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The affective life of heterosexuality: heteropessimism and postfeminism in *Fleabag*

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ABSTRACT

In this article we engage with the cultural moment of “heteropessimism” through the specific case of *Fleabag* (2016, 2019), with the show acting as the lens through which we illuminate the psychic and affective life of heterosexuality’s cultural production. Our queer reading of *Fleabag* suggests that while the heteropessimist sensibility of the show critiques the neoliberal and gendered constraints of heterosexuality, it at the same time creates a renewed, if pessimistic, investment in heteronormativity and repudiates alternative feminist and queer attachments. Overall, our analysis of *Fleabag*’s failed attempts to detach from heterosexual fantasies of the “good life” highlights the centrality of heteronormativity to contemporary imaginaries of feminism. As such, we suggest that heteropessimism might be best understood as the latest stage of postfeminism and argue that a critique of the cultural prominence and affective structure of heteropessimism is crucial for invigorating queer and feminist politics today.

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Introduction

“Heteropessimism consists of performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience”, writes Indiana Seresin in her 2019 article “On Heteropessimism.”¹ Seresin notes that while heteropessimism has a long history, it is “particularly palpable in the present” (Indiana Seresin 2019), and indeed a whole genre of cultural production lamenting the sorry state of heterosexuality has emerged across the UK and US in recent years. Opinion pieces have appeared in popular media outlets from *Buzzfeed*—where Shannon Keating describes 2019 as a “tough year for heterosexuality” (Shannon Keating 2019b)—to the *New York Times*, where Stephanie Coontz pointedly asks “how to make your marriage gayer?” (Stephanie Coontz 2020). Although expressions of heteropessimism provide commonplace cultural references for both men and women, it is particularly women’s dissatisfaction with heterosexuality—and heterosexual men—that has gained the most cultural traction. This recent pop cultural focus on heterosexuality’s internal problems follows several years of popular feminist activism highlighting, among others, the

prevalence of (mostly, although not exclusively, heterosexual) sexual and gendered violence, particularly through the #MeToo movement.

In this article we engage with this cultural moment of heteropessimism through the specific example of *Fleabag* (2019)—an “original bad-girl comedy” (Emily Nussbaum 2016) about the life of a young, white, middle-class single woman in London that earned star and creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge a series of accolades from BAFTAs to Emmys and Golden Globes. Premiering on BBC 3 in 2016, the two seasons of the show generated significant public and scholarly commentary. Originally a one-woman play, *Fleabag*’s stage director Vicky Jones has claimed the show as a “tipping point for feminism” (Michael Hogan 2020) and scholars like Rosalind Gill (2017b) have identified the series as a key cultural object for thinking through contemporary attachments to, as well as detachments from, feminism. Congruently, scholarly and popular readings of the show have tended to situate it within the spate of recent “dramedy” TV series that centralise complex female “antiheroes”—from *Girls* and *Broad City* in the US, to *Chewing Gum* and *The Bisexual* in the UK (Gill 2017a; Julia Havas and Maria Sulimma 2020; Faye Woods 2019). These commentators point out how, in clever, funny and sometimes shocking ways, *Fleabag* and other similar shows break down many of the strict expectations of contemporary neoliberal femininity. These “precarious-girl comedies” make “endless alienation a source of humor” (Rebecca Wanzo 2016, 29; cf. Woods 2019), associating their protagonists with failure, cringe, and the messy, embodied experience of female sexuality instead.

In this article, we take a slightly different angle to commentators who have examined *Fleabag* within—and usually, in opposition to—postfeminist discourses and an earlier more aspirational generation of women-centred TV shows such as *Sex and the City* (Gill 2017b; Havas and Sulimma 2020; Nussbaum 2016; Woods 2019). Drawing on feminist and queer cultural studies scholarship, we bring a focus on heterosexuality to bear on the series’ representations to situate it within the cultural moment of heteropessimism. By “heterosexuality” we do not refer just to individual identity or object choice, but a social institution that naturalises a hierarchical gender binary and enshrines narrow definitions of love, intimacy and sexual attraction—and the ways in which its cultural dominance and affective attachments are reproduced. *Fleabag*, thus, acts as a lens through which we illuminate the psychic and affective life of heterosexuality’s cultural production, allowing us to dissect the affective structure of heteropessimism. Our analysis aligns with Seresin’s argument that heteropessimism has “perversely [–] created a renewed investment in the consistency of heterosexuality, a reinscription of heterosexuality’s tired features, even as this investment takes the disguised form of negative feeling” (2019). It argues further that one key way in which this reinvestment is affectively achieved is through the repudiation of alternative feminist and queer attachments—which marks heteropessimism not as an antidote to but as the latest stage of a postfeminist sensibility.

