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# THE EUROPE OF WOMEN

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Joke HERMES (2015)

paper presentation

(Internationale conferentie)

THE EUROPE OF WOMEN, Radboud University,

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'Demythologizing motherhood.'

Deconstructing the critical  
acclaim for Penelope

- \* conference programme
- \* powerpoint dia's
- \* tekst als gepresenteerd

International Conference

## **The Europe of Women**

November 25, 26 and 27, 2015  
Radboud University





## The Europe of Women

is organized by

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Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religion Studies  
The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences



KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE  
AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

Welcome to the international conference *The Europe of Women*!

*The Europe of Women* explores the gender dimensions of the research theme "Europe and its Worlds," jointly developed by the Faculties of Arts and of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies of Radboud University. Themes addressed in the conference range from female book ownership, women's travelogues, and female detectives, patrons and politicians, to forgotten, invisible and unrecognized women, the unequal outcomes of gendered life scripts, women's secular and religious activist groups and communities, and the gendering of anthropometrical practices and data.

The conference thus looks at the representation of women in/of Europe (in travelogues and television series, but also in the professions, institutionalized churches, historiography, and canonized Christianity), their practices (as patrons, book collectors, writers, scientists, politicians, spokeswomen, etc.), and the effects thereof. Taking gender as a significant category of experience, of social organization, and of symbolic meaning it inquires into the effects and outcomes of gender in a European context, exploring the ways in which women act and are enacted in different social, cultural, literary, religious, political, scientific, historiographical, anthropometric practices. It asks: what does "the Europe of women" look like, both in the present and the past? How do "women" imagine, represent, and experience, and contribute to the making of "Europe"? What was their role in subsidizing and encouraging writers, musicians and painters in the period 1850-1950? Which factors influenced the advance of women in politics and government? What were the characteristics of the collections brought together by female book collectors? How did women represent themselves and their male travel companions in their travelogues? What other public, and private, images did they create for themselves? What role did women play in religious movements that search to articulate their soteriology around (or across) the borders of institutionalized churches and canonized Christianity? How can the historical and contemporary relationships between Eastern and Western European feminisms? How did gendered norms and life styles impact the survival rates of adult men and women in European societies in the past? And how does gender influence the anthropometrical ('big') data of European historiography? By looking at "Europe" from a gender perspective, the conference aims to throw new light on the concept of Europe, foster the integration of the gender dimension in research content, and achieve closer local, national and international cooperation within the Humanities.

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# **PROGRAMME** **Thursday 26 November**

Registration, coffee and tea, Foyer of the Gymnasium Building (9-9:45 AM)

Opening by prof. dr. Theo Engelen, Rector Magnificus (9:45-10AM) – GN3

Keynote lecture 1 by prof. dr. Siep Stuurman, "European Identity and the Gendering of Progress" (10-11 AM) – GN3

Coffee break (11-11:30 AM)

Parallel Sessions I (11.30-1 PM)

Panel 1: Female Book Ownership, 1500-1700 – GN4

Organized by the research group 'Radboud Medieval and Early Modern Studies' (RMEMS)

*Johanneke Uphoff*, "Owning and Bestowing: Book Ownership and Donation of Religious Manuscripts by Lay Women in the Long Fifteenth Century"

*Mark Empey*, "Early Modern Women and their Books: Some Preliminary Results from Library Catalogues and Book Lists, c. 1550-1700"

*Johan Oosterman*, "Commissioned by Mary of Guelders: The Role of Noble Women in Book Design and Devotional Practices"

Panel 2: The Gendering of Anthropometrical Practices and Data – GN5

Organized by the research group 'Self, Script and Society'

*Geertrij Mak*, "Women in Anthropometry in the Dutch East Indies"

*Celia Roberts*, "Scaling Puberty: J.M. Tanner and the Gendering of Sexual Development"

*Saskia Bulman*, "Sexuality Under Scrutiny: Measuring Pupils in the Dutch State Reformatory for Girls, 1905-1952"

Panel 3: Unequal Outcomes of Gendered Life Scripts – GN2

Organized by the research group 'Self, Script and Society', with a response by *Alice Reid*.

