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## **‘A Revolutionary Voice’: Analysing Maxine Peake's Northern Stardom in Silk and Room at the Top**

### **Abstract**

This article explores how Maxine Peake’s explicit and directly articulated social conscience – specifically in terms of class, gender and Northernness – can be explored in television drama, and what this might say about her ‘Northern Stardom’ in our contemporary cultural climate. Our central case studies are the series *Silk* (2011-2014), and mini-series *Room at the Top* (2012), both chosen as recent productions that explicitly engage with politics but in quite different ways. In the case of *Silk* this is foregrounded as a courtroom drama, while *Room at the Top*’s 1950s setting demonstrates the way working class men and women were able to break free of expectations around their gender and social standing – but at a cost. Peake is presented in popular culture as a rarity, a socially aware, politically active Northern actor who is able to break free of a Northern stereotype; at the same time, we will argue, as an actor she brings an honesty/emotion to the roles she plays that both chime with audience expectations of the ‘strong’ Northern woman and yet, allow her to expose the fragility and anxiety inherent to this persona.

### **Keywords**

Maxine Peake, Television, the North, *Silk*, *Room at the Top*, *The Village*

On 6 March 2015, Maxine Peake took editorial control of the BBC's new art series *Artsnight* (2015-). She began in a white van, driving around Salford, and explained to the audience that this episode was about 'revolutionary voices: the voices that inspired me, the voices that continue to inspire me, and those voices that make me want to do things just a little bit differently. So friends, Northerners, countrywomen: lend us your faculties. Here we go'. This opening statement reveals her preoccupation with culture, politics and gender, all issues that Peake has had to engage with from the beginning of her acting career. After her successful debut in Victoria Wood's television comedy *Dinnerladies* (1998–2000), Peake was typecast 'as the funny Northern lass' (Day 2013). She describes how she would attend castings for characters from places such as Hertfordshire, and in the audition, 'they'd hear my accent and say, "You do know she's not Northern?"' ...I might be Northern, but I can actually read. But I think because I was young, chubby and bubbly, people felt they had to explain in a slightly patronising way' (Day 2014).

This article explores how Peake's explicit and directly articulated social conscience – specifically in terms of class, gender and Northernness – can be explored in television drama, and what this might say about her 'Northern Stardom' in our contemporary cultural climate. Our central case studies are the series *Silk* (2011–2014) and mini-series *Room at the Top* (2012), both chosen as recent productions that explicitly engage with politics but in quite different ways. In the case of *Silk*, this is foregrounded as a courtroom drama, while *Room at the Top*'s 1950s setting demonstrates the way working class men and women were able to break free of expectations around their gender and social standing – but at a cost. In the course of this analysis, we ask: how does Peake's stardom – her association with being female, Northern, working class, outspoken – fit within the casting and expectations of contemporary British television performance? And how does her Northernness lend itself to the characters she portrays?

## **Silk**

Peter Moffat has been quoted as saying that he considers Peake 'to be the best there is' (Dowell 2014), which explains why she was given the starring role in *Silk*, *The Village* (2013 -), and in series two of *Criminal Justice* (2008-2009). Given the scope of this article, there is not room to adequately explore Peake's role in all three programmes, so we focus in particular on her character and performance in *Silk*. It is worth highlighting, however, that Peake's role in *Criminal Justice* is very different to the other series in which she plays strong, Northern women. In *Criminal Justice*, Peake takes on the character of Juliet Miller, a fragile upper-middle-class Southerner, victimized woman who murders her barrister husband in cold blood. It is not until the end of the series that we begin to see the steely portrayal we are used to from Peake.