We begin with a section highlighting the many ways in which *Fleabag* critiques both neoliberal femininity and heterosexuality, pointing out its anti-aspirational and transgressive aspects vis-à-vis the pressures of white, middle-class heteronormativity. In the second section, we juxtapose this reading with a focus on the show’s continued attachments to heterosexuality and the “good life” (Lauren Berlant 2011) associated with it. We argue that the good life fantasy is sustained in the show’s narratives despite its—perhaps more obvious—gestures of sexual transgression and anti-aspirationalism. The final section outlines the feminist and queer alternatives that are foreclosed through this continued

attachment to heterosexuality. Here we suggest that one way of (queerly) reading the show is through the concept of “gender melancholia” (Judith Butler 1995), positioning Fleabag—and, perhaps controversially, the heteropessimist woman—as a true lesbian melancholic. Overall, our queer reading of *Fleabag* highlights the centrality of heterosexuality to contemporary imaginaries of feminism, arguing that a critique of the cultural prominence and affective structure of heteropessimism is crucial for invigorating feminist politics today.

Critique of heterosexuality

Fleabag's popularity and labelling as a feminist show are not surprising given the intelligent ways in which the show breaks with traditional gender roles and normative expectations of female sexuality. From the first scene on the show avoids tropes of feminine innocence and passive sexual desire. We meet the main character, Fleabag, opening the door to a man she has called over to have sex with. Looking into the camera, she addresses the viewer directly, commenting that once they are in the bedroom “after some very standard bouncing, he is edging towards your asshole” and that she lets him as “he’s come all the way here.” Upon waking, the man tells her how special the night has been for him, as it has been the first time he has had anal sex, and kisses her on the forehead. Fleabag seems sceptical of his earnest affection and, turning toward the camera, comments that all *she* wonders about is: “do I have a massive arsehole?” In this scene, we encounter the core features that have made the show such a success: Fleabag is crass and un-ladylike, sceptical of romance and affection, and instead indulges in casual sex with many different men and relishes in biting irony and grinding self doubt.

For most of the first series we follow Fleabag in her hunt for casual sex. We see her taking her dates to sex shops, seducing her lawyer, a stranger on a bus, and later on even a celibate Catholic priest. All the men Fleabag meets are presented through stereotypical and often vulgar nicknames such as “Hot Misogynist”, “Arsehole Guy” and “Bus Rodent”. Bus Rodent (referred to as such for his large front teeth) proves to be not only bad at sex but also emotionally inept and unable to follow her jokes. Her beautiful lover in the leather jacket, Arsehole Guy, is portrayed as vain and self-involved. What these characters share is a failure to understand or care about Fleabag’s inner world, and an inability to keep up with her humour. They are also presented as clueless optimists unaware of the gendered pressures of heterosexual dating—in sharp contrast to Fleabag’s witty, pessimistic critique. At least initially, then, the show’s general heteropessimist sensibility “that has a heavy focus on men as the root of the problem” (Seresin 2019) makes perfect sense, given the many disappointing men the show introduces Fleabag (and us) to.

When Fleabag finds herself in a relationship—such as with Harry, a childlike “nice guy” who keeps returning to her for his toy dinosaur collection—she remains emotionally distant and reverses classical gender roles. While Harry cries after watching *Cats* and cleans her house every time they break up, Fleabag leads him on and masturbates to videos of Barack Obama. When Harry eventually discovers Fleabag’s internet porn search history he breaks up with her for good, and remains coded feminine/emasculated by wearing a post-shower towel on his head during the scene. It is these sexual transgressions and subversions of traditional gender roles that carry the main feminist potential of the series. Fleabag is not a passive romantic waiting for her Prince Charming, but an

imperfect, even selfish, young woman confused about her own desires, yet willing to explore and follow them.

As such, female sexual desire in *Fleabag* is portrayed as awkward, difficult and at times deeply painful. Different from characters such as Samantha Jones or Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, Fleabag does not celebrate her sexual desire as part of a larger narrative of individual achievement and neoliberal success (Eva Chen 2013). Instead, the sex she has with selfish men—who rave about her small breasts or try to engage in said anal sex without communicating with her first—is represented as weird and uncomfortable. Such sex scenes that are “not stylish, nor beautifully-lit, nor artfully filmed” (2017a, 235), as Gill notes in relation to *Girls*, are “at the representational level, [-] a significant departure” (2017a, 236) from earlier generations of televisual representation of female sexuality. They align more closely with the representative and aesthetic grammar of “cringe” than that of sexual liberation (Havas and Sulimma 2020; Theresa Trimmel 2018).