*Claire Weeda*, "Non-naturals, Diet and Gender in the Late Middle Ages"

*Corry Gellatly and Charlotte Störmer*, "Survival Benefits of Marriage for Men and Women in Nineteenth-century France"

*Evelien Walhout*, "Female Infanticide: Exploring the Evidence for the Netherlands"

Lunch (1-2 PM)

Parallel Sessions II (2-3:30 PM)

Panel 1: Forgotten Women: Women Excluded from European Historiography Organized by the research group 'Memory, Materiality and Meaning in the Age of Transnationalism' – GN4

*Sonja Stojmenska-Elzezer*, "A Tribute to the 'Voiceless' Women of Europe: Freud's Sister by Goce Smilevski"

*Marit Monteiro*, "Paradoxes of Public Presence: Anna Terruwe (1911-2004), Catholic Psychotherapist"

*Meike Schmidt-Gleitm*, "The Europe of Women-Who Can Speak?"

Panel 2: Male and Female Travelers in Women's Travelogues – GN5

Organized by the research group 'Tourism, Travel and Text'

*Anna Geurts*, "Have You Packed Your Man?"

*Kor Bosch*, "Experiences of Companionship and Loneliness on the Pilgrimage to Rome in the 'Book of Margery Kempe'"

*Suzan van Dijk*, "Representing Women Travelers/Travel Writers in the Dutch 19th-century Press"

Panel 3: Whodunit? The Female Detective in European Television Series

Organized by the research group 'Creative Industries: Society, Culture and Aesthetics in the 21st century' (CISCA) – GN3

*Joke Hermes*, "Demythologizing Motherhood"

*Marlon Janssen and Timotheus Vermeulen*, "The Team - Gender Across Borders"

*Deborah Jermyn*, "The most feminist show on television?": Interrogating the Postfeminist Politics of *The Fall*"

Tea break in Hall Erasmus Building (3:30-4:15 PM)

Keynote lecture 2 by Dubravka Ugrešić, "Women of Europe" (4:15 - 5:15 PM) – GN3

Drinks (5:15-6:30 PM): Music (6-6:30 PM) by Catharina Jansen (soprano), Charles van Doornewaard (piano), and Vocal Ensemble Cambiato: 'Je veux vivre'.

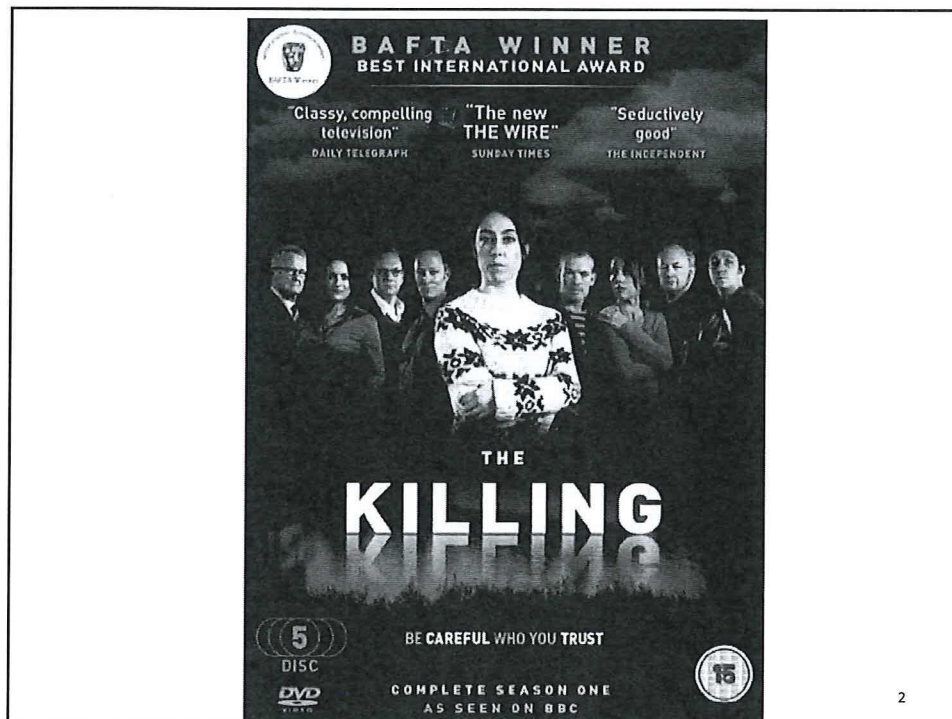
Conference dinner in Restaurant Beau (7-10:30 PM): Ensemble Fantastico will play Music by Couperin, Marin Marais, Tobias Hume, Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre and Barbara Strozzi.

