

## ***Women We Loved: Paradoxes of public and private in the biographical television drama***

### **Abstract:**

Broadcast to critical acclaim and relatively large audiences for its niche channel, the *Women We Loved* season (BBC Four, November 2009) consisted of biographical dramatisations of three prominent female figures of 20<sup>th</sup> century British culture. These dramas shared in common narratives that centre on two aspects of public and private: the tension between public career and personal life, and the discrepancy between celebrity persona and private individual. Combining theoretical insights from feminist studies of biography with close textual analysis, this article analyses how performance, aesthetics and narrative express the ambivalent placement of their protagonists between public and private sphere.

Key words: biographical drama, feminist criticism, public and private spheres.

Enid Blyton, Gracie Fields and Margot Fonteyn. Three prominent figures of twentieth century British culture with seemingly little in common except that, according to the title of a season of biographical dramas broadcast on BBC Four in November 2009, they were *Women We Loved*. These dramas, supplemented by documentary and performance programming, furnished the niche arts and culture channel with some of its highest ever ratings (see Table 1.1). The selection of these famous women had an economic logic, as it allowed BBC Four schedulers to exploit extant archive programming showcasing Fonteyn, Fields and Blyton. Moreover, these prominent figures of 20<sup>th</sup> century culture are likely to be meaningful and intriguing to the core BBC Four audience of older, middle-class viewers. But it also has a cultural logic: dedicating whole evenings to reassessing these women was a reaffirmation of their place in the public sphere, and an exploration of British cultural history befitting the BBC's 'intelligent' digital channel. Following a formula that had proven successful for the channel in its drama output, these television films constitute revisionist accounts of these

women based upon the scrutiny of the private individual beneath the public persona. The central thrust of the dramas was to reveal the complexity and (usually) darkness of these personal lives, aiming to show the ‘truth’ beneath the celebrity surface (Andrews, 2016a).

**Table 1.1 Broadcast Information for *Women We Loved* season**

| <b>Title</b>          | <b>Broadcast Date</b> | <b>Number of Viewers</b> | <b>Supplementary archive programming</b>   |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <b><i>Enid</i></b>    | 16 November 2009      | 1, 371, 000              | <i>Bookmark: Enid Blyton</i> (original tx. BBC Two, 26 December 1992)  |
| <b><i>Gracie!</i></b> | 23 November 2009      | 1, 514, 000              | <i>Amazing Gracie</i> (original tx. BBC Four, 23 Sep 2004)   |
| <b><i>Margot</i></b>  | 30 November 2009      | 804, 000                 | <i>Marguerite and Armand</i> (Taken from <i>The Magic of Dance</i> , original tx. BBC Two, 10 December 1979) |

(Sources: BARB 2015; BBC 2015)

This is made explicit from the opening of the first film in the season, *Enid*. After an intertitled apologia reminding the viewer that ‘some scenes have been invented and events conflated for the purposes of the narrative’ fades, the camera pans past a BBC radio microphone, settling on the shadow-shrouded profile of Enid (Helena Bonham Carter). She is questioned on her prolificacy, and the possibility that she is not the true author of all of her books. Her denial is issued with haughty, wide-eyed fervour: ‘I am the guardian of our children’s morals. How can I uphold this position if there is

the merest hint that I am not all that I seem?’ The drama’s project will be to undermine this statement, to prove, indeed, that Enid was not all she seemed. This is highlighted in the very next shot, a close up of Enid’s lips as she applies crimson lipstick. Little could better suggest feminine mendacity than the act of concealing one’s true face with make-up, evoking the figure of the *femme fatale*, the popular icon of ‘epistemological trauma’ (Doane 1991, 1). The film’s key narrative thrust is to reveal the distance between Enid’s conservative public image as the embodiment of a middle-class ideal of wifeliness and motherhood, and the ‘truth’ of her more complex family life. If we are to take the claim of the intertitle seriously, the film will constitute a fact-fiction hybrid about a woman who was a self-invented character. The films in the season (which all bear a similar disclaimer) each trace this line, performing one of biography’s major tasks: unsettling the carefully constructed public image through scrutiny of the private life.