In the second episode of the series, Fleabag confesses that she is addicted to “the performance of [sex]. The awkwardness of it. The drama of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body”, and then adds: “Not so much the feeling of it.” Her emotionally detached hunt for sex is nearly compulsive, with at times disturbing consequences for her everyday life. When applying for a loan, Fleabag lifts her sweater to reveal nothing but a bra underneath—although it is not clear whether accidentally—not only causing her to lose the loan but also leading the loan manager to ask her to leave. Nevertheless, throughout the show, Fleabag continues to joke about rape and makes inappropriate comments about her and others’ sex lives. When having sex with Bus Rodent, crouched awkwardly over the counter of her café, Fleabag is clearly uncomfortable and comments that it is “surprisingly bony [-] like having sex with a protractor.” After which, he not only prematurely ejaculates but then also confronts her for pretending to have enjoyed it and hiding her disgust toward him. In such scenes, Fleabag does not shy away from negative feelings or experiences—if anything, as Woods argues, she “revels in shame, desire, disgust, pain and joy” (Fleabag 2019, 196)—and portrays sex to be “at times abject, rather than erotic” (Fleabag 2019, 205). As such, *Fleabag’s* sexual representations align with series like *Girls* and *Broad City*, which have similarly been celebrated for charting a more vulnerable, complex and at times abject depiction of female sexuality.

The main character’s compulsive search for sex might be seen as part of the show’s wider anti-aspirationalism, which Gillian Silverman and Hagelin Sarah 2018 point out as a key feature of this new wave of female-led television. Born into a white, middle-class family, Fleabag seems to have few career aspirations. She is content with running a small café whose only remarkable features are its guinea pig decorations and “chatty Wednesdays” attended by lonely locals looking for someone to talk to. Different to *Girls*, where the main character Hannah fails to attain but still desires the glamorous life of a writer like Carrie Bradshaw, career aspirations are not part of the affective grammar of *Fleabag*. This is most evident in the contrast that the series builds between Fleabag and her sister Claire—a successful businesswoman—who is so concerned with appearing successful that she even organises her own surprise birthday party. As Orlaith Darling argues, it is specifically in the contrast between Fleabag and her sister that the show “exposes the shortcomings of neoliberal value systems” (Orlaith Darling 2020, 1) of self-reliance, aspirationalism and gendered hypervigilance. Claire is portrayed as the archetypical neoliberal feminist who prides herself on “having it all”—a family and a stellar

career as the two goals of neoliberal feminist achievement (Catherine Rottenberg 2014). Yet, her life is portrayed as bitter and heartless through the running joke that her “cold heart” would be much happier in Finland, in contrast to Fleabag’s messy and uncontrolled but definitely more fun existence. At one point in the series Fleabag, accidentally yet highly symbolically, even smashes the “Women in Business” award that Claire is about to present.

Fleabag’s anti-aspirationalism comes across most clearly in her rejection of normative heterosexual marriage and family life. All the heterosexual relationships around her are depicted as nightmares. Claire is in an abusive relationship with a man who drinks too much, makes sexist jokes, and tries to kiss her sister at her birthday party. Her husband’s son stalks her, and she does not know how to escape the cruel trap that her marriage has become. Fleabag’s father is in a codependent relationship with a controlling artist—the Godmother—who pushed her way into his life after Fleabag’s mother died. And Fleabag’s own chances of finding Mr Big seem equally bleak, as all the men she dates turn out to be either selfish, idiots, or both. As viewers, we are invited to join in with the critique of these relationships, as well as the heterosexual desires that underpin them, through the show’s emblematic breaking of the fourth wall. In turning to the camera and speaking directly to the audience, Fleabag invites us to share her judgements of heterosexual dating. When having sex with the Arsehole Guy, for instance, she comments that he is losing his erection because he is falling in love, joking about the pathetic ways in which emotional attachment breaks the performance of virile masculinity. We, as viewers, become interpellated as Fleabag’s confidantes and intimate accomplices in her biting attacks on straight, white men and heterosexual middle-class life (Tom Brown 2013; Havas and Sulimma 2020; Woods 2019).

While the direct address allows Fleabag to escape reality, real solace from the demands of neoliberal, heterosexual dating life is only found in rare moments of female bonding. While Fleabag’s relationship with her sister is tumultuous and competitive, they bond in their grief over their mother’s death and their dislike for the Godmother, whom they attempt to sabotage by repeatedly stealing her favourite art piece. They cuddle up together after a failed meditation retreat and Fleabag covers for her sister when she has a miscarriage. Yet, the most affectively charged scenes of intimacy are found in the flashbacks with Fleabag’s best friend Boo, whose death stands as the pivotal event of the first season that leads Fleabag to seek endless (hetero-)sexual distraction. The biting irony and passive aggression that infuses the rest of the series fades in these moments, as we witness Fleabag and Boo laughing, cuddling and being frank with each other. In these scenes, Fleabag lets her guard down, and most importantly the direct address and breaking of the fourth wall disappears. Fleabag does not need to distance herself through an external audience, as she already has an accomplice to confide in right in front of her: Boo.