In the opening of the first episode of season two of *Silk*, Martha, performed by Peake, is referred to by her colleague Clive as looking 'vintage lesbian', a description that returns throughout the series, even though Martha later becomes pregnant with Clive's baby. The reference to her being a lesbian has nothing to do with her sexuality, which is often confirmed as heterosexual, but to her fashion sense, her tenacity and strength in the courtroom and her preference for beer. These masculine stereotypes, which are lovingly read as lesbian by Clive, are also part of the construction of Martha as a 'strong' woman. The fact that Martha has a Northern accent and is from Bolton underlines and emphasizes this characterisation. In *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination*, Dave Russell argues that '[t]he North has certainly been the key site for England's "strong" women [...] both real and fictional. Individuals as varied as the Brontë sisters, politicians Bessie Braddock and Barbara Castle and the racing cyclist Beryl Burton have been both represented and imagined as, path-breaking women empowered to at least some degree by their Northernness' (2004: 39).

Martha is often described and imagined as path-breaking partly through her Northernness and in turn is seen to be empowered by her Northern roots. Ultimately, however, her Northernness is seen as part, if not all, of the reason why she does not fit into the storyworld of Silk, a cutthroat legal chambers in London.

Throughout the series we discover a space between the law and what is right according to Martha, and this is underlined by her Northernness. Her Northern accent renders her as the teller of ‘truth’ and as someone on whom we can depend, whereas Clive, with his posh Southern accent is seen as more selfish and prone to bending the law and the truth to suit his own needs. Martha’s honesty and strength is framed through her work ethos and her ‘passion’ - ‘you can’t match Martha Costello for passion’ (series one, episode four). Passion is seen as driving Martha as opposed to personal ambition or materialism. This is very important as it reiterates the notion that women can be successful if they are passionate, somehow not quite in control of their actions, as opposed to being calculating or manipulative to reach their ambitions. The latter is often seen as a negative stereotype of the ambitious woman, and Caroline Warwick QC known as ‘Lady Macbeth’ (Frances Barber) is a good example of this and is duly punished later in the series for being so. It is important to note that not only does Francis speak in a posh English accent, but she takes on Clive as a protégée, as if they are cut from the same cloth (though Clive is later voted as Head of Chambers, beating Frances).

It is clear in Silk, that being privately educated, male and posh is the dominant norm. As her Senior Clerk, Billy Lamb, tells Martha: ‘People say you got silk because you’re a woman and you’re from Bolton and the bar is trying to stop looking male and posh’. Throughout the series a class distinction is made between Martha, the Northerner ‘made good’ and Clive, the posh London boy who ‘belongs’ in the habitus. Peake herself reflects on

this and says: ‘When you have an accent as specific as mine people do tend to pigeon-hole you. Especially as far as class and education are concerned’ (Wickham 2012).

At the close of the first series, Martha resolves the pain of losing her child with the reconciliation of her career ambitions. She tells the members of the chambers: ‘these two letters would mean nothing without all of you’ as if they are her family, now that her chance at having a more traditional family has gone. And the suggestion is that this chance would have only happened if by accident and this is confirmed at the start of series two when she tells Caroline Warwick QC: ‘No kids, no abortions’, as if to reiterate her position as single and childless. It is as if Moffat is aware and somewhat anxious about having a female lead that is neither married, with children, nor terribly interested in the prospect of having either. Indeed, throughout the series there is a sense of narrative anxiety, partly driven by the legal thriller genre, but also, we would argue, because of having a main character who is a woman and yet is unmarried, without children, and demonstrating no desire for either. It is also possible to read this anxiety as a manifestation of someone who is out of place, not quite fitting into the environment. Martha is an honest, Northern woman working in both a *man’s* world but also a Southern locale.