*Enid* tells the story of Blyton from childhood to the beginnings of her dementia, focusing on her harsh treatment of her first husband, Hugh (Matthew Macfadyen), and her children, and the ruthless way in which she erased from her mind and – where she could – from public record aspects of her life that didn’t suit her preferred story. She is represented as a cold fantasist, permanently damaged by her father’s abandonment of the family in her adolescence. In contrast, *Gracie!* provides an attempt at character rehabilitation rather than assassination. Gracie Fields’s reputation was significantly damaged when she left England during the Second World War to give concerts in support of the war effort, and to avoid the arrest of her Italian husband, but she was vilified in the press for doing so. The film’s narrative

focuses specifically on this part of Fields's life, eliding her rise to fame and unhappy first marriage. It is an affectionate portrayal of Fields (Jane Horrocks) that emphasises the patriotic sacrifice of her private life to public duty. 'Private life' is represented by husband Monty (Tom Hollander), who is consistently frustrated by 'our Gracie's' unwillingness to retire and become *his* Gracie. *Margot* similarly explores the effects of a delayed retirement, with a narrative structure that focuses on this specific moment from the protagonist's life. Aging prima ballerina Fonteyn (Anne-Marie Duff) is torn between the financial and emotional demands of her diplomat husband, Tito Arias (Con O'Neill), and her position as much-loved public figure. Her professional life is reinvigorated by the arrival of the charismatic Russian exile Rudolph Nureyev (Michiel Huisman), while Tito siphons off the proceeds of Margot's star partnership to pay for his attempted coup in native Panama. Each of the films explores the ways in which public success for the famous woman either conceals or causes private agony.

This 'collision between the public and private figure', as Márta Minier notes, is an age-old convention of film biopics inherited by what she calls the 'bio-docudrama'. (2014, 97). Dennis Bingham has outlined a specific resonance of public and private in the female-centred biopic:

Female biopics play on tensions between a woman's public achievements and women's traditional orientation to home, marriage and motherhood. In consequence, female biopics often find suffering (and therefore) drama in a public woman's very inability to make her decisions and discover her own destiny. (Bingham, 2010, 213)

Similar lines of argument around gendered life histories are routinely pursued in the scholarly study of biography. Feminist biography scholars have interrogated the influence of the 'separate spheres' idea in the ways in which

the lives of public women have been written. Public and private, in the life histories of women, have two interlinked but distinct meanings and consequences. The first is the traditional location of women in the domestic, private sphere, outside of the public sphere of discourse and politics. The second is the sense, as discussed above, of the biography as an attempt to excavate the private individual beneath the public persona., According to Richard Klein, controller of BBC Four at the time, this was central to the objectives of the channel's drama policy:

BBC4 is the place where dramas look to explore that space between artists' public works and private lives, shedding light on the artistic process while offering intelligent entertainment. (Conlan, 2009)

In its deconstruction of public and private spheres, the biography overlaps with television, a medium whose *modus operandi* is to bring the public sphere into the privacy of the home, and with the specific institutional remit of this broadcaster to provide 'intelligent entertainment'. Taking its cue from feminist biography studies, this article analyses how these two senses of the public/private dichotomy work in relation to biographical television drama about women, taking *Enid*, *Gracie!* and *Margot* as its case studies. It will explore how performance, narrative and aesthetics combine in these television dramas to dramatise the effects of the public/private binary in these women's biographies. I begin by exploring how the films represent the tension between the domestic private sphere and the (cultural) public sphere of the subjects' careers. I go on to analyse the distinction between the publicly constructed persona of the individual portrayed and their private self. Considering the relationship between fact and fiction in these dramas, I explore the paradoxical positioning of their narratives as the 'truth' behind the

public persona, via the construction of a fictive version of the private personality.

### **Public and private spheres in biography and television**

There are two broad ways of conceiving the relationship between feminism and biography. The first is to think about the contribution of biography to feminism, that is, to consider the influence that the writing of (in)famous women's lives has had on women's advancement. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall noted, this is often a process of reclamation:

Feminist biographers often see themselves as engaged in an act of rescue, trying to restore to their rightful place foremothers who have been ignored, misunderstood or forgotten. (1987, 23)

While, of course, not all biographies of women are explicitly or implicitly feminist, the writing of a wider range of life stories is a means to recognise the contribution of women to the public sphere, and to argue for women's further inclusion in public discourses of history, politics, culture and so on. The second key influence of feminism is on the *theorisation* of biography. The use of biography as a lens through which wider historical change and social constructs can be examined is common to the feminist study of the genre.

Three areas of enquiry have been central to feminist (auto)biographical analysis. The first concerns the ways in which gender affects identity and subjectivity. If, in the past, women have not been granted full subjecthood, then how can we make sense of women within a mode of writing which focuses on the individual as a subject? (Smith, 1993) The second key area questions the power dynamic in the relationship between biographer and subject, with feminist scholars like Liz Stanley, Paula Backscheider and Judy

Long suggesting that a truly feminist biography will allow for a greater level of openness in reading, and a more exploratory rather than expository style of storytelling than is conventional in the biographies of public figures. Finally, the focus on an individual woman's life story has been a powerful way of understanding in microcosm the complex relationship between public acts and private life, and women's access to the public sphere. Paula Backscheider argues that feminist interventions have placed an *inclusive* emphasis on the intimate sphere, on the 'ordinary' aspects of an individual's domestic life (1999, 153). Biographical studies of women have thus been required to grapple with the dual meanings of private/public: the domestic versus the political, and the interior versus the exterior self.