In *Fleabag*, then, we get a sophisticated critique of heteronormativity and the cruel demands that it places not only on gay, lesbian and trans people but also on young straight cis women. Attaching little hope to careers, straight men or heteronormative relationships, *Fleabag* seems to break with the neoliberal feminist fantasy of a “good life” found in the double achievement of a high-achieving career and a successful family life (Rottenberg 2014). In this way *Fleabag* appears to illustrate Berlant’s argument that what we call the “good life” in fact turns out to be “for so many a bad life that wears out the

subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it" (2011, 27)—thus continuously attaching to the fantasy of it. This feminist antihero is as difficult and self-involved as she is witty and sharp in her dissection of the stale gendered and sexual normativities reproduced through this fantasy. Rather, affective attachment is redirected to the intimacy found in strong female bonds—whether these are with Fleabag’s sister, her deceased mother or most importantly her best friend Boo.

Continued attachments to heterosexuality

At first glance, then, Fleabag seems to refuse neoliberal and the confines of heteronormativity that come with it, similarly to many other protagonists in the “precarious-girl” genre. Wanzo coined the term “precarious-girl comedies” to describe shows in the new millennium characterised by “the nexus of abjection and precarity” (2016, 29). However, while it is clear that heterosexuality is not working for Fleabag, it is less clear to what extent she still *wants* it to work for her. While Fleabag is initially struggling to hold onto the café she opened with her friend Boo before her death, in the second season the café is thriving. It is unclear exactly how Fleabag managed to turn the cafe into a success, but this certainly fits the narrative of the second series where Fleabag is *doing well*—as if purely by virtue of her being in a better headspace customers have started flowing into her café. This small but not insignificant detail in the series’ overarching narrative is just one of the ways in which *Fleabag* remains an undeniably white and middle-class narrative about anti-aspirationalism, for her anti-aspirationalism is only possible because of the various connections she has to structures of privilege. Thus, while in many ways Fleabag matches Wanzo’s “precarious-girl” descriptor, it is important to note that her precarity is first and foremost emotional, not financial.

Fleabag’s staunchly middle-class depiction of precarity mirrors but also clearly differs from other precarious-girl comedies like *Chewing Gum* or *Girls*. Through its main character Tracey Gordon—a young Black woman living on a council estate in London—*Chewing Gum* cleverly embraces the precarious-girl format to dissect the raced and classed exclusions that accompany contemporary gender and sexual normativities (Francesca Sobande 2019). And while Hannah Horvath from *Girls* is undeniably white and middle-class, the combination of her emotional frankness and her deviation from standard beauty norms has made her one of the most controversial and even hated characters on TV. In contrast, Fleabag matches Rebecca Liu’s description of the “archetypical Young Millennial Woman—pretty, white, middle-class, cisgender, and tortured enough to be interesting but not enough to be repulsive. Often described as ‘relatable,’ she is, in actuality, not” (Rebecca Liu 2019). The show frequently mixes cringe aesthetics with representations of conventional feminine beauty and white middle-class respectability (Beverly Skeggs 1997). In other words, even when Fleabag farts, drinks, jokes about rape and in other ways challenges normative gender expectations, she looks gorgeous while doing it—and thus remains within the bounds of respectable femininity.

This brings the show’s class and racial politics into sharp relief. Wanzo argues that “in the woman-centered sitcom, abjection has been an important affective mode, disrupting the genre’s narrative tendency to support a domestic status quo or move women toward marriage and greater professional fulfillment” (2016, 33). However, she also notes the “racial and class-based differences in the embrace of not only this twenty-first-century

form of comedy but also in modes of self-fashioning in neoliberal times” (2016, 30). For Wanzo (cf. Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine 2008), race and class make a difference to how, and to what extent, abjection can feature as part of a character’s path towards freedom from the normative expectations of heterosexual femininity. Characters such as Fleabag and Hannah from *Girls* (the topic of Wanzo’s analysis) can so easily associate themselves with abjection through their open engagements with and discussions of sex, dirt, and bodily fluids precisely because white, middle-class femininity has historically been associated with purity, and not the abject. Thus, while we agree with the commentators who have positioned Fleabag’s rejection of some facets of normative femininity as a sign of her (emotional) precarity, at the same time it is clear that only some characters can so easily “embrace physical and emotional abjection” (Woods 2019, 198) and still be accepted—let alone admired. As such, Fleabag’s light-hearted toying with abject narratives and imagery may undermine and hide the often violent consequences that norms of white middle-class femininity and respectability have for working-class, queer and trans women of colour.

Overall, then, although the fantasy of the white, middle-class nuclear family is carefully broken down in the series, in many ways the attachment to it remains. This continued attachment is most notable in Fleabag’s relationship with the Priest in the second, generally more optimistic, season. The Priest is a welcome break from the other men in the show—his emotional maturity appears in stark contrast to Fleabag’s previous sexual partners. He is the first man Fleabag engages with who shows a genuine interest in her, and it is also with him that her facade of sarcastic detachment starts to crack (if never to the same extent as with Boo). He notices her disassociating while she makes remarks through the fourth wall: “What is that? [-] That thing that you’re doing? It’s like you disappear”, and she accidentally directs a comment intended at the viewer to him instead (“the arms, the neck”). Fleabag and the Priest seem to experience genuine emotional intimacy and in the final episode of the series they confess their love to each other. Despite all the ways in which conventional romance has been shown to be futile, stupid and even dangerous throughout the series, the desire for it reappears in the narrative of the Priest.

