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THE UNRULY WOMAN IN PRIME TIME ANIMATED SITCOMS

By

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B.A., Bellarmine University, 2010

A Thesis

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Master of Arts

Department of Women's and Gender Studies

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

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Utilizing the criteria for unruly women established by Kathleen Rowe, this work engages with current television scholarship on animated sitcoms in order to come to an understanding of how unruliness as a category of behavior and embodiment is expanded in prime time animated sitcoms. In looking at the ways in which unruliness functions in animated series, examples from *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *South Park*, *Daria*, and *Home Movies* are examined. It is through this analysis that I prove that not only do the mother characters from all of these series embody unruliness, but through their prominence in their respective shows unruliness becomes normalized within the genre of prime time animated sitcoms.

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INTRODUCTION

Prime time animated sitcoms have been seen on television since *The Flintstones* premiered in 1960. Over the years these series have changed from family-friendly fare to series that are constructed with a largely adult audience in mind, while never departing far from the format of the traditional domestic sitcom. Though there are older examples of prime time animation, the form of the contemporary prime time animated sitcom was pioneered by *The Simpsons*. Until the creation of that series, no prime time animated show had been developed specifically to cater to an older, often adult, audience. Perhaps because of this no other animated series has done as well in prime time as has *The Simpsons*, which has been guaranteed to extend to at least twenty-five seasons (Snierson).

Nonetheless, in the past twenty years, due in large part to the success of *The Simpsons*, prime time animated sitcoms have become a staple of television programming. Due to the genre's popularity, Fox has dubbed Sunday nights from eight PM to ten PM "Animation Domination," a programming block wherein four prime time adult cartoons are showcased. In addition to *The Simpsons* and other Fox programming, the cable channel Cartoon Network airs a popular programming block called Adult Swim, which has allowed for an expansion of the audience for prime time animated sitcoms in recent years. Though in the last few seasons Adult Swim has to some extent moved away from developing its own animated series in order to provide space for

oddball live shows such as *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*; *Children's Hospital*; and *The Heart, She Holler*, over its ten year history, the programming block has provided exposure for many animated sitcoms, such as *Morel Oral*, *Home Movies*, and *Mission Hill*. Cartoon Network was even credited with the reemergence of both *Futurama* and *Family Guy* after their respective cancellations, as the network provided a place for the fan base of both shows to continue to grow and stay loyal to their favorite franchises.

It is not by chance that these shows have been so popular—the domestic sitcom has proven to be a reliable formula since the beginning of television. Through the use of animation, television writers have found an arena in which they can combine the social criticism typical of television drama with the satire and comedy typical of the sitcom tradition in order to address a wide variety of issues ranging from the realistic to the fantastic. Given the prominence of these shows on television, it is important to understand how their construction of women's televised portrayals differs from more traditional live action genres, as this portrayal can potentially either alter or replicate larger societal views of women.

The popularity of the prime-time animated sitcom has drawn the attention of scholars in a variety of fields from philosophy (Irwin, Conard, and Skoble) and religion (Pinsky), to psychology (Brown), women's studies (Neuhaus) and queer studies (Johnson, Henry 2004, and Keller). One of the most substantial bodies of work addresses the unique generic and stylistic conventions of adult animated television, arguing that these conventions make the genre potentially more radical in its social implications than live-action or traditional television. Within this literature, a number of scholars have

emphasized the carnivalesque nature of animation itself. Michael Tueth's article on the family in animated sitcoms acknowledges that the use of the carnivalesque allows for a more subversive narrative to take hold in animated series. This subversion then allows the series to address more serious issues in comedic ways, something that live action series are unable to do because of the constraints of their medium. Alison Halsall's "“Bigger Longer & Uncut’: *South Park* and the Carnivalesque” similarly examines the series as an example of the carnivalesque. *South Park*, she argues, subjects recognizable stereotypes of symbolically powerful figures, such as the American hero, to a barrage of vulgar, scatological treatment to produce “a transformative vision of the world that ‘excrementalizes’ the U.S. sociopolitical landscape” (24). Central to her analysis is the ability to render iconicity through an animation style that communicates the one-dimensionality of both the characters and the values being represented. However, she offers no reading of how these characteristics might affect gender politics in particular, and does not relate *South Park*'s particular enactment of the carnivalesque back to the larger genre of the animated sitcom genre. As a result, she overlooks the possibility that animation's carnivalesque might become a normalizing force within the genre as a whole.

In *Blame Canada! South Park and Contemporary Culture* Toni Johnson-Woods similarly describes *South Park* as conforming to the spirit of the carnivalesque: the series is excessive, unruly, and anti-authoritarian. One of the characters Johnson-Woods sees as most highly carnivalesque is Liane Cartman, who was depicted for a large portion of the series as a hermaphrodite, a mistaken assumption not cleared up until fourteenth season. Like Halsall, Johnson-Woods describes the entire series as carnivalesque in nature, a descriptor which, while true, ignores the ways in which unruliness and carnivalesque

depictions are normalized throughout the entirety of prime time animated domestic sitcoms.

Finally, Terrance R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton's article on the cartoon carnival situates animation as an ideal genre in which carnivalesque depictions of characters can take place. Though they deal primarily with animated films, ignoring animated series, the authors find that animation allows a space for extreme self-reflexivity, a process which makes it possible for the medium to mock itself even while creating itself. Though these articles differ in their approach to the carnivalesque, they ultimately agree that animation can heighten the possibility and power of the carnivalesque.

Scholars have also discussed the disruptive potential of animated sitcoms in terms of their postmodern characteristics. In his article "'It's Just a Bunch of Stuff That Happened': *The Simpsons* and the Possibility of Postmodern Comedy," H. Peter Steeves examines *The Simpsons* as a postmodern text, concluding that the moral of every episode is simply "it's just a bunch of stuff that happened," a position that forestalls any possible commitment to normativity by pointing out the limitations of any universalist thinking (271). In "The Triumph of Popular Culture: Situation Comedy, Postmodernism, and *The Simpsons*," Matthew Henry similarly argues that *The Simpsons*, as a postmodern pastiche of references to existing sitcom conventions, satirizes a variety of social values and hierarchies even as it "is involved in the production of the very 'culture' it satirizes" (263). Jonathan Gray assigns a similar role to parody in his analysis of *The Simpsons*, arguing that the show teaches its audience to critically evaluate how television narrates social conventions. Finally, Valerie Weilunn Chow's essay on Homer Simpson

emphasizes the role of hyperconsciousness—the text’s hyper-awareness “of its cultural status, function, and history”—in establishing the show’s ironic self-regard and encouraging the audience’s own awareness of itself as a commodity (107).

Though these analyses all make claims for the animated sitcom as playing a unique role in destabilizing genre norms and conventions, they do not systematically address the implications that such destabilization can have on gender and sexuality in particular. Moreover, the majority of such analyses tend to focus on a single series or episode and, as a result, they fail to take into account the construction of a whole genre world in which unruliness becomes normalized.

Where scholars have focused on the role of gender in animated sitcoms, they have done so primarily with reference to the conventions of the domestic sitcom rather than the conventions of animation. For instance, Jessamyn Neuhaus’ article “Marge Simpson, Blue-Haired Housewife: Defining Domesticity on *The Simpsons*” argues that Marge’s failures as a housewife conflict with the traditional conventions of domestic sitcoms, but that these failings serve as an indictment of unrealistic normative expectations rather than of Marge herself. Ultimately, though, she concludes that the show “offers a relatively mild critique of domestic gender roles” (762). In Victoria Nagy’s article on “Motherhood, Stereotypes, and *South Park*,” the author examines how the show’s mother characters are constructed from traditional stereotypes of sitcom mothers, exaggerating these stereotypes for comic effect (2). She argues that, “in cartoons aimed at adults, there is no space for the myth of the perfect mother or wife” and it is by exaggerating these stereotypes that *South Park* is able to avoid traditionally idealistic depictions of women

(1). Neither author, however, considers how the carnivalesque of animation might deepen the shows' gender critiques.

In further looking at the body of literature surrounding gender in animated sitcoms, Valerie Palmer-Mehta examines the idea of a normalized masculinity in *King of the Hill*, seeing Peggy as a feminizing force within the relationships of the shows. Given that her analysis is focused on a discussion of masculinity, however, Palmer-Mehta gives little critical consideration to Peggy's non-normative behaviors. Matthew Henry's (2007) article on feminism and feminist ideology within *The Simpsons* may come closest to acknowledging the importance of unruly behavior in undermining gender norms on the show. Henry finds Marge Simpson to be a liminal character, caught between family and career, but this contradiction is attributed to the series' engagement with family values and the ideology of feminism, not to Marge's embodiment of unruly femininity. Additionally, like many of the other articles on gender, this analysis of liminality is not read as challenging gender norms found within sitcoms. Instead, it allows a small space for challenging ideas of female identity within a single series while acknowledging that traditional attitudes towards feminism and women's roles remain normative both within and without the animated sitcom.

Scholars of gender in sitcoms as a whole have also generally failed to acknowledge animation scholars' arguments for the intensified role of the carnivalesque in animated series. In his examination of the sitcom as a genre, Brett Mills describes *The Simpsons* and other animated examples as belonging to the category of sitcom, but spends little time discussing the ways in which animation can function within the genre. In Mills' analysis, there is no difference between live-action domestic sitcoms and their

animated counterparts. This lack of differentiation between genres ignores the possibility, as discussed by other scholars, that animation can allow for a radicalizing of the genre.

Similarly, in Joanne Morreale's collection *Critiquing the Sitcom* the examinations of gender conducted by the contributors is, over all, very conservative. These examinations include an analysis of the homemaker in 1950's television by Mary Beth Haralovich, which looks at how the success of the domestic sitcom served to naturalize women's places in the home and promote middle class values and ideology (71). Virginia Wright Wexman's piece on *The Honeymooners* allows a space for carnivalesque, though only for the male characters, consigning the female characters to a normative space in which their bodies and actions serve to contain those of their husbands. Serafina Bathrick's essay on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* engages with the idea that the show was supposed to be seen as a beacon of change for women, but concludes that the series ultimately reinforced patriarchal norms for relationships through its enactments of gendered relationships. Only one essay, written by Kathleen Rowe Karlyn and sourced from her book, allows a space for unruly and challenging behavior for women in the figure of Roseanne Barr, who works against both traditional ideas of embodiment and action for female characters in the domestic sitcom. However important these examinations of gender are in relation to the sitcom, the examples offered all come from live action series. In this way the collection ignores the construction of gender within the animated domestic sitcom.

In her book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe acknowledges the possibility of unruliness within the television convention of the

domestic sitcom mother, which signals more radical possibilities for the sitcom. Rowe addresses both traditional sitcom expectations as well as women's abilities to break out of the traditional sitcom norms through the use of unruliness. However, her analysis doesn't include the genre critics of animation would argue is, because of its animated form, the most amenable to radical outcomes.

Within these existing bodies of work, then, there is rarely an overlap between analyses of gender, genre, and animation studies. Few authors address female unruliness as a function of animation, and fewer address multiple series in one examination, an approach necessary for capturing the ways the relationship between animation and genre affect the shows' constructions of gender. My purpose in writing this thesis, then, is to bridge these gaps between understandings of genre, animation, gender, and unruliness in a sample of five series. In doing so, I hope to complicate existing accounts of the ways prime time animated television is constructed in terms of genre, comedy, and audience with an analysis of gender. Conversely, I hope to show how synthesizing the conventions of the domestic sitcom and the conventions of animation changes the gender politics of the traditional live-action sitcom.

In looking at prime time animated series, most contemporary shows follow a similar format. They focus on a family wherein the father is a lovable but blundering oaf, the children are either precocious outcasts or popular dolts, and the mothers are the hard workers who hold the family together. This pattern can be seen in *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, and *Family Guy*, three of the most recognizable and popular examples of contemporary prime time animation. A few shows do alter the format somewhat, including *Home Movies* which centers on the family of a single mother, and *Daria*, in

which the mother is seen as a work-obsessed corporate lawyer. Excluding these examples, however, the format is similar to that of the traditional live-action domestic sitcom, exemplified by shows such as *Father Knows Best* and *I Love Lucy*. However, while the mother characters are often the stable centers of animated shows, they do not function as responsible and normative models of womanhood. Instead, the mothers in most prime time animated sitcoms fulfill most, if not all, of the traits Kathleen Rowe ascribes to the unruly woman, while the demure, well-behaved women who often appear as bit characters or extras are viewed with suspicion or seen as somehow insincere within the larger culture of the show.

This move to unruliness has also been seen in live action television. In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* Kathleen Rowe draws on writing about the tradition of the carnivalesque or grotesque woman to develop her own criteria of unruliness, which she then applies to modern television personalities including Roseanne Barr and Miss Piggy. In mapping out the history of the theory upon which the figure of the unruly woman is based, Rowe begins her discussion with Mikhail Bakhtin, author of *Rabelais and His World*. She writes that his discussion of the carnivalesque, rooted in literary tradition, provides a starting place to question power dynamics of social interactions (32). Carnavalesque practices, whether through performances, texts, or events, provide for the acknowledgement of the dominant classes and cultural norms, while simultaneously mocking and degrading these higher forms, often through use of the grotesque body (32). Within the space of the carnival, hierarchical structures are suspended, allowing a leveling to occur between the basest elements of society and the most pious. It is during this leveling that moves can be made to criticize the structure of

society. However, such criticisms automatically re-encode the structure of society through their acknowledgements of traditional structure, creating the ambivalence Russo references (56). Additionally, such critiques, while creating a space for leveling, only allow this as a temporary process. Following the end of the carnival, social order is restored to its normative patterns. In this way the critique is further contained, allowing no real space for societal transformation.

Bakhtin also spends some time describing the idea of the grotesque, which he sees as one means to social critique. The grotesque, according to Bakhtin, emphasizes an idea of incompleteness, using depictions of dirt, disease, age, and death. Because human bodies are encoded with elements of social structure through their very engagement with society, they can be read as grotesque in both function and action (33). Rowe emphasizes, as does Russo, that though Bakhtin wrote about female examples of the carnivalesque, his primary concern was with class, not gender (34).

