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Sex and the soaps

The morality of the soap operas we see on our TV screens is a far cry from the steamy sex sagas of the American soaps.



The truth at last

DIRTY DEN'S OWN STORY

I WAS ANGLIE LOVER BY TOY BOY, 19

ANGIE GETS HER OWN BACK

ROSS THE HEART-BREAKER

He shinned down the drainpipe to escape rival lover after cheating on me!

Jason in torrid affair

EXCLUSIVE: Ex-mistress reveals shock antics of star in TV marriage tangle

DAY 3 EastEnders LOVE TRIANGLE THE UNTOLD STORY EVERY TV FAN IS READING

THE STORY SO FAR: Don has had a...
 HE'S IN CHARGE: Don is in charge of the...
 NIGHTS OF PASSION: Don and Angie...
 EXCLUSIVE: Ex-mistress reveals shock antics of star in TV marriage tangle

Coronation Street when Mavis's nose was put out of joint by Rita's boyfriend Alan, forcing Rita to appeal to the time-honoured tradition of female solidarity: "We've been through so much together over the years, love; surely we're not going to let a couple of men come between us now?"

If sex as such isn't crucial to soap opera, women are—on both sides of the screen. They watch in greater numbers than men do (*EastEnders* are keen to tell you of their 50/50 audience mix) and research suggests that they are more appreciative of what they see. Is that because, as William Smethurst points out, "Soap operas have traditionally had strong women in them," or did the strong women evolve in response to the audience profile? All the greats in soap opera history have been women: Annie Walker, Elsie Tanner, Doris Archer, Meg Richardson. When *Crossroads* began in 1964 it was the story of two sisters, although it

It's outside the soaps that things start hotting up... The soaps have their own internal morality and a flurry of comment will make it very clear when boundaries have been transgressed.



SHIRLEY THE SEX BOMB

Now she is facing the sack

DIRTY DEN is the male sex star of EastEnders, but the female crown belongs firmly to blonde Shirley Channon.

She's apparently got few...
 Pictures
 She was almost given her...

subsequently focused on one—Meg Richardson—who ran her own motel single-handed. This one-woman management system persisted with the arrival of Nicola Freeman (Gabrielle Drake), and since she left the series recently, the producer is feeling the need to promote Debbie Lancaster and Jill Chance to fill the female vacuum at the top.

The tradition continues in *Brookside*, with its sensitive treatment of Sheila Grant's experience of rape and postnatal depression. In dealing with Sheila the programme has created an enormous aura of sympathy for the housebound woman, even extending as far as the claustrophobic camerawork on interiors. *Brookside's* producer Stuart Doughty is anxious to avoid having his programme classified as "soap box" rather than soap opera, but he admits that "within the context of being an entertaining drama series we do like to air topical issues, and the role of women is one of those issues."

Brookside is unusual among the soaps in being set on an anonymous, rootless modern housing estate; it's a far cry from the worlds of Ambridge, the Street and the Square, which express a profound nostalgia for the lost rural or working class community. The absence of what Stuart Doughty calls "a granny figure" in *Brookside* brings home the extent to which the other soaps (with the exception of *Crossroads*) depend on rather implausible models of the extended family. Families in soaps provide a focus of interest, a healthily multiplying cast and an abundance of storylines. The Archers have become positive dynastic over the years, and family connections are increasingly tenuous; Jill, who like all *Archers* women seems to live in a permanent state of suppressed hysteria, is currently venting her anxiety on the fact that her daughter's new boyfriend is her own husband's former wife's half-brother.

Naturally the near-universal importance of families in soaps reinforces the pivotal role of women characters, who tend to be identified with rootedness and the values of home. "If you know anything about the East End you'll know it is a matriarchal society," says Julia Smith; but the Street was meandering on its matriarchal way long before its young upstart cousin was ever thought of. What's more, the way Lou Beale disposes of her sons in *EastEnders*—sending Kenny off to New Zealand to avoid feuding—is not so very far from Miss Ellie's behaviour in *Dallas*.

David Buckingham, a lecturer in film and television at the University of London who is writing a book about *EastEnders*, thinks that the new, forward-looking soaps are broadening their traditional remit and undercutting the traditional hierarchy of women. *Brookside* and *EastEnders* have shown a new interest in male characters and "masculinity in crisis": Arthur breaking under the stress of unemployment and debt repayments; Pete finding that a history of domestic violence makes him a suspect for the Walford attacks; Bobby in *Brookside*, struggling to come to terms with the effects of rape on his marriage to Sheila.

But the treatment of women is becoming more imaginative, too. *EastEnders* make a speciality of setting up apparent stereotypes only to subvert them. So Debbie, who is the nearest thing to a dumb blonde that the series possesses, suddenly announces that she's joined a women's group; Pat, the middle-aged barmaid, takes on new psychological dimensions and a new significance in the plot after being assaulted by the Walford attacker. *Brookside* has been conducting a quietly effective campaign against occupational stereotypes, with Heather, an accountant, shown struggling in a man's world, and Annabelle Collins wielding unusual authority as a magistrate. In this respect, however, the soaps are constrained by the pace of social change outside the studio. The Australian soap *Neighbours*, which the BBC imported for daytime television, features a cheerful independent girl called Daphne who works as a stripper; we have some way to go before Daphne could turn up on *Crossroads*.

Soap operas are a uniquely pervasive and persistent cultural phenomenon. Millions watch them—and not always the same millions—over a period of years. They are discussed in the popular papers; they spill over into other areas of television. The characters who appear in them are fictional, and they are individual; no one is arguing for a theory of soap opera archetypes. But the continuity, week in week out, of a certain view of women or a certain view of sex must have an impact on viewers. One case of AIDS on *EastEnders* will undoubtedly make more of an impression than a hundred documentaries. The left should stop regarding soap operas as opiates; these opiates are responsible for some of the most positive images of women to be found in the mass media today.

In the soaps, sex is a complex matter, as Den and Jan in *EastEnders* found (far left). Sex outside the soaps can also have serious consequences—Shirley (left), who plays Debbie the dumb blonde in *EastEnders*, had to face the publicity of her extracurricular activities. Above, Mavis (left) and Rita in *Coronation Street* try to keep sex from interfering and spoiling their friendship.