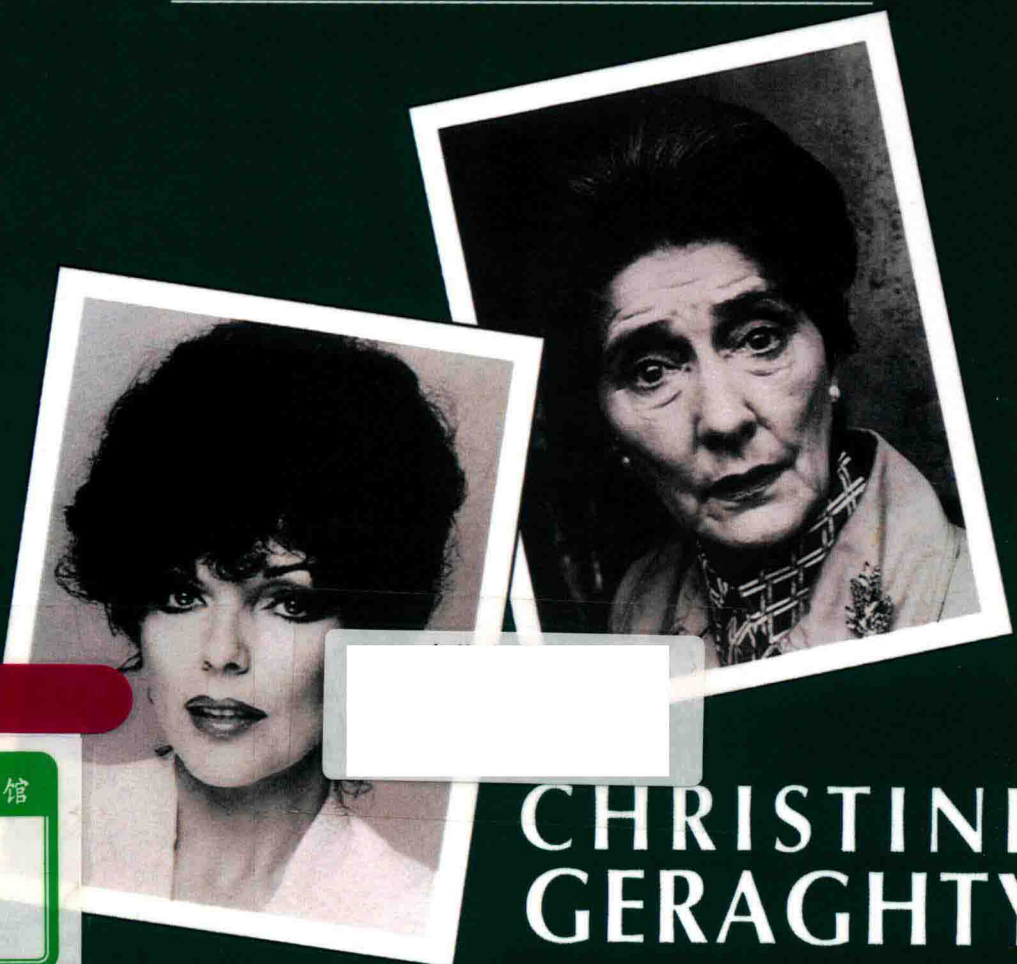
WOMEN AND SOAP OPERA

A Study of Prime Time Soaps



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Women and Soap Opera

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Introduction

For years, soap operas were scarcely noticed, trundling on in the corner, the same characters apparently going through the same traumas, watched only by the 'housewife' in the odd moments of her busy day. 'Soap' was a term of derision, an expression which implied an over-dramatic, under-rehearsed presentation of trivial dramas blown up out of all proportion to their importance. There was little here apparently to bring soaps to the notice of the general public or even media theorists.

But, as in the best soaps, things do change and this book examines the nature of that change. It is clear that the soaps themselves have widened their appeal: the glossy prime time soaps, *Dallas* and *Dynasty,* have become worldwide phenomena; in US colleges, the daytime soaps have keen followings among students; in Britain, playground conversations reflect the children's lively interest in both *EastEnders*, a British soap set in London, and *Neighbours*, an Australian soap set in the suburbs of Melbourne. Soaps in the eighties have become big news; *Time* magazine, in August 1980, took the question 'TV's *Dallas*: Whodunit?' and the shooting of JR was an item on the BBC's evening news on the evening it was shown in Britain. The tabloid papers made headlines of the characters' off-screen lives and speculated wildly about the outcomes of major stories. Rivalries were set up between *Dallas* and *Dynasty* or the British *EastEnders* and *Coronation Street* and the ratings were studied for indications of which programme was winning what became known in the British press as 'The Great Soap War'.