In complicating the idea of the carnivalesque with gender, Natalie Davis studied the issue of what she called the “woman on top” (Rowe, 35). Her study, which was conducted across several fields including history and literature, described the woman on top as showing an inversion from the natural gender order (35). This inversion could occur in giving way to baser instincts, such as in the idea of looseness, or in a woman taking control over men as an authority figure (35). In this way Bakhtin’s idea of demonstrating the norms of the dominant culture through opposition can occur with an emphasis on gender instead of class. Unlike Bakhtin, Davis argues that carnivalesque actions are not necessarily subject to recontainment. Instead, she sees a possibility for unruly women on top to protest social norms in order to create a lasting change (Davis,

131). In her essay she writes that the image of the unruly woman, instead of serving as a warning to retain gender roles, is a “multivalent image that could operate...to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside of marriage” and “to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest” (131). In this way the unruly woman becomes not only a means to temporarily invert the social order, but also a point of conflict concerning the balance of power in society.

Mary Russo continued this discussion of gender in relation to the carnivalesque in her essay, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” which was later lengthened into a book. Rowe cites Russo’s essay as the impetus behind her own work on the unruly woman (222). Just as did Davis, Russo complicates Bakhtin’s argument about the carnivalesque with the addition of gender. Russo, however, acknowledges the ambivalence that can occur in depictions of the carnivalesque, calling attention to the ways in which carnivalesque portrayals of spectacle can be accidental and unwanted (53). Similarly to Davis, Russo argues that the carnivalesque allows a space to “destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society” through a “redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure” which allows the carnival to be seen as a site of insurgency (62). However, Russo also notes that the figure of the unruly woman can provoke laughter at the normative order as well as those who contest it, leading to a somewhat ambivalent role for laughter.

In furthering the work of Bakhtin, Davis, and Russo, Rowe argues that the figure of the unruly woman is rife for feminist reappropriation, as the unruly woman, in her excess and parodic state, “points to new ways of thinking about visibility as power” (11).

However, unlike Davis who allows the carnival to change the ways in which traditional society functions, Rowe constrains the role of the unruly woman to television. Though she argues that power is contained within visible spectacle, her discussion of the containment of actresses who appear unruly or carnivalesque in real life seems to point to a containment of the carnivalesque through televised medium.

Though Rowe's analysis of the unruly woman is thoughtful and complete in regards to live action series, she ignores animated portrayals of femininity in her analysis. I argue that, when we extrapolate Rowe's criteria to animated series, we not only obtain a more complete understanding of the semiotics of the series, but also gain new perspective on the role of the unruly woman in television culture. As a genre, the contemporary animated sitcom, unlike its live-action counterpart, depicts unruliness itself as normative.

Rowe enumerates eight traits that serve to define the unruly woman:

1. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
2. Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her appetites.
3. Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
4. She makes jokes or laughs to herself.
5. She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender.
6. She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.
7. Her behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale. She may be pregnant.
8. She is associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence. (31)

It is important to note that all eight of these traits are directly linked to the unruly woman's visibility. None of them have anything to do with defining her mental or

emotional state. This visibility is important, as it is directly acting against the forces that have traditionally kept women within their prescribed social roles. As Rowe explains, “[I]nvisibility helps constrain women’s social power; as long as women are not seen in the public sphere, they do not exist” (52).

In Rowe’s analysis, women’s unruliness functions as a self-conscious protest by the character or as a pointed commentary by the creator or writer. This function of unruliness as commentary is evident when Rowe discusses Roseanne Barr’s motivations in the making of *Roseanne*. Rowe explains that Barr was constantly involved in fights with the producers in order to allow for an unruly portrayal of women on television (81). In this fight she came up against her original producer, Matt Williams, who wanted what Barr called “a male point of view coming out of women’s mouths,” something that had been seen on television in nearly every live-action domestic sitcom until *Roseanne* (81). In this interpretation, unruliness is a set of non-normative behaviors that are only enacted with purpose and consideration, a self-conscious violation of gender standards understood by the character, actor, writers, and audience as a disruptive breach.

In prime time animated sitcoms, however, Rowe’s idea of the unruly woman as a calculating violator of gender norms is essentially reversed. Rather than constraining their actions to eliminate unruliness for fear of damage to their reputations as functioning members of society, prime time animated women are allowed and often encouraged to behave badly in order to fulfill their roles as both mothers and the social conscience of their families and shows. In this way, unruliness moves from being an occasional tactic or running commentary, as in the case of *Roseanne*, to being an accepted character trait and expected premise of animated sitcoms.

This analysis will concentrate on five examples of prime time animated series: *The Simpsons*, *King of the Hill*, *Daria*, *South Park*, and *Home Movies*. In choosing these series I looked to programs that followed the format of the traditional domestic sitcom, as this is the genre upon which Rowe bases her criteria. Within the wealth of animated programming currently on television, many animated sitcoms, such as *Mission Hill* and the stop-motion styled *Frankenhole*, do not conform to the domestic sitcom genre, leaving them without a place in this analysis. Within each animated domestic sitcom, I concentrate my analysis on the mother of each family, as these are the women who are most often seen as the anchors of their respective shows, both in live action and animated domestic sitcoms.

I begin in Chapter One by examining the literature surrounding both the unruly woman and the existing work on prime time animated series. By combining a knowledge of the workings of traditional live-action domestic sitcoms with an understanding of genre conventions of animated series, I explore the ways that prime time animated series further the representation and acceptability of the unruly woman through comedy and plot. I use this theoretical framework throughout to illustrate how the portrayal of women in domestic sitcoms has evolved from live-action to animation. Additionally, by analyzing both the perceived and actual audiences of these shows, I illustrate how animated series producers have established a place for their series that allows for exploration of serious and controversial issues that are often suppressed in the traditional live-action genre.

In Chapter Two, I examine how female characters' roles outside of the home serve to depict them as unruly. Rowe attends carefully to the ways in which women's

social class and their adoption of traditionally male roles often make them act or appear to be unruly. Historically, this can be seen in such figures as Joan of Arc, whom Rowe describes as an unruly “woman on top” for taking up the male position of military leadership or seizing public authority through riots or demonstrations (35). In prime time animated sitcoms, much as in history, most of the female characters at one time or another leave the domestic sphere either to work or to protest laws or decisions which they feel to be unfair. By leaving the domestic sphere in order to join the traditionally male spheres of labor or politics, these women become Rowe’s unruly “women on top.”

Finally, in Chapter Three, I examine how the physical appearance of women in prime time animated sitcoms represent them as carnivalesque and unruly. More often than not, central female characters in prime-time animated sitcoms fit almost all of Rowe’s physical criteria for the unruly woman. This unruliness is often played for laughs within the confines of the show, and the women’s incongruent measurements and sizes, such as Peggy Hill’s size 16 feet and Marge Simpson’s 2-foot-tall hair-do, symbolize their failure to remain within the bounds of “normal” society. However, the bizarre characteristics that serve to cast these women as “other” also grant them entrance into the equally bizarre societies that populate prime time animated sitcoms. I argue, then, that the physical characteristics that would define a woman as “unruly” in any other society are in fact the very same characteristics that allow these women to function as average members within their respective societies.

Though prime time animated sitcoms have varied in popularity over the years, they have become television staples over the past two decades, allowing for a space in which an adult audience can find comedic enjoyment while also affirming changes in

expectations of femininity through alterations in traditional portrayals of women in domestic sitcoms. Though comedic, these series clearly function as serious critiques of larger society for their makers and audiences. By examining the treatment of women in particular, it becomes apparent that the women of prime time animated sitcoms, while unruly by Rowe's standards, are considered normative within the relative chaos of their animated communities.

CHAPTER I

THE PRIME-TIME ANIMATED SITCOM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE

Animated sitcoms have always been treated differently from their live action counterparts. In *Drawn to Television*, M. Keith Booker outlines the history of animated sitcoms on prime time television, beginning in the 1960's with the first episode of *The Flintstones*. In part due to the success of *The Flintstones* in their prime time space, networks developed other animated series, including classics such as *The Jetsons*, however these shows were not successful during this later time slot. For the decades that followed their move back to Saturday mornings, it was assumed by networks that animated shows could not sustain an audience in prime time (x). Just as *The Flintstones* was followed by other animated shows in the 1960's, *The Simpsons*, after their full-length premiere in 1989, was followed by other animated series such as *King of the Hill*, *Daria*, and *South Park*. It is worth noting that networks were more cautious about adopting prime-time animation in light of the genre's failure in the 1960's. Booker observes that *King of the Hill*, which did not premiere until 1997, was *The Simpsons*' "first major successor" (x). This lack of immediate successor for *The Simpsons* gave the networks time to determine whether an animated sitcom could be financially and critically viable in prime time. Because *The Simpsons* was essentially the only show in its category for

nearly a decade, it played an enormously influential role in reestablishing animated sitcom genre norms by serving as the blueprint for other animated sitcoms.

Once the animated sitcom was again seen as viable in the 1990's, many animated series were developed, ranging from short lived series such as *Dilbert*, *Mission Hill*, and *Clerks*, to longer running series such as *Beavis and Butthead*, *Family Guy*, and *Futurama*. Though many of these series were successful, and nearly all of them challenged the traditional live action series in ratings or innovation, this paper is concerned primarily with the contemporary prime time animated domestic sitcom. It is this genre of animated sitcom that follows most closely the genre conventions of the traditional prime-time (live-action) domestic sitcom, the genre which established still-followed gender norms within television comedies (Rowe 211).

Like their live-action predecessors, animated sitcoms frequently use women's frustrations with being confined to the role of wife and mother in order to explore both their comedic potential and women's opportunities to expand these roles (Rowe 170). However, unlike live-action shows produced before the U.S. Women's Movement of the 1960's and 1970's—shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best*—these later animated series also had the freedom to show women breaking out of traditional gender, and sitcom, roles and succeeding in renegotiating their own space and identities.

Each of the five series analyzed here, while embodying the basic definition of the domestic sitcom, builds upon and slightly changes the genre's norms, altering traditional ideas of how sitcoms function. In each, the writers' approach to gender is, while different from series to series, challenging to the ways women are traditionally portrayed on television. In large part by employing satire, these writers not only call attention to the

ways gender and gender roles are traditionally portrayed within sitcom culture, but also comment upon the ways televisual constructions of gender roles both mirror and influence gender in larger society. Though the series achieve their goals in different ways, as a genre, the animated sitcom inverts the position of the unruly woman, creating a genre world in which women are required to exhibit traditionally unacceptable behaviors in order to fulfill their roles as mothers and productive members of society.

In part, these interventions in the gender politics of television are made possible because of the way producers and critics conceptualize the audience. According to Hilton-Morrow and McMahan, the common conception of the audience for prime time animated series is adults, which differs from the more family oriented audience of standard prime time audience (81). By coming to a better understanding of who actually comprises these audiences, I hope to establish why these series are so successful at subverting ideas of normative behavior.

The Gender Politics of the Sitcom Family

In the introduction to *Prime Time Animation*, the authors argue that

more than any other genre, the domestic sitcom served to institute a particular myth about the nuclear family in popular culture. Even today, when politicians and policy-makers describe the ‘traditional’ family, their descriptions are invariably a pastiche composed of characteristics from a number of different domestic sitcoms (Stabile and Harrison, 7).

This view of the sitcom as the portrayer of the “traditional” family is not only ingrained in those who create media and social policy, but also in the general television viewer. Even when the families pictured on television do not mirror those present in actual society, television has the power to perpetuate the idea that “the traditional family is a safe haven in a cruel and unpredictable world . . . the family featured on domestic

sitcoms is absolutely remote from violence, conflict, and the realms of labor and politics. These families were never homeless, hungry, prone to sexual abuse, discontent, or in any way unhappy” (7). Given that television programming is very heavy on these portrayals of safe, traditional families, any show that challenges these representations is potentially seen by critics and audiences as disruptive.

In looking at traditional family sitcoms, it becomes apparent that women are allowed one primary mode of comedic expression: the domestic. Rowe claims that this genre is typified by authors such as Erma Bombeck, whose writings “chronicle a woman’s life as wife and mother, after the rosy illusions promised by the narratives of romantic comedy have been replaced by a very different reality” (69). Though inherent in Bombeck’s writing is an idea that domestic life is not as perfect as promised in television and movies, the message that comes across is that even without perfection, family life is what is expected of women and it should be approached as a necessary and largely enjoyable responsibility. Just as in domestic sitcoms, there is no hint that life might be plagued with serious problems; instead the problems a wife encounters largely center on domestic duties, like housework.

According to Stabile and Harrison, in all domestic sitcoms, whether animated or live action, the focus of action centers on a white, middle class family in which the father functions as the main means of economic support. Additionally, Stabile and Harrison write that “the mom stays at home, the sons are strong, and the daughters are good” (7). Though some of the animated sitcoms analyzed here differ from this model in a few ways, for the most part they adhere to the idea of the traditional family, and, when

breaking out of these norms, self-consciously recognize their break with tradition through conspicuous reference to the convention.

The Simpsons, for example, adopts a traditional family structure even while Marge acts in a variety of ways that can be read as unruly. The series focuses on the Simpson family, which is composed of husband and father Homer, a nuclear technician who is typically depicted as a bumbling fool with anger management issues; mother and wife Marge, a housewife who does her best to care for her family; daughter Lisa, an eight-year-old honors student at the local elementary school who plays the saxophone and frequently leads the charge in correcting a variety of bad behaviors her neighbors and classmates participate in; son Bart, a ten-year-old mischief maker frequently seen with his skateboard tagging local buildings with graffiti and bossing around his classmates; and baby Maggie, who has yet to speak in the entirety of the series, even when seen as an adult. The Simpsons live in Springfield (in a running gag on the series, the state the town is located in is never named). In setting up the family structure, which expands to include extended family such as a senile Grampa Simpson, Marge's sisters, and neighbors Ned and Maude Flanders, *The Simpsons* closely mirrors the family structure of live-action domestic sitcoms.