There is very little by way of framing Martha’s character in terms of her past, she never ‘goes home’ as it were: the chambers and courtrooms are her past, present and future. Martha may want to make the chambers her home, her family, and yet as the series progresses this becomes less and less tenable. Pierre Bourdieu argues that habitus ‘is not a fate, or a destiny, nor is it eternal’; he also remarks on how ‘one cannot enter this magic circle by an instantaneous decision of the will, but only by birth or by a slow process of co-option and initiation which is equivalent to a second birth’ (cited in Eagleton 2014: 14-15). The first series depicts Martha’s second birth and entrance into the ‘magic circle’ as Silk, and yet, the text also wants her to be unchanged and unscathed by the corruption that surrounds her. She

comes through the initiation as the same Martha, the strong-willed, passionate, honest Northerner who started the journey. There is something unbelievable about it all. Would she really be able to keep her principles? Or does Moffat pose the loss of the child and of a potential future with Clive as the price she has paid, thus keeping her honour intact? Either way, her Northernness, as something that underlines her honesty and genuineness, is privileged and yet never 'seen'.

The opening episode of series three focuses on Martha at her most passionate. In previous series we witness outbursts of her emotional strength and dedication, particularly when she defends clients she believes in, but at the start of series three she seems to harness all this energy at once — as if she has finally come into herself and her convictions. The episode begins with Martha in a darkened courtroom stunned at the verdict of a case she has just lost. Experienced viewers will know that she rarely loses a case and so can guess at the emotional turmoil she is in, but this is also written across her face and embodied in her actions: she lashes out at a glass carafe in anger and cuts herself, puts some Joy Division on her iPod, marches into Clive's party, grabs a beer and confronts the judge who has just given the verdict in her case. He tells her that she is being 'too emotional' to which she replies, 'because I'm a woman', addressing the gender stereotype straight on. She then hooks her iPod up to the sound system and blasts 'Love will Tear us Apart' by Joy Division and starts to dance. Clive tells a clerk that he loves when Martha loses it and dances because she does both so badly. He then goes straight up to her and tells her that he loves her. They leave the party for the courtroom where she kisses him before passing out. The drama is led entirely by Martha's mood, her passion and her insistence that she is right. She is out of place in her surroundings and yet draws everyone's attention. This drama within the opening scene is cut short by the announcement from Billy that the Head of Chambers, Alan Cowdrey's QC's (Alex Jennings) son is in jail for murder. When Martha begins to flounder as his lawyer, Clive

tells her that she is acting ‘like his mother rather than his lawyer’. This is quickly followed by the opposing counsel saying to Clive that ‘she seemed a bit fragile, Blondie’. Here, again, there is a sense of anxiety and deep unease that is not only embodied by Peake’s performance, but also expressed by ancillary characters which further underlines a sense in which Martha can no longer ‘be herself’ in this world. When David, the client, calls her ‘mummy’ she is overcome by her desire to save him, irrespective of the ‘truth’ of the trial. She exclaims: ‘I can’t be only a lawyer, Clive’.

In the closing of the series, we see Martha abandoning her bid for Head of Chambers and mysteriously disappearing. The implicit suggestion, as she tells Clive at the start of the series, is that being a lawyer is not enough, but what else she wants is left undefined. The strong energy and passion that marks the beginning of series three culminates in Martha’s decision that being a lawyer or rather, putting all her energy into her career, is not enough for her. But in refusing to offer us a clear answer as to what she does want or where she will go, Moffat leaves Martha as a spectre, literally, and as someone who ultimately does not fit in her environment. In a sense, what the ending suggests is that the truth-telling Northerner must return ‘home’ in order to alleviate the anxiety and unease she finds in a dishonest environment and that a woman, who cares and invests herself emotionally, is at risk in a masculine world.

Peake, as an actor, adds an additional dimension to Martha’s character; indeed, we argue that Moffat relies on audiences’ understanding of Peake as a ‘real’ person to imbue Martha’s character with the kind of honesty and strength expressed through Peake’s public persona. The narrative of *Silk* guides our understanding of Martha as a truth-teller, but it is the fact that Peake performs this character that makes us believe she is a truth-teller. In this way, Peake’s Northern stardom saturates and imbues her characters with an integrity and emotional depth that reifies and at times, complicates perceptions of Northernness.



