

Flouting the law. *Underbelly: Razor's* (de)construction of normative femininity

S Tack

Macquarie University

Abstract

Australian TV series *Underbelly: Razor* represents gangsters Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine as women equipped to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts. These women's 'toughness' is simultaneously tempered and reinforced by gestures toward stereotypes of 'female weakness', which they employ to fulfil their criminal agendas. This paper will analyse how the TV series frames these women's femininity through interactions between the male and female characters and how the series invites a modern-day audience to interpret these representations of femininity. By foregrounding idea(l)s associated with normative femininity, the paper will explore themes of vulnerability and sexuality as creative approaches to criminal strategy. It will evaluate the relative success of such gendered acts via theories of performativity, masquerade, mimicry and camp so as to analyse how each of these influence the acceptance of *Underbelly's* construction of and the characters' (ab)use of 'femininity'. As such, this paper suggests that *Underbelly: Razor*, in representing Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine's gendered acts as shifting between performativity and performance, does not simply reinscribe notions of normative femininity on the bodies of these women, but also questions and queers them.

Keywords: *Underbelly: Razor*, Kate Leigh, Tilly Devine, femininity, masquerade, mimicry

[Underbelly: Razor](#) represents Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine as tough women who do not shy away from violence and other behaviour that is perceived to be masculine in heteronormative societies. They do, however, at several instances in the series assume perceived notions of female weakness in order to flout the law. In this paper, I will analyse how *Underbelly: Razor* frames these women's femininity through interactions between the male and female characters, and how the series invites its commercial modern-day audience to interpret these representations of femininity. Whilst scholarly analysis of *Underbelly: Razor* is scarce, I suggest that through the application of various feminist theories the deconstructive value of the TV series can be realised. I will thus explore themes such as loopholes in the law grounded in the belief that women were passive and vulnerable beings, the stereotype of female domesticity and the character of the dutiful daughter as (un)successful tools that allow Devine and Leigh to engage in criminal activity. I will evaluate their gendered performances through theories of performativity, masquerade, mimicry and camp and analyse how each of these influence whether the characters are able to 'pass' as 'woman' or not, and consequently whether the series invites its audience to accept or reject their performances.

A clause in the New South Wales Vagrancy Act of 1908 made "soliciting, living on the earnings of prostitution, and brothel keeping and leasing premises for the purposes of prostitution" illegal ([Perkins, 1991](#)). Any man who was caught running prostitutes could be jailed. The law did, however, not mention women and was thus clearly designed under the assumption that women were mere victims of prostitution. They did not possess the intelligence nor entrepreneurial capacity to run or own brothels, or live of the earnings of prostitutes. When the conservative government in 1908 wanted to introduce a bill that

would have lumped together prostitutes with murderers and thieves, Labor MP George Beeby (in [Writer, 2001](#)) asserted:

In very rare instances is the woman who is concerned in [prostitution] a woman of abnormal sexual desires . . . 90 or 95 per cent of the women engaged in this traffic are engaged in it as a result of outside pressures of different kinds. (p. 25).

Labor member John Meehan (in [Writer, 2001](#)) argued that these women were forced onto the streets by "some of the pillars of society . . . where any person who likes can make use of them" (p. 25). The conservative camp thus perceived women's sexuality as a criminal and virtually demonic practice; whereas the liberal thinkers opposed the bill out of compassion for women and as an attempt to protect them, but in the process deprived them of agency. Both of these standpoints provide a clear illustration of the position of women in early twentieth century New South Wales.