In the more rarified atmosphere of media theory, soaps were also being taken more seriously in the 1980s. This was due to the convergence of two emerging trends – a growing interest in popular television forms and an awareness, prompted by feminism, that

programmes enjoyed by so many women should not be ignored. Theoretical work on television began to look up from the news and current affairs programmes and to take more of an interest in other forms of drama, police series, situation comedies and quiz shows. In film theory, work on melodrama had rescued a despised genre and turned it into a legitimate object for study. US television theorists began to look at their own soaps in the same way and work on the importance of soaps in women's lives began to make a dent in the prejudice which surrounded them. The impact of feminism has been critical in creating an atmosphere in which the traditional skills and pleasures assigned to women could be re-evaluated rather than dismissed; this reassessment covered a range of cultural issues, from the apparently frivolous, such as the role of fashion and dress in women's lives, to the more obviously serious, as publishing houses discovered that the reissuing of long-neglected women's fiction could be profitable. In this changing atmosphere, it became possible to acknowledge the pleasures of soap operas and to argue that soaps are not inherently worthless but have been made to seem so. Jane Root has pointed out that the fact that 'soap operas are seen as female has helped to bring the whole form into disrepute',[1] but as feminism brought neglected genres such as the melodrama and the romance back into the centre of theoretical work so the potential importance of soap opera to women began to be recognised and argued about. This book is, I hope, a contribution to that process.

The soaps referred to in this book are not those which have always been defined as soap operas, particularly in the United States. I have concentrated deliberately on programmes which have been broadcast in the evenings but which, in their themes and presentation, seem to offer a space for women in peak viewing time. Research with audiences such as that of David Morley indicates that it is still difficult for women to control what is watched by the family in the evening and that prime time soaps are programmes which tend to be watched by women in the face of family opposition.[2] This book in its analysis of the US prime time programmes, *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, and of the British evening programmes, *Coronation Street*, *Crossroads*, *Brookside* and *EastEnders*, offers a case study of how far commercial popular programming can go in presenting strong female characters and dealing with issues from a point of view which is sympathetic to women. This appeal to women can be discerned in both the US and British soaps and explains some of their simlarities but the way in which it is handled also reveals key differences and one of my purposes is to explore the range of pleasures offered to women in these programmes. But if these prime time soaps have a specific

appeal to women they are also the programmes which are most under pressure to broaden their appeal to the whole evening audience and this book also seeks to explore how this necessity has affected their themes and structures.

This approach does not conform to some of the definitions of soap opera which are based on the traditional model of the daytime soap. The term is taken from US television where daytime programmes aimed at women were owned and produced by soap companies such as Procter and Gamble. It was used to describe (and denigrate) low-budget, daytime drama which to the outsider seemed slow paced and tacky, featuring families whose interactions produced stories of notorious complexity. Among American media theorists there has been some controversy as to whether prime time serials such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, with their more lavish production values and evening viewing slots, can be counted as soap operas. Thomas Skill argues that, 'for the most part, daytime is the province of the slower-paced, reflective drama compared to prime time's higher budgeted, action-orientated drama'[3] and George Comstock remarks that 'by definition, soap opera is a daytime program, broadcast several times a week with low production costs, as compared to prime time and attracts a predominantly, if hardly wholly, adult female audience.'[4] Other US writers have been more ready to include *Dallas* and even *Hill Street Blues* with soap operas. 'What unites them,' writes Horace Newcomb, 'and links them to soap opera is the sense of openness, the rejection of endings anticipated or already known.'[5]

What is important here is not so much to give the US prime time dramas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty* the correct label but to recognise why there is a problem about definition. Clearly, as US critics have acknowledged, there have been changes in the daytime soaps themselves in the eighties. They have become more adventurous and outgoing both in their settings and their stories. They have received a wider share of publicity and, as Robert Allen has described, 'new groups have "discovered" soap operas, including millions of college students (nearly half of all undergraduate students in the United States), five million non-college-age men, and as yet uncounted adolescents.'[6] At the same time, some of their formal strategies for handling narrative and their thematic preoccupations have been recognised and taken over by prime time programmes from different genres. Police series like *Hill Street Blues* and *Cagney and Lacey* have strong serial elements in their format and a greater concern with the domestic and emotional life of the characters which has shifted them away from the more traditional police series; situation comedies like *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers* and *Roseanne* have allowed

characters to develop in a way comparable to a soap, building on the audience's growing familiarity with a family's domestic dramas. In addition, prime time family dramas like *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and their offshoots have very strong thematic and formal links with daytime soaps but do not have the same scheduling format and make greater use of action and suspense. It is this blurring of the boundaries between soap opera and other genres which has caused the problems of definition.