## **Room at the Top**

Russell argues that there was a ‘kind of “Northernisation” of the national culture’ (2004: 28) that can be dated from the time of Bradford-born John Braine’s first novel, *Room at the Top* (1957). The novel tells the story of Joe Lampton, an ambitious and mercenary man in his 20s, who leaves behind his poor, working class factory town of Dufton to be an accountant in neighbouring middle-class Warley. Joe has a passionate affair with older and disaffected married woman, Alice Aisgill, and at the same time courts Susan Brown, the teenage daughter of the richest man in town. The narrative culminates in a pivotal decision for Joe: does he marry rich (and now pregnant) Susan, and be settled with job security and the life he has always wanted, or does he follow his heart and choose Alice, with the scandal and abandonment of Warley? Jack Clayton directed the screen adaptation in 1959, which is considered the first film of the British New Wave, and was closely followed by *Look Back in Anger* (Richardson, 1959) and *Saturday Night Sunday Morning* (Reisz, 1960). These films were frequently Northern, or Midlands-set, resolutely non-Southern: *Room at the Top* and *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger, 1963) were filmed in Bradford, and *A Taste of Honey* (Richardson, 1961) in Salford. But just as importantly, they were films that examined working-class life and offered a voice to those who frequently had none. Issues of class, gender and Northernness were embedded in the novels and plays that formed the basis for the films; in the case of Braine’s novel ‘the larger issues of postwar society (demands for equality, dissatisfaction with class hierarchies, a loss of patriotic feeling) are dealt with through the romantic triangle’ of Joe, Alice and Susan (Palmer 1986: 129). The films had their own distinctive approach to politics and society, for some, *Room at the Top* found the ‘appropriate strategy’ to engage the working class, and young cinemagoers, ‘to assert scandal and to revolt against passivity and puritanism’ (Durgnat 2011: 7).

Towards the end of the novel, Joe decides to stay with Susan and have the life he always wanted. He meets Alice for a final time to tell her he does not love her. Alice remains very calm, and as he leaves he is not even sure if she is crying. However, in the morning he discovers she has killed herself. While Alice's descent into despair and death is tragic, crucially in the novel it happens elsewhere – the tight point of view of Joe as first person narrator, typical of the late 1950s 'angry young man' novels and plays, means her demise is never experienced directly. This preoccupation with male point of view continued into the film adaptations, which 'centre almost exclusively on the discontents of the young urban working-class male' (Richards 1992: 175). The film makes much more of Joe's (Lawrence Harvey) preoccupation with Susan, while Alice (Simone Signoret) is strong, secretive and intellectual. As Joe breaks up with Alice, Signoret emanates sadness but remains utterly still and composed. She only displays emotion when Joe reveals he is marrying Susan. She turns away from him, and stands to fix them a drink. Her face slowly droops, and 'no' crawls unwillingly from her mouth. Then she returns to stillness, gazing beyond the camera. Joe leaves and his final image of her is the back of her head; she remains unknowable.

In drawing attention to the novel and film, we wish to argue that in performing for the television adaptation, Peake offers a very different kind of characterisation of Alice. Written by Amanda Coe, the story was produced in two, hour-long episodes, shown over two evenings on BBC Four in September 2012. In May 2013 it won a BAFTA for best miniseries, and Peake was nominated for Best Actress in the 2013 Press Guild awards. In an interview about the role, Peake explains that she was drawn to the story's heritage: 'I had seen the film years ago – I'm a big fan of those films from the 50s and 60s, especially the Northern based new wave of films that were coming through. So when I saw it was being made, I thought I've got to be in this' (Lobb 2012).