Similarly, *King of the Hill* follows *The Simpsons*' lead in creating a traditional family structure that includes husband and father Hank Hill, an assistant manager at Strickland Propane; wife and mother Peggy, who works as a substitute teacher for the local school district; son, Bobby, a twelve-to-thirteen year-old boy whose main interests include stand-up comedy; and Luanne Platter, Peggy's ditsy niece who lives with the Hills for much of the series while she attends beauty school. The series is set in the

fictional town of Arlen, Texas, and uses ideas about the conservative nature of the state to inform plot lines and the characters' political beliefs. *King of the Hill* complicates the traditional sitcom family by giving the mother a career, albeit one that is seen as menial by much of the Arlen community, and by frequently addressing issues of infertility, which is a topic that is still uncommon in either live-action or animated sitcoms.

Though the mother characters on these animated sitcoms occasionally work—Marge Simpson has held jobs at places as diverse as an erotic bakery and the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant—these jobs do not define the characters for more than one episode with the exception of Peggy Hill, who prides herself on her work as a substitute teacher. In no description of *The Simpsons* would Marge's job be listed as “ex-bar manager and former trade-show model,” but in descriptions of Homer, the fact that he is a nuclear technician, albeit inept, is nearly universally used in defining his character. For instance, in *Drawn to Television* Booker calls Homer “lazy and stupid,” the cause of “near-catastrophic crises at the plant,” and “oafish” within the space of a few sentences (49).

In this regard, the prime time animated sitcom has not advanced the portrayal of women beyond what was seen in the 1950's in *I Love Lucy*, one of the most popular female-centered domestic sitcoms in television history. Just as Marge Simpson works in various fields in order to combat boredom, earn some pocket money, or simply as a scheme to keep an eye on her husband, Lucille Ball also took episode-long jobs that, once played for comedic effect, were abandoned, never to be mentioned again. However, while the animated sitcom repeats many of the gender tropes of traditional live action sitcoms, it departs from these tropes in order to allow female characters a space to also

address more serious issues, such as problems surrounding money that can occur in a working class family like the Simpsons.

In some instances, animated shows break more notably from the family politics of the traditional sitcom. The MTV series *Daria* focuses on the Morgendorffer family, which is comprised of husband and father Jake, who is chronically plagued with self-doubt in regards to both his family and his business; wife and mother Helen, an overworked corporate lawyer who tries her best to hold the family together, but is mostly absent save for family crises; younger daughter Quinn, a fashion obsessed teenager constantly working to remain popular; and older daughter Daria, an angsty teen who criticizes both her parents and her sister in their pursuit of popular ideas of success. Unlike Peggy Hill, who works at a part-time job to supplement her husband's income, Helen Morgendorffer is portrayed as the primary breadwinner of the family, a role rarely seen in either animated or live-action domestic sitcoms.

The family structure of *South Park* closely mirrors that of traditional domestic sitcoms, however, instead of focusing on a specific family, the series instead focuses on a group of boys. These boys, Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, and Kenny McCormick, are all situated within traditional nuclear families, with the sole exception of Cartman, who is the son of a single mother. But while the audience is aware of these families, they are rarely the focus of character or plot development. In most episodes, the parents are either missing from the storyline entirely or are expressly written in as being absent or out of contact with their sons. This set-up does not, however, mean that the mother characters are insignificant in terms of study, as they are frequently shown in ways that are both normalized in terms of sitcom portrayal and in ways that are unruly.

Home Movies also breaks from the traditional family model of domestic sitcoms. In this series, Paula Small, a single mother, holds together her family with the local soccer coach, a drunk named John McGuirk, frequently filling in for the role of father. Paula's family also includes an ex-husband, Andrew, who first appears in season two, and his new, much younger wife Linda; a son, Brendon, on whom most of the action is centered as he creates short films with his classmates Jason and Melissa; and baby, Josie. Of all the major prime time animated sitcoms of the past ten years, *Home Movies* is the only show with a leading single mother.

The Importance of Genre

While the animated sitcom draws on the structure of the traditional family sitcom, a number of features distinguish it as a different genre with different possibilities for representing female characters. Just as the traditional domestic sitcom focuses upon a family unit as the locus of action and character development, the prime time animated sitcom is generally domestic in nature, centering its action on immediate family and a few neighbors and friends. This is the same sort of character set-up seen in classic live action sitcoms such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, or even the more recent *Roseanne* or contemporary *The Middle*. However, the prime time animated domestic sitcom departs from this model by centering on an unruly woman who, within the confines of the show, is seen as normative. Unlike other sitcoms in which the female lead is seen as occasionally unruly, the female lead of the animated sitcom is always unruly, breaking rules for normative behavior without apology or even intentionality.

The animated sitcom also tends to address different subject matter from most of its live-action predecessors. One way Stabile and Harrison argue that the domestic

sitcom has changed in recent years is in the genre's treatment of serious issues, including class. The authors note that the live series *Maude* and *Roseanne* both "dealt with darker, more serious issues," just as animated series including *Daria* and *The Simpsons* have "address[ed] topics not considered traditional comedic material" (7-8). Like *Roseanne*, *The Simpsons* frequently addresses issues of working class existence and the precarious situation that often arises when an unexpected expense occurs.

Rowe emphasizes the way class contributes to the visibility of the unruly woman. "Social class is often used as a marker of the heroine's unruliness," Rowe suggests. "[S]he is either an outlaw or an heiress, outside the conventional middle class," making her therefore unrelatable to the characters found within the traditional domestic sitcom sphere (118). Like *Roseanne*, the unruly cartoon women who will be discussed in the next chapter largely fall within the working class. These characters struggle at times to figure out where they will come up with the money needed to insure that their families are fed, clothed, and sheltered. Unlike in the traditional domestic sitcom, wherein all the families were supported by a reliable male breadwinner, these unruly women are often saddled with the added responsibility of class disadvantage. This necessity of providing for the family ensures, in part, that these women are not invisible.

Such visibility is one of the central forms of power made available to women through the carnivalesque. However, in both Rowe and Russo's accounts of the carnivalesque and female unruliness, visibility carries with it an inherent ambivalence. In becoming visible, a woman is just as likely to become an object of derision and ridicule as a force of change. Mary Russo writes that "these extremes are not mutually exclusive, and in various and interesting ways they have figured round each other" (54). In enacting

visibility, a woman takes on a specifically female danger of becoming a spectacle, a situation in which the inadvertent loss of boundaries calls unwanted attention to the woman's embodiment, often resulting in the woman becoming the object of unwanted laughter. These slips into spectacle can occur in any woman through dress mishaps, vocal slips, or visible aging, and, while accidental and often entirely unavoidable, draw attention to the often unnamed boundaries between expectations of acceptable bodily exposure and containment.

Though the idea of spectacle contained within the televisual world of a series works particularly well for animation, this same principle can be applied to women in live-action domestic sitcoms who perform in traditionally unspectacular ways in their real lives. One actress who seemed to navigate these boundaries especially well was Lucille Ball, who enacted a type of raucous unruliness that often verged into spectacle in *I Love Lucy*. Through her actions on the series she drew attention to the social norms within which women's lives often occur in domestic sitcoms, but in breaking out of these boundaries in order to enact unruliness, Ball was able to simultaneously create laughter at the social norm she is violating and at her own spectacular failure. This dynamic is especially apparent when Lucy lampoons high fashion and culture. In the episode "The Fashion Show" Lucy desires a new dress and is told that she will be able to get it by appearing in the titular fashion show. In order to garner sympathy from Ricky when the dress she wants is vastly more expensive than the one he had agreed to, Lucy stays out in the sun until she is severely sun-burnt. In enacting traditional femininity through her appearance in the fashion show but failing at it in her burnt and painful condition, Lucy

becomes an object of laughter both for her acknowledgement of social norms and her failure to achieve them.

Similarly, in the episode “Scenes from the Class Struggle in Springfield,” Marge gets the family to join the town’s country club after she finds a Chanel suit at a great discount at an outlet mall. When Marge is seen in the same suit twice, the women of the club begin gossiping that she is not fit to be a member of the club, which prompts Marge to alter the garment repeatedly for each new event at the club, alterations that do not go unnoticed by the other women. Just as Lucy gains attention for her failure to enact femininity in an acceptable way, Marge becomes an object of ridicule for the women of the club while drawing attention to the ways in which portrayals of femininity are reliant upon clothing and fashion to succeed. Just as in the live action series, unwanted laughter, such as that of the audience and the club members, can mitigate the power of the unruly woman in animated series to enact lasting social change.

Rowe also argues that the unruly woman, though visible and influential in the world of television, is often seen as a sort of cautionary tale in real life, reflecting the ambivalence of spectacle suggested by Russo. She illustrates this with the case of Roseanne (Arnold) Barr, who was successful in creating a sitcom that allowed her to act as an unruly woman while calling attention to various types of constrictive gender norms within the television sitcom tradition. However, according to Rowe, Roseanne, the actress, was repeatedly called fat, loud, and a slob both in reference to her show and in regards to her personal life. Because Barr was unruly not only within her television show but also in her daily life, she became so maligned in the press that she was unable to continue her television work changing the ways women are portrayed in television.

The animated women profiled in this study, then, have an advantage over Barr in breaking down traditional gender roles—they have no life outside of television. Because of this singular existence, unruly women such as Peggy Hill are able to challenge gender norms through comedy, without the fear of repercussions to their career or personal lives. In this way, these women can act unruly without worry of what the press might say, making it impossible for their unruly performances to be constrained by real world concerns of reputation. Additionally, these animated women have no lives outside of those written for them within their sitcoms, meaning that there is no outside, or “real”, life that can counteract their televised unruliness. Unlike a real actress who might choose to behave in a normative way in her life outside of television, animated women like Peggy Hill or Marge Simpson have no lives outside of television and are therefore always unruly, an unruliness that comes without any consequence. Though these characters are subject, within the worlds of their respective shows, to the derisive laughter that comes with making a spectacle of oneself, they escape the social control such laughter supports in the real world.

The generic expectations of animation are also important in that they enhance the disruptive potential of the carnivalesque. In “Back to the Drawing Board: The Family in Animated Television Comedy,” Michael Tueth states that the unruly or carnivalesque “can be subversive, especially if the counter model it proposes looks like a lot of fun” (141). Looking to animation as the primary form of the carnivalesque in television, he sees potential for these animated shows to “explore darker, subversive aspects of family life thanks primarily to the possibilities of the cartoon aesthetic” (141). He argues that the cartoon format is important because “like carnival, [cartoons] offer their critique in a

familiar and ideologically acceptable environment: the traditional sitcom format. It is precisely this mixture of shock and reassurance that distinguishes the new animated television comedy” (141). Because of this blending of the unruly woman with animation, the unruly woman can be normalized within the genre of the animated domestic sitcom. Instead of Roseanne functioning as a singular unruly woman within a sea of traditional roles, the animated woman is able to function as unruly within a genre dominated by unruly woman, thereby normalizing unruliness.

In looking at animated sitcoms, it is important to acknowledge not only the narrative features of the genre, but also the time in which these shows are aired. Many children’s animated shows function as domestic sitcoms, however, they differ from the prime time animated sitcom in terms of audience. According to Rebecca Farley in *Prime Time Animation*, the simplest definition of prime time is programming that falls between eight and ten PM, Eastern Standard Time (148). However, given that shows that have been conventionally shown between these hours and considered “prime time,” such as *CSI*, are now being moved later and later, the prime time slot for most major networks can extend to encompass hour-long shows, often dramas, beginning at ten PM. Even in reruns and syndication, then, the animated series analyzed here fall within the new and expanding boundaries of prime time.

Prime time status becomes an important part of the series identification as adult programming. In the first animation boom during the 1960’s, the shows were written with the understanding that they were for a mixed adult and child audience. Once these series went off the air, the cartoons that remained on television on Saturday mornings “had become entertainment aimed solely at children” (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 78).

However, once animation became a prime time commodity again in the late 1980's/early 1990's, it was altered from a medium for children and adults to a medium targeted towards adults (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan). In choosing to limit my argument to prime time animated sitcoms, I have simultaneously chosen to focus on shows with a largely adult audience and following through subject and comedic form. Among other things, this adult audience makes politics a more viable field for satirical comedy than it would have been in earlier animated series.

Satire and Comedy

In looking at prime time animated sitcoms, it is important to understand the ways that they function as comedies. Given that these series are created with mass appeal in mind, the first concern of the writers and creators is creating a show that is appealing to a large audience. Like the traditional live-action domestic sitcoms that preceded them, animated sitcoms generate their appeal through comedy. However, instead of adhering to the domestic comedy, which is seen as an acceptable form for women, animated series instead utilize satire (Rowe, 69). This use of satire expands the women's comedic potential, allowing more space for them to become unruly while subverting gendered expectations of comedy.

Prime time animated sitcoms use many types of comedy in order to create a commentary on contemporary American life, classic television norms, and politics. Unlike traditional live action sitcoms that relied almost exclusively on domestic humor, these new animated sitcoms often utilize satire to skewer American culture and domestic life, a process that occurs largely through their use of the carnivalesque. Terrance R. Lindvall and J. Matthew Melton argue that animation inherently contains within it the

spirit of the carnivalesque. In their examination of the self-reflexive cartoon, they state that such animated examples mock themselves, “romping with [their] audience” (203). Though Lindvall and Melton are primarily concerned with animated films, prime time animated sitcoms similarly embody this spirit of self-reflexive mockery, as evidenced in the myriad texts on the post-modern nature of *The Simpsons* and other animated series (Steeves, Gray, Chow). The self-reflexive nature of animation is apparent in three primary ways. Firstly, cartoons reveal their own textuality by commenting on the production process (204). Secondly, cartoons can function as discourse by speaking directly to their audience (205). Finally, cartoons “reflect their relationship to their creator” in a similar fashion to that of the film auteur (205). Together, these characteristics create a space in which Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque is able to reign in new media. In recognizing textual limitations in relation to production and authorship, animation acknowledges its constraints, and by engaging directly with the audience, animation is able to acknowledge the cultural norms it is breaking.

