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# Gender and Family in Television's Golden Age and Beyond

By  
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Images of women, work, and family on television have changed enormously since the heyday of the network era. Early television confined women to the home and family setting. The increase in working women in the 1960s and 1970s was reflected in television's images of women working and living nontraditional family lives. These images gave way, in the postnetwork era, to a form of postfeminist television in the 1990s when television undercut the ideals of liberal feminism with a series of ambiguous images challenging its gains. Women's roles in the workplace, increasingly shown, were undercut by a sense of nostalgic yearning for the love and family life that they were seen to have displaced. Current television presents a third-wave-influenced feminism that picks up where postfeminism left off, introducing important representations more varied in race, sexuality, and the choices women are seen to make between work and family.

*Keywords:* gender; family; feminism; women; sex; lesbian

Any discussion of the end of the network must address the importance of television's imaging of women and domestic life. An extensive literature (Spigel 1992; Spigel and Mann 1992; Haralovich 1989; Taylor 1989; Press 1991; Brown 1994; Lipsitz 1992; Lotz 2006; Oren 2003) has examined the development of images of women and the family on television, particularly during television's "golden age" from the 1950s to the 1970s. The consensus is that television's depiction of gender and of the family has been influential in American culture

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(Coontz 1992). Television's early family images, in particular, have become cultural icons that feature extensively in scholarship on the importance of early television in American life (Haralovich 1989; Lipsitz 1992; Spigel 1992, 2001). As Oren (2003, 78) notes, the white suburban sitcom genre of the late 1950s and early 1960s has "had a curious afterlife. These visions of domestic bliss continue to fascinate." This article explores television's imaging of women and the family, by discussing their iconic cultural and scholarly importance, and argues that current representations of family and gender on television in the new postnetwork era continue to be culturally significant, though not in the iconic fashion of television's golden age.

Scholars have noted that in its golden era, television worked to create a "unifying address with which to capture an American majority" and created "an immediate 'mainstream' through which notions of proper behavior and a desirable lifestyle were represented" (Oren 2003, 89). These attempts, and this effect, have now given way to a more fragmented mode of address that explicitly questions television's former assumption of an important, mainstream majority and recognizes the importance of various racial, sexual, and ethnic minorities. In its new role, television in part reflects our increasing cultural recognition of the true diversity of gender roles and family forms that constitute our culture.

Early television's representations of gender and the family presumed a unified American majority identity, an identity many scholars have attempted to specify, if only to criticize. Yet, it is interesting to note that it took almost a decade of programming for this convention to emerge. The earliest television representations of the family included images of ethnic and socioeconomic difference that dropped out of later representations (Lipsitz 1992). Family shows in the early 1950s—*I Remember Mama* (1949-1957), based on an immigrant Swedish family; *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956), based on a Jewish family; and most popularly *The Honeymooners* (on and off from 1952-1967), a cornerstone of classic television history based on an avowedly working-class family—were more diverse than the white middle-class pattern of a few years later. Due explicitly to sponsor influence (Barnouw 1990), this white, middle-class model came to be identified—against much of the sociological evidence—with the majority collective American identity in the 1950s. Some assert that the 1950s white middle-class television family has "come to stand in as an icon for the 1950s decade in total" (Oren 2003, 78).<sup>1</sup>

Alongside its portrayals of ethnic diversity, very early television had occasionally depicted single working women, such as the schoolteacher in *Our Miss Brooks* (1952-1956), the cruise director in *My Little Margie* (1952-1955), or the secretary in *Private Secretary* (1953-1957). However, the independence of these women was tempered by their representations as seeking marriage and/or their continued connection to their families of origin. The spirited heroine of *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) was wife to Ricky and later mother to little Ricky, yet she never gave up her repeated attempts to escape the confines of her domestic situation to enter show business, start a business, get a job, or generally to play a role in the extradomestic sphere.<sup>2</sup>

Many have noted the themes of women's rebellion present in these early sitcoms (Press and Strathman 1993; Oren 2003; Mellencamp 1986). Quite explicitly, in the plotlines women's domestic roles were often parodied and noted as boring or confining, particularly in the successful and still-popular *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). Mellencamp (1986) and Oren (2003) note that these early television sitcoms reflect the rise of the strong woman comedienne in the personae of Gracie Allen (*The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show*, 1950-1958), Joan Davis (*I Married Joan*, 1952-1955), in addition to Lucille Ball. These shows ironically featured strong and memorable women actresses playing housewives who did not work outside the home, although their roles featured elements of rebellion toward the domestic sphere.