Peake's version of Alice is far more ordinary than Signoret's. Her muted, dark tailored clothing and strawberry blonde hair are commonplace, a world away from Signoret's platinum locks and her unbridled sensuality. There's more to Peake's performance than ordinariness though, evident when Alice invites Joe to the pub after rehearsal. Throughout the evening, amongst the pints of beer, the cigarettes and the crushed crisps, she gently plays with him. She makes slow pronouncements, throws in soft compliments such as 'you clever man' to see how he responds, a knowing smile curling across her lips. When she delivers her speech on Joe's inferiority complex, she conveys it in a caring tone, her face half hidden by the shadowy walls of the snug. She begins, 'now listen', then pauses, pushes her back against the seat and looks down at the floor; 'we're going to -', then looks up at him, a faint grimace, before continuing, '- be doing this play together. So I thought we'd better get everything straight between us'. She inhales, the grimace slowly transforming into a gently mocking smile, and continues: 'I don't care if you're working class or Little Lord Fauntleroy'. Her smile has reached her eyes, and her eyebrows rise in solidarity. She gulps, almost imperceptibly, and states: 'But if you've got an inferiority complex don't take it out on the rest of us'. A few beats of silence, she blinks. Then apologizes: 'I'm sorry'. Another pause. 'But you were like a bear with a sore head in rehearsals'. Alice stops and awaits Joe's response. Her telling off is much kinder than in previous incarnations, far more grounded in real life with the mannerisms to accompany it. Here, Alice is maternal, a mother reluctantly telling her truculent son the appropriate way to behave. There is no real pain, nor anger, nor desire to hurt, just the beginning of a sense of warmth and intimacy beginning to encompass the pair of them.

In *Screen Acting*, Alan Lovell and Peter Kramer discuss how it is easy to think that 'the decisions the actor has made are invisible', and given this, 'it becomes almost inevitable that the actor disappears into the character or, vice versa, the character disappears into the

actor' (1999: 5). They explain that 'any analyses of film acting are in fact discussions of a fictional character (whose creation is the work of the writer) rather than analyses of how that character is embodied (the work of an actor)' (1999: 5). With Lovell and Kramer's points in mind, the following analysis examines the break-up scene. Drawing on the shooting script and an interview with Coe, we highlight Peake's decisions about the performance of Alice in order to reveal how Peake has provided emotional resonance and nuance of character, something absent in the novel and only suggested in the film. When Joe reveals they are to separate, Braine writes 'she described everything we'd done together in Dorset, using the simplest Anglo-Saxon words and talking with a cool, dry detachment' (1957: 213). In Coe's adaptation, Alice enunciates these words very clearly. Joe (Matthew McNulty) tells her that their affair will be discovered, and her husband will leave her, and that he is not 'going in any mucky divorce courts'. Peake's Alice responds, 'Mucky?', her mouth, framed in matte red lipstick, begins to twitch, 'It's not long ago, is it, since you - ', then she leans forwards beginning to spit out the words, 'fucked me'. She says 'fuck' likes she is punching him in the face. She continues: 'Kissed my breasts,' beginning to speed up, her emphases growing, 'Licked. My. Cunt'. Her mouth grows bigger and wider, as the anger rolls out of her throat: 'Let me suck your cock let me -' and her head begins to shake, the hairsprayed waves of her hair quivering, '- ride you'. Joe cuts her off, disgusted: 'well you don't have to talk like that', and she pauses, momentarily stemming the tide. She tips her head on one side, draws her lips together and considers him. Then asks in a little girl voice: 'we did it, didn't we?' Yet while Alice's delivery is angry, her eyes reveal desperation not disappointment. Joe bends down to her, gently holds her chin and brushes his thumb down her cheek. Alice's tiny headshakes become wrenching convulsions. He leans in to kiss her and she shuts her eyes and twists away, dropping her head and staring into her lap.