In his examination of prime time animated sitcoms, Michael Tueth describes *The Simpsons* and other animated fare as subverting traditional expectations of the situation comedy through use of the carnivalesque. Within these series, he argues, “viewers had come to expect, even in the familiar format of situation comedy, some presentation of alternative viewpoints and more-or-less direct challenges to the prevailing values and social norms” (133). These series create a space to explore cultural ideals, prejudices, and mores in a way that allows for continual revision of such criticisms in the face of an ever-evolving culture (134). In creating a space wherein such cultural critiques can be made, prime time animated sitcoms function as an arena for the carnivalesque.

This satire and subversion of cultural norms is somewhat constrained within the animated genre, in an effort to remain somewhat realistic-looking to audiences in terms of plot and character (135). Tueth explains that this realism is necessary because audiences are used to the tendency of live-action programming to reflect naturalism in their portrayal of domestic and work settings. When animated series do not reflect such reality, they run the risk of appearing as caricatures, like those found in Disney films (135).

Nonetheless, in moving to animation, sitcoms are freer to “pursue a more subversive function” that frequently takes the form of the carnivalesque (139). Because these shows are animated, they cannot take part in the “naturalism and realism inherent in live-action programming” (135). As a result, awful behaviors—including such typically carnivalesque occurrences as gluttony, an impending threat of death or physical harm, and the destruction of property—can become comedic tropes. Whereas in a live-action sitcom these themes “would tend to offend viewers” through “graphic realism,” when transposed to the world of cartoons, “by their very exaggeration in animation they become ludicrous and beyond offense” (142).

In his treatment of *The Simpsons*, Booker repeatedly references the use of satire in order to make larger connections to both society and popular culture. Booker notes that *The Simpsons* is “famed for its satire of American suburban life,” referring in part to the ways in which the series continually holds a critical mirror up to the attitudes of America. Unlike traditional live action sitcoms, *The Simpsons* and the other series that followed in its footsteps are unafraid to call their audiences’ attention to politics. Booker calls *The Simpsons* “one of the few American sitcoms to have become actively engaged with

politics” in regard to its treatment of President H.W. Bush. During his presidency, Bush vowed to make American Families “a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons” (60). In response, *The Simpsons* aired a short clip following the episode “Stark Raving Dad” in which the family is shown watching the speech by Bush. In response Bart says to the audience, ‘hey, we’re just like the Waltons: We’re praying for an end to the Depression, too” (61). For Booker, this overt call to the president, while atypical of the series as a whole, illustrates the way in which *The Simpsons* embraced satire even early on in the series.

More typical, according to Booker, is the episode-driven satire, that, while often political, is more general in its target. Such satire can be seen in episodes such as “Itchy & Scratchy & Marge” in which Marge protests the violence and perceived inappropriateness of her children’s favorite cartoon (in a manner similar to the protests and disapproval with which *The Simpsons* themselves were nearly universally met in the first few years of production), but is forced to rescind her position once she is called upon to protest against nudity in relation to Michelangelo’s *David*. In such episode-driven satire, *The Simpsons* relies upon its audience to be well acquainted with not only television history, but also pop culture and current events in order to fully enjoy the shows. Booker calls this episode “a retort to those who were already complaining that *The Simpsons* was not appropriate family TV viewing—though it can also be taken as a general satire of attempts by various special-interest groups to exert pressure to force television programming to conform to their own particular standards” (56).

Just as in *The Simpsons*, *South Park* exploits current events and ideologies in order to satirize them for comedic value. Unlike the relatively tame *Simpsons*, *South*

Park frequently pushes the boundaries of what has been generally considered to be good taste in order to create laughs, drawing on potty humor and religion in order to poke fun at nearly every segment of society. Booker describes *South Park*'s humor as bringing "tastelessness to the level of an art form" (128). Unlike the other shows being examined, *South Park* does not feign an interest in being a family show—the dialogue is constantly peppered with profanity as well as explicit references to sex, drugs, and child abuse. Additionally, *South Park* is the only series which does not utilize women as cohesive characters. Instead, *South Park*, while populated with traditional nuclear families, is a space in which the children are left to run loose, with only minor interactions with the parents, who are often conspicuously absent. In this way, the series recognizes the family-centered conventions of the domestic sitcom, thereby satirizing the ways in which the animated sitcom is constructed.

Unlike the satirical *Simpsons* and *South Park*, Booker sees *King of the Hill* as the series which "attempts the most realistic depiction of suburban life in America at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century" (70). In *KOTH* and also in the Mike Judge-created *Daria*, though the characters seem realistic, the series are still able to function as comedies in large part due to the ineptness of many of the major characters, as well as the lack of self-assurance and need for approval which all of the characters demonstrate on a nearly continual basis. The comedy in *KOTH* and *Daria* comes largely from lampooning the ideas common within a conservative society, and from forcing the characters to confront things they do not understand. According to Paul Wells, animated sitcoms such as *KOTH* have "created a sustained satire on American mores, using

animation as the vehicle through which to reveal contradiction, hypocrisy, banality and the taboo” (30).

The only series examined here that does not employ satire as its primary comedic tool is *Home Movies*. Unlike the other shows being analyzed, *Home Movies* relies primarily upon parody in crafting its humor. In the course of every episode of the series, the children are seen creating at least one movie that is, if not a parody of a specific movie, then a parody of a larger genre. Additionally, of these shows, *Home Movies* is the only series not concerned with politics or current events. However *Home Movies* is also the only one of these series to seriously address the issue of single parenthood and irresolvable relationship issues in a consistent and realistic way. This avoidance of direct satire could be a result of the show dealing with sensitive issues surrounding relationships or family structures. The lack of satire could also be the result of *Home Movies* being the only animated sitcom to be written through the view point of children, who would be much less likely to find humor in satire. Given that *Home Movies* participates in self-reflexive practices in acknowledging its animated nature and its construction of non-normative family structures, the series can still be seen as enacting a satiric portrayal of the traditional domestic sitcom.

Even given the different ways in which these series approach both satire and comedy, all five are successful in creating a space in which women are able to function simultaneously as both unruly and the centers of their home lives. Forgetting whatever other political motives the series have, this renegotiation of gender expectations is successfully accomplished largely through comedy for all of these series. In looking to the ways that these series follow their animated predecessors in terms of satire, cultural

critique, and comedy, Wells states that “while *The Flintstones* offered a mild critique of American consumer culture, and, unusually, offered a representation of working-class culture in a period when television privileged middle-class aspirant values, it ultimately reinforced the status quo” (30). By somewhat abandoning these more traditional television values, newer prime time animated sitcoms have moved beyond what has been considered traditionally acceptable into a space where they can explore issues directly related to the ways society and television function.

Without the use of satire, it is unlikely that any one of these series would be able to adequately alter the ways women are portrayed within domestic sitcoms. Simply changing the ways women are portrayed without comment is not an effective tool to create a sustainable pattern through which female characters can be allowed to function outside of their home environments. Instead, television is a highly interconnected medium, with most series consciously harkening back to at least one other series within their chosen genre. To simply change the rules of the genre without reason or conscious method would then be ignore the entirety of television history, something that the audience is unable to do. By drawing on previous conventions and satirizing them, these series are able to consciously change how female characters operate within the series, allowing a genre-wide change that embraces the unruly woman as a normative character type. However, even within this satiric reappropriation of genre norms, it is important to acknowledge that in creating comedic explorations of gender, these unruly women are just as likely to become objects of ridicule as they are to turn traditional notions of gender around in a way that causes laughter at the norm.

Audience and Permissibility

Stabile and Harrison note that the traditional sitcom was expected to be free of controversy in order to “not alienate any portion of the mass broadcast audience [producers] sought to deliver to advertisers” (8). In stating this, they create a theory about audience which is mirrored in other critiques and writings on animated television. In his article, “The Same Thing We Do Every Night,” Jeffrey Dennis writes that when *King of the Hill* was first launched, advanced screening copies of the show were sent to screeners along with portable grills and bags of pork rinds. The accompanying “gifts” were important in that “together...these items signified a culture assumed as 'other' to that of the TV tastemakers.” Just as the characters of *KOTH* were seen as different, the audience was characterized in the same way—it is not common in the age of such critically lauded, sophisticated shows as *Sex and the City* that a “typical” audience is presumed to be familiar and comfortable with a culture so rooted in conservative traditions as the one portrayed in *KOTH*. Though none of these authors cite any sort of study to back up their claims that the audience of prime time animated sitcoms is inherently different from the audience of prime-time animated sitcoms, Stabile and Harrison theorize that, because of the simple fact of animation, shows such as *The Simpsons* and *KOTH* can risk being more offensive and edgy than their live action counterparts because “we have been primed as viewers of television and consumers of other media products to equate animation with humor” (9).

One consideration which Wells, Stabile, and Harrison do not seem to consider is the demographics of these audiences. According to Brian Ott, as of 1998, 28% of the audience of *South Park* was under the age of 17, and 5% of the audience was under the age of 11 (220). Additionally, as of 2006 *South Park* was the highest rated show on

Comedy Central, “attracting 3.1 million viewers an episode, more than *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*” and generating \$34 million in advertising revenue in 2005 (Leonard). Given that *South Park* constantly runs a TV-MA rating, this young section of the audience is especially significant. Perhaps this understanding of the permissiveness of the audience of prime time animated series by the networks and producers is predicated in part on the age of the viewers, and the great profits that the network stands to make.

By comprising the audience of such “role reversal” shows, the viewers of prime time animated sitcoms come to occupy a space outside of the perceived normal television demographic, wherein it is already assumed by producers and creators that their tolerance for difference in subject matter allows the shows to address more controversial themes. Additionally, given that this newest crop of animated series began on Fox, whose motto was “if it would work on one of the other networks, we don’t want it,” these series began with a longer leash than contemporary live action sitcoms (Elder in Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 82). Unlike the live action sitcom, which had its roots in radio, animated sitcoms are inherently created to be different, with different ideas of what is and is not appropriate for prime time television.

When *The Simpsons* was first in production, creator Matt Groening stated that he knew the show would be successful because children loved animated series. However in reality “more adults would tune in than children, with viewers aged above 18 constituting nearly 60 percent of the audience” (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 81). This should not have come as a surprise given that “it was also discovered that 44 percent of the general cartoon audience were adults” (Hilton-Morrow and McMahan 81). Given that these cartoons began with a largely adult audience, the writers and creators could be more

permissive in what they allowed on television. Unlike in series that attracted a more heavily mixed audience, these writers could compose more controversial scenes with the understanding that their largely adult audience would be able to handle the material. Thus, for example, Marge Simpson could behave in an unruly way while still functioning as a sympathetic maternal character, challenging the idea that there was an easy answer to whether women were happier when working in our outside of the home.

In their essay “*The Flintstones to Futurama: Networks and Prime Time Animation*” Wendy Hilton-Morrow and David McMahan examine the ways prime time animation since the 1980’s has progressed. Following the premiere of *The Simpsons*, various animated television shows were created by different networks, but few of them made it beyond a few episodes, and even fewer lasted longer than a month. Hilton-Morrow and McMahan propose that this was because the networks did not have much tolerance for an animated series that did not appear immediately successful, in part due to the time it took to produce a show. At the time that *The Simpsons* debuted, it took between six and eight months to create a single episode of a series, whereas a live-action pilot could be filmed and edited within a week (Leonard). With the exception of *South Park*, most animated series still stick to these same schedules, making the debut of an animated series a very time intensive project. This investment of time meant that if these series did not immediately find an audience, they were canceled and largely forgotten. *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, *King of the Hill*, *Daria*, and *Home Movies*, however, immediately found a large audience, and it is likely that their networks were unwilling to change the shows’ formats too much—if edgy was working and attracting an audience, then the networks were willing to keep it.

There are, however, limits to the networks' willingness to challenge audience expectations, and the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in recent animated domestic sitcoms serves as an example of the ways in which such programs are willing to both challenge and reinforce television norms. In an age of inclusiveness and political correctness, both *Daria* and *King of the Hill* stood out as programs that were more concerned with portraying reality than with encouraging acceptance across cultural boundaries. Jeffrey Dennis writes that "MTV has been at the cutting edge of gay inclusion in series like *The Real World*, but its animated toon *Daria* (1996-2001) is equally aggressive in asserting that same-sex desire does not exist, and same-sex identities are either silly or creepy" (Dennis). This argument could just as easily be made for *King of the Hill*, a program in which the only openly gay character, Bill's cousin from Louisiana, appeared on a handful of episodes and was seen by some of the other characters as a pervert bent on corrupting Bobby.

The only animated series to present LGBTQ characters on regular basis as anything other than deviant is *The Simpsons*. In "There's Something about Marrying" Patty Bouvier, Marge's sister, comes out as a lesbian when she asks Homer to perform a wedding between her and her fiancé Veronica, as Homer is the only person performing gay marriages in Springfield following the adoption of a new law allowing such unions. Even so, her sexuality has not been a prominent through-line in the series. Since she came out, there have been a few scattered references to her lesbianism, but the issue has otherwise been largely ignored. *The Simpsons* has aired a few other episodes prominently featuring LGBTQ characters, including "The Three Gays of the Condo," in which Mr. Smithers is also outed as a gay man, and "Homer's Phobia," in which Marge

befriends John, a gay man who owns a nostalgia store. Again, though, the long-term impact on the show's central narratives has been limited, and most of the gay characters in these episodes have not reappeared. Unlike in *Daria* or *King of the Hill*, the gay characters depicted in *The Simpsons* are mostly accepted with understanding at the outset of the episode, and are generally fully accepted by the town by the end of the episode. In "Homer's Phobia," though Homer is initially terrified that exposure to John will make Bart gay, by the end of the episode Homer's fear has given way to relief that he has found a new friend in John, who saves his life from a pack of angry reindeer.