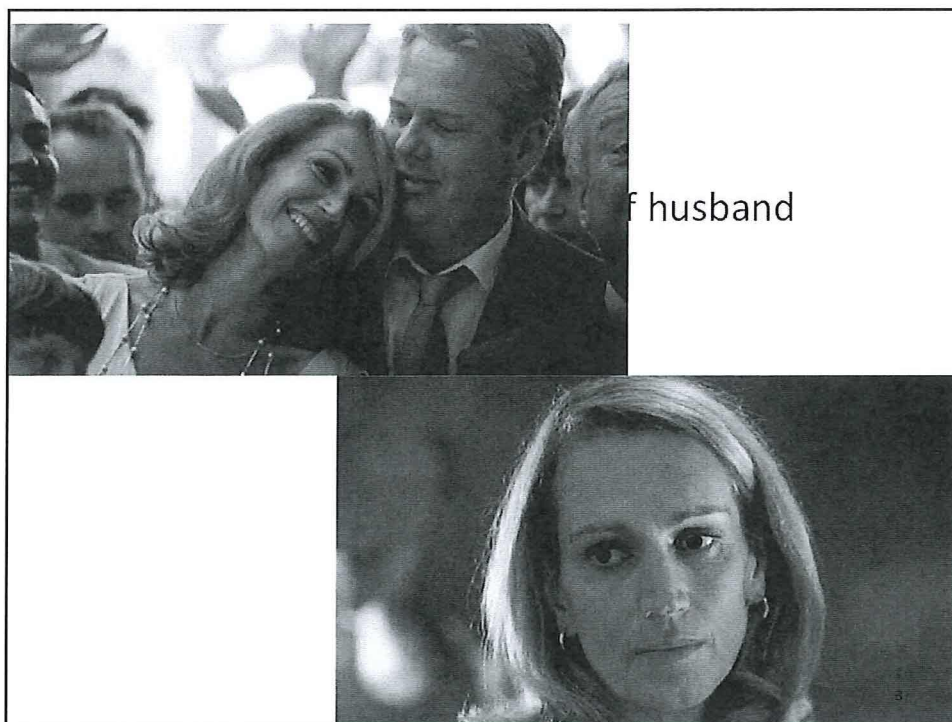
# Demythologizing motherhood. Deconstructing the critical acclaim for *Penoza*

Joke Hermes

Inholland University

Presentation for *The Europe of Women* conference,  
Radboud Universiteit, Nijmegen, 25-27 november  
2015