The ethnic and diverse representations of women early in television's history were replaced by a plethora of white, middle-class families showcasing very simple problems—the happy people with happy problems, as the saying goes (Taylor 1989; Coontz 1992), which constituted television's "golden era" (Spigel 1995). The commercial nature of television dictated that it feature a middle-class ambiance, in association with the nature of the products that formed its commercial basis. Therefore, a proliferation of middle-class family images characterized most situation comedy programming of American television's prime-time from the mid-1950s through the late 1960s, television's "signature" years in many respects, at least where family television is concerned (Lotz 2006; Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman 1986).

Television families of the period tend to be white, middle-class, intact, and suburban, all appearing in much higher percentages than they did in actuality. Women in these families overwhelmingly do not work outside the home and are shown primarily in the activities associated with their roles as wives and mothers, which are shown to be the center of their lives and identities. By the early 1960s, the earlier vestiges of independence and strength had disappeared almost entirely. Family values—presented in a straightforward way, without irony—came to predominate in the television sitcom, tempering even the image of fathers as breadwinners and certainly taming the earlier independence of television's domestic women. Oren (2003) notes how widely the phenomenon of the family-oriented dad was noted in reviews and commentaries of the time.<sup>3</sup>

*The Donna Reed Show* was one of the most popular of the golden era television situation comedies, running from 1958 to 1966 in a prominent prime-time evening slot. The show starred former film actress Donna Reed, playing a wholesome wife and mother, Donna Stone, married to a physician, with two children. The show revolved around mostly rather mundane family issues and dramas, scrapes the children would get into, problems Donna's friends might have, friends whom she made through her women's club associations and her card playing, all set in a large white home in an unnamed American suburb.

Viewer reaction to the iconic nature of programs of this era can be observed in online comments, for example, the following observation on watching *The Donna Reed Show*:

I remember watching this show sometimes when it was on Nick at Nite back in the '80s. I was a kid at the time and I remember Donna Stone just being so nice. She always solved any problem in such a sweet, wholesome and sensible manner. Sure it's another example of that "perfect picturesque fifties family lifestyle" but it's part of television heritage. Just like those messages embedded in the show telling you to have good manners, drink more milk and marry a doctor. Still, the theme song brings back memories that are warm and endearing. Donna Reed will always be there to give us our milk and cookies. (Internet Movie Database)

In interviews with women and girls, I have encountered nostalgic references to television families of the classic period that indicated that viewers read these shows as reflective "of an earlier period of American culture in which families often stayed together rather than divorced, in contrast to the present" (Press 1991). While Coontz (1992), Oren (2003), and Spigel (1992) address the fact that the reality of American family life was very different from television's golden representations, given that more and more women were entering the workforce during the 1950s—ironically in part to achieve the dream life of a suburban, single-family-home lifestyle—they also describe in great detail the mythic power of these oft-repeated images. How, if at all, we must consider, has the decline of network television affected such mythic power of television in our culture? Has there been a fundamental shift in television's cultural function?<sup>4</sup>

The particular representation of the relationship among women, work, and family characteristic of early 1960s television families begins to change on prime-time television in the late 1960s as alternative images of women in the workplace as well as in the family slowly begin to proliferate. For example, the television situation comedy *That Girl* (1966-1971), starring Marlo Thomas, is the first show of the new period to feature a young, unmarried girl living on her own. Ann Marie wants to become an actress and leaves her family's home in Brewster, New York, to occupy her own apartment in Manhattan while she searches for fame and fortune in the entertainment business. Daddy and boyfriend Donald are both prominently featured, so we hardly see Ann as unprotected; yet, she does live on her own to seek a career, a clear departure for a young girl in the world of television situation comedy prior to this show.

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) was the next major departure from the early images. In this path-breaking show, we are introduced to what is perhaps television's first true "career woman." Mary leaves a broken engagement to "make it on her own," as the theme song tells us, presumably because a woman "on her own," without husband or family, is so unusual as to be worthy of note on the prime-time television of the 1970s. The show revolves around what becomes her workplace "family" once she finds a job as a television producer and her apartment neighbors Rhoda and Phyllis, both of whom are strong characters, although each contrasts with Mary's nontraditional image (Rhoda is looking actively to get married; Phyllis is married with children and speaks humorously of her family).