Though the treatment of gay and lesbian characters on animated sitcoms is problematic, it is also symptomatic of the way that the LGBT community is generally ignored in television programming at large. The few successful live action major network shows to embrace LGBT characters include *Modern Family*, *Will & Grace*, *Soap*, and *Ellen*. Given the number of live action shows on television at any given time, this sampling accounts for a very small minority of programming. Thus, where LGBT issues are concerned, instead of challenging traditional television ideas about how genre can work, animated sitcoms sadly conform to the norm. In doing so, they reveal that although their audience demographics allow animated series to be more offensive or crude than other series, the audience of prime time animated series is still comprised by the same people who make up the audiences of other prime time programming, making it difficult to completely break outside of all television norms.

In understanding prime time animated sitcoms, it is not enough simply to recognize that they follow some of the genre conventions of traditional live-action domestic sitcoms. Instead, we must also attend to the ways these animated series

approach comedy and their audiences differently, and how those changes alter audience expectations of the shows. Understanding how these shows work in terms of genre, comedy, and audience, is central to understanding their role in the normalizing of the unruly woman.

CHAPTER II

THE UNRULY WOMAN IN ACTION

There are two primary categories through which a character may be considered unruly: her actions and her body. Three of the criteria Rowe uses to define the unruly woman relate to embodiment—excessiveness or fatness, androgyny, and age or masculinization—while the rest relate to the public behavior of the woman, such as speech, laughter, or the breaking of taboos. In this chapter, I will be primarily concerned with how the actions of lead female characters in prime time animated sitcoms serve to construct them as unruly. This unruliness is manifested in a variety of ways, and varies largely from character to character, as well as from episode to episode. Given that prime time animated sitcoms are episodic, the actions of a character in one episode often do not directly influence the actions or plot of the next episode. However, because these shows have large and devoted fan bases, the fans of each show are well aware of these episodic departures from story arcs and plotlines, thereby making them influential and important to series development. Additionally, in many of the shows, plot lines repeat to some extent, making a character's unruly action in one season very similar to a different action in another season. Because of this repetitive nature, a few concrete examples of characters' unruliness can be extrapolated to the series, and genre, as a whole.

In describing the unruly woman, Rowe looks to history as well as television. Historically the phenomenon of the unruly woman can be seen in such figures as Joan of Arc, whom Rowe, quoting Mary Russo, describes as an unruly “woman on top” for taking up the male position of military leadership (35). Rowe also cites as historical examples of unruly women participants in riots and public actions, which were often rebellious and illegal. In prime time animated sitcoms, much as in history, most of the female characters at one time or another work or protest laws or decisions which they feel to be unfair. By leaving the domestic sphere in order to join the traditionally male spheres of labor or politics, these women become Russo and Rowe’s “women on top” (35). Moreover, because their entry into these spheres is often motivated by a need for money, the women are depicted as base through their abject class status. Finally, by behaving in male spheres in ways which are often loud, absurd, or discouraged by their communities, the women become unruly and carnivalesque.

Careers and Jobs

The roles women in prime time animated series choose to inhabit, both inside and outside of the home, function to further their perceived unruliness. One hallmark of the unruly woman is that her social and economic status frequently does not fit with the normative televisual idea of class—instead, she remains firmly “outside the conventional middle class” (Rowe, 118). Shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *Father Knows Best* exemplify the traditional television ideas of the middle class. In each of these shows the male lead—the husband and father—works full time in a position that allows his family to have a home and all necessities without any appearance of struggle or strain to make ends meet. When children, or wives such as Lucy, take on a small job

such as babysitting or a paper route, it is in order to get a small amount of money to be used for an extra that the family sees as unnecessary.

In prime time animated sitcoms, however, this financially stable model of middle class ease is often seen as an impossible ideal. Most animated sitcoms, such as *Daria* and *King of the Hill*, challenge this ideal by giving the female lead a career that allows her to help make ends meet. In *The Simpsons*, however, Marge's main duties are being a wife and a mother. Nonetheless, in a plot device used often in *I Love Lucy*, some episodes see Marge taking on jobs outside of the home. As in *Lucy*, these jobs never last for more than one episode—as soon as she is done proving her point or raising the money necessary to avert financial disaster, she goes back to her work in the home. Unlike *Lucy*, whose work was most often the result of a bet or the desire for some sort of indulgence for herself, like a new dress, Marge's jobs are often taken on due to the family's financial need or to find personal fulfillment. These jobs, while temporary, are necessary for both Marge and her family. Additionally, these jobs allow Marge to move outside of the domestic sphere, into the working world, an arena that is normally closed to women in traditional domestic sitcoms. By allowing for this move into the wider world, this plot device not only allows Marge to help support her family, it also allows her to create a space for herself outside of the home.

Though there are many episodes of *The Simpsons* in which Marge works outside of the home, the first of these was “Marge Gets a Job” which aired during the fourth season. In this episode, the foundation of the Simpsons' house has developed a crack, which leaves it sinking unevenly into the ground. Homer attempts to fix the foundation himself, but never gets past watching a how-to-video. In order to repair the foundation

and save the house, the Simpsons must come up with \$8,500 to pay a repairman, an amount beyond their means—as Homer states, they “have five-hundred in the bank, which means they need eighty-hundred.” In a happy accident of fate, the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant forces the retirement of Jack Marley, a thirty-five year veteran, and Marge applies for, and gets, his position after Lisa helps her to “improve” her resume. While working for the plant, Marge comes to the attention of Mr. Burns for her enthusiasm for the job. Because of her upbeat attitude, Burns fails to notice that Marge has no idea what she is doing at the plant—she is seen spending most of her work day polishing her consol. It is through Mr. Burns’ attraction to her that Marge gets promoted during her short time at the plant, surpassing Homer in rank and position. As a result of the promotion the family is able to afford the needed repairs. Marge decides to stay on at the plant because of the satisfaction she receives from working, but once Burns discovers she is married, he fires her. The episode ends when Marge’s attempt to sue for sexual harassment is settled with an apology from Burns and an evening of dinner and entertainment by the singer Tom Jones.

Though this episode is similar to *I Love Lucy* in that Marge gets a job for a single episode, it differs in a number of important ways that all serve to construct Marge as an unruly woman, not only in terms of her actions, but also in terms of the family’s financial situation. First and foremost, the family home is in financial jeopardy in a way that only Marge can fix. This responsibility becomes hers through Homer’s ineptitude. It unclear whether or not he actually understands how much money is needed to fix the home, as evidenced by his coming up with a total shortfall of “eighty-hundred,” but it is clear that he does not understand the importance of Marge getting a job in order to help raise the

money. When Marge first mentions working, Homer's initial response is to say that her working will allow him to quit his own job. Not only is the home sinking, but Bart uses this in order to create a sideshow showcasing the horrors of "the slanty shanty." In creating a spectacle of the family's precarious financial situation, Bart makes the family's financial failings visible, which furthers the class-related unruliness that characterizes Marge. Unlike in *I Love Lucy*, the family's stability and basic necessities are on the line, forcing Marge to get a job and thus differentiating her motivation for working from Lucy's. While moving into the working sphere paints both Marge and Lucy as unruly, because she is forced to work in order to provide for the family, Marge's unruliness also involves a class dimension that distinguishes her from Lucy.

Additionally, by surpassing her husband at work, Marge loses sight of the traditional "place" of the sitcom wife. Within television culture, there is an expectation of place, not only in relation to physical location, but also in relation to gender. In the case of Roseanne Barr, Rowe describes her disastrous singing of the National Anthem as stepping out of her place as a woman—by performing badly and attempting to turn this poor performance into a joke, Roseanne not only "violate[d] the space of baseball, but she encroached on another sacred masculine territory—that of the joke-maker" (69). Though Marge's promotion differs from Roseanne's performance in that she is successful while Roseanne is not, both incidents are similar: both women abandon their traditional domestic space in order to perform in a male sphere.

Finally, Marge is perceived as a sexual object by Mr. Burns, thereby drawing attention to the problem of sexual harassment in the workplace. In this way, Marge's character becomes a vehicle for the show to (briefly) explore "darker" issues traditionally

eschewed by domestic sitcoms (Tueth, 141). Rowe describes the “well-adjusted” woman as “silent, static, invisible,” essentially prompting no additional thought or analysis of her situation beyond the superficial (31). By drawing attention to the very real issue of sexual harassment and protesting against it in a lawsuit against Mr. Burns, Marge makes herself visible. By compounding her deficient class status with her success at work, Marge moves beyond the examples of unruliness given by Rowe. Unlike Roseanne, who as a character was never able to better her working situation beyond that of her husband, Marge succeeds in an arena in which Homer has always failed, thereby creating a new space for unruly action.

The only other animated sitcom in which the family is consistently in the same financial peril as *The Simpsons* is *Home Movies*, which is also the only prime time animated sitcom headed by a single parent. In *Home Movies*, Paula Small is a single mother to two children, Brendon and Josie. For the entirety of the first season, Brendon’s father is not even mentioned until the final episode, in which he is nothing more than a voice on the telephone. As the single head of household, Paula often struggles to make ends meet, especially given her low paying job as an instructor at the local community college. In order to meet her budget, Paula is often forced to get her son’s soccer coach, McGuirk, to do chores and renovations around the house, even though he usually only drinks beer and makes the problem worse (“Breaking Up is Hard to Do”). This lower-class status marks Paula as unruly, just as it does Marge.

Though unique in the precarious class position of their main characters, *The Simpsons* and *Home Movies* are not the only shows in which the sitcom mother works outside of the home. In *King of the Hill* (*KOTH*), Peggy Hill works as a substitute

teacher partially in order to supplement the family's income. Unlike in *The Simpsons*, Peggy is not required to work in order to avert financial disaster. Instead, she works in order to help buy the family "extras" that they would be unable to afford on one income. But most importantly she works in order to fulfill her own needs and desires outside of the home. In her work as a substitute teacher, Peggy finds her reward. Her pursuit of a rewarding career in itself makes her unruly in that it represents a break from her proper domestic place. But in pursuing a job that she is middling to bad at, she is often confronted with situations drive her to other forms of unruly behavior.

In the episode "Square Peg," Peggy is called upon to teach sex ed at the local middle school, where her son, Bobby, attends. The health teacher has quit following death threats from Dale Gribble, one of the Hill's neighbors. Though she is initially wary of teaching the class, Peggy decides that it is her duty, announcing that though she did not ask for the assignment, "I am a substitute teacher. That means that I have to be prepared to go wherever they need teachers most, at any hour of the day or night, and teach anything, from gym to home-ec...and if I start to pick or choose, the whole system just breaks down." Though Peggy's description of her profession is inflated—education will continue whether she is there or not, as her husband points out by referencing the time she declined an assignment in order to attend a concert—her declaration is important because she is taking for herself a position of power and respect within her profession that is normally reserved for traditionally male careers such as police or firefighters. This juxtaposition of her seemingly trivial career with her own opinion of that career then becomes a source of comedy for the audience. By choosing to teach sex-ed, she opens herself up to the same threats that plagued the health teacher, though knowing who is

making the threatening the calls moves them from sinister to comical. Additionally, by standing up for her right to teach sex ed, Peggy also stands up for her right to work outside of the home, something that the other characters, including her husband, his (male) friends, and Peggy's girlfriends see as frivolous. Indeed, the male characters spend much of their time in the episode minimizing the importance of her chosen career.

Given that this was the second episode of the series, Peggy had not been truly established as a character. In the first episode, she played a secondary role in a plot that centered on Hank and his parenting techniques. In Peggy's first appearance as the main character of an episode, the writers of the show were able to establish her as both a conservative woman—through her original refusal to let Bobby take the sex-ed class and her discomfort with the subject matter—and as a committed worker who sees her career as educator as being more important than her own morals and preferences. But by choosing a career outside of the home and endowing it with such importance, Peggy also becomes an unruly woman. She dominates her husband through her insistence that she will teach the class, and ignores the “proper” attitudes of her friends who seem blissfully unaware of the reality of sex or the inner workings of human anatomy. In this way, Peggy fulfills Rowe's first criterion for being an unruly woman: creating disorder by dominating men and refusing to confine herself to her proper place (31). Peggy's insistence on teaching this sex-ed course, to the disappointment of her husband and his male friends, positions her as a woman who is willing not only to leave the domestic sphere but to leave it in a way that is met with disapproval by those in the public sphere. By going against this disapproval in order to pursue her own ideals, she dominates the

popular—and within the context of the show, male—opinion in order to pursue her own goals, thereby becoming unruly.

Peggy's foray into the world of work marks her as unruly in a number of other ways, as well. Not only does she go against the will of her husband and his friends, but she does so in a way that contravenes her community's standards for acceptable speech. Unlike her female friends with whom she consults at her son's baseball game, Peggy is willing to explicitly name female anatomy in a way that is considered unnecessary, and thereby excessive. This excessiveness becomes comical when Peggy is learning to say the word "vagina" aloud. She wanders the house chanting names of female reproductive organs, working up to "vagina." Instead of simply chanting this word, she yells, loudly enough that her husband and neighbors can hear her outside, victorious in her ability to speak without shame. By naming the body in anatomically correct terms, Peggy breaks the silence about sex in a community that is largely conservative. As a result, she is unruly not only by virtue of her excessive speech but also by her association with the taboo (Rowe 31). Finally, because she accepts the sex-ed assignment, the other characters describe her as a "loose" woman who knows "everything about sex." The fact that this is an incorrect assumption—later in the series Peggy describes her sexual history as encompassing her husband, Hank, and one previous boyfriend—does nothing to change their perception of her as licentious: As a result, like Rowe's unruly woman, she is "associated with looseness and occasionally whorishness," at least by the other characters on the show ("Luanne Virgin 2.0"; Rowe 31).