In this scene, the shooting script is primarily dialogue, leaving space for the actor to bring their interpretation to the role. Coe's only character direction during this section is 'ALICE can't believe this' when Joe tells her he has chosen Warley over her (Coe 2010: 45). What we see on screen then, the physicality of Alice's response, comes from Peake. She offers her own distinctive reading of the character's state of mind – her emphases on certain words, the pacing and rhythm of delivery, the headshake and the shift in voice – and produces a much more exposed, emotional reading of Alice. This is emphasized further in the final moments of the scene. The novel and film conclude with Joe's perspective: the back of Alice's head as he leaves. Instead, in the TV adaptation, Alice sits facing Joe. This was important to Coe: 'there's always an emphasis on Alice's point of view as much as Joe's [...] the scenes as written end on Alice – us knowing something more about her and her emotional world than Joe does' (email, 6 May 2015). As Joe walks away, the camera remains on Alice and we become witness to the most awful and intimate of moments: her dissolution in a single shot. In the script, this action is simply described as 'ALICE is drinking, on the bed, in her own world of pain' (Coe 2010: 46). Peake has taken the idea of 'world of pain' and embodied it. She looks up, breathes in, and takes a big drink of gin, her hand shaking so badly that the glass chatters against her teeth. She inhales, almost choking, and the choking transforms into an inhalation that stems the tide of her tears. She gazes wildly around the room, unable to focus; she looks for a morsel of comfort and finds none. Then, at last, the pain escapes, verbalised as the midpoint between disbelieving laughter and a primal cry. She grasps at her stomach, under her breasts, her teeth bared as she doubles over and silently screams. She touches her own neck and a strangled cry emerges. The scene ends.

Here, Peake imbues Alice with a devastating reaction utterly absent from the other versions of the story. Peake reveals far more of Alice's internal dialogue than either the novel or Signoret; there is now emotion where there has been repression, vulnerability where once

there was denial. Notably, Coe reveals that in the edit, ‘we reined it in a bit, in terms of how much we saw, because it was really so upsetting’. Due to this performance, Alice’s consequent suicide now feels like the terrible progression of her despair, rather than a shock narrative twist experienced by Joe.

The novel and film possess ‘a pervasive misogyny: the idea of marriage as a trap and the end of freedom for the male; the maltreatment of women by violence or exploitation, abuse or neglect’ (Richards 1992: 175). Notably, Peake has described how Coe’s script is ‘very different from the film’ (Lobb 2012). What Coe’s adaptation does, so successfully, is remain sympathetic to the source material while expanding the role of the female characters, making *Room at the Top* as much Alice’s story as Joe’s. What is intriguing here though, is that the part was not written for Peake, but her casting brings further textual dimensions to the script’s resonance with the North, gender and the working class. These connotations, in turn, allow us to consider how they might usefully be understood in relation to her performance of emotion and vulnerability on screen.

In representations of popular culture, the North is invariably inhabited by the working class, an connection made from the 1930s in the words of George Orwell, documentary filmmakers and *Mass Observation*, and cemented in the 1950s in the work of John Braine and Stan Barstow amongst others, who seemed ‘to confirm the “commonsense” that the working class belonged in the north’ (Dodd & Dodd 1992: 117). As noted earlier in relation to the British New Wave, such representations are gendered in favour of male points of view and are often created by those on the outsiders, ‘either visitors such as Orwell (and Grierson’s documentary filmmakers) or escapers (such as Storey and Hoggart)’ (Dodd 1990: 21). This is what makes Peake’s version of Alice such an interesting proposition. Born in working -class Bolton, studying in London at RADA, and returning to the North to settle in Salford, Peake embodies a form of Northern stardom that emphasizes the female perspective, the experience

of the working class, and the voice from 'within'. She has discussed this in relation to Silk for which she had to soften her accent. She explains: 'they go, "OK, so this character is from the North but she went to university, Maxine, and has lived in London for 10 years". So I went, "OK, well I went to RADA and lived in London for 13 years", and they go, "Yeah, but she's lost her accent a bit more than you have"' (Carter 2011). In Braine's novel, Alice is middle class, and Signoret brings a French sensibility to the film. Yet in the television series, Peake never properly passes as really middle class: the enactment of social mobility is always, to some degree, apparent. As Coe notes, 'as far as I've seen in other roles, Maxine's RP is never spot on (e.g. in Silk), she had this wandering RP that suggested that like Joe, she came from a working-class background and had achieved middle-classdom in snobby Warley', noting 'it added to the sense that she was trapped in a role'. When Peake plays Alice, the investment of her own background is apparent: Alice, a former Northern working class woman 'made good', has been on a pilgrimage to London and returned to perform a different kind of social function. For Peake, 'she got out of this small town of Warley went to London and became an actress, so she has mixed with more bohemian types and inherited that open mindedness. But then she came back and doesn't quite fit in' (Lobb 2012).