Here, there is a productive intersection with standard theorisations of television as a quotidian medium of the public sphere that is consumed (customarily) within the private spaces of the home. However, this aspect of television's mediality led prominent biopic scholar George Custen to conclude that, in its co-option of the audiovisual biographical narrative, television changed the terms by which fame might be understood, telling smaller, more ordinary stories within a 'shrinking frame'. Custen equates the focus of the television movie biography on ordinary people with a 'vernacular perspective' (1992, 221). Though he does not outwardly associate this 'shrinking frame' with the telling of female stories, it is difficult not to see this critique of television biography as gendered, especially since the kinds of programming he discusses are television movies-of-the-week marketed predominantly to women (Lipkin, 2002). It is interesting to note that the very aspect of television biography of which Custen seems to be most suspicious - the redrawing of

'fame' to include apparently ordinary or inauspicious people - is analogous to the efforts of feminist biographers to make seen the unseen: the lives of non-famous women, or the domestic lives of those who have achieved notoriety. Custen's critique of television as an insufficiently 'large' medium for the publicisation of lives is also provocative when compared with the feminist treatment of television:

Feminist television critics ... also sought to critique the 'two sphere' mythos that private and public life were somehow divided, with the housewife in the private space of the home and politics as a public and male domain. In other words, like other feminists of the time, feminist TV critics proceeded on the more general second wave premise that 'the personal is political'. (Brunsdon and Spigel 2008, 7)

Feminist critics have sought to account for television's dual role as a medium of public address and of domestic intimacy, and for the place of women therein. The television biopic intersects these areas, emphasising the paradoxes and complexities between public and private sphere, female narrative and medium.

In her influential study of the theoretical problems with ideas of the 'public sphere', Nancy Fraser appeals for the recognition that these are 'cultural classifications and rhetorical labels' which are 'deployed to delegitimize some interests, views and topics and to valorize others' (1990, 73). Fraser's acknowledgement of the social constructedness of the terms of reference for 'public' and 'private' spheres is useful in the cultural analysis of representation of these spheres. As Susan Moller Okin points out, these distinctions are gendered:

Men are assumed to be chiefly preoccupied with and responsible for the occupations of the sphere of economic and political life, and women with those of the private sphere of domesticity and reproduction. Women have been regarded as 'by nature' both unsuited

to the public realm and rightly dependent on men and subordinated within the family. These assumptions, not surprisingly, have pervasive effects on the structuring of the dichotomy and of both its component spheres. (1998, 117)

The perception of women as 'by nature' subtended by the private sphere, perpetuated by representations across culture, is used as (faulty) reasoning for their lack of influence or representation in the public sphere. Part of the feminist response to this problem has been to argue for a greater recognition and re-legitimation of the private sphere. However, as Kay Ferres has noted, this has had ambivalent effects on the acknowledgement of women in the public sphere:

Despite, or perhaps because of, the successful installation of a feminist version of 'women's narrative' – one that makes identity claims by bringing private life and sexuality into view – it is still very difficult to account for women's influence and reputation in public arenas. (2002, 303)

All of this points to a paradox in the female biography: to account for this (exceptional) woman's position in the public sphere, we must understand her uneasy place in the private sphere. In each of the *Women We Loved* films, a core component of the dramatic narrative is the exploration of this relationship between domesticity and publicity.

### **Dramatising separate spheres**

Of the *Women We Loved* dramas, *Enid* is the most critical of the placement of its protagonist between spheres. Enid is portrayed as being *excessively* comfortable with her position as a public figure, to the extent of braggadocio. For instance, in a moment of domestic intimacy – Enid is propped up in bed reading letters as Hugh enters the room and undresses –

she abruptly begins a conversation 'Do you know, last year I made more money than the Chancellor of the Exchequer? I had twenty-three books published.' His sarcastic response - 'good for you. How was the tea party?' (referring to a publicity event she has arranged for her child fans) - is designed to undermine Enid's confidence. When Enid responds positively, with a lively description of the party, she is silenced again by Hugh's bad-tempered reminder that 'we're about to go to war', chastising her characterisation of this as 'depressing' by curtly arguing 'reality often is'. 'Reality' is presented as the domain of international politics, contrasted with the supposedly less 'real' domestic, child-centred life. Hugh's invocation of the 'real world' is meant as a corrective to Enid's attempt to insert herself into the cultural public sphere on similar terms to powerful men through an assertion of her comparative wealth status. She may have literal capital, but, as a writer of fiction for children, she lacks cultural and political capital.