In breaking the taboos surrounding appropriate behavior and speech, Peggy embraces her unruly status even while politically disapproving of the work that makes

her unruly, creating an ambivalence in her portrayal that seems to be unique within discussions of the unruly woman. This ambivalence causes two distinct types of laughter to be present in the watching of this episode. In *The Unruly Woman*, Rowe states that laughter can be both a means of opposing normative assumptions and behaviors, as well as a means of ridiculing women who transgress boundaries. Within this episode, laughter occurs both at the notion of sex-ed being an inappropriate topic for children, as well as a result of Peggy's insincere attempt to transgress this boundary. Whereas Roseanne Barr believed in and fought for the inclusion of issues surrounding sexuality on her show, Peggy finds the subject of sex-ed somewhat repulsive. She originally decides not to allow her son to attend the class, but because of her inability to address the subject as a parent, relents. In taking the position of sex-ed teacher, Peggy is not intending to create a space where women can talk comfortably or freely about their own sexuality. Instead, she takes the position through a sense of duty to her job. She is able, as is the audience, to ignore the criticism articulated by her friends and neighbors because of the ridiculousness of the characters who are attempting to police her behavior. Peggy knows Dale to be harmless, so she is able to ignore his threats on her life without even momentary consideration. This use of satire—specifically a satire on the conservative values enacted by Dale—allows the audience to see the preposterous nature of such behavioral restraints and distance themselves from them in such a way that these concerns become comedic, not immediate.

In the series *Daria*, the sitcom's traditional gender roles in the family are reversed. In this series, Helen Morgendorffer works as a corporate lawyer and, as such, is rarely home. As a lawyer, she is the primary spouse in charge of finances. Her

husband, Jake, runs a consulting business out of the home, but seems to be largely unsuccessful at it (“Just Add Water”). When his work is mentioned, it is as a joke, or because he is in danger of losing a client. Instead, Helen provides the family with much of their income, making her the economic authority of the family. Rowe argues that “shows set in middle-class WASP families . . . tend to leave the authority of the husband/father largely unchallenged,” but goes on to explain that series with non-WASP male leads, such as *I Love Lucy*, allow for more questioning of male authorities (81). However, Helen opposes Jake as an authority and succeeds on the basis of class, not racial or ethnic background. Additionally, given her high earnings, she is not part of the middle-class, so that her exceptional class status functions as part of her unruliness as well.

Though Helen has clearly usurped the breadwinner role her husband should occupy according to the dictates of the traditional domestic sitcom, she does not relinquish her domestic authority. She performs what could be seen as the most important of her motherly duties by giving advice to her daughters, and holding the family together. In the episode “Quinn the Brain,” Helen rails against her position as both provider and mother. She complains that she should not have to come home after “another twelve-hour day” and see a letter from Quinn’s teacher about her poor performance. When Jake questions why she should be in charge of the issue, Helen explains, “It’s just . . . a strong parenting team is like a singing group. The lead singer carries the tune, and the backup singers support her. That’s you! . . . You chime in at just the right moment and then you fade into the background. Doesn’t that make sense?” essentially railroading over her husband in an effort to get the issue resolved. Later in the

episode, when it is revealed that Quinn has gotten an A on her last paper, she attempts to manipulate her parents into paying her for her grade. Jake decides that he will be the one to solve the issue, but becomes confused when Daria points out that she is never rewarded for her good grades. Frustrated, Jake throws his wallet at the girls while yelling “I told you I was no good at this parenting crap!”

In this way, not only does Helen take over the traditional male role of provider, but she also—somewhat forcefully—excludes Jake from the role of parent. Like Rowe’s unruly woman, she dominates the men in her life and is unwilling to confine herself to her “proper” or traditional place. Unlike the rest of the women in this analysis, Helen dominates her husband and her family in a way that makes her essentially unlikable and unsympathetic as a character. In Rowe’s analysis of traditional sitcoms, she states that “the unruly woman became anchored in the family like television itself... a *matriarch*... part of the everyday” showing “children, the routine of family life, and marital discord with no promise of a magic, total reconciliation of difference” (emphasis Rowe’s, 80). By acting in a way that is unlikable, Helen remains true to Rowe’s observation that the unruly woman offers no magical reconciliation for marital discord, but she does so less by being a benevolent if put-upon matriarch than by dictating family roles without compromise. By removing herself from some domestic duties—her place—in order to become the main provider of the family without relinquishing her domestic authority, Helen Morgendorffer becomes a new type of unruly woman—a career-focused mother. Through the use of satire, the writers of this episode are able to expand the acceptable limits of unruly behavior.

By taking on careers, the unruly women in prime time animated sitcoms are able to consistently remove themselves from the domestic sphere in order to create their own meanings and responsibilities outside of the home. Even when embracing the traditional sitcom trope of episodic careers, as is the case with Marge Simpson, these unruly women are able to move beyond the expectation of unruliness to create a new space for themselves in which they are able to succeed at work, sometimes even outperforming their husbands. This expansion of unruliness is predicated on an understanding of past examples of televised unruliness, such as those enacted by Lucy and Roseanne, and an often satiric portrayal of these old ideas in order to create further latitude for women's actions.

Artistic Pursuits

In prime time animated sitcoms, the female characters are often not content to simply work or parent. Instead, they also focus a large amount of time and energy on creative pursuits. Even given the amount of time that they invest in these pursuits, none of the characters ever achieves lasting artistic success. The causes of this failure vary from show to show. However, one constant is the criticism and derision they must face from their male counterparts when attempting to be creative. In pursuing art, all of these animated sitcom mothers abandon their primary role as mothers, choosing instead to pursue their own happiness and fulfillment. By choosing to work for their own enjoyment instead of the immediate needs of their families, these women abandon their proper places, and the roles that traditional sitcoms afforded them, instead pursuing their own desires. In this, they again parallel Rowe's description of the unruly woman. Rowe describes Rosanne Barr's original outlet for creativity as being stand-up comedy, and

then situates her alongside comedians such as Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory, two male performers who are often seen as breaking limits in terms of free speech (67). In Rowe's analysis, pursuing creative outlets requires that unruly women abandon their traditional feminine roles of housewife or mother and move into the public sphere.

The desire for creative recognition drives the mother in *Home Movies* to assume the position of unruly woman. In the episode "Storm Warning," Paula attempts to get a novel published, going as far as demanding that an agent accept her manuscript even though, as it turns out, she has never met him, and going to see a publisher to bully him into reading her (unfinished) manuscript while on vacation. By coercing the agent into accepting her manuscript, Paula embodies the same sort of dominating unruliness that Helen Morgendorffer does when she challenges her husband. Neither woman is willing to back down in her pursuit of what she wants, and each is perfectly willing to create a scene in order to achieve her goals.

However, in this episode, Paula repeatedly sabotages herself, waiting until the last minute—during a severe storm—to deliver her manuscript. Unlike some of the other women in animated sitcoms, Paula seems bent on not succeeding, deciding near the end of the episode, once she has missed the deadline for submission, that she will abandon her plans for a novel, "taking out all that stuff about the murder and sex and...making it a children's book." When retelling this to her family, she states that "you might say that storm saved my life . . . my literary life." Paula appears to want to succeed as an artist, but she becomes mired in her own personal responsibilities, including taking care of her own family. Though Paula begins as an unruly woman in unstoppable pursuit of her goal, she ends by becoming content with her lack of success, a confused, but somewhat

common position for women within the prime time animated sitcom genre. Not only does this contentment with her position allow the episodic nature of *Home Movies* to continue without any major change to Paula's character, but it also allows Paula to continue to conform to the traditional portrayal of unruly woman as constantly pursuing a goal outside of the home. Given that this pattern of relentlessly pursuing, then abandoning, goals is common to the female characters of prime time animated sitcoms, in reenacting this trope Paula is firmly conforming to the expectations of the genre, which requires a continual effort by the women to better their situation, without success. If Paula, or any of the other female characters, achieved success at one of their self-imposed goals, they might become actualized individuals capable of throwing off the mantle of the unruly, very possibly becoming much less interesting to the television audience. Instead, by continuing to struggle, these women remain unruly characters capable of acting in any number of unpredictable ways.

Unlike Paula Small, Marge Simpson finds temporary success with at least one of her creative pursuits—painting. In the episode “Brush with Greatness” Marge becomes an artist following a delayed response letter she receives from Ringo Starr, to whom she had sent a portrait as a teenager. In response to his praise, she becomes one of the town's most celebrated painters, and is commissioned to do a portrait of Mr. Burns for his museum. The episode sees her torn between her artistic vision and the money that will come with completing the portrait. At one point she decides that she will simply quit because Mr. Burns is so unpleasant, but is pressured to complete the picture out of fear that quitting might jeopardize her husband's job. In the end, she creates a portrait that

depicts Mr. Burns hunched over, naked. She proclaims that she painted him in this way to show his humanity.

Once the episode ends, Marge's art career, like her other forays into the world of work, is over. Though she is able to bring in money and achieve some initial satisfaction from her art, she is forced to decide between it and her stay-at-home mothering. Even when she is working, her studio is actually in her living room, so she is unable to ever escape from household responsibilities. It might seem as though artistic success would be one of Marge's goals—and it originally was—but the episode ends with her content to leave her artistic career behind. And while she does not overtly state that everything will now return to normal, the episodic show structure leads the audience to presume that it will, and it does.

Marge's success in painting allows her to briefly move beyond the domestic sphere, an arena in which she is not merely a worker, but a notable talent, again surpassing her husband in terms of skill and ability. Just as in "Marge Gets a Job," Marge's success permits her to outshine her husband, thereby allowing her to leave her "proper place" of domesticity (31). Additionally, by encoding her final painting with a joke about the size of Mr. Burns's genitalia, Marge assumes the role of the unruly woman who, in Rowe's analysis, makes jokes or laughs to herself (31). By taking the joke into the public sphere, and making it at the expense of her and her husband's seemingly clueless boss, Marge allows her unruliness to become visible within the public sphere. Just as Paula Small's foray into writing is temporary, Marge's success in the art world is also temporary. This limit to success allows Marge to continue her housewife duties uninterrupted, while still fulfilling some part of her personal goals.

Unlike Paula and Marge, who pursue very specific artistic outlets, Peggy Hill repeatedly tries new artistic outlets for her energy. She writes a column called “Musings” for the local paper, which is derided by all of the neighbors in part because of some of the odd things she says, and in part because she is attempting to overstep her bounds as both teacher and mother, abandoning her “proper place” within the sitcom family. In the episode "Ceci N'Est Pas Une King of the Hill," Peggy becomes a sculptor, assembling used propane tanks into pieces that are quickly sold to local collectors. She is initially proud of her work, feeling that it is appreciated because of her innate talent, and rejoicing when one of her pieces is bought by Mr. Strickland and donated to a highway beautification project. As the episode unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that her art is only deemed collectible because it is “primitive.” It is assumed that she is not intelligent enough to understand art, and her work is at once both a desired commodity and an object of ridicule. Unlike Paula Small and Marge Simpson, Peggy is forced to abandon her career due to her treatment at the hands of the artistic community, and not simply out of a desire to return to her normal life. It is this community critique of her sculptures that forces Peggy to retire from her art in order to return to her more conventional pursuits.

Unlike Marge Simpson, who was able to create a joke at the expense of others, Peggy becomes the object of laughter and derision in her pursuit of artistic fulfillment. Hank attempts to make Peggy feel better about this ridicule, telling his wife that the art community has no idea what they are talking about. Additionally, the Dallas art dealer who initially sells Peggy’s pieces is portrayed in the show as laughably inauthentic in relation to the construction of masculinity aspired to by the other men in the show,

making his critique of Peggy seem mean-hearted and petty. Nonetheless, by becoming visible within the public sphere, Peggy becomes the opposite of the “well-adjusted” woman described by Rowe as being an alternative the unruly woman, thereby entrenching herself well within the category of unruliness (31).

Social Roles and Relationships

Female characters in prime time animated sitcoms are not simply content with their work and artistic pursuits. Instead, they also work to better their own societies and relationships, becoming activists as well as more highly developed characters. This aspect of self- and community improvement is largely missing from discussions of the traditional domestic sitcom. In being converted into an animated format, these shows are more willing and able to explore issues of sexism, relationships, violence on television, and community activism. The willingness to discuss these topics hearkens back to Michael Tueth’s claim that animated series can “explore darker, subversive aspects of family life thanks primarily to the possibilities of the cartoon aesthetic” (141).

In *King of the Hill*, these darker issues to come light in the episode “Shins of the Father.” In this episode, Hank’s father, Cotton Hill, comes to visit with the family for Bobby’s twelfth birthday, and then refuses to leave. Throughout the episode Peggy and her niece, Luanne, struggle to get Cotton out of the house. For Peggy and Luanne, Cotton is an unwelcome guest and a menace, bent on teaching the easily influenced Bobby his sexist and misogynist ways. In order to stay with the family, Cotton repeatedly sabotages his car, which Luanne could easily fix, unlike Hank and his male friends. In response to her offer to fix the car, Cotton tells Luanne “thanks a lot, Girlie, but the truth is: you’re a girl,” thereby making her offer an object of ridicule instead of

gratitude or respect. As the episode progresses, Cotton declares that women “will never know if [they] are attractive. It's up to a man to tell [them] that.” Cotton also takes Bobby out of school in order to go to a bar, where he harasses the waitresses with sexist remarks, some of which Bobby picks up; later at home, Bobby demands that his mother go get his dinner and punctuates the remark by smacking her on her behind.

Even though Peggy’s actions in this episode—her desire to be treated as an equal human, her vocal disgust with the behavior of her father-in-law—could be definitely construed as feminist, she is adamant that she is not a feminist. Instead, she declares that she is

Peggy Hill, a citizen of the Republic of Texas. I work hard, I sweat hard and I love hard and I gotta smell good and look pretty while doing it. So, I comb my hair, I re-apply lipstick thirty times a day, I do your dishes, I wash your clothes and I clean the house. Not because I have to, Hank, but because of a mutual, unspoken agreement that I have never brought up, because I am too much of a lady.

