

Domestic Violence in the Archers: Gender, Mental Health and Victim Blame

by LESLEY HENDERSON Apr 20, 2016



Image: Helen Titchener (Louiza Patikas) and Rob Titchener (Timothy Watson)

When Helen Titchener finally took a knife to abusive husband, Rob, there was a national outpouring of relief from Archers fans, who had become increasingly frustrated with the long running, apparently endless subjugation of Helen. Others had long switched off, seeing the story as a cynical step into 'social issue' territory best occupied by primetime television drama such as EastEnders – where storylines on drug abuse and sexual violence are regularly revisited and audiences expect those types of stories to be interwoven regularly. Whatever fans may think of the story it is certainly a success if measured in terms of raising the profile of the Archers. It also creates an opportunity to rebrand this longstanding programme as a show that is now able to deal with contemporary issues. The 'Helen-Rob' storyline has been discussed at length by cultural critics and has also been used as a valuable 'hook' to raise considerable funds for women's support resources but the production team now face a common dilemma that follows high-profile story arcs which have built slowly over many months – what happens next?

During the series of episodes that follow the dramatic stabbing the production team have the opportunity to help construct the character of Helen and her motivations for audiences. At this point however perceptions of Helen's behaviour amongst her family and the wider community seem to perpetuate existing tropes about women as being 'highly strung', melodramatic and unstable (both 'bad' and 'mad'). This of course neatly excuses Rob of any blame for what happened and reflects wider important debates concerning patriarchy of psychiatry and criminal justice.

In many ways this period is the most fascinating point of the story which has now stretched over two years. In constructing Rob as an abuser whose actions were largely hidden from other characters in the show, the programme managed to draw audiences into gripping 'gas lighting' story peaks where Helen began to question her sanity. At certain points it would appear that Rob was close to being found out (for beating up a hunt saboteur or revealing his true colours in homophobic comments directed at Ian). However, it was Helen's actions in stabbing Rob that eventually brought the whole story out to the rest of the cast. Obviously, there is less immediate drama as Helen is now in jail and Rob is in hospital. However now audiences are able to be privy to what is near impossible in any other media format- the reactions of the wider community to Helen and Rob, particularly around the key question – why did Helen stab Rob? While the story is fiction it is arguably the responses of Helen and Rob's social network to these questions that demonstrate the power of soap opera and how programmes like this might act as a comment on society, allowing us to hear a range of analysis from within the community in all its misconceived, prejudicial forms.

One element that is particularly striking is the extent to which their responses largely mobilise lay ideas about mental health and the conflation of this with issues of gender and indeed criminality. Early on Helen's mother, Pat Archer is interviewed by police and describes Helen as "fragile" due to her past anorexia and depression. Even kindly local policeman Harrison Burns, who is haunted by his memories of discovering the injured Rob, expresses surprise that

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he did not know about Helen's 'troubled' history. Eddie Grundy describes Helen as having "always been a bit funny" and village gossip Susan Carter notes "With [Helen's] history...she's had her problems but we don't all go round stabbing our nearest and dearest with a kitchen knife do we?" Indeed the latest moment of high drama is where popular character Jazzer is overheard by Tom (Helen's brother) bantering that Helen has "never been normal" citing her decision to conceive her son Henry via IVF rather than just "find a man to have sex with". When Helen undergoes medical examination by Dr Sharma, it is explicitly noted that she has a prescription for anti-depressants (seeking psychiatric help being something audiences know has been instigated by Rob to make Helen appear unstable).

It appears that perceptions of Helen's mental health will play a key role in the forthcoming court case as her barrister (who specialises in "women's issues") seeks to construct her defence. The constant references to pejorative stories in local newspapers underline the point that women are frequently vilified by the press before their cases even come to court and that societal perceptions of what is 'normal' or permissible play a key role in the potential outcome. The story has all the ingredients of a gripping narrative:

The victim's history of mental illness and perceived vulnerability introduce doubt and probable cause. Add a lack of bruises, outright denial and dependence on the perpetrator, and you begin to get a sense of how complex this issue can be. How could a charming, well-liked man be capable of cruelty? Why wouldn't a woman with a history of instability be culpable?

The ambiguities that surround such cases in real life have provided intense drama in TV soaps indeed the best known fictional domestic violence plot involving EastEnders' "Trevor and Little Mo" was also overseen by Archers editor Sean O Connor. However as has been pointed out, these TV soap opera characters tend to be frequently depicted as poor or at least lower working class. The character of solidly middle-class Helen cushioned by the Archer family inheritance and with an aspirational working life involving the production of artisan cheeses provides a useful counterpoint to those stereotypes.

The risk is that the programme fails to adequately challenge other stereotypes concerning of mental illness, violence and unpredictability. There are clear opportunities for The Archers to open up a space to think about how law and psychiatry might operate in a patriarchal way. Whether the programme achieves this remains to be seen but at present it looks like the forces of law and medicine will intersect and that it will be Helen rather than Rob who will be held to account.

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