*Margot* dramatises analogous marital tensions, based this time around a husband failing in the public sphere. Following the discursive formula critiqued by Fraser and Muller Okin, Tito repeatedly trivialises Margot's career in comparison to his, assuming that his work in politics is by nature more important than his wife's in the arts. At the beginning of the film, Tito returns from a failed coup. As the couple recline, her head supinely rested on his lap, he discusses plans for further insurrection. The placement of their bodies conveys the unequal power dynamics in their relationship, reinforced in the dialogue. Her concern for his safety is met with disdain: 'This is my life. You know that. It is infinitely more exciting than tripping around on your toes with nancy-boys. Admit it.' Tito is persistent in undermining Margot's career,

overtly comparing it with his as unworthy of serious attention. For instance, at a party in which she attempts to put forward her point of view on the Panamanian situation, Tito humiliates her, scathingly rejecting her opinion and stating to the gathered crowd that she does not 'understand' politics. Speaking for her, he denies her right to knowledge of and participation in public matters.

Margot is unequipped with the discursive tools required to participate in the masculine public sphere, as she does not rationalise, rather she *feels*. Margot's body and mind are shown to be inherently intertwined, and she appears to have no capacity to think outside of movement. This is highlighted in the repetition throughout the film of performance sequences, in which shots of Duff's face, shoulders and torso are intercut with wider-angle images of professional dancers. The close-ups reveal Duff's strained facial expressions, especially her widened eyes, conveying intense emotion. Filmed against a black backdrop, with low-key lighting, the diegetic positioning of these sequences is unclear: they could take place as literal on-stage performances, or they could represent the workings of Margot's ballet-centred imagination. The narrative placement of the sequences, often at moments of emotional intensity implies the latter; that dancing, for Margot, is used in lieu of thinking, that she experiences and enunciates only through her body. Sidonie Smith argues that women's identity, subjectivity and embodiment are, indeed, inherently interlinked. Unable to achieve subjectivity without recourse to embodiment, women's role in public life becomes reduced to that of body, with the effect that

Woman's mode, conceived as more natural and less fully human and mature because speechless, inarticulate, unanalytical, unreflective,

disqualifies her for public life and the arena of cultural discourse.  
(Smith 1993, 15)

Margot's verbal inarticulacy, by comparison with her extraordinary ability to convey meaning through her body seems to reflect this idea. The film's desire to see Margot as an embodied thinker – a woman who could not exist independently of the bodily articulation of ballet – conforms with ideas of Woman's embodied subjectivity outlined by Smith, and is troubling in its limitation of her subjecthood. This is consistently underlined by Tito's frustration with Margot and her career, admonishing her because there is 'nothing outside of it' for her. Only when Tito is dis-embodied (rendered paraplegic) and silenced (through a tracheotomy) as a result of his injuries after an assassination attempt, does Margot's embodied subjectivity win out over his verbal, public self. She is freed to assert herself in the public sphere as she sees fit, though it is telling that the ending to the film is precisely one of those ambiguous performance sequences, concluding, either in Margot's imagination, or on the stage that is more 'real' to her than her private life.

In all three dramas, husbands act as narrative devices to emphasise the disjuncture between a family/domestic life and a public career. In *Gracie!* Monty's relegation to the background in Gracie's life is visualised punctually in early performance sequences. For instance, Gracie gives an impromptu song for British troops encountered on the road in northern France, where she is touring as part of the war effort. Monty has discouraged her from performing for the sake of her health, which she has ignored, citing her public duty to the soldiers as her motivation. The sequence concludes with a two shot with Gracie in close-up in foreground, Monty in the background. To emphasise the power relations between them, this shot begins with Monty in focus, but then

racks to Gracie, as she concludes her verse. This visual statement of the programme's thesis about their relationship is reinforced in the next scene, composed of medium close-ups of Gracie on stage, interposed with long shots of Monty watching proudly from backstage. As the song concludes, soldiers jostle past Monty, overwhelming the frame and rendering him tiny within it. Here is a clear visualisation of the idea that Gracie's public duty, represented by her adoring fans, overtakes her personal relationship with Monty.