In this way, Peggy is able to reclaim both her humanity and her gender. Though this episode does not see Peggy interacting in the public realm, it does show that she is more than willing to voice unpopular opinions in order to stand up for what she feels is right. Moreover, she becomes unruly in her protest against allowing her son to grow up to be as sexist as Cotton. Instead of simply deferring to the men in her life, she dominates the family’s decisions, eventually succeeding in throwing Cotton out of the house, and, once again, fulfilling the dominating aspect of Rowe’s criteria for unruliness (31). Like her insistence on the use of the word vagina, her impassioned speech to Hank about her own life and roles is a form of excessive speech that marks her as unruly, but that also earns her the respect of her husband, who tells Bobby that Peggy’s “probably

got a better head on her shoulders than anybody in Arlen.” Though this family situation with Cotton is different from her public unruliness in teaching sex-ed, Peggy participates in the same sorts of unruly behavior within the home environment, overriding her husband’s decision to allow his father to stay, and, by naming her own concerns with Cotton’s sexist, though seemingly accepted, behavior, engaging in excessive speech.

Peggy Hill is not the only animated woman to use her voice in order to better her home life. In the episode “The War of the Simpsons” Marge forces Homer to attend marriage counseling after he gets drunk at a dinner party she is throwing and embarrasses her. During the counseling session, when asked to list Marge’s faults, Homer concedes, “She’s perfect. . . . Sometimes it’s annoying.” Marge responds to the same question about Homer first by hedging that, “It’s not that I don’t love the guy. . . . I’m always sticking up for him,” but she follows with a long list of time-lapsed complaints, during which she becomes visibly disheveled and exhausted by the effort of cataloguing.

It’s just that he’s so self-centered. He forgets birthdays, anniversaries, holidays both religious and secular, he chews with his mouth open, he gambles, he hangs out at a seedy bar with drunks and lowlifes, he blows his nose on the towels and puts them back in the middle. . . . He drinks out of the carton, he never changes the baby, when he goes to sleep he makes chewing noises and when he wakes up he makes honking noises. Oh oh and he scratches himself with his keys. I think that’s it.

In response to her litany, Reverend Lovejoy declares, “As a trained marriage counselor, this is the first instance where I’ve ever told one partner that it’s all his fault. I’m willing to put that in a certificate you can frame.” In concluding a rather dark episode that makes Homer and Marge’s relationship seemed doomed, Marge eventually decides that Homer is worthy of her love because he was willing to give up claim to the world’s largest catfish.

This episode is important to understanding *The Simpsons* as it shows that Marge understands the faults of her family, and that she is not completely blind to the problems her family causes. It allows us to understand Marge as more than just a static character who attempts to do good. Instead, she is also a very human character with her own faults and insecurities. We also see the way other characters perceive Marge. Homer admits that he feels she is perfect, and the preacher seems more than willing to agree with him. Even within this perceived perfection, however, Marge is unruly. Instead of dealing with her marital issues in the comfort of her own home, she takes her grievances to the more public space of a couples' retreat sponsored by her church, which has been previously established in the series as being full of gossips. In doing so, she makes herself visible and therefore unruly (Rowe, 31). In addition to being outside of her traditional place as wife within the home, Marge's public listing of Homer's faults as well as her admission of marital problems—a taboo within the sitcom genre—fully situates her within the realm of unruly women.

Marge does not end her pursuit of betterment within her own relationships, however. In the episode "Itchy & Scratchy & Marge," she takes it upon herself to end violence in children's programming, in order to make both her home and the community at large a better place for children. The episode revolves around the content of *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*, a cartoon featured on the show-within-a-show *The Krusty the Clown Show*, which largely consists of a mouse, Itchy, violently killing a cat, Scratchy. After Maggie hits Homer in the head with a mallet while emulating a scene from the cartoon, Marge begins a protest group entitled S.N.U.H.—Springfieldians for Nonviolence,

Understanding, and Helping—and pickets the cartoon studio responsible for *The Itchy & Scratchy Show*.

In her effort to get Itchy and Scratchy to clean up their act, Marge appears on *Smartline* to draw more attention to her cause. She succeeds in getting the cartoon studio to change *The Itchy and Scratchy Show* into a gentle series about the friendship between a cat and a mouse, to which Springfield's children respond by turning off the television and playing outdoors. Later in the week, another group of Springfield citizens become upset that Michelangelo's *David* is coming to town because the statue appears nude. When she is called back on *Smartline* in order to offer commentary on why *David* should be banned, Marge argues that it shouldn't be—that it is a great work of art that everyone should see. Psychologist Dr. Marvin Monroe points out that it is inconsistent to support freedom of speech in only certain areas. Marge concedes that this is the truth, and backs off of her stance on cartoons, observing, "I guess one person can make a difference, but most of the time, they probably shouldn't." Following this, Itchy and Scratchy return to their usual violent ways.

This episode serves to illustrate the lengths to which the mothers on prime time animated sitcoms will go in order to protect their children. This episode does not end particularly well in terms of activism, and instead serves to illustrate the perpetual return to the status quo in which episodic sitcoms participate. It is important, however, in demonstrating that the unruly animated sitcom woman is able to affect change beyond her own community by ignoring the traditional behaviors expected of women and instead dominating the conversation, forcing (male) television executives to bend to her will and making her voice heard in every home. Additionally, by aligning herself on the side of

ensorship, Marge becomes one of Rowe's "figure[s] of ambivalence," a category that is not resolved upon her joining the cause of free speech (31).

Following the trend of having animated sitcom parents fight for television reform, the *South Park* episode "Death" illustrates another side to parental activism. In the episode, Kyle's mother Carol (later renamed Sheila) organizes a boycott of the network Cartoon Central to protest the potty humor and foul language that is featured on the children's favorite show, *Terrance and Phillip*. Unlike Marge Simpson, who undertook her activism at a local level, Carol convinces the other parents to travel to New York City from South Park, Colorado, in order to protest at the network headquarters, leaving the children behind and largely unsupervised. As the episode progresses, Stan's grandfather attempts to recruit the boys to help him commit assisted suicide, which leads to the character of Death chasing the boys in an attempt to kill them. Trying to secure help, Stan calls his mother Sharon, but as she is in New York protesting with the other parents, the boys are left to their own devices.

By creating a space in which the parents are absent, *South Park* depicts a community in which every mother character is unruly. Throughout the series, this absence of parental involvement is a recurring theme, extending even into the franchise's movie, *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*, in which Kyle's mother Sheila once again organizes the parents into a protest, this time against Canada. Though Carol/Sheila and Sharon attempt to fight to protect their children, an action that would normally be considered desirable, they allow their public protests to remove them from their children, leaving them alone and unsupervised, and breaking the taboo against child neglect. This taboo, though undoubtedly not the type of proscription Rowe had in mind when

describing the unruly woman's association with taboo, certainly secures the mothers of *South Park* as unruly.

In examining the actions of the female characters in prime time animated sitcoms, their behaviors both inside and outside of the home are often unruly. These characters expose their own desires through their artistic pursuits and in their careers without concern for how their actions might be perceived in the wider community, and challenge their communities' ideas of acceptable behavior. Additionally, by being vocal about the changes that they want to see enacted within their homes and communities, these characters give voice to larger social concerns about society. Through these active challenges to gender and societal norms--which often extend beyond those seen in the live-action domestic sitcoms such as *Roseanne* or *I Love Lucy* in their use of satirical critique against the dominant social order--these women become unruly.

CHAPTER III

EMBODIED UNRULINESS

Kathleen Rowe describes unruliness as a set of embodied characteristics as well as actions. The women of prime time animated sitcoms certainly fit the traits of embodied unruliness that Rowe enumerates. They are often overweight or “excessive;” occasionally androgynous; sometimes seen as old, yet highly visible; and loose in sexuality and bodily control (31). Additionally, the unruly woman is visibly bodied. While the “well-adjusted” woman who serves as the antithesis of unruliness is “silent, static, and invisible,” the unruly woman is the opposite loud, ever changing, and highly visible (31).

In producing her criteria for the unruly woman, Rowe draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s scholarship surrounding the carnivalesque, a tradition that has been prominent from medieval times. Following Bakhtin, Rowe describes the carnivalesque as expressing “the relativity of power in all aspects of life,” which can occur in any arena, from “actual performances and events . . . to texts which sublimate [the carnivalesque’s] festive and oppositional impulses” (32). According to Bakhtin, the body plays a central role in the enactment of the carnivalesque. He sets up an opposition between the “grotesque body” and the “classical body” (33). While the classical body conceals anatomical processes in

an effort to appear refined, the grotesque body “breaks down the boundaries between itself and the world outside it” and is associated with bodily functions, such as eating, drinking, sex, death, and birth (33). Rowe argues that the carnivalesque notion of the grotesque body “bears the most relevance to the unruly woman” as it is through her body that she “so often makes a spectacle of herself with her fatness, pregnancy, age, or loose behavior” (33). By being female, then, and participating in the biological processes associated with femininity—birth, pregnancy, weight gain, and aging—women are essentially condemned to be ever embodied as unruly.

Literary scholar Mary Russo describes the problem of the carnivalesque body as a fear of becoming a spectacle. By being large, or pregnant, or simply aging, women become visible, which raises the risk of making a spectacle of themselves, something Russo identifies as “a specifically feminine danger...of exposure” (318). Russo argues that the carnivalesque can both undermine and reinforce existing social structure, which is evidenced by her examination of the work of Natalie Davis who states that “the image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place,” but instead sometimes worked to “widen behavioral options for women” (Russo, 321). This widening of options is evident in the case of Roseanne Barr, to whom Rowe devotes much analysis. Media critiques of Barr as fat, slobbish, gross, low-class, and scandalous appeared not only in reference to her televised presence, but also her personal life. Offscreen as on, Barr reveled in her unruly embodied nature, publically discussing her size, her menses, and her eating habits (64-65). For the women of prime time animated sitcoms, there is no time or space outside of their thirty minutes of weekly programming,

however, these women discuss their embodiment with much of the same pride as Roseanne.

Peggy Hill: Excessiveness and Androgyny

According to Russo, the carnivalesque woman is distinguished in part by her large or imposing size. In this respect, Peggy Hill definitely fits the description of the carnivalesque or female grotesque. She is tall, towering over most of the other female (and some male) characters. She wears size 16 ½ shoes that come in boxes so large her son confuses them with packaging for a microwave (“The Order of the Straight Arrow”). By drawing attention to his mother’s inability to fit into the bounds of traditional femininity as described by the classical ideal, Bobby exposes her failures, drawing attention to his mother’s unintentional unruliness. In this depiction there is nothing inherently wrong with Peggy. She is, however, not small in size, unlike her neighbors Nancy Gribble and Mihn Souphanousinphone. Though she is not overly large, or fat, she is unable to share clothing with Nancy and Mihn as they do with one another (“The Peggy Horror Picture Show”). In this way her body becomes excessive, falling outside of the normative bounds of the “classical body,” as exemplified by her neighbors. In her embodiment as in her speech, Peggy is unruly by virtue of her excessiveness, though unlike her speech, this type of unruliness is not one that Peggy can control (31). Instead, she is confined to unruliness without any means of escape.

Peggy’s body is further contrasted with the “monumental, static, closed, sleek” ideal of the “classical body,” in the episode “Peggy’s Pageant Fever,” in which she enters a beauty pageant in order to win a new truck for Hank. In preparation, she undergoes a complete makeover, including dying her hair, updating her wardrobe, and duct-taping her

body in order to appear more aesthetically ideal for the judges. Against everyone's advice, she decides to compete, because she feels that the size of one's brain is more important than one's bra size. Her attempt at traditional, or "classical," femininity only seems to further her depiction as unruly or grotesque—her dress falls apart, the duct tape binding her butt comes loose, she loses her shoes, her hair falls down. In this way she fails spectacularly at traditional femininity, and, furthermore, becomes an object of semi-public ridicule (though she is saved from going on stage by her husband who picks her up in his newly repainted truck), thus further reinforcing her failure at femininity through her highly visible costume problems.

In addition to her towering size, Peggy is also a figure of androgyny for at least one episode. During the course of "The Peggy Horror Picture Show," Peggy is mistaken for a drag queen by a group of drag performers. Through this misidentification Peggy becomes both somewhat androgynous and hermaphroditic, which are one set of criteria which Rowe uses to establish embodied unruliness (31). Rowe writes that the androgynous body—described as "leggy, slim, curveless and hairless, minus the markers of adult female sexuality"—is considered ideal in terms of fashion as it "dismantles men's fears of sexual difference" (142). Additionally, perception of sexual identity appears to oscillate when in the presence of such an individual, "undermining not only gender but also fixed subjectivity" (142). Unlike the thin examples Rowe cites, such as Audrey Hepburn, Peggy Hill embodies another sort of androgyny that cannot be confused with the desirable "classical body." Nonetheless, like Rowe's examples, Peggy's androgyny collapses the illusion of sexlessness under closer scrutiny (143). What is important in Rowe's examination of such criteria is that these individuals "destabilize the

social and sexual norms of gender,” a function Peggy also serves when she is mistaken for a drag queen (211).

This episode opens with Peggy searching for a new place to buy her shoes, after her previous supplier goes out of business. While shopping, Peggy meets a drag queen named Carolyn, who shares the same shoe and clothing sizes as her. Peggy soon becomes close with Carolyn, never suspecting that she is actually a man. At the same time, Carolyn believes that Peggy is also a drag queen, and invites her to perform with her. Carolyn and her fellow drag queens are convinced of Peggy’s masculinity in part by her shoe size and in part by the domineering way she treats her own family. This conflation of sex and gender roles underlines the disruptive implications of Rowe’s embodied unruliness. When Peggy finds out that Carolyn is a drag queen, she again becomes depressed because she feels that she is unfeminine. Carolyn then invites Peggy to one of the drag queens’ clothing exchanges, an invitation that prompts Peggy to pout that only men seem to want her clothes. Peggy sees this acceptance of her clothing by men as a further implication of her lack of femininity, thereby reinforcing the idea that she is far removed from the classical ideal exemplified by Nancy and Mihn. Once Carolyn points out that the reason the other queens want her clothing is because they want to emulate strong women, Peggy once again returns to her old, confident self.