The British context offers an even clearer example of the problems of attempting to work within a tight definition of soap opera. The different circumstances in which the British TV system developed meant that daytime soap operas could not be based on the US model since advertisers were specifically prevented from having that kind of direct input into programming. The limited number of channels (a commercial channel being first introduced as late as 1955 and a fourth national channel arriving only in 1982) and the more sporadic and piecemeal development of daytime television in the UK has meant that the demand for cheap, regular programmes has been much more limited. Generally the daytime needs have been met by obscure, home-produced serials like *Gems* or by Australian imports (*Sons and Daughters*, *The Young Doctors*) whose status is even lower than that of homegrown products. It would be meaningless, in a British context, to limit the definition of soap operas to programmes with a regular daytime scheduling. There has, indeed, been some hesitation in using the term at all in the British context. Granada, the production company for *Coronation Street*, has consistenly refused to describe its programme as a soap and indeed early critical work on it, such as the British Film Institute's monograph, *Coronation Street*, is restrained in the use of the term, preferring to talk about the 'continuous serial' or 'serial drama'.

Given the blurring of boundaries in the US context and the consistent use of prime time scheduling for the British programmes, it would be perverse to deny that *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Coronation Street*, *Crossroads*, *EastEnders* and *Brookside*, are soap operas in the interests of maintaining the purity of a definition. The programmes to which I refer, while maintaining certain key narrative strategies and thematic concerns, have extended the boundaries of soaps. Soap operas, as we shall see, has changed and it can now be defined not purely by daytime scheduling or even by a clear appeal to a female audience but by the presence of stories which engage an audience in such a way that they become the subject for public interest and interrogation. 'Who shot JR?' (*Dallas*), 'Should Deirdre leave Ken?' (*Coronation Street*), 'Will Den divorce Angie?' (*EastEnders*), 'How

will Meg be written out?' (*Crossroads*) are, like it or not, questions which became part of the public arena, bringing to the fore two issues which will be extensively explored in this book – the capacity of soaps to engage their audiences in the narrative and their ability to open up for public discussion emotional and domestic issues which are normally deemed to be private. Stuart Hall has described this process well when, in commenting on *Dallas*'s popularity, he remarked,

> At a certain point, the programme attained a type of popularity that was not a popularity in terms of figures and ratings. I mean it had repercussions on culture as a whole. The viewers' involvement became something different. You couldn't help talking about the popularity of *Dallas*, because people were starting to refer to categories taken from the serial in interpreting their own experience.[7]

Part of this book's purpose is to explore how and why this happens. Individual programmes do not of course maintain at a consistent level the intense public interest which Hall describes but the soaps I shall be discussing have all shown this capacity to spread their hermeneutic entanglements well beyond the television set and to engage their audiences in the process of discussion which Hall describes.

One of the traps of work on a genre is the search for the perfect example. Genre theory then becomes a question of elimination and exclusion. The arguments against considering *Dallas* and *Dynasty* as soap operas smack of this, making it more difficult to recognise connections in the interests of preserving boundaries. This book is concerned to delineate the strategies and thematics which are shared by the soaps I am looking at but it is at least as important to recognise that their differences are also a source of pleasure and that we need to chart these differences as well as the similarities. In this context, it is essential to have a wide definition of soap opera, to see soaps as programmes in which similar issues are variously played out and which offer, within the same broad area, a spectrum of different styles and preoccupations. As we shall see, the viewer can then pick and choose between Colorado and Liverpool, glamour and down-to-earth ordinariness, fantasy and naturalism. Looked at this way, it is precisely because *Dynasty* and *Dallas* are different from the British serials that it important to look at them together. What is at stake is not the pure examples of a particular genre but a range of programmes which, taken together, represent a whole which can never entirely be consumed or played out.