The film is highly invested in dramatising, and often also redundantly explaining through expository dialogue, the sacrifice of privacy for public duty or successful career. Monty eventually berates Gracie – 'All you can think about is them, them, them. But you're not married to them, you're married to me!' A similar moment occurs in *Margot*, in which an exasperated Tito, admonishing Margot for not taking up her long overdue retirement, barks 'When will you be MY wife?' The career exists in uneasy tension with the domestic life. Questions of 'ownership' over a person in this way seem to be unique to the woman's story, and neither *Margot* nor *Gracie!* seek to challenge the conception that a woman's life is more rounded if she submits to the desires of a husband. These dramas follow the romantic/domestic storyline that Ginette Vincendeau has recognised as formulaic to female biopics, in the context of an analysis of the representation of Coco Chanel:

The choices the films made in what they represent, and more importantly *do not* represent, make them a fascinating case study for the female biopic, revealing our culture's institutional misogyny, which still makes a woman's professional achievements subservient to her love life. (2014, 191)

The narrative snare that Vincendeau perceives in relation to female biopics is, of course a cultural one, related to Fraser, Muller Okin and many others' conceptions of the cultural positioning of women and the public sphere. It is not simply that these films ignore or sideline the public achievements of the famous woman under scrutiny, it is that they also reduce their uniqueness to a generic story, one that fits within conventions of the romantic melodrama. It is telling, for instance, that each of the *Women We Loved* films contains a scene in which the protagonist, overcome with emotion, collapses into a sobbing heap, borrowing a narrative device so common that it borders on melodramatic cliché. While it may seem apt on the one hand to use the tropes associated with a genre often codified as feminine to dramatise women's lives, the use of these conventions generalise the experiences of women, asserting or assuming the prominence of domestic life rather than public achievement.

While in *Gracie!* and *Margot*, the tension between domestic life and public career is positioned as an inevitable but sad (even torturous) choice for the protagonist, *Enid's* key point of critique of its subject is that she *wilfully* chooses her public life over her duties as a wife and mother. This is demonstrated early in the narrative, as she ignores her wailing newborn, shutting the door on her to drown out the noise, and continues typing out her writing. The sound effect of typewriter keys thumping up and down is used throughout as an aural motif to signify the dominance of work over family. This is demonstrated most clearly in a short scene in which younger daughter Imogen (Ramona Marquez) waits patiently in bed for her mother to read her a promised bedtime story, but hears only the echoed sound of typewriter keys,

exaggerated on the soundtrack to emphasise the distance between mother and daughter. Enid is heard but not seen, not exactly an absent mother, but a half-formed presence in her children's lives. The drama revels in the irony that Blyton appeared to be oblivious of her own shortcomings as a mother.

Her lack of enthusiasm for her own children, however, is contrasted with her treatment of her 'friends' – the children who read her books and write to her – to whom she is attentive and kind. For example, she holds a tea party at her home for children who have won a competition, to which her daughters are not invited. When questioned by one of the children on her daughters' absence from the party, Enid's response is telling, as it contains what the viewer knows to be a lie about her family life: 'They see me all day everyday. I have to squeeze my writing in between trips to the seaside and picnics and games, you know, all the things that children love to do.' Bonham Carter's reading of this line, beginning with an enthusiastic cadence, but breathily rushing the end of the list, signifies Enid's impatience with the question and, implicitly, with her children. It tells the viewer that this statement is not just an untruth, but one that Enid is weary of. Indeed, elsewhere in the narrative Enid misleads her public about her home life, such as in a radio interview where she declares her satisfaction that she 'manages' her work and home life. Her children listen to this broadcast at home, and look at each other with incredulity. Once again, the sound (interview) and image (the open-mouthed astonishment of the girls) mismatch to emphasise the gap between statement and truth. The use of disjuncture between what is visible – Enid's actions and attitudes – and how this is narrated through dialogue and sound, emphasises the separation between the public facing

Enid and her 'real' private nature. The version of Enid she presents to the public is domestically adept and superhuman in her efforts to balance public and private sphere. The film's key project is to uncover the distance between this and the 'truth' about Blyton, to undermine the publicly constructed version of the author. This is primarily done by showing how Enid constructed this public persona, by showing the work of Blyton's public relations machine.