Throughout the episode, Carolyn’s confusion places Peggy in a position to counter traditional ideas about sex and gender. By challenging the aspects of Peggy’s appearance that are presented as female, Carolyn challenges not only Peggy, but the larger audience, to consider what traits are required to appear as feminine within the realm of prime time animation. The answer to the question, however, remains ambiguous

when Peggy accepts the drag queens' praise of her appearance, allowing Peggy to become the very embodiment of contradiction that defines unruliness.

Marge Simpson: Spectacle and Aging

Peggy Hill is not the only animated sitcom woman whose body appears as carnivalesque and unruly in a variety of episodes. Marge Simpson often comes under scrutiny in the town of Springfield for her inability to consistently perform embodied femininity in an appropriate manner. In the episode "Large Marge," Marge begins worrying that she is not attractive enough for her husband, though he himself is often described as a fat slob. At the insistence of Manjula Nahasapeemapetilon—her friend, wife of Quickie Mart clerk Apu, and mother of his eight children—Marge decides to get a "five minute suck and tuck." Though Marge is not excessively overweight in the episode—she appears to be the same size that she is throughout the entire series—by naming weight as an issue, Manjula constructs Marge as excessively large and therefore unruly. Not only does the name of the procedure, as given by the nurse, signify that Marge is not overly fat to begin with, her empirically trim appearance leads to confusion within the surgical suite, so that the surgeon mistakes Marge for Mayor Quimby's intern, who is scheduled for a breast enlargement. Due to the confusion, Marge receives a breast augmentation instead of liposuction. But instead of having the surgery immediately reversed, as the surgeon offers, Marge becomes a product spokesperson and begins modeling at tradeshows, a pastime that takes her away from her family. She eventually saves Bart from a ravenous elephant by use of her new breasts, flashing the local police force, which distracts them and renders them unable to shoot the elephant, and, very

possibly, her son. Ultimately, though, she decides to get the implants removed anyway as they disconnect her from family life

Marge's physical unruliness operates in several ways in this episode. The confusion over conflicting definitions of what kind of body is excessive or improper enough to require surgical intervention throws into relief the role of social construction in defining the excessive body, and in ascribing meaning to bodies in general. Marge's body is interpreted differently by different characters, and this process calls the audience's attention to the way they themselves have interpreted it. Later in the episode, by drawing attention to her large bust when she flashes the police, Marge makes a spectacle of her now comically excessive breasts and therefore becomes a carnivalesque figure. Marge comes to be seen as carnivalesque by drawing attention to the construction of femininity by use of her newly ample bust. Furthermore, by exposing her breasts to the police force, Marge also comes to embody looseness, a criteria that Rowe describes as a general category of behavior (31).

In the episode "The Blue and the Gray," Marge further cements her embodied unruliness by drawing attention to her aging. Marge goes to a salon for a haircut and the stylist combing her hair discovers some gray hairs. Instead of getting them dyed her trademark blue—as the stylist hints would normally happen during the course of her visit—Marge instead decides to dye her hair completely gray, embracing her new look. At first she is very happy with the look, but after being mistaken for her children's grandmother, she reverts back to the blue that she keeps for the rest of the series. By allowing her natural gray color to come out, Marge reveals that she is aging, thus bringing her close to Rowe's idea of the unruly crone (31). Moreover, by acknowledging

her age in such a visible way, Marge becomes a topic of town discussion, and thus a spectacle.

The treatment of Marge's body in these episodes reveals a dimension of embodied unruliness that is accentuated by the technique of animation. Though Marge's normal appearance is itself somewhat unruly—a two-foot high up-do is not a normative look for a woman, even in animated series—the ease with which her body changes underscores that unruliness. Unlike Peggy Hill, who is constructed as unruly through the unchangeable characteristics of her shoe size and stature, Marge's unruliness is a direct result of dramatically altering her appearance, which, according to the ideal of the “classical body,” should be static. This expectation of stasis is heightened in animation. Drawn characters are not expected to age, to gain or lose weight, or to look slightly different from episode to episode, as a live actor must. Thus, the mutability of Marge's body is a double violation of the norm. Though Rowe does not identify this idea of change in her description of the unruly woman, it furthers the construction of Marge's body as liminal, unstable, and ambiguous.

Paula Small: Slovenliness and Looseness

Unlike the other unruly women discussed in this chapter, Paula Small is exceptional for two criteria that are not replicated to the same extent within any other prime time animated sitcom: slovenliness and looseness. Her slovenly behavior is often discussed over the course of the series. In the episode “Bad Influences,” Melissa points out to Brendon and Jason that they have both gained a great deal of weight between filming two different versions of a Western. In response to the accusation, Brendon questions his mother, demanding “what have you been feeding me?” to which Paula

responds “I’ve been feeding you the same thing I’ve been feeding me and I don’t look fat.” Brendon couches his response by saying “I don’t think you look that much fatter . . . from down here you look gigantic, but that’s ‘cause I’m small.” Paula’s excessive weight gain is acknowledged not only in the dialogue but also in her animated portrayal: her shirt strains at the buttons, gapes open between them, and no longer appears to fit around her now ample hips. Moreover, the dialogue, which emphasizes what Paula has been eating, implies that Paula has, like Rowe’s archetypal unruly woman, become fat due her “unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites” (31).

Though both Paula and Brendon are able to lose the weight they have put on within the episode, this does not put an end to Paula’s portrayal as a slob. In “Get Away from My Mom” Paula agrees to go on a date with Coach McGuirk. While preparing for the date, she tells one of her friends on the phone that she is not going to change clothes for the date and describes her current outfit: “big baggy pants and shirt that makes a man want to buy me another shirt,” which she accessorizes with a red baseball hat. She is seen in the same outfit throughout the episode in a variety of settings—cleaning the house, on the date, and watching Brendon’s soccer game. In choosing a very androgynous outfit, Paula fails to perform femininity properly, thereby “drawing attention to the social construction of gender,” a mark of the unruly woman. Moreover, by refusing to change clothes, she also becomes somewhat unkempt. This slovenliness violates the expectations of dating, so that she not only enacts the association with dirt that Rowe identifies as a characteristic of the unruly woman, but also behaves in a fashion that is taboo to the rituals of courtship.

Paula's final embodiment of unruliness is, while important, never explicitly discussed or even referenced during the course of the series. While Brendon's father is present occasionally, and Paula's divorce from him is mentioned, the reason for their divorce is never explicitly addressed. Rather, it is implied through animation, in the skin tone of Paula's infant daughter, Josie. Within the animated realm of *Home Movies*, race is depicted through skin color. Paula, her son Brendon, his coach McGuirk, and his classmate Jason are all varying shades of white, while Brendon's friend Melissa and her father are drawn as black characters. Josie, while a little paler than Melissa, is most assuredly outside of the spectrum of whiteness as defined by the other characters, thus implying that Paula's white ex-husband is not her father. Josie's apparent racial difference led to years of fan speculation that she was the result of an affair and the reason that Paula was divorced (R.I.P.heyshous, drewpa13, treehouse). Though there was a mention in the fourth season that Josie was adopted, it was fleeting and was undercut by the fact that it introduced the obviously ridiculous joke that Josie's parents were Don Ho and Eartha Kitt ("Temporary Blindness"). Even if Josie was in fact adopted by Paula after the divorce, the popular perception of her as the product of an affair persists online, thereby constructing Paula as a loose woman. On its own, this looseness would help to define Paula as unruly, but in the imagined narrative of Josie's parentage, the scandal of infidelity is ultimately produced by a body out of control. If Josie is Paula's biological daughter, she is a sign that Paula was unable to check her own sexual desires and reproductive capacity. As a result, Paula's imputed moral looseness also becomes evidence of the unruliness of her body.

The Women of South Park: Looseness, Excessiveness, and the Taboo

In most of the shows examined here, the unruliness of the central female characters is contrasted with peripheral female characters who embody normative behavior and near-invisibility in both actions and body. For Peggy Hill, these are the women who tell her that understanding sex-ed is unnecessary at her son's ballgame, and her neighbors Nancy and Mihn, who represent the "classical body" ("Square Peg" and "The Peggy Horror Picture Show"). In the world of Springfield, the normative woman is frequently represented by the minister's wife, Helen Lovejoy, who acts shocked to hear Marge's tirade against Homer in "War of the Simpsons" and whose appearance remains static through the entire run of the series. In *Daria*, Helen Morgendorffer stands in contrast to her daughter Quinn, who is more obsessed with clothes and popularity than with intellectual pursuits, while in *Home Movies*, Paula Small's unruly tendencies are questioned by her son, who complains about her inability to act like the other mothers in town, or even to act in a considered, less impulsive way.

Because all of these characters have examples of normative behavior and appearance to rebel against, their personalities and bodies stand in contrast to those seen around them, which highlights their unruliness. However, because the normative women are usually minor characters, they are rendered as one-dimensional and unreal. Moreover, when the failings of unruly central female characters are pointed out by those around them, the normative expectation is generally verbalized by characters whose opinions are already discounted. Paula Small and Helen Morgendorffer are most often criticized by their children, whose efforts to police their mothers' appearance and behavior therefore take on a quality of unreflective naiveté. Peggy Hill's detractors, such as Dale Gribble, are invariably portrayed as reactionary and irrational. As a result, their

opinions about normative qualities lose their authoritative ground. The unruly woman remains the stable center of her family and community, her unruliness normalized as the moral center of the sitcom's inverted story world.

South Park, however, employs an even more radical strategy for normalizing unruliness. The women of *South Park* are often absent and are therefore rarely discussed within the realm of the show. Though their actions are often associated with unruliness, their appearances also construct the women as unruly. Sharon Marsh, Stan's mother, is drawn with very short hair, somewhat reminiscent of her husband's cut, and constantly wears a brown sweater and blue pants which do not show her shape. Her androgyny, unlike that of Peggy Hill or Paula Small, is a permanent condition that firmly connects her to the trope of the unruly woman. By contrast, Sheila Broflovski's appearance is explicitly feminine. Sheila, Kyle's mother, is always shown in a blue sweater and a purple skirt with her long hair formed into a beehive up-do. However, though feminine in dress, Sheila is drawn as overweight, and is shown as being much larger than her thin husband. Despite her efforts to perform normative femininity, her excessive body marks her as unruly.

Liane Cartman is perhaps the mother who is most discussed within the city of South Park. In the episode "Cartman's Mom Is Still a Dirty Slut," Cartman's mother is explicitly described as being a hermaphrodite. Indeed, when Cartman orders a paternity test to reveal the identity of his absent father, the test finds that his mother is his father. As if such exaggerated liminality were not enough to establish her unruliness, the same episode discloses that during the "Drunk Barn Dance" years earlier, Liane had sex with multiple men and women. Though Liane is revealed in a later episode, "200", to be

neither a hermaphrodite nor the father of her son, her portrayal as a hermaphrodite, however brief, and her repeated depiction as promiscuous firmly establishes her as unruly.

All of the mothers in *South Park*, then, are depicted as unruly in both behavior and body. In fact, the series is entirely without normative female characters. Even minor characters are unruly in actions or body or, more often, both. The only character who consistently behaves in a normative way, the school nurse, is still represented as a spectacle of grotesque embodiment—she has a fetus attached to her head (“Conjoined Fetus Lady”). For the women of South Park, who have no normative examples of femininity to stand in contrast to, unruliness becomes a fully hegemonic norm, leaving no other option available.

CONCLUSION

My aim in this study has been to continue the work of television scholars in analyzing how animated television plays with and conforms to the genre conventions of live action television and to further the understanding of the unruly woman, a subject that has been repeatedly addressed in decades of scholarship on the carnivalesque and the woman on top. By examining the genre conventions of animated sitcoms through the lens of gender, this thesis not only deepens our understanding of both television culture and the trope of the unruly woman, it reveals how animated television inverts the traditional roles of live action television, allowing more space for dynamic female characters.

As the existing scholarship on prime time animated sitcoms demonstrates, these shows exist in a unique genre space that allows them to use satire and parody in order to counter traditional genre expectations for comedies, including expectations about gender. This use of comedy allows animated shows to stand in opposition to certain, often conservative, politics, in order to create a commentary on free speech and censorship. By using the traditional domestic sitcom format and by largely adhering to traditional television family structures, these shows participate in television history and tradition, creating a space that is at once familiar but also challenging to some cultural norms. However, these shows also incorporate nearly every criteria used by Kathleen Rowe in

describing the unruly woman, thereby creating a space that is nearly dominated by unruliness.

My research clearly illustrates that within the genre conventions of the prime time animated sitcom, the female lead characters, who are most often wives and mothers, consistently and nearly unanimously engage in unruly behavior, challenging laws and cultural norms, often fighting to make the lives of their children better. In enacting these unruly behaviors, the female characters of the prime time animated sitcom universalize unruliness within the genre, creating a space in which unruliness is no longer simply used for protest or as a means of commentary, but instead becomes an accepted behavioral trope. In this arena it is expected that women act up; female characters who do not participate in unruly behavior are seen as non-normative. This embrace of unruliness allows for a televised portrayal in which women are no longer expected to be constrained by the traditionally acceptable premise of invisibility, but are instead expected to act out and challenge behavioral codes in ways that are often closed to actresses in live action series.

Though unruliness becomes an expected behavioral trope within this genre, this unruliness remains somewhat contained both through animation and the televised medium. Though these animated sitcom mothers are allowed and expected to be unruly, this expectation does not translate into a similar set of expectations for the viewers of prime time animated series. This lack of translation is acceptable, given that animation is perceived as already containing unrealistic expectations in terms of character development and plot by virtue of its very medium (Tueth, 133). It is within this space apart from reality that cartoons are able to present alternative viewpoints and challenge

social and cultural norms, a point upon which animation scholars tend to agree (Booker, Tueth). However, given that Rowe's criteria of unruliness were originally written with live-action examples in mind, this universalized unruliness remains a possibility for other television genres. Though television scholars and Bakhtin argue for the idea of recontainment within carnival, the possibility Natalie Zemon Davis raises that carnivalesque and unruly behavior can create lasting change through countering social norms allows for the potential for such normalized unruliness to spread to other television genres.

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