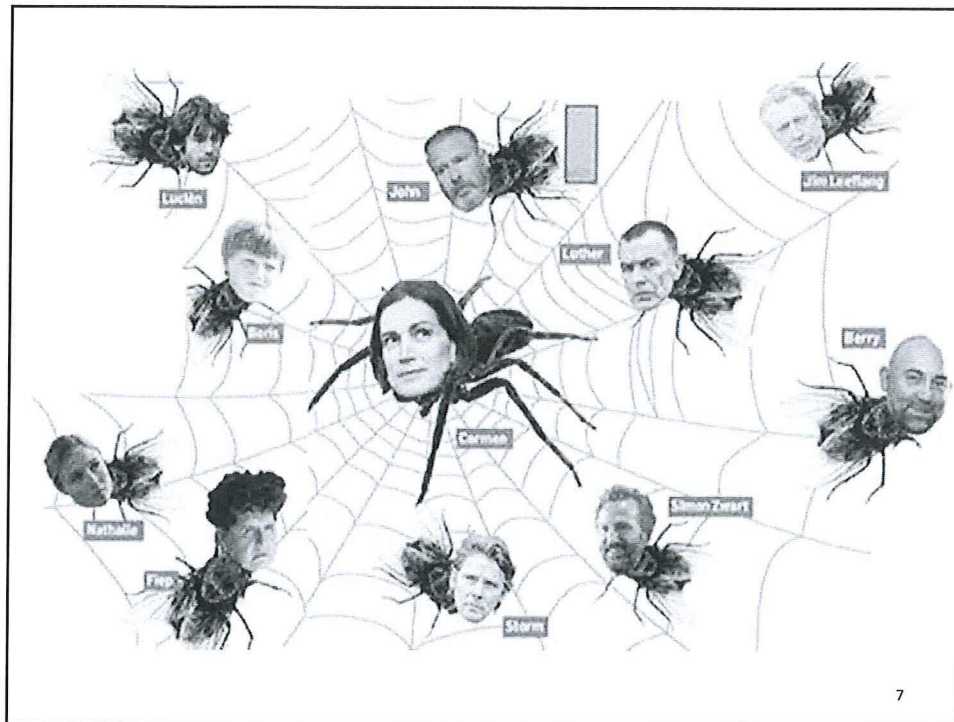




“A lead character can make or break television drama. This actress makes it and turns it into more than what it would seem to be on paper. Powerful and raw, elegant and emotionally pure.” The jury of the film- and television award parade De Gouden Kalveren (the Golden Calves) could hardly have put it 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 *Penoza* since 2010, it is Hendrickx playing Carmen van Walraven  
(Maas in *Limburgs Dagblad* 12 October 2013). <sup>5</sup>

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? In the new series Carmen is harder towards criminals and softer towards her children.

(Takken, *NRC* 23 November 2012). <sup>6</sup>



## Emotional realism

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).

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. (-) *Penoza* comes close, that is its power.

(Maas *Limburgs Dagblad* 12 October 2013)

Carmen is 'strong and independent, a power woman but also vulnerable'

(Maas *Limburgs Dagblad* 6 March 2014).

*Opzij*: Carmen is 'fragile and hard' (Wiggen 1 December 2012).

9

'People call out to me (-): Hey, Carmen: You are a good mother! You are really great man!'

(Meerman *Limburger* 2 July 2015).

10



Demythologizing motherhood  
Joke Hermes, Inholland University

Crime fiction occasionally portrays women as criminals. This paper will discuss a recent (and ongoing) Dutch series called *Penoza*. *Penoza* portrays the Dutch criminal milieu from the perspective of the daughter of an Amsterdam mobster who shortly into the first season will be the widow of another criminal. Against her wishes she is drawn into the criminal activities of her husband. She feels she has to protect and provide for her children. Although involved in murder and mayhem while gaining control of the trade in hard drugs, critics applaud the character for taking being a mother seriously. While for women police officers motherhood is usually their Achilles heel (e.g. recently *the Killing*), the part of their life in and with which they pay for their ambition and usurping male authority, it is apparently not a problem for a criminal to do so? Against the dual backgrounds of feminist interrogation of crime fiction and feminism's uneasy relation to motherhood ideology, this paper will try and demythologize motherhood - with apologies for spoiling some of the opportunities offered by archetypes that should long ago have become obsolete.

15 minute presentation with images

Killing – Hewson – Penoza (GB, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands)

Does bad equal mad: for men yes, for women: not

#### Material used:

All 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 1.000) in the period August 2010-July 2015 were collected and analysed. Articles in syndicated newspapers (the regional press) are only counted once. Articles quoted are included in the References.

Tekst:

My youngest, now 16, and I like to watch television series together, including crime fiction. We have found that there is one exception: he refuses to watch Danish series. Season 1 of *the Killing* and mere glimpses of *Borgen* and *The Bridge*, have convinced him that the Danes suffer from a severe moral deficit: systematically children are used as targets and victims, while parents and often mothers are singularly untrustworthy and ineffective human beings- SLIDE 2

While Noah's complaint is about using children as easy targets, I wonder why crime fiction, my personal favourite tends to portray women police officers as bad mothers? Generally my gut feeling as a fan is that women have always paid a hefty price for professional success. Cagney, of *Cagney and Lacey*, a canonical figure) is an alcoholic but the higher ranked officer against Lacey who is a mom. *Prime Suspect's* Jane Tennison cannot make a lasting success of relationships and is an alcoholic when she retires (Brunsdon, fuddy-duddy feminism). *Silent Witness's* Samantha Ryan is another example of a troubled woman. More recent, post-feminist and younger heroines appear to do better which is hopeful – yet, they are seldom mothers and can be seen as enjoying (extended) youth.