### **The Construction of Public Personae and Private Selves**

*Enid* emphasises Blyton's shrewd business sense, and the careful control of publicity she undertook to build a personal brand: attending radio interviews, writing to her legions of young fans, and posing for photographs with her family are all explicitly described as 'work'. The clearest demonstration of Enid's talent for public relations is in the reconstruction of a real-life Pathé newsreel made about the author's family life, which replicates its framing, mise-en-scène and soundtrack fairly precisely. Taking place in the story's third act, this newsreel shows how Enid has replaced Hugh with her new husband (Denis Lawson), using her PR abilities to erase all traces of her old husband from her life, to re-write her own story. The newsreel is distinguished from the film's 'real' diegetic world by the use of grainy black-and-white, and a male voiceover which announces in Received Pronunciation, 'Enid Blyton and her husband Kenneth play tiddlywinks with their daughters. Watch out girls, it seems that mother might be beating you!' This short segment draws to a close with the whirring sound of a film camera shutting down, and the image returns to the colour 'story' camera, which shows the scene in Enid's house as it is set up. As the newsreel camera switches off,

Enid and Kenneth promptly walk away from the scene that has been constructed for it, leaving the children to tidy up. In this juxtaposition of the 'real' life household with the one constructed for the newsreel, we see the contradiction of Enid Blyton in microcosm: a domesticated figure onscreen, a negligent parent off-screen.

*Gracie!* uses a similar re-constructed newsreel as an economical way to cover story time, to narrate Gracie's activities and travel during World War II. In contrast to *Enid*, though, *Gracie!* makes no suggestion of archness or exploitation in Gracie's use of the press. It seems convinced – in keeping with other biographical treatments of Fields - that the public and private personas were more or less the same (Andrews, 2016b). The use of these re-constructed newsreels indicates a desire to authenticate the version of the personality portrayed in the fictionalised version. Through the imitation of artefact in this way, a trace is manufactured that connects dramatised character to real-life personality (Brinch, 2013). It is ironic, then, that the films also show that these public outputs are part of a campaign to conceal the 'real' or private person in the service of their carefully constructed public persona. The use of reconstructions like these thus presents a paradox – a means of authentication of the dramatised version of the private life that is predicated on (excessively) revealing the inauthenticity of these public personae.

The films are all equally interested in the attempts that these famous women make to use the media PR machine and its cogs – radio, newsreel, television interview – to construct their public identity, and tell the story the way they prefer. In lieu of re-producing real archival audiovisual documents of

its subject, *Margot* utilises a common trope in television docudrama, the talking head, to show how Margot constructs her own story. Because we hear the voice of the interviewer off camera, we can surmise that, in the diegesis, Margot is participating in an interview for television. In the first of these, she quickly dismisses the idea that her life is 'glamorous', saying 'that must be the costumes! I assure you there is nothing glamorous about going to class every day'. This is a means of acknowledging the distance between the character 'Margot Fonteyn' witnessed in performance onstage, and the dancer in her everyday life. However, a third 'Margot' is created, that is, the celebrity, who, as the drama outlines, was as much a construction as the fantasy characters danced out on stage. The use of a television format – the talking head interview – through which to dramatise this process provides a metacommentary on the contribution of television to knowledge about the public personae of 20<sup>th</sup> century celebrities, a contribution that is, of course, continued through the present dramatisation.

These sections are contrasted with the primary storyline, which is coded as 'truth' through a more apparently objective, 'third person' style of narrative exposition (in contrast with the talking head's quasi-direct address). Margot's comments to the off-screen interviewer are skewed, inverted, or invented versions of the primary story. She details, for example, how romantic her husband is, when we know that he really denigrates the fantasy world she inhabits. She neglects to discuss one of the key reasons behind her delayed retirement – the use of her money to fund Tito's political ambitions – couching the decision instead as a personal one, wrought of the love of dancing and nothing more. This plot point borrows a detail from Fonteyn's life,

as her biographer Meredith Daneman noted, 'Certainly from the time she took up with [Tito] Arias, she adopted a far less placatory tone with the press, brazenly lying to them if need be' (2005, 309). Through the interview sequences, we witness Margot shaping her public persona, one that hides the sacrifices she makes of body and personal happiness, and one that is also, crucially, separate from the fantasy characters she portrays through dance.

The deconstruction of a public persona is, of course, a central objective of biographical narration. Linda Wagner-Martin argues that the biographer has two options in this regard:

If the biographer sees that self-definition as inaccurate, then he or she must find ways of building a different story from the same facts the subject had at hand. If a biographer sees the self-definition as true, then his or her role is to enhance the subject's account – to put it in a wider context, to relate it to other histories, to find new threads in events, and then to connect them in one compelling portrait. (1994, 8)

*Gracie's* representation of Fields largely accords with her star image, the public face she self-constructed. Inasmuch as this can be taken as equivalent to self-definition, the film tends to follow the second strategy. Its recontextualisation of Fields seeks to align her with ideas of wartime British stoicism in an effort to recalibrate her image away from the reputation of cowardice and decadence that had marred her post-war career. *Margot* and *Enid*, on the other hand, correspond to the first strategy. In both these cases, the public persona is questioned through the dialectical opposition between private behaviour and attitude, and their outward, publicised manifestations. However, while Wagner-Martin presents this as an opposition between acceptance or rejection of self-definition, the approach in the *Women We Loved* films to the question of public image demonstrates that there is a third

option: to self-consciously explore the *process* of such image making. In doing so, though, the power of self-definition is removed from both the fictionalised character and their original, real-life referent, and appropriated by the 'author' of the biopic, whether this is considered to be the screenwriter, director or, even broadcast institution.