Reading the Priest’s storyline this way helps at least partially explain what Louis Staples in *The Independent* calls an “online thirst-fest” (Louis Staples 2019) over the character. The frenzy over the attractive yet unattainable character of the Priest crystallised around a scene in the second season, where Fleabag goes to the church to meet him. The sexual tension is palpable, as the Priest quips to Fleabag: ‘Fuck you calling me “father” like it doesn’t turn you on just to say it.’ He invites her to the confessional booth (“I know what to do with you”), where Fleabag lists her various “sins” from stealing and lying to extra-marital sex. Eventually the jokey tone turns more serious, and after some hesitation, Fleabag reveals some of her genuine feelings:

I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. [-] I want someone to tell me what to eat, what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, and who to love, and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I’ve been getting it wrong.

She says she is scared, and after a pause the Priest replies: “kneel”, and then proceeds to open the curtain of the confessional and kiss her.

One way of reading this scene is through the fantasy of normative heterosexuality. In her most vulnerable moment, Fleabag begs for someone to tell her what to do, and the Priest’s command for her to kneel turns what is perhaps originally a broader expression of her lack of direction in life into a sexual desire. Her request thus appears as a desire for the Priest to take control of the situation sexually, so as to be liberated from the excessive freedoms and choices associated with being a white, middle-class woman in the twenty-first century. This reflects the common dilemma of femininity Meg-John Barker articulates (in relation to the *Fifty Shades of Grey* films) as “the desire to be desired and pleasure in pleasing another, and the yearning to remain childlike and not agentic/responsible” (Meg-John Barker 2013, 900). In this sense it is apt the scene takes place in a confessional, as she confesses to both the Priest and the viewers that all she actually wants is for someone else to be in (patriarchal) control. Here we are reading the scene as not a queer moment like some commentators have (Keating 2019a), but as a yearning for the comfort of conventional and normative heterosexuality, with all of its patriarchal connotations.

Fleabag’s relationship with the Priest, however, is suggestive of a desire for heteronormativity only so far as it is unattainable. An actual relationship between the two is near impossible, and definitively revealed as such in the series’ final episode, when the Priest admits that he chooses his love for God over his love for her. While Fleabag’s desire for normative coupledness with the Priest remains unfulfilled due to his vow of celibacy, it is precisely because of this impossibility that the fantasy of conventional romance can be kept alive. The reality of heterosexual coupledness is deferred, displaced onto an imaginary future, which is perhaps also the reason behind the Priest’s seemingly near-universal desirability. Because both Fleabag and the viewer know that the relationship will never be actualised, we can fill it with our own imaginary instead. This reading is confirmed in the series by Fleabag’s sister Claire. When Fleabag tells her that she has “found someone” and that “he’s a priest”, she responds: “It’s just, you’re a genius. You’re my fucking hero”—as if to signal that she understands it is better to fall in love with the idea of a man, rather than an actual man. If “disappointment is not how it feels when the object of your attachment fails to give you what you want; rather, disappointment is how it feels when *you* fail to detach yourself from the disappointing object” (Fleabag 2019, 64, emphasis in the original), as Andrea Long Chu argues, then the Priest is the perfect heteropessimist object of desire—he can never disappoint because he is always already unattainable.

In the final episode, Fleabag’s father is about to marry the Godmother. The scenes at the wedding present a further shift in Fleabag’s attitudes towards romantic relationships: she first supports her sister in following her perfect match, Klare, to the airport, choosing real romance over her disappointing marriage, and then calms her father when he has last minute nerves (despite perceiving his marriage as constraining to him). Her father reciprocates by saying of his future wife: “Look I know she’s not ... everyone’s cup of tea [they both laugh]. And neither are you, darling”—suggesting to Fleabag that she also has a chance of finding someone who will accept her, despite her unlikeability. Thus, at the end of the series, conventional heterosexual coupledness reappears as the inevitable goal, undermining some of the earlier more critical sensibilities. The final scene sees Fleabag walk away after saying goodbye to the Priest, and as the camera starts following her she turns around, smiles and shakes her head, and then waves at us. Fleabag’s goodbye to the

viewer suggests she no longer needs the sarcastic, detached disassociation that the breaking of the fourth wall has provided her throughout the series—between abjection and aspirationalism, Fleabag chooses heteronormative aspirationalism, after all.

Repudiation of feminist and queer attachments

But is Fleabag a straight woman? So far in this article we have assumed so, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. In the very first episode of the series Fleabag tries to pick up a woman: when she sees a very drunken woman fall down at the bus stop, accidentally revealing her chest, Fleabag pulls up her shirt and asks her if she is okay. Fleabag then helps her into a cab and asks her “Do you want to come home with me?”, to which the woman replies—“What?! No way! You naughty boy.” Another encounter takes place in the second season, between Fleabag and Belinda who has received the “Women in Business” award presented by Claire’s company. Fleabag runs after Belinda in the rain to retrieve the Godmother’s statue that she has been given as the award (in place of the statue Fleabag accidentally broke). Belinda signals that she is aware, and perhaps scared, of being followed, turns back and says “I’m trained in martial arts.” They then go for a drink, where Fleabag makes a pass at Belinda—only to be rejected.

