

THE AMERICANIZATION OF A BIGOT: FROM *TILL DEATH US DO PART* TO *ALL IN THE FAMILY*

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the similarities and differences between the British sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-68, 1972-75) and its American adaptation *All in the Family* (1971-79). After briefly tracing the genesis of these programs, it focuses on the process of social and cultural translation which gave life to the American version and made it one of the most popular and, at the same time, most controversial programs in the history of American television. Like its British model, *All in the Family* offended many for having at its centre the figure of a husband/father who freely gives vent to his prejudice against women and minorities. Through a comparative analysis of characters and plots, this essay argues that while the British original was more daring in its language, its American counterpart was much bolder in its subject-matter, venturing as it did into areas that had previously been deemed unsuitable for popular entertainment.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza las similitudes y diferencias entre la comedia televisiva británica *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-68, 1972-75) y su adaptación americana, *All in the Family* (1971-79). Tras hacer una breve historia de la génesis de estos programas, se centra en el proceso de traducción social y cultural que dio vida a la versión americana y la convirtió en uno de los programas más populares, y al mismo tiempo más controvertidos, de la historia de la televisión americana. Como su modelo británico, *All in the Family* ofendió a muchos al tener como centro la figura de un esposo/padre que da rienda suelta a su prejuicio contra las mujeres y las minorías. A través de un análisis comparativo de personajes y argumentos, este

ensayo aduce que aunque el original británico era más atrevido en cuanto a lenguaje, su contrapartida americana era mucho más osada en cuanto a temas, aventurándose como lo hizo en áreas que anteriormente se habían considerado inapropiadas para el entretenimiento popular.

George Bernard Shaw's provocative statement that "the secret of success is to offend the greatest number of people" (339) found resounding confirmation in the 1960s and 70s when the British sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* and its American transposition *All in the Family* achieved stellar ratings and generated an unprecedented amount of controversy. Centered on a working-class family living in the Wapping area of East London, *Till Death Us Do Part* was created by Johnny Speight who had previously made a name for himself with such plays as *The Knacker's Yard* and *If There Weren't Any Blacks, You'd Have to Invent Them*, as well as another very popular sitcom, *Steptoe and Son* (which was later remade in the USA, as *Sanford and Son*, by Norman Lear, the man responsible for *All in the Family*). A lifelong admirer of Shaw, Speight always relished challenging convention, attacking tradition, and offending decorum. He found the best vehicle for all this in Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell), the leading character he created for *Till Death Us Do Part*. Alf Garnett is a man in his fifties who has worked all his life as a dockhand in the East End. He lives in a very modest house which, at least in the series' early seasons, has only one lavatory (and that outdoors), and no telephone. At home he spends most of his time locked in verbal combat with his wife Else (Dandy Nichols), his daughter Rita (Una Stubbs) and, especially, his son-in-law Mike (Anthony Booth). But if his endless bickering with Else is the product of marriage fatigue degenerated into seething hostility, his clashes with the young couple stem from diametrically opposite world views, exacerbated by forced cohabitation (given Rita and Mike's inability to support themselves). In addition to being staunchly conservative, and deeply disgusted with modern ways and mores, Alf is a bigot who, in his strong cockney accent, freely expresses his dislike of minorities, always lacing his remarks with a series of outrageous racial, ethnic, religious and sexual slurs. This, inevitably, results in collision with the socialist-leaning and open-to-change thinking of Rita and Mike who embody the new ideas and fashions that emerged in the so-called "swinging London" of the mid-sixties.

Till Death Us Do Part made its debut on BBC1 in July, 1965, as part of the anthology series "Comedy Playhouse," and began its run as a regular series in June of the following year, changing the face of British television forever. In order to understand the kind of impact *Till Death Us Do Part* had at the time, it is well to remember that the revolution of language and culture which had found expression in drama, fiction and film through the writings of the so-called angry young men had only partially affected television. True, there had been some ground-breaking dramas in the anthology program *The Wednesday Play* (thanks to, among others, a young Ken Loach), as well as some irreverent satire in the news spoof *That Was the*

Week That Was. But comedies, especially those about families, tended for the most part to be rather tame. And the way in which most British viewers experienced working-class life on television was through the rosy, uplifting world of *Coronation Street*, the long-running soap opera which was the ratings champion of the commercial channel ITV. Significantly, with a decision that was at once a challenge and a gamble, the BBC broadcasted *Till Death* in direct opposition to its “antithesis” *Coronation Street* and won the ratings race. In its heyday *Till Death* was watched by one third of the British population. With success, however, came controversy, which escalated to the point where in 1968, at the end of its third season, the series was taken off the air. It returned only in 1972 and ran for another four seasons (Ward 44-150, 179-205).