In looking at this particular group of soap operas, therefore, this book has two purposes. It seeks firstly to examine the role of women in prime time soap operas and the pleasures and values which are offered to them as the implied audience for these programmes. It does not, however, focus exclusively on the representation of women in soaps but argues that their dominant role needs to be studied more broadly in terms of the thematic preoccupations of the programmes and the formal conventions which structure them. Very often, as we shall see, the powerful representation of women in soaps comes from the contradictory demands made of them by, for example, their role as the moral centre of the family which is set against the expression of their own personal desires and needs. Such contradictions are marked on a more formal level by the way in which the need for narrative action may be set against the demand for spectacle and glamour, the values of melodrama at odds with those of light entertainment. In looking at the role of women in soap operas, therefore, we need to examine the programmes' narrative organisation and aesthetic characteristics since it is the combination of certain thematic preoccupations with a particular kind of engagement with the viewer which forms the basis of soaps' appeal.

The book's second purpose, however, is to look at the way in which prime time soaps have stretched the boundaries of the genre, by introducing stories which are different from the traditional soap format, by giving more space and arguably more sympathy to male characters and by addressing issues of gender, race and class in a more overt and dramatic way. Such changes have had a considerable effect on the balance between male and female, the personal and the public, domestic life and work which is at the heart of soaps and I am concerned to explore the effect of these new issues and particularly the way in which women's pleasures in their programmes might be put at risk.

This book therefore begins with an analysis of the way in which soaps organise their narratives and demonstrates the position of simultaneous engagement and distance which is offered to the audience. This is backed up by an examination of the asethetic experience of watching soaps. One of the confusing things for critics of soap operas is the way in which they mix genres and work with elements of melodrama, realism and light entertainment. What is a problem for the critics is a source of pleasure for the audience and the different ways in which various soaps mix their generic factors is important in understanding their differences in approaching the major themes with which this book is concerned. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are centrally concerned with the appeal soaps make to women and in

particular with their validation of women's role in the personal sphere. The basic staple of soaps is the difference between men and women, between the public and personal spheres, between work and home. The complexity with which this motif is worked across the families and communities of the various soaps shows that it is still a major preoccupation although how it is articulated depends on the particular combination of setting and character, specific to each programme. Chapter 6 suggests how soap operas might be placed in the broader context of other women's fiction such as the woman's film and the romance, and contrasts the utopian possibilities of these popular genres. The final chapters are devoted to an analysis of soaps' capacity to handle difference and change and examine the innovations which have been brought about by the soaps' search for new viewers beyond the traditional female audience. Once again, women are central to these shifts although, as will be seen, some of the changes seem to be at their expense.

Most recent work on soap operas has concentrated on studies of audience response either to a particular programme such as *Dallas* or in the context of television viewing more generally. Such work has been important in shifting discussion away from more abstract theories which neglected the role of the audience or implied that the text controlled the viewer's response. The conditions in which I write do not permit me to undertake such systematic work (although as the acknowledgements make clear I am very grateful to all the people with whom I have discussed these programmes) but, in any case, it seems important that in the urge to speak to 'real viewers' the pendulum should not swing so much the other way that textual work which is sensitive to the positions offered to the audience is no longer feasible. It seems important still that the patina of authenticity which glows over the statements produced by audience research does not mean that this method becomes the only way in which the products of popular culture can be discussed. David Morley's identification of the very firm gender stereotypes which appear to mark family viewing needs to be pushed further if we are to understand why soaps are so clearly associated with women's viewing.

Writing about soap opera is a perilous business. There is no fixed object of study over which the critic can pore, hoping to extract a further nuance; the readers of this book will not be able to flick back and study the precision of my examples or the aptness of my descriptions. During the writing of this book, Pamela left *Dallas* and Fallon, via a space ship, came back to *Dynasty*; Angie and Den left *EastEnders* and the factory in *Coronation Street* was demolished; *Crossroads* was killed off and *Dynasty* came to an abrupt halt with

Alexis and Dex suspended for ever in mid-air. Despite all this, I believe that it is possible to map out the general contours of the soap terrain and would ask the reader to check my propositions against whatever is currently going on in the soap world.

1

Soap Stories

'Not another death. I don't believe this place. There'll be none of you left by Christmas.'

Lisa Lancaster, *Crossroads*

'I like a good gossip. It gives you an interest in life.'

Ethel, *EastEnders*

Lisa Lancaster's somewhat callous remark on the high death rate in the British soap *Crossroads* during the autumn of 1987 was, at face value, a comment which was in character and offered an opinion on what was happening in the narrative. For regular viewers, however, who participated in the gossip network established around the programme in the popular press, it had other resonances. They knew that the show itself was going to be killed off the following Easter and that Lisa's apparently casual remark was a rather bitter joke on what was happening outside the fictional world of the Crossroads Motel. The audience was thus expected both to feel strongly about the deaths and departures that were occurring in the storylines and to understand the external reasons which caused them.