Given Fleabag’s explicit attempts to sleep with women, it is somewhat surprising that much of the commentary on the show has missed her flirtations with lesbianism or bisexuality, labelling her as straight instead (like us so far). As well as the explicit encounters mentioned above, lesbian references are scattered throughout the series: Fleabag makes a lesbian joke to her sister (“Do you know what the lesbian app for Grindr is called?—Twatnav”), the Godmother introduces the Priest with “You know the most fascinating thing about Father here, is that his mother was originally a LESBI” before the scene cuts off, and when arriving at a silent retreat Fleabag suggests to her sister that they will probably be read as a lesbian couple. While some of these encounters perhaps have more to do with Fleabag’s desire to shock and tantalise, lesbianism seems to *haunt* the series and its representations of femininity and feminism (Ilana Eloit and Clare Hemmings 2019). What is curious about her attempts to sleep with women, however, is that Fleabag is coded masculine in them. She is the pursuer/aggressor, actively seeking to pick up women, and in both of the examples above she is also mistaken for a man: the drunken woman calls her a “naughty boy” and Belinda’s running away from her is reminiscent of the dynamics of women being sexually harassed on the street.

The gender-reversed nature of these encounters is also mirrored in Fleabag’s relationship with Harry, which we presented as a potential subversion of traditional gender roles earlier in this piece. When Fleabag bumps into Harry at a church fête in the second season, it is revealed that Harry has a new partner and a child. He talks about how difficult the birth was and how his body feels different now (“Elaine is being amazing, so supportive”), Fleabag responds jokingly “it sounds like you have postnatal depression”, to which Harry replies: “I do, yeah, but we’re working through it.” The Priest then joins them:

Priest: Do you guys know each other?

Fleabag: Well, we sort of used to, kind of, go ...

Harry: Er, yeah. I used to be her girlfriend.

Their relationship, while of course heterosexual in content, also reverses the show's representation of heterosexual roles—with Harry even eventually labelling himself “her girlfriend.”

So what are we to make of these queer desires and gender-bending narratives? What guides our reading of them is that these narratives, despite their seemingly non-straight or gender-reversed *content*, remain very similar in *tone*—and particularly in *affective* tone—to the other relationships depicted in the series. Fleabag's (half-hearted) attempts at sleeping with women are not met with any enthusiasm, just like her attempts at sleeping with men all result in disappointment (even when they result in multiple orgasms, as in her dalliance with her lawyer, the Hot Misogynist). She responds to both with the same cynical and sarcastic distance, and the affective register of the encounters remains one of flat detachment—it *doesn't matter who you sleep with*, the show seems to want to tell us, because it will all be just as disappointing in the end. The women (and feminine men) Fleabag tries to sleep with turn out to be objects just as disappointing as the (macho) men, because, as Chu reminds us, it is not the object itself that is disappointing, but rather “your own optimism: your continued belief in the world's being enough for the desires that tether you to it, all evidence to the contrary” (Chu 2019, 64). Thus, heteropessimism might be better described as *cruel hetero-optimism*—to borrow from Berlant's (2011) “cruel optimism”, which describes the condition of maintaining an optimistic attachment to objects that are actually obstacles to one's flourishing. For Berlant, “the fantasy life of normativity” (2011, 167) is precisely such an object, and correspondingly, despite all evidence to the contrary, the heteropessimist continues to optimistically tether her desires to a world and to relationships ill-equipped to meet them.

The argument of this article should consequently not be (mis)read as: Fleabag's life would be so much better if she was as a lesbian (even though it might). Rather, we are identifying a particular heteropessimist sensibility that critiques the gendered constraints of the institution of heterosexuality while simultaneously embracing them—albeit with flat and cynical detachment. Congruently, even in the show's most transgressive moments, Fleabag remains affectively and self-consciously aligned with patriarchal and heteronormative power relations. Real female sexual pleasure remains not only forestalled but also unimaginable in a society guided by the gendered scripts of heteronormativity, the show seems to suggest, while also offering us little respite from these scripts, or indeed remedy to them. If postfeminism is a distinctive “sensibility that characterises increasing numbers of films, television shows, advertisements and other media products” (Gill 2017a, 248), Fleabag's self-referential gestures of heteropessimist lament might be understood as the latest form of a postfeminist sensibility. Such a sensibility throws the subject back onto itself and proclaims that, while we can point at the gendered confines of heteronormativity, ultimately there is little we can do to change them. As such it replaces an earlier, more optimistic, paradigm of postfeminism focused on individual success, resilience and a positive mental attitude (Gill 2017b; Christina Scharff 2016) with a more pessimistic attachment that critiques yet likewise remains enamored with the affective pull of heteronormativity.