Tilly Devine, as she is represented in *Underbelly: Razor*, used the loophole in the Vagrancy Act to her advantage. Once a prostitute herself, she now owns a string of brothels. Whilst the earlier mentioned arguments of Members of Parliament could be interpreted as a condescending attack on women and their supposedly inherent weakness, for Tilly Devine they provided the ideal climate in which she could build her prostitution empire. The displacement of women is thus empowering for Devine. Although represented as excessively feminine in terms of dress and hair, her incessant swearing, threatening and fits of aggression in *Underbelly: Razor* shows that she is not the type of woman the liberal thinkers had in mind when opposing the conservative government's bill. She thus uses her womanliness so as to bend the law to her own benefit. In episode one, doorman Nugget tells Frank Green that "menfolk is not permitted to live after moral earnings of women", to which Green replies: "But a sheila can, well that ain't fair!" (00:12:35). Although being

sentenced to pay a 250 pound fine in court in the same episode for running a disorderly house, Devine is rarely sentenced for the same offence again in the rest of the series. Lillian Armfield, one of the first female police detectives, tells Nellie Cameron, a young prostitute who ran away from her family, in episode four that she's "better off going to work for Tilly Devine. At least [she'll] have some protection" (00:14:28). In the second to last episode, Detective Inspector Bill McKay calls Devine and Leigh into his office and tells them: "So. If you Kate run your sly grogging, and you Tilly, run your brothels, quietly and cleanly, then I will ensure you do so with a minimum of police harassments . . . No more murders now, as of for good. You have a choice, ladies. Behave yourselves, we'll all get along fine" (00:40:13). The police are thus not critical of Devine's law-bending practices based on her being a woman. If anything, they are accepting of it in that the organised crime in their eyes protects those - women - who would otherwise have been vulnerable. In outlining the ambivalence between the assumptions of the government whose Acts suggest that women are incapable of active and powerful lives, and the day-to-day events in which the local police have to acknowledge Leigh's and Devine's power and potential to protect the little crooks, *Underbelly: Razor* invites its audience to question the underlying presumptions about dichotomous sex and gender categories.

Kate Leigh, at several instances in the series, is represented and represents herself as a domestic goddess. In the first episode, she has reported Tilly Devine to the police for running a disorderly house. The next day, Inspector McKay visits Leigh at home and tells her: "I appreciate any information you can pass my way, but I will not be used as a weapon in your war against Tilly Devine". Leigh, who had told Wally Tomlinson, her partner in crime and bed, to get McKay a self-baked scone (00:16:34), tells him to "put them scones away"

when McKay tells her to call him Inspector McKay and not Bill. By receiving Bill McKay in her dining room and serving him tea and homemade scones Kate sets up an image of herself as a good housewife, the type of behaviour that was deemed appropriate for women. McKay and his police corps do not buy into it. He perceives her behaviour as performance, as an attempt to paint a picture of herself as a dutiful and good woman, as opposed to an out of line Tilly Devine. McKay's interpretation of Leigh's behaviour relates to Doane's notion of the masquerade. She (in [Robinson, 1991](#)) argues that

the masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed. The masquerade's resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as a presence-to-itself, as precisely, imagistic. (p. 119)

Leigh's character thus empowers herself by using the construction called femininity and the image of the domestic goddess to get her way. Her mockery of McKay invites the series' viewers to interpret her domesticity in the same manner as McKay. However, whilst McKay finds her performance of femininity merely annoying, the viewer is invited to question the naturalness of female domesticity and to interpret Leigh's mockery as an attempt to subvert patriarchal discourse from within its own assumptions.

Leigh, throughout the series, is continuously represented in her kitchen. She is baking, peeling vegetables and caring for her daughter, associates and friends. Whilst *Underbelly: Razor* thus initially invites its audience to be sceptical about Leigh's performance in which she mocks the police force, it also invites the audience to interpret Kate's scones baking not merely as the conscious abuse of character traits associated with normative femininity to get her way, but simultaneously as the performative effect of society's belief in what is appropriate behaviour for women. Judith Butler, in her concept of performativity,

identifies gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" ([1990](#), p. 33). This understanding of gender as a becoming rather than a being, I suggest, can be related to Luce Irigaray's concept of the masquerade. Irigaray (in [Craft-Fairchild, 1993](#)), by masquerade, means

in particular . . . femininity . . . A woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into the masquerade of femininity . . . [has to enter] into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can "appear" and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely men. (p. 54)