While these are not a set of carefully selected and representative examples, they are reason enough to remain on the alert regarding the representation of women as professionals and as mothers. In this paper I would like to focus on a third, even rarer example: the portrayal of a mum as gangster which queries both motherhood and professionalism or, more precisely, women having a career.

The recent (and ongoing) Dutch series *Penoza* portrays the Dutch criminal milieu from the perspective of the daughter of an Amsterdam mobster who shortly into the first season will be the widow of another criminal. SLIDE 3 (Carmen and murder of husband)



Against her wishes she is drawn into the criminal activities of her husband. She feels she has to protect and provide for her children. Although involved in murder and mayhem while gaining control of the trade in hard drugs, critics applaud the character for taking being a mother seriously.

#### Slide 4: Carmen with gun, Carmen with her children

While for women police officers motherhood is usually their Achilles heel (as in *the Killing*), the part of their life in and with which they pay for their ambition and usurping male authority, it is apparently not a problem for a criminal to do so.

Against the dual backgrounds of feminist interrogation of crime fiction and feminism's uneasy relation to motherhood ideology, this paper will try and demythologize motherhood - with apologies for spoiling some of the opportunities offered by archetypes that should long ago have become obsolete. I draw on the 45 newspaper reviews the series garnered between summer 2010 and summer 2015. You are invited to multitask and read them while I talk,

#### Slide 5: praise voor penoza

*Penoza* is an acclaimed Dutch television crime drama series. In the three seasons screened to date it has steadily garnered better viewing rates. What is its secret beyond the actress playing the lead character? And how can it be that its strong woman lead character also feels like a throwback to earlier times? While actress Monic Hendrickx does an excellent job, Carmen van Walraven, the character she plays, 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, there is a second layer of rewriting morality that appears to erase feminism in favour of a mythical notion of what makes women strong. *Penoza* offers an old myth of motherhood as its solution to how to understand gender after over a century of struggle over women's rights.



## SLIDE 6

The core ideological work *Penoza* does is not about the rights and wrongs of criminal dealings, the series offers what John Mepham has called a different type of 'usable story' (1990:59). One that helps come to terms with how to think being a woman and motherhood in neoliberal times that favour individualism and ambition. Stories, Mepham argues, are a form of enquiry that help us as individuals come to forms of social self-understanding (idem 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. 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 *Penoza*'s version of how women can be strong against the feminist discussion of motherhood is not a confrontation with a guaranteed outcome.

*Penoza* is 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 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 ran this September to early November), 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: 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.

#### Slide 7: Carmen spider in the web

While the death toll mostly consists of men and grows to a considerable number, and children are abducted to be held hostage, Monic Hendrickx' 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, *Penoza* 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 of gender relations? A return, as it were, to a fantasised 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? *Penoza* also tells the story of a stay-at-home mum who after two seasons as unwilling victim decides to embrace her career perspective and move up in criminal hierarchy in season three. There is a price to pay for this. The third season ends (and here a spoiler alert is required) with Carmen shot in the final episode.



### *The housewife legacy: Motherhood in Dutch culture*

According to Korthuis, *Penzoa*'s main writer for season one to three, the secret of *Penzoa*'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 *Penzoa* remake *Red Widow* (ABC 2013) which was not a success (Onkenhout *Volkskrant* 28 September 2013).

In another interview Hendricks remarks that Carmen does become more extreme in the third season and more vulnerable. She turns into a hardened criminal and her children start to revolt (Groenier *BN/De Stem* 28 September 2013). Others too remark on how Carmen in season three 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' (Rhee 2013). *De Volkskrant* calls hers an amoral choice (Onkenhout 2013). 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 them.

The fact that Carmen is quintessentially a mother, 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. At the same time *Penzoa* as a piece of popular fiction 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 three, a professional. The telling of that story involves querying and possibly rewriting dominant ideology regarding motherhood and professionalism. It is what makes popular fiction of interest; it is ultimately a mirror, be it a somewhat distorting one, that helps further



understand contemporary culture and society, which includes the options open to individuals, whether women or men, young or older.