In terms of Northern stardom, then, it can be argued that it is not simply that she plays Alice as much more emotional, that in fact Peake's performance (and the audience's expectations of a Peake character) bring a much more layered and nuanced dimension to the role. In this adaptation, Alice is revealed as a construct – not simply in how Joe sees her, which is the function of her character in the novel – but in terms of class. Peake's 'wandering RP' signals the precarious nature of Alice's identity, of the fragile carapace of the respectable middle class. This in turn opens up gaps in Alice's identity, creating spaces where a complex and contradictory strong Northern female voice is able to emerge, a voice built on compassion, vulnerability and knowledge.

## Conclusion

Dave Russell has observed that ‘most people outside the North and many within it have come to know the region not through personal experience but via the versions they encounter in the cultural field’ (2004: 4). Moffat’s television drama, *The Village*, set in a Derbyshire village in the twentieth century is a perfect example of what Russell is referring to. In *The Village* we have a version of the North and the people we have come to expect from the north, including the ‘strong’ woman, embodied by Peake as Grace Middleton, a hard-working, patient and passionate farmer’s wife.

In one of the final scenes of series two, Grace stands on a box in the centre of the village and makes an impassioned speech against the proposal to turn the village into a reservoir. She passionately exclaims:

I was born here, my family has lived here for 200 years and it is my intention that we will still be here 200 years from now. I have been tempted away from home by excitement and passion. Both of which are a part of politics. It is a great temptation to let passion take over your life. But that would be to forget and betray all that is at the heart of what really matters. It has become clear to me that it is my home, my family, my village and all of those that live here are what I really care about. And I hope I judge you right when I say, this is our fight and as long as we have breath in our bodies, this will be our village (series two, episode six).

In this scene, we, along with her family and friends, witness Grace go from a victimized wife to a strong woman who has discovered a new understanding of herself. In this sense, the strongest story arc is that of Grace’s and this privileges her character as the backbone of the



family and the village. The Village is less anxious than Silk in this respect, perhaps because Grace's strength is seen as coming from her family and her ties to the village as opposed to Martha whose past is as vague as her future. It is interesting to think whether taking the Northerner out of the north helps to create this anxiety and dislocation whereas The Village continually roots Grace's character to the land and the people. And does the fact that Peake delivers this impassioned speech about the North, its people and social solidarity make it all the more powerful?

Peake is presented in popular culture as a socially aware, politically active Northern actor who brings an honesty and emotion to the roles she plays that both chime with audience expectations of the 'strong' Northern woman and yet, allow her to expose the fragility and anxiety inherent to this persona. In *Room at the Top* she took on a role that was imbued with Northern culture from its foundations in the British New Wave. Yet Peake developed and refined the characterisation of Alice to offer her a new vulnerability designed for the intimacy of television viewing. As Martha Costello, Peake inhabits the persona of the Northern woman made good and yet simultaneously exposes the sexism, class prejudice and regional anxiety that proliferates in London legal chambers. It can be argued that many stars imbue their characters with their 'real' life personas; however, the nuance with Peake is the political awareness and feminist agenda she brings to the screen which is a welcome and, to a certain extent, a revolutionary voice.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Criminal Justice (2008-2009, UK: BBC)

Dinnerladies (1998-2000, UK: BBC)

Room at the Top (2012, UK: BBC)

Silk (2011-2014, UK: BBC)

Village, The (2013 - , UK: BBC)

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