Understanding heteropessimism as a postfeminist sensibility also helps explain the show's highly anxious relationship to feminism. Fleabag's sister's neoliberal feminist credentials of having “two degrees, a husband and a Burberry coat” are ridiculed as much as her Godmother's embrace of an earlier version of liberation feminism.

Announcing her “Sexhibition”, the Godmother proudly yet nervously declares: “I’ve taken a photo of my naked body every year for the past thirty years. [–] I think it’s important for women of all ages to see how my body has changed, over the years. I think they have to have a healthy perspective on my body. Don’t they?” Shown to privilege self-congratulatory postures of feminist achievement over actual solidarity with the other women in her life, the Godmother’s feminism is presented as cunning and manipulative as Claire’s is shown to be cold and heartless.

In *Fleabag*, then, an identification with feminism is sought, while any concrete feminist politics are repudiated—marked as outdated and laughable. After meditating in silence in a Quaker meeting, Fleabag stands up to declare “I sometimes worry that I wouldn’t be such a feminist if I had bigger tits.” In an emotional speech to her father she laments: “I have a horrible feeling that I’m a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist.” And when a speaker at a feminist conference (rhetorically) asks who would swap ten years of their life for the “perfect body”, only Fleabag and her sister raise their hands. These scenes offer both comedy and relief, as they pull us out of earnest discussions of who deserves to call themselves a “real” feminist, yet also create clear affective distance to (presumably humourless) feminist politics.

Afraid of being labelled a “bad feminist” herself (BBC 2019), Waller-Bridge’s biting commentary on the difficulties of living a feminist life has been celebrated by commentators, with one arguing that it “empowers all of us guilty feminists, who, for years, have felt the need to apologise for breaking the rules of game” (Claudia Mulholland 2019). While it marks a shift from earlier postfeminist sensibilities in which young women tended to repudiate the label of feminism while embracing neoliberal values of independence and individual success (Scharff 2016), Fleabag’s anxious desire for feminism is marked by an ongoing sense of shame and guilt. These anxious attachments might be explained through the heteropessimist paradox: while figures like Fleabag identify the problems of heteronormativity, they remain unwilling (or rather unable) to step outside of its gendered and sexual confines.

As suggested earlier, the only alternatives to the heteropessimist feelings of guilt, shame and disappointment in *Fleabag* appear in moments of female bonding, in particular the flashback scenes with Boo. In contrast to the rest of the show, in these scenes, shot with a soft lens and in the warm light often seen in intimate love scenes, Fleabag lets her guard down and we witness intimacy, vulnerability and companionship. After her mother dies, Fleabag cries out “I don’t know what to do with all the love I have for her”, to which Boo replies “I’ll take it, you’ve gotta give it to me.” In a queer reading, we might understand Fleabag and Boo’s relationship as part of what Adrienne Rich (1980) famously described as the “lesbian continuum”: a bond of intimacy between women unsanctioned by heteronormative social standards. From this perspective, the show is a narrative of loss and grief over an intimate relationship of trust and hopefulness. This narrative, however, seems to get troubled by the big reveal at the end of the first season when it is suggested that Boo (accidentally?) took her own life because Fleabag slept with her boyfriend. Here the terms of the direct address shift from maintaining affective intimacy to exposing a “failure of insight” (Brown 2013, 122). “The power dynamics of her direct address shift as [Fleabag’s] control over our relationship is shattered” (Woods 2019, 209), and we, as the audience, are asked to re-evaluate our interpretation and understanding of her. Rather

than as an exploration of grief and the pain of losing her best friend, the show suggests it should be read as a story of guilt, remorse and self-hatred—or even as a pathological narrative about the compulsive and destructive sexuality that both caused and emerges as a result of that guilt.

In a queer reading, then, both the character and the audience might be said to become prey to what Butler (1995) calls “gender melancholia.” Butler describes gender melancholia as the inability to mourn same-sex love objects in a heteronormative society that makes it impossible for the lost object to have ever been recognised as a love-object in the first place. For Butler, it is not that homosexual love is transferred onto a substitute (opposite-sex) figure, or even abandoned—rather, it is a “preemption of the possibility of homosexual attachment, a certain foreclosure of possibility that produces a domain of homosexuality understood as unlivable passion and ungrievable loss” (1995, 168, emphasis in the original). Of course Fleabag *does* grieve—loudly, improperly, pathologically—throughout the show, but we also detect a melancholic attachment to “what exceeds, what is unrecognised, what is lost” (Eloit and Hemmings 2019, 353). In this reading, Fleabag cannot properly mourn Boo because to do so would mean needing to have already admitted that she once loved (or desired) her. This melancholic attachment is further heightened by Fleabag’s social environment in which her grief is belittled and her inability to continue life as usual is pathologised—leaving her without socially sanctioned avenues for mourning her friend, confidante and lover.