In the wake of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, television family shows began to exhibit a marked differentiation from the old pattern. While some single-parent

families always appeared on television prior to this period, all of them—in direct contradiction to the reality of single-parent households—were male-headed households. *My Three Sons*, for example, with its long run from 1960 to 1972, was one of the most successful and popular shows of early television, yet for most of its run, it had no regular female characters at all; neither did *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* from 1969 to 1972 or the earlier *Bachelor Father* from 1957 to 1962.

In a new turn toward relevance, television of the 1970s and 1980s began to feature the single mother, or ensemble mothers, or combined families. *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) had focused on a combined remarried family (with a nonworking mother and a full-time housekeeper). *Kate and Allie* (1984–1989) featured two single-mother friends sharing a household, and *Who's the Boss?* (1984–1992) focused on a single mother and her household helper. Images of gender, and family, and women's roles in society really began to shift with the establishment of the women's network Lifetime in 1984 (Byars and Meehan 1994), and later with the rise of postfeminist television in the 1990s (Lotz 2006). These key events followed the breakdown of the network era in the late 1970s and the concomitant changes in the structure and organization of television programming.

Byars and Meehan (1994) argue that television “discovered” the female prime-time market in the 1970s, as evidenced by a spate of what they call “hybrid” prime-time shows, which combine melodramatic elements with traditionally male genres like the cop show or the action show. Beginning with the female cop show *Cagney and Lacey* (1982–1988), television witnessed a spate of the hybrid genre, evidenced in shows such as *Spenser for Hire* (1985–1988), *China Beach* (1988–1991), and *L.A. Law* (1986–1994), which combined action, adventure, detectives, and workplace with melodramatic elements. Byars and Meehan discuss how the image of women populating prime time, in particular their relationship to work and sexuality, shifted as well, toward a more “feminist” image that was less passive, more powerful, and more independent—though still heterosexual and romantic—than earlier television women.

While Byars and Meehan (1994) discuss primarily the Lifetime network, which arose in the 1980s and was marketed as “television for women,” their observations apply as well to other images on network television. Beginning in the 1970s, television's norms of representing women overall began to shift. While previously most women on prime-time television were positioned squarely within the nuclear family as homemakers and mothers, thereafter images of working women became first acceptable, with *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, then common, and finally unremarkable.

With the breakdown of network television—as cable television claimed a larger share of the airways—came a decidedly postfeminist proliferation of women's television images. Postfeminism, as Lotz (2006) and others argue, is characterized by a clear and constant undercutting of the ideals and visions of liberal feminism (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003; Heywood and Drake 1997), which stressed the need for women to achieve equality with men in the workplace, the home, and



the bedroom. Postfeminist television opened up a new set of possibilities for the representations of women, work, and family. Television's representations of women throughout the 1980s and 1990s focused on women making "choices," usually between work and family. While some shows (*L.A. Law* [1986-1994], *Thirty-Something* [1987-1991]) make the case that fulfilling both roles is impossible, others (*The Cosby Show* [1984-1992], *Family Ties* [1982-1989]) portray the easy fulfillment of both as a given (Heide 1995; Press and Strathman 1993).

In an analysis of the popular television show *The West Wing* (1999-2006), Lotz (2006) points out how strong female characters exist alongside references to a pair of female underpants being found in a diplomat's suite and the search for a boyfriend. Lotz comments that "I use these examples from *The West Wing* to indicate how a series that professes liberal politics and offers female characters narrative space still undercuts and minimizes their professionalism. These devices only can be identified by examining the stories told by the series; the characters' status as single women in career roles provides no suggestion of the ambivalent nature of their narrative construction" (p. 162). Thus, does Lotz illustrate the postfeminist quality of postnetwork shows in which feminist themes about women's professional status are systematically ignored and undercut in favor of a focus on the details of women's romantic personal lives, in narratives that could just as easily have been featured in a Rock Hudson-Doris Day comedy of the 1950s.

Lotz (2006) finds that the "choice" theme is also limited to women who actually have such choices to make—mostly upper-middle-class, educated, white, and attractive women: "Employment in a professional career remains a crucial component of female representations that critics consider progressive" (p. 146). Although feminist second-wave ideals are critiqued, the postfeminist critique does not extend to the more sophisticated critique of third-wave feminism, which spotlights the white, middle-class, heterosexual biases of the second-wave feminist movement and the stories it spawned.