This close relationship between soaps and their audiences, the intimate knowledge regular viewers have of the programmes and their identification with particular characters, is still a source of puzzled dismay to those who do not watch soap operas. Concern is expressed that soaps are a substitute for 'real life', that viewers believe that the characters really exist and think that Albert Square and Southfork are something more than sets grown familiar through repeated viewing. Such criticisms are, as I hope to show, ill founded but they do at least hint at the crucial relationship which soaps have with their audiences. This chapter will explore the nature of that

relationship through an examination of the formal narrative strategies which work to create it. Other TV programmes may deal with the traditional subject matter of soaps – personal problems, family life, relationships within a community – but only soaps invite the audience both to enter intimately into a fictional world and to stand back and view with dispassion the formal conventions through which that world is constructed. This double action of engagement and distance is the subject of this chapter. By examining the way in which soaps construct their stories and in particular the manipulation of space, time and characterisation in them, we shall be better placed to understand the particular pleasures of soap viewing.

Soap narratives and time

The organisation of time is one of the key distinguishing features of soap story-telling and allows us to draw a distinction between soaps and the related formats of the series and the serial. The differences between a serial, a series and a soap opera have become blurred in recent years as the success of the soap format has encouraged series programmes like *Hill Street Blues* and *Cagney and Lacey* to incorporate strong elements of soap. Nevertheless, there is a distinct difference between these formats which hinges on how far the organisation of time dominates the organisation of the narrative itself.

A serial tells a complete story but spreads it over a number of episodes, often using the device of the cliffhanger to pick up from one episode to another. Serialisation in this way has an honourable tradition in which the novels of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens feature. It is the format of many TV programmes, particularly the adaptations of classic novels for which British television has a reputation, and the popular mini-series (somewhat misleadingly named since they are not in fact series but serials) in which best sellers such as *Roots* and *Lace* are presented in three or four consecutive evening viewings. Thus serials, like soaps, use a set of unresolved narrative puzzles to carry viewers across the time gap from one episode to another but the length of the fictional time which is deemed to have passed between episodes depends on the demands of the narrative: it may be a minute, a month, a year; it may be no time at all if the following episode returns to the moment of drama on which the preceding episode ended. In addition, serials differ from soaps in having a final ending which provides a resolution to the problems which have been set up at the beginning of the story. This ending clearly subordinates the organisation of time to the

resolution of the narrative strands. The series format, on the other hand, is like the soap in that it offers the audience a set of characters and very often a place (the police station, the hospital) with which we become familiar. In the traditional series format, however, like *The Rockford Files* or *Minder*, the organisation of time is dominated by the demand that the main story be resolved in a single episode. The classic narrative strategy of a stable situation which is disrupted and then restored through characters' actions is thus worked through for the viewer in one viewing and, while sub-stories may run across episodes, the audience is presented with a satisfactory resolution to a particular problem every time the programme is shown. The series, thus, lacks that sense of endless but organised time which characterises soap operas and which shapes the way in which we respond to their narratives. In soaps, stories are never finally resolved and even soaps which cease to be made project themselves into a non-existent future. The final scene of *Crossroads*, when, after nearly 24 years, it came to an end in April 1988, showed Jill Chance with her new lover, John, driving away to seek another motel, another 'Crossroads'.

This lack of resolution is both an effect and a consequence of the sense of a future which is another mark of the difference between soaps and serials and the traditional series. *The Jewel in the Crown* and *Rich Man, Poor Man* may be long, complex serials but we expect that in the end the significance of what we are watching will be revealed and each strand tied into a resolution. This is not to say that the resolution will always be effectively accomplished or that the story's pressures will necessarily be contained by its ending. It is the expectation of resolution which is important here. Soap operas do not encourage such expectations and the longer they run the more impossible it seems to imagine them ending. Instead of narrative time being subordinate to the demands of the story, it dominates the narrative process and enables other formal structures to be brought into play. Time rather than action becomes the basis for organising the narrative. At its most classic, a soap opera would appear daily and its organisation of time would be based on the yesterday, today and tomorrow of the viewer. Prime time soaps are not so strict in their adherence to 'real' time as this model suggests. Nevertheless, unlike the serial, the time which elapses between episodes of a soap is not dependent on the organisation of the story (what happens next?) but on some sense of time passing in the programme which parallels the time which has passed for the viewer between episodes. Characteristically, such soaps are introduced by the announcer inviting us to 'drop in on the Square' or 'find out what's been happening