That Fleabag’s attempts to sleep with women (and men) seem to evoke a *gendered* anxiety and not just an anxiety about sexuality, as recounted above, supports such a reading. In Butler’s argument, “the fear of homosexual desire in a woman may induce a panic that she is losing her femininity” (1995, 168) because a feminine gender is formed precisely through the incorporation of the already-excluded potential feminine love object—or in other words, the formation of femininity depends on the repudiation of homosexuality. Within this logic, “the ‘truest’ lesbian melancholic is the strictly straight woman” (1995, 177). Fleabag, along with the heteropessimist woman, might therefore be read as such a straight lesbian melancholic—stuck in gender melancholia and unable to mourn her lost love object, all that she is left with, and leaves us with, is a pessimistic reattachment to heterosexuality as not just an object choice, but also a social institution, cultural imposition, and affective structure.

Seresin (2019) frames heteropessimism as a *performative* disaffiliation: despite all of our unhappiness with it, heterosexuality remains both inevitable and a strictly individual, rather than a structural or collective, problem. Our reading of *Fleabag* has shown how such heteropessimism unavoidably operates through not only an aspirational reattachment to white, middle-class heteronormativity, but also the repudiation of any viable feminist and queer alternatives. As a response to the gendered confines of heteronormativity, *Fleabag*’s heteropessimist sensibility leaves both its protagonist and its viewers with little more than biting, yet self-referential, irony and sarcasm. The problem with such a postfeminist sensibility is that it is ultimately an “anesthetic feeling, a feeling that aims to protect against overintensity of feeling and an attachment that can survive detachment from the particularity of its objects” (Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman 2014, 17). What *Fleabag* and its incredible success show us is that such an anaesthetic might help us live through the constraints and disappointments of heterosexual life, yet it also forecloses any alternatives that might move us beyond its confines.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed *Fleabag* through the lens of heterosexuality. Our reading has suggested that what makes the series so appealing is not only how it breaks with the expectations of white, middle-class femininity but also how it pokes holes into the fantasy of the heteronormative “good life.” Through the breaking of the fourth wall, the series offers a space where the gendered discontents of heteronormativity—narrativised as shitty men, bad vanilla sex and the neoliberal demand to both have a top career and be a good wife—can be expressed through sharp irony and sarcasm. The laments emphasised in the show are, however, pointedly white and middle-class, and potentially obscure the sacrifices and violences that heteronormativity entails for non-binary, trans and queer working-class people and people of colour. Dismissing both the horizons of neoliberal feminism and earlier liberationist ideas, the show offers us few political openings beyond self-referential irony and flat detachment. Further, through a disavowal of the potential of non-heterosexual objects of intimacy, love and desire, the show ultimately regurgitates a cruel reattachment to the promises of heterosexuality that, despite all its faults, retains its place as the only available horizon of possibility.

Through this reading, we have explored the psychic and affective life of heteropessimism—a mode of attachment that offers a way to live through the horrors but little remedy to them, let alone an ability to move beyond them. While *Fleabag* crystallises this heteropessimist sentiment, it is part of a larger cultural formation that can be observed not only in many other female-led dramedy TV series like *Girls* and *Broad City*, but also in proliferating online (and offline) discussions and pop-cultural products about the difficulties of being a young, straight woman. As such, we want to suggest that heteropessimism marks a new postfeminist sensibility, operating within a pessimistic yet strictly heterosexual imaginary that forecloses any more radical alternatives to the gendered, classed and racial confines of heteronormativity.

In some ways, that the primary affective mode here is pessimism is not surprising. While decades of feminist activism, as well as more recent feminist movements such as #MeToo, have pointed to the ongoing problems of gendered and sexual violence, little has changed about the structural violence of the institution of white, middle-class heterosexuality. Similarly, many more radical queer imaginaries have been incorporated into homonormative and homonational projects that redirect political hope into the trite objects of marriage and inclusion in the nation. In these circumstances, it makes sense that cultural objects like *Fleabag* interrogate and reproduce forms of pessimistic reattachment. These forms of reattachment are a particularly pernicious expression of cruel optimism (clinging to disappointing objects despite their non-viability) as much as they are compulsory—no matter how much we want *Fleabag*/the heteropessimist woman to want *something else* (Boo), she cannot not want *the same* (the Priest). In this context, we want to suggest that it is paramount to not only problematise heterosexuality as both an institution and affective structure, but also work to move beyond its affective lure.

Note

1. A range of terms are emerging to describe this phenomenon. Jane Jane Ward 2020, for instance, uses “heteromiserabilism” and Seresin herself has started using the term

“heterofatalism” instead of “heteropessimism” to clarify that the concept has no parallels to Afropessimism. We agree that no equivalence between Afropessimism and heteropessimism can or should be made. We use the term here to foreground the lineage of queer scholarship on affect, most notably Berlant’s (2011) work on “cruel optimism”, that our argument draws on.

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