This uneven power dynamic between biographer and subject that has been a central source of critique for feminist scholars, and the question of privacy is particularly germane to the understanding of this complex relationship, as Judy Long has argued:

In searching for the truth in a life, the biographer encounters a fundamental dilemma in deciding how much to reveal or conceal his subject's secrets. Scenarios of power, rights, and responsibilities are played out in conjunction with stratagems for wresting information from an unwilling source. (1999, 102)

This is exaggerated when the medium of delivery shifts from written to televised biography. The likely audience for the television drama is much larger than that of any individual biography, increasing the likelihood that the audiovisual version of the life becomes fixed in public memory. The reputation of the public service broadcaster can, in addition, serve as extratextual verification of a biographical representation, given the association between the PSB and trustworthiness (Andrews, 2016a). As many discussions of docudrama have noted, this power of television institutions to convey a lasting image of a real person assigns to them the responsibility to be fair and accurate (Paget, 2011). This is not, however, coterminous with the responsibility to maintain personal mythologies through concealing secrets. Indeed, as Hermione Lee has noted, such activities might be viewed as censorship or bowdlerisation, as inherently dishonest: 'Even if it is hard to

distinguish, at times, between a dislike of hypocrisy and a delight in scandal, the ethics of our society entail a belief in openness' (2009, 9). Operating in these cultural conditions, the *Women We Loved* films utilise the revelation of private or secret aspects of the personalities to authenticate their representations, to imply that these dramatised versions are more truthful or honest than the public personae.

Moreover, bringing out private aspects of these subjects helps to construct psychologically convincing characters from real personalities. As Long argues, 'if the task of biography is exploration of the subject's personal mythology, then material that the subject customarily conceals yields the greatest insights' (1999, 102). Such aspects of personal lives are clearly utilised in the *Women We Loved* films to shape their representations of these women. For example, research into Blyton's private life revealed to biographer Barbara Stoney, that a hormonal condition had stunted the growth of her uterus at the age of thirteen, at roughly the time as her father abandoned the family. Stoney interpreted these events as having a significant impact on her personality, fixing her in a state of perpetual psychological adolescence and accounting for some of her less positive character traits (2006, 180). The narrative structure of *Enid*, particularly the use of childhood flashbacks, foregrounds this interpretative framing of her life. In so doing, it follows a well-worn framework for aligning the creativity of female artists and writers with mental and emotional instability (Dolan, Gordon and Tincknell, 2009). In promotional interviews, Bonham Carter discussed how these revelations had helped her to understand Enid as a person (Davis, 2009). Bonham Carter's reading of Enid as a childish figure is exuded through

her performance, at times wide-eyed, playful and enthusiastic, at others sullen, petulant and impatient. This specific piece of private information is the cornerstone of the film's representation of Blyton, a revelation seen as the undiluted 'truth' of this complex figure.

In addition to isolating specific biographical events or circumstances as the centre of their interpretations of real life figures, (to the exclusion of other, equally salient facts), screen biographies can combine reconstructed public fact and invented or exaggerated fiction in ways that would tend to be unacceptable in conventional written biography. *Margot's* treatment of the disputed sexual relationship between Fonteyn and Nureyev provides a good example of this. There were persistent rumours of an affair, which she always denied, but he confirmed. Perhaps inevitably, it is the confirmation that plays out in the film. At the end of a passionate performance of *Giselle*, we see Rudolph and Margot in front of the curtain, taking their bows and performing a ritual in which she is given a bouquet of flowers, offers one to him, and he kisses her skirt. This is presented in a combination of diegetic audience point-of-view long shots and a series of eyeline-matched medium close ups of Margot and Rudolph gazing intensely at one another. The organisation of shots in this manner highlights that, though these events take place in an overtly public forum, they have personal and private resonance to these protagonists. The camera follows them behind the curtain, where they exchange a short exchange of desiring glances, framed in intimate medium two-shot. These shots are shadowed, though a strong light from the stage illuminates their sweating bodies. Combined with the sound of their heavy breathing, the register of these images is clearly an erotic one, confirmed in a

sound-led match cut, which reveals Rudolph and Margot in bed at the climax of aggressive sex. Many aspects of the sequence immediately prior to this (such as the flower ritual) are drawn from publicly recorded acts from the real lives of Fonteyn and Nureyev. Their juxtaposition with the conjectured sexual relationship means that the film has taken an unambiguous position on this particular question about Fonteyn's private life. Her biographer, Meredith Daneman, was more reticent about this relationship