Not subscribing to the fiction in which gender naturally follows from sex thus means that one cannot 'exist' (Butler, 1990, p. 17). Leigh has been forced to step into patriarchal discourse and cannot exist but by accepting its prescriptions of what it means to be a woman. She must 'pass' as a normal woman, as the 'other' for men. In its repetitive representation of Leigh as normatively feminine, as a housewife while also being a criminal, the series invites its audience to interpret her as a performative product of a patriarchal society that cannot but embody normative femininity.

When threatening McKay to write a letter of complaint to the Premier if he does not act on her reports of Devine's criminal activity, McKay is clearly annoyed and orders his men to "conduct a search of these premises for illegal firearms" in the first episode. A large pile of various types of firearms is compiled on the bedroom floor, and Leigh remarks: "You'd leave me defenceless in the face of me enemies, would you?" (00:17:47), to which McKay replies that she "can always pelt them with [her] scones". He is thus yet again sceptical about her domestic femininity and her motherly punishment for his 'bad' behaviour when she did not give him the scones she promised him. McKay's sense of humour invites the

audience to be sceptical about Leigh's vulnerability. Historically, Leigh is said to have become a rather plump lady by the late twenties (Writer, 2001, p. 88). Her frightened comment about being defenceless therefore would have been interpreted as humorous performance. Whilst the police scepticism was maintained in the series, Leigh's bodily figure was not translated in the same manner. She is - although mentally tough - a physically frail lady who moves in dangerous circles. The series thus simultaneously encourages its audience to believe that Leigh truly would have been defenceless in the face of her enemies, and to interpret her reaction as genuine fear. Her defencelessness is exemplified later in the series in episode ten when Tilly Devine's gang breaks into Leigh's house and threatens to shoot her. If Leigh had not had a gun at that time, she may not have survived the attack. In juxtaposing McKay's humorous comment and Leigh's frail physique, the series thus asks its viewers to critically interrogate the power structures underlying the societal construction of femininity as weakness.

Towards the end of the series, in episode eleven, both Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh attempt to escape a jail sentence by assuming the role of the dutiful daughter. Devine was sentenced to two years in jail for consorting. She does, however, decide that she may be able to convince the judge to drop her sentence if she goes back to London for the duration of her original conviction. In a heartfelt yet seductive plea she asks him

"Your honour, who I know is a fair, kind and extremely handsome man. If you could find it in your heart, [at this point Devine gets up from her chair for added drama] your beautiful generous heart, to let me off these charges, so that I might return home, to the land of hope and glory, and see me poor old consumptive mother who is languishing away and may be on her last legs, I would be eternally grateful. (00:11:39)"

Under the guise of the loving daughter, of the young woman who misses and worries about her far-away mother and wants to see her one last time in case she died, Devine consciously embodies seduction. Her voice, her movements and her syntax all point to an exaggerated femininity. The judge grants her request and as such is not sceptical about her behaviour. Whilst Devine lets the judge believe he has simply shown compassion to a worried woman, she has consciously adopted that type of femininity that plays on the weaknesses of the stereotypical man. Devine's behaviour here is so excessive that the series urges its audience to interpret it as camp. Susan Sontag (1966) refers to camp as "the love of the exaggerated, the 'off'" (p. 279), "a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (p. 279). She argues that "to perceive camp in . . . persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility of a metaphor of life as theatre" ([Sontag, 1966](#), p. 280). *Underbelly: Razor's* audience is not the direct receiver of seductive femininity, and as such, for them, Devine is playing a role, is performing, and consequently does not 'pass'.