These themes are evident in popular shows of this era, such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). While *Ally McBeal* features a single, successful attorney shown largely in her workplace, her preoccupation is with marriage, with dating relationships and the search for a partner. *Sex and the City* focused primarily on the personal (and sexual) lives of four women in New York City. While all have successful careers, the show combines an acknowledgment of the importance of women's independence with a very traditionalist focus on "the search for Mr. Right." This emphasis is so strong that it undercuts the way the women's careers might be seen to underscore their (and the show's) support for second-wave feminist values.

One episode of *Ally McBeal* featured Ally defending a woman in court who was suing a company for allowing more time off and flexible hours to women with children than women without. Ally's main defense of her criticism of these policies was that "women now have the 'choice' to have children, and when they do, they should be forced to bear the consequences for this," an argument that has been amply invalidated by current feminist scholarship (Douglas and Michaels

2004). This narrative ignores what has been perhaps the most prominent thrust of the women's movement in the United States, that is, the push to allow family benefits for both women and men (Douglas and Michaels 2004).

On another topic in the same vein, an episode of *Sex and the City* involved an abortion decision made by Miranda, one of the show's main characters. A surprise pregnancy makes Miranda consider having an abortion, causing her friend Carrie to reflect with extreme sadness and regret on her own abortion when she was younger. We see Carrie unwilling to admit to her current boyfriend that she had the abortion, changing the details so that she seemed to be younger at the time (and thus perhaps less responsible), and narrating the incident with a regretful voice.

This episode epitomizes postfeminism, as the choice feminist abortion activists have made possible for these characters is simply assumed and then undermined by the show's multiple critical perspectives toward the act. In the end, Miranda changes her initial decision to abort into a decision to have her baby and become a single mother, and is toasted and supported by all the women. Can the prime-time audience—even the audience for a paid subscription service like HBO—not be trusted to sympathize with a character who obtains an abortion without regret, or even without much second-guessing? Despite this backtracking from one of the most hard-won goals of second-wave feminism—women's reproductive freedom—this is one of the shows that has been most heralded as an icon of the era of feminist television. While its portrayal of women and their sexuality has certainly been progressive in many respects, the postfeminist qualities of *Sex and the City* (and its overall adherence to traditional values of glamour and consumerism) tend to mitigate the radical impact the show can have on its eager and committed female audience (Arthurs 2003; Akass and McCabe 2004).

In what has come to be called “third-wave” feminism, an attempt has been made to retain a feminist “essence” while redressing some of the deficiencies of second-wave feminism such as a lack of ethnic, racial, and sexual diversity in the movement and a sexual Puritanism that many found alarming. Gill (2003) argues that a third wave or “new era” of feminism in which women wear T-shirts proclaiming sexually explicit slogans—in the guise of asserting women's right to sexual freedom—has not really proved to be a feminist advance for women. Television shows like *Sex and the City* or *Ally McBeal* invoke a third-wave feminist perspective in the explicit “sexiness” of their lead characters but, at the same time, feature the upper-middle-class, professional, educated, white, glamorous women so widely criticized in third-wave literature as precluding any real diversity in televisual portrayals.<sup>5</sup>

While issues like women's relationship to work, family, and romance, or women's reproductive rights were not always (if ever) presented in a feminist manner, television of the 1990s did come to reflect the feminist victories of the preceding decades in the form of many new and innovative images. *Ellen* (1994-1998) featured the first overt lesbian “outing” on prime time; *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) starred a hard-driving career women who chose to become a single mother; *Roseanne* (1988-1997) centered on a working-class family whose female head did



not fit the bill of the typical slim, white, and glamorous television woman; and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) featured an extremely powerful, feminist, and capable young woman heroine. All of these shows were popular successes, and all helped pave the way to the increasingly innovative television images of the new millennium.

## A New Critical Rhetoric: But Not for Women?

Current television reveals a different comment on postfeminism and third-wave feminism in comparison with the 1990s. For example, the recent HBO show *The Wire* (2002-2007) offers a new level of diversity in its representations. It is a police show that introduces depth in its portrayal of the criminals and members of the "underclass." For example, one narrative line follows an African American drug-dealing dynasty in some depth, including many of the members of the drug dealers' families, children who are recruited by the business, informants, and the wealthy kingpins.

The female characters featured on *The Wire* provide the kind of diversity that Lotz and others failed to find in the past decades of network television. Particularly noteworthy are the characters of Brianna Barksdale, sister of one of the drug dynasty kingpins (Avon Barksdale) and mother of D'Angelo Barksdale, a character who finds himself facing a twenty-year jail sentence. In one subplot, Brianna's son is offered a deal that could shorten his sentence significantly if he offers information on the drug-dealing. We see the mother visiting her son and urging him *not* to testify, because it will help her and her family, even as he faces possible death as a result. It is certainly an unconventional portrayal of motherhood—and one totally new to prime time. Another unconventional mother is De'Londa Brice, mother of Namond, a fourteen-year-old whom she urges to skip school and join the family drug business.