The frustration which they have bequeathed to us endures for a very good reason – in order to lead us to the real question, and to its true answer: namely the fact that rapture has a realm beyond the bedroom, and that whatever took place behind closed doors, out of our sight, was *nothing* compared to what happened on stage, in front of our eyes. (2005, 408)

Given that the only explicit sex scene in the film is short, rather brutal, and shot lit in unromantic white light, it's arguable that the film takes the same view, that the fact or otherwise of sexual contact is only a minor detail in a working relationship that was fascinating on its own terms.

Extrapolating elements of the private personality from both widely available knowledge about a famous person, such as their public behaviours and attitudes, and from more intimate details revealed about the private life is a means of constructing authentic and convincing televisual characters from real-life personalities. However, this comes at the expense of the subject, in terms of their reputational legacy and their (or their family's) control over it. Susan Ware argues that such a collapse of personal privacy is in keeping with a key trend of twentieth-century popular culture, 'the disappearing boundary between public and private life', has had a huge influence on contemporary biography. She goes on to question:

But to what end? Too often the details seem included solely for titillation rather than integrated into an overall interpretation of someone's life. Without such a larger explanatory purpose, details from private lives, far from fulfilling the goals of feminist biography, are simply the personal without the political. (2010, 417-8)

Ware's critique of the breakdown of privacy does seem apt in the context of the *Women We Loved* season. Their 'explanatory purpose', in Ware's terms, is not particularly evident, and their intense focus on the life histories of these specific figures, often with minimal explanation of or reference to historical context, means that the political is indeed divorced from the personal.

## **Conclusion**

In the biographical drama, accommodation must be made between the public record, that is, the 'knowledge' about a figure and her actions that is re-circulated in the public domain, and the private personality, which may be reconstructed from the real behaviours or attitudes of the subject through a process of research, or may be largely invented by the writer to fulfil drama's requirement of psychologically rounded, comprehensible characters (or, of course, some combination of the two). When the subject of such dramas is female, however, this tension between public and private personality acquires another layer of complexity, centred on the uncertain position of women in the public sphere, as opposed to their culturally codified 'natural' place in the private, domestic space. The *Women We Loved* films exemplify these tensions through their central melodramatic narrative drive which seeks to locate their characters ambivalently in the private space of the home, and through their exposure of their central character's construction of public personae, whilst at the same time revealing 'truths' about their biographical

subject which were not previously common public knowledge. There is a central paradox here: revelations about the 'private' life, many of which are invented or exaggerated, are used as a means of authenticating their portrayals and undermining the public figure.

Submitting these films to an analysis informed by feminist biography scholarship reveals the complexities in the televised representation of famous female lives. Telling the stories of prominent female figures through the medium of broadcast television, even on a niche digital channel, allows for renewed attention to these lives, offering the process of 'reclamation' for women's history seen by Jacquelyn Dowd Hall as crucial to the process of feminist biography. Even where the biopics offer revisionist portrayals of their subjects, the very practice of scrutinising in this public forum the contribution and value of female popular cultural figures could suggest a feminist approach. In other words, their selection for special attention by the nation's public service broadcaster as the subjects of not only dramatisations, but complementary scheduled programming over the course of three evenings can be seen as symbolically further inducting Blyton, Fields and Fonteyn into the pantheon of influential and noteworthy British cultural figures. However, as Liz Stanley has pointed out, simply selecting female figures for such treatments cannot be considered an inherently feminist move:

Treating the production of biography in an epistemologically and theoretically more critical fashion requires recognising that the choice of subject is located within political processes in which some people's lives, but not others, are seen as interesting and/or important enough to be committed to biography. (1992, 9)

Stanley's argument has far reaching consequences and provokes difficult questions: why these women, who lived privileged, extraordinary, seemingly

apolitical lives? The selection of these women as subjects fits within the remit of the broadcaster, as they are recognisable figures to a certain demographic section of the British public, likely to be white, older, middle class. This perpetuates hierarchical power dynamics that feminist scholars like Stanley have critiqued. Moreover, the narrative parallels between these women's lives that are drawn by the dramas are emphasised by their appearance in a television season, reducing their uniqueness to a formula followed by other dramatised biographical treatments of women. The exposure of apparent failures in the private life as the necessary sacrifice that these women must make to achieve their public successes renders these stories of culturally important women not as celebrations, but as cursory reminders that, while they may have been *Women We Loved*, they are not women we would want or aspire to be.

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