is equally based on the simple facts that a mother entering a life of crime as a lead character is unusual in popular television drama and that the Netherlands have quite an unusually strong adherence to the idea of motherhood. The alternative interpretation would stress not only the traditional stay-at-home-mum version but also the I-am-a-better-mother-when-I-can-also-work version. This newer construct is part of government initiatives to get more women (including mothers) to work. Given Dutch seriousness about the moral duty of mothering, this will necessitate debate and rumination and careful consideration of all possible consequences. Popular culture is good at doing just that. It helps reflect on mothering from any and all ideological

angles. Whether the angle is that of a life of crime as a test of fire of one's stamina as a mum, or whether it is a careful exploration of what might go wrong when a mother takes up a career. Carmen's life of crime allows for both: at any given moment, a viewer can fault the series, realism on denotational grounds. Its narrative is far-fetched and over the top and gets to be more and more 'Hollywood' style as the series becomes be darker and darker (Meerman 2015). So far, this is not what viewers do. They let the actors know they love them (van Rhee 2013b). Telling is what people call out to Monic Hendrickx who plays Carmen Walraven. In an interview for *De Limburger*, announcing the fourth season, she says: 'People call out to me [...]: Hey, Carmen: You are a good mother! You are really great man!' (Meerman 2015). Which neatly sums up how *Penoza* not only references but apparently temporarily solves all confusion about mothering and gender: a mum can be a great guy.

The great thing about Carmen [...] is that she is both mafia and a mother. A working mum with balls. When she gives her children a hug after having endangered their lives for the umpteenth time, it has as much impact as when she roundly curses a Yugo and puts him in his place. You follow Carmen's ups and downs with beating heart, as if it is your own family fighting for her life. Sometimes it is as if you are the one getting hit in a fight, or who takes up a gun while setting up another illegal drugs deal. *Penoza* comes close, that is its power. (Maas 2013)

As an antiheroine, Carmen is not easily appropriated for the feminist cause. Given that feminism's own ambiguous track record in discussing and understanding motherhood is itself a major obstacle to do so, it would probably be best to cherish Carmen as a working woman who is loved despite being less than successful in her attempts to care for her children. As an antiheroine, she mostly urges feminist self-reflection. It is a slight deception for the 'curious feminist' who would prefer popular culture to do the work of changing the world for her. Then again, *Penoza* may well help shift deeply lodged Dutch convictions regarding how mothering can and should be done. The series producers might well try and go for a government subsidy to promote women's emancipation. The series' double take on political correctness could of course confuse policy-makers, but what extraordinary campaign material it would provide.

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Note

- 1 In total 45 unique articles referencing *Penoza* in the Dutch press from a length of 250 words upwards (the longest articles are over 2000 words, most are under a 1000) in the period August 2010–July 2015 were collected and analysed. Articles in syndicated newspapers (the regional press) are only counted once. All quotations are translated by the author.