Detective Shakima "Kima" Greggs, an African American lesbian cop (played by Sonja Sohn), with a live-in lesbian lover (Cheryl), is yet another significant and unconventional character in *The Wire*. Kima is an extremely tough cop. She is also a glamorous woman who often goes undercover to ferret out information about the drug dealers the cops are following throughout the show. In one episode, she gets shot, and we are shown how difficult this is for her girlfriend, particularly when she recovers and insists on going back to police work rather than accepting the desk job she is offered. What has changed here? Social class, sexuality, and race are more diversified in these portrayals than in the vast majority of the shows portraying women on television throughout the preceding decades.

The *L-Word*, a new Showtime show about the lives of lesbians, displays young lesbian women as though they were heterosexual glamour girls. While at one level, it is transgressive to portray a group of lesbians openly at all on television; at another level, it should be noted that every woman featured in the show could be considered glamorous—thin and beautiful in conventional terms. Although not all the women in this show are white, they all have the

kind of beauty that belongs to the social class that possesses enough time and money to acquire glamorous clothing, to maintain the perfect body shape, and to correct obvious facial flaws by cosmetic means. The new Showtime show *Weeds*, about open drug-dealing and drug use among middle-class white America, features a single mother, played by Mary Louise Parker, who supports her white, middle-class family with drug-dealing. Certainly *Weeds* breaks new ground in its social mores and perspective through its matter-of-fact portrayal of drug use and drug-dealing among white middle-class Americans, but at the same time, it retains the norm of focusing on thin, conventionally beautiful women.<sup>6</sup>

These shows illustrate the “narrow-casting” that has become a feature of television in the postnetwork age, playing to audience groups who find open lesbian lifestyles or drug use acceptable but in large part clinging to visual portrayals of women that remain conventional and straightjacketed, impervious to decades of feminist critique. Yet, this array of new images on prime time opens up possibilities for diversity in images of women, work, and family never hinted at during television’s golden era. The impact of these images is strengthened by the general mode of address established in television’s golden age. Walters (2001) argues that television has played a key role in the struggle for gay and lesbian rights in the United States. The presence of the *L-Word* on prime-time cable television provides an updated illustration of her argument. As social minority struggles for women’s, gay, lesbian, and minority rights continue, prime-time television will continue to play an important role in establishing for the public what can be acceptable in modern American life. Both an African American and a woman ran in the 2008 presidential primary, so it is hard to deny that social consciousness about the rights of gender and minority groups has changed fundamentally in the United States. And an examination of changing images on current television indicates that the ever-popular medium has potentially played a considerable and important role in these changes.

Television has even taken a step toward a more honest portrayal of women’s choice issues, as seen in the prime-time hit *Desperate Housewives*. A key breakthrough image on this show is on-again, off-again working mother Lynette, who left a successful advertising career to become full-time stay-at-home mother. Yet, the portrayal of her role contrasts markedly with families of television’s golden era. Unlike the television of an earlier era, motherhood in this instance is not idealized, as Lynette is shown having many regrets about her choice, and then trying to go back to her career and realizing the difficulties involved in this choice as well. In this instance, women’s need to choose among motherhood, work, and their combination are fairly and critically portrayed, although it should be noted that like the golden age of family television, the show has a white, middle-class bias and errs on the side of portraying conventionally beautiful actresses. Nevertheless, in some respects, with *Desperate Housewives*, we travel beyond postfeminist television to family television written with a more overt consciousness of the real social and political issues women now face, in the family, in relationships, and in the workplace.

## Conclusion

Images of women, work, and family on television have changed enormously since the heyday of the network era. Early television offered a rather restricted set of images, confining women to the home and family setting. The increase in working women in the 1960s and 1970s precipitated a concomitant rise in later television images of working women, and in women living nontraditional family lives, as this increasing market of working women was not lost on the television industry. As well, an increased number of television women in action genres marked television of the later golden period. These images gave way, in the post-network era, to a form of postfeminist television in the 1990s, in which television undercut the ideals of liberal feminism with a series of ambiguous images challenging its gains. Women's roles in the workplace, increasingly shown, were undercut by a sense of nostalgic yearning for the love and family life that they were seen to have displaced.