Whilst Tilly Devine flaunts her sexuality under the guise of worry to escape punishment, Kate Leigh displays excessive grief. When Leigh was held in custody awaiting trial after having been arrested for the possession of cocaine, her elderly mother Charlotte passed away. Leigh was allowed a one day release to attend the funeral. Standing next to the coffin she says her goodbyes to her mother, while calling her a "cruel old bitch" (00:35:26). However, as the lid is being placed on the coffin, Leigh seemingly becomes hysterical with grief: "No, no. It's too soon. No. I know she's safe dancing with the angels, but I will miss her so. No sweeter mother ever drew breath. Oh mama! Oh!" (00:35:40). Through comments such as "Talking about laying it on with a trowel" and "London to a brick

she's gonna use this to go for an adjournment" (00:35:58), it is clear that neither policeman Tom Wickham nor Syd Thompson believes her performance. Mimicry, as [Irigaray \(1985\)](#) posits, is

to assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to being to thwart it . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to simply be reduced to it. (p. 76)

Leigh thus agentially assumes the emotional and hysteric character traits that are indicative of subordinate and exploited womanliness and femininity, and therefore does not reduce herself to it. She does not pass for both the series' viewers and the police characters. It could be argued that rather than empowering, her performance has degraded her in the eyes of the police characters. Nonetheless, she was "released from jail on compassionate grounds" (00:36:09), but Tom Wickham who claimed to "hate [her] guts" for "the kind of woman [she is]" (00:33:49) did not give up and continued to try to find reasons to arrest her. The effect of the series' representation of Leigh's mimicry as performance is similar to that of the representation of Devine's performance of camp. It allows the viewer to question those gendered fictions and constructions that are often naturalised.

In these two thematically similar scenes, flaunting one's sexuality so as to play on perceived notions of male weakness is, however, shown to have more beneficial effects than the use of stereotypical female weakness. *Underbelly: Razor* thus exemplifies that within the series, utilising the two sides of the gender binary - normative notions of femininity and normative notions of masculinity - has a more desirable effect for women trying to escape punishment. [Sullivan \(2003\)](#) defines the masquerade as "a performance in and through which one 'passes', and which therefore does not call into question hegemonic

notions of identity" (p. 90). Tilly Devine 'passes' for the judge, in that she does not provoke the receiver of her masked performance to question patriarchal conceptions of gendered identity. *Underbelly: Razor's* audience, however, in not being on the receiving end of Devine's masked performance and in living in a society in which men and women are arguably more equal than in the 1930s, is invited to be sceptical about her performance. She does not 'pass', and therefore also queers the oppressive character of dichotomous perceptions of sex and gender. Kate Leigh, on the other hand, does not 'pass' at all. Her performance is met with scepticism from both the police characters watching her and the series' viewers. However, whereas her performance does not cause the police characters to question the societal inequalities between the sexes in the 1930s in that they, at this instance, perceive of Leigh as criminal more so than as woman, the series' representation of Leigh's melodramatic and excessive performance invites a twenty-first century audience to queer and call into question hegemonic and patriarchal conceptions of normative femininity. Evolving perceptions of dichotomous sex and gender categories and equality of the sexes can thus be said to affect the ways in which certain gendered acts are interpreted as an attempt to queer that which is often deemed to be natural.

Underbelly: Razor does not simply reinscribe stereotypical and normative femininity on the bodies of Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine. Both Leigh and Devine use and abuse perceived notions of feminine weakness so as to flout the law and engage in illegal activities. Whilst the male characters in the series do not question these notions of subordinate femininity in that they perceive of Leigh and Devine primarily as criminals who engage in illegal activities, a modern-day audience is invited to see both performatively internalised and strategically performed characteristics that are considered to be feminine. In using feminist theories of

masquerade, mimicry and camp, I have argued that the series represents femininity as continuously shifting between performance and performativity. As such, it emphasises the constructed nature of coherence between sex and gender and lays it bare as fiction. In illustrating the vast complexity encapsulated in gendered acts, *Underbelly: Razor* thus deconstructs and queers what are still considered to be inborn and natural gendered expressions of one's bodily sex, and encourages its commercial audience to do the same.

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