The series overall certainly does not idealize or romanticize motherhood but lead character Carmen, in a way, does. In addition, the series remains ambiguous on whether women should or should not try to become professionals. At first (and second) sight, *Penoza* argues the opposite case. Not many of the women characters are portrayed primarily as other than in their relation to family members while some of the men are (a police inspector, other career criminals). When Carmen does decide to become a pro in season three, she will get shot at the end of the season, by the look of it lethally.

What makes Carmen so fascinating as a character is that she is an unapologetic reference to the archetypal mother: anything for the children - and that she makes a mess of it. Her daughter Natalie is a disturbed girl suffering from some kind of depressions. 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 are landed in a new series of dangerous complications in season two. Boris, the youngest brings a gun to school to defend himself against bullying, 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.

## SLIDE 8

The **emotional realism** *Penoza* achieves depends, so it seems, on the deep contradiction at the heart of the myth of motherhood. Lodged painfully as a result of half a century of second wave feminism and its fierce debates around motherhood that may well have produced one of the deepest divides in the movement and be part of how feminism never came to fully convince so many women and men.

### *Fraught feminist heritage and two myths of motherhood*

The Netherlands have traditionally had unparalleled low labour market participation of women. In 1985 40% of women between 15-64 worked, this changes somewhat in the 1990s but the higher percentage directly relates to a vast increase in part-time workers, the majority of whom are women (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 start working part-time (idem 22).

a reminder that feminism has not offered much of an alternative for (neo-) traditionalist notions of motherhood. Johnston and Swanson quote Elizabeth Fox-Genovese (1996) that feminism has essentially ignored women's roles as mothers. That seems too strong a statement and one moreover that does not allow for understanding how fraught discussion of motherhood has been in 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. Adrienne Rich's (1977) *Of Woman Born* distinguished between the oppressive institution of motherhood and its experience which could also be enriching. Roiphe's (1997) *A mother's eye* likewise pleads the case of motherhood. Simons (1984) suggests that feminism's theoretical impasse regarding motherhood dates to the 1960s and 70s when to have children was taken by some as a sign of a lack of commitment to the feminist cause and its individualism (Simons 1984:350). This line of argumentation can be followed back to Beauvoir's rationalist assessment of what motherhood did to a woman's life. In *the Second Stage* Betty Friedan (1982) takes issue with this 'egoistic individualism' and to being anti-family, anti-male and anti-life (quoted in Simons 1984: 355). Others too partake in this early 1980s massive offensive to stop separating women and mothering (i.e. Ruddick, 1980). While an important moment given the division second-wave feminism had created between white women and women of colour exactly over motherhood and mothering, it is also a deeply felt problematic.

Ann Snitow's (1992) reconstructs how feminism set out to break both the taboo surrounding those who mother in a patriarchy and those who are not mothers. She suggests that early second wave feminism produced a number of 'demon texts' (the motherhood as betrayal to the cause-ones)



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 self questioning in the feminism of the 1970s about a motherhood that had formerly been taken for granted (1992: 37). 'Family' according to Barbara Ehrenreich and others, was a grave in which the more autonomous word 'women' got buried (idem 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 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards is about the vote, the second wave was about the right to abortion (1992:43).

Although twenty 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 on 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 *Penoza'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.

#### SLIDE 9 mafia and mother

There is an alternative interpretation equally based on the simple facts that a mother entering a life of crime as a lead character is unusual in popular television drama; that Carmen's motherhood is the most referenced quality of the character in the press reviews of the series, and that the Netherlands have quite an unusually strong adherence to the idea of motherhood. After all, there are at least two different routes in motherhood ideology: 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 a life of crime is 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 makes it all the more easy to do so: at any given moment as a viewer the series realism can be faulted on denotational grounds. Its narrative is farfetched and over the top and gets to be more and more 'Hollywood' style as the series gets to be darker and darker (Meerman *Limburger* 2 July 2015). So far, viewers let the actors know they love them (Rhee *Algemeen Dagblad* 12 October 2013). 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 *Limburger* 2 July 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.

Slide 10: good mother