Current television presents a third-wave-influenced feminism that takes up where postfeminism left off. The recent popularity of *Sex and the City* perhaps best illustrates this paradox. As Tukachinsky (2008) notes, *Sex and the City* is read by young college women today as both a paean to traditional romantic feminine values and a diatribe against them. Precisely this ambiguity is the key to its enormous success, both with viewers of different ages, and in the feminist critical television literature.<sup>7</sup> With a culture that remains decidedly ambivalent about feminism for women, the most successful cultural products will reflect this ambivalence, which can be read as the celebration of diversity that characterizes what has come to be known as third-wave feminism. Yet, on prime time, diversity remains limited for women, as thin, young, and conventionally beautiful images predominate even as portrayals become sexually and racially diversified. Even newer shows illustrate some of these marked though limited gains. Perhaps we have moved beyond a simplistic nostalgia for 1950s' life, so shaped by television family images of the period, to a new sophistication in our ability to consider the choices women continue to make between the roles that family, work, and career will play in their lives. If so, television may be playing a progressive role in facilitating this change of mood.

Does postnetwork television still reflect consensus values in our culture? If maintaining a multitude of positions—all portrayed as equally valid—is the key to relevance in a hybrid culture, television can be said to remain on our cutting edge. And given the lack of actual cultural consensus previously masked by the television medium, television's multiplicity may be playing an increasingly progressive role for women and minority groups in our culture. While television may never again provide the iconic symbols of the golden era, it nevertheless will continue to play a central cultural role in the United States. At least for now, it continues to maintain its status as the most used medium,<sup>8</sup> even as we experience the vast technological changes and the proliferation of new media that characterize life in the new millennium.

## Notes

1. See Coontz (1992, 1997) and Spigel (1992) for detailed discussion of differences between, as Coontz notes, “the way we really were” in the families of 1950s America.

2. Consider the following episode titles: “The Girls Want to Go to the Nightclub,” “The Audition,” “Lucy Writes a Play,” “Job Switching,” “Lucy Becomes a Sculptress,” “The Girls Go into Business,” “Equal Rights,” “The Million Dollar Idea,” “Lucy Writes a Novel,” “Lucy Gets into Pictures,” “Lucy’s Italian Movies,” and so on.

3. Oren (2003) cites a slew of current reviews and commentaries that take note of this apparent “weakening” of the strong masculine aspect of fathers, which now became tempered with domesticity, in such publications as *Time* magazine, *Cosmopolitan*, the *Saturday Review*, and *American Mercury*.

4. One plotline of *The Donna Reed Show* indicates that even in the white, middle-class, nonethnic family of early 1960s television, the theme of women’s rebellion remains. Donna and her friend Midge get the idea of starting their own business after a card game in which their husbands repeatedly belittle and dismiss women’s financial acumen. They visit a bank for a loan but again are belittled by the bank manager, who states he is often inclined to lock up the vault when women come to request loans. Very condescendingly, he explains how difficult it is for women to make money in business, and he tries his best to discourage them. The episode ends with Donna and Alex talking in their (separate) beds, with Alex protesting that he does not think Donna will fail in business, but his resistance comes from his desire to keep her efforts all to himself and his family. Hearing this, Donna protests that she could not imagine any other role seriously for herself aside from wife and mother, and the episode is resolved on a happy, contented note for all involved. Thus is the “mother-milk-cookies” heritage expressed and reproduced in this as in so many episodes of early television situation comedies.

5. In fact, *Ally McBeal*’s star Calista Flockhart was the widely publicized victim of a life-threatening eating disorder that kept her dangerously thin almost throughout the production of the show. Her adherence to an excessively thin body ideal flew in the face of one of the main cultural critiques of second-wave feminism (Orbach 1978), and this in pursuit of a third-wave defined sexiness.

6. I am indebted to Amanda Stuckey for pointing out these facets of the show *Weeds*.

7. The evidence that viewers respond to the ambiguity about feminism in *Sex and the City* is not unlike the evidence that audiences of *All in the Family*, the controversial 1970s (1971-1979) hit show about a bigot, was read favorably by conservative audiences who liked bigoted lead character Archie Bunker and liberal or radical viewers who read the show as a criticism of Archie’s beliefs (Vidmar and Rokeach 1974).

8. See del and ins. <http://www.podcastingnews.com/2008/12/26/internet-overtakes-newspapers-as-news-source-in-2008/> for recent figures supporting this point.

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