The enormous success of *Till Death*, and the heated debate it had sparked in the British media, soon caught the attention of television producers and writers in other countries who tried to adapt its formula to different settings, mentalities and cultures (a process which Albert Moran and Michael Keane have termed the transfer of “cultural technologies” [203]). Thus, more or less revised versions of Alf Garnett and family appeared in the Netherlands, Israel, Brazil and Germany (Ward 163-164, 169-170). The best-known and longest-running transposition of *Till Death* was by far the American sitcom *All in the Family*, which lasted from 1971 to 1979, begat successful spin-offs and, at the height of its popularity, was watched by over one-fifth of the entire population (Pierce 60). In comparing and contrasting *All in the Family* with the British original, especially in terms of setting, characterization and themes, my essay is concerned to highlight the strengths, rather than the weaknesses, of the copy (thus departing from most of the criticism devoted to these two series). It will show how, while being perhaps “softer” than *Till Death* in its representation of family conflict, *All in the Family* outdared its model with its bold treatment of hot-button issues pertaining, in particular, to race and gender.

In January 1967, after reading a short piece about *Till Death* in *Variety Magazine*, American television and film writer Norman Lear became convinced that the premises of Speight’s series – the generation gap, the opposition between old and new, prejudice and acceptance – would resonate powerfully with American TV audiences who were starved for realistic and socially relevant entertainment. Family tensions, contemporary cultural and political issues, were conspicuously absent in late sixties’ American television series, which seemed to take place in a sort of alternative universe where there were no echoes of the Vietnam War, student protests, women’s liberation and the struggle for civil rights. Without even watching a single episode of *Till Death* Lear bought the rights to the series and set about creating an American version (as we will see, Lear, together with his collaborators and cast, did eventually watch some episodes of *Till Death*). After a few years, several revisions, and a rejection by the first network to which it had been offered (ABC), *All in the Family* reached America’s small screens in 1971, as the prime

example of CBS's new director Robert Wood's efforts to modernize the network's image and attract what advertisers had begun to identify as the most valuable part of the audience: younger, urban, educated viewers (Adler xvii-xix; Brown 128-130; Miller 141-143).

Even though both *Till Death* and *All in the Family*, from the start, found ardent champions among the critics and received numerous awards, they were also condemned by a part of the press and became the focus of some high-profile attacks (Ward 56-60; Adler 69-120). *Till Death* became something of an obsession for Mary Whitehouse, promoter of the "Clean Up TV" campaign and author of the book *Cleaning Up TV*, who saw Speight's series as the epitome of what was wrong with British TV and, by extension, British society. In the United States Laura Hobson, best known as the author of *Gentleman's Agreement* (a novel which had denounced anti-Semitism in America), took Norman Lear to task for creating a series centered around "a lovable bigot" in a lengthy and pointed editorial in the *New York Times* (to which Lear later replied with an equally pointed piece in the same newspaper).

Both the British series and its American counterpart raised concerns about what today we would call the "politically incorrect" language of their protagonists and about their depiction of working-class life, which some observers found demeaning. A great deal of attention in the press and in academic studies was devoted to the question of whether audiences watching these shows laughed *at* the main character (the bigot), as Speight and Lear had intended, or rather shared his views and laughed *with* him. *All in the Family*, in particular, was the subject of a number of surveys conducted by social scientists to analyze viewers' responses to the show, and this phenomenon is in itself indicative of the exceptional relevance that this series acquired in American culture. The model for the research done on *All in the Family* actually dated back to 1947 when a landmark article in the *Journal of Psychology* had analyzed readers' reactions to a cartoon series featuring a deeply prejudiced character named Mr. Biggott who may be considered a sort of precursor to Alf Garnett and his American equivalent Archie Bunker (Carroll O' Connor). Like these characters, Mr. Biggott was supposed to be an object of ridicule and embody the absurdity of prejudice. What the article concluded, however, was that prejudiced readers of the cartoon found ways to enjoy it without confronting their own bigotry. What they did was, essentially, "to evade the issue psychologically by *simply not understanding the message*" (Cooper and Jahoda 16). Along similar lines, most of the studies done on *All in the Family* in the 1970s reveal that different viewers saw different things in the show and for the most part came away from it with their attitudes (whether prejudiced or accepting) intact or even reinforced.¹

Those who have compared *Till Death Us Do Part* with *All in the Family* have tended, for the most part, to judge the latter as a tamer, watered-down version

¹ On viewers' responses to the character of Archie see, for example: Lieberman and Lieberman 236; Newcombe 218-219; Pierce 60.

of the original, especially as regards the characterization of the protagonist. This was also, by and large, the response of British viewers when the BBC broadcasted a selection of the American series' first two seasons between 1971 and 1972. Alf Garnett is, admittedly, a more abrasive figure than Archie Bunker; his attitude towards his family and society, as well as his language, is more shockingly violent than that of his American counterpart. Moreover, the portrayal of working-class family dynamics in *Till Death* is decidedly bleaker than that in its American adaptation. As Mark Ward has rightly noted, the Anglican marriage vow evoked by the title of Speight's sitcom takes on the connotation of a threat or a sentence (36, 80). Alf and his wife are trapped in a loveless marriage characterized by a relentless exchange of insults (with his typical "silly moo" countered by her cry of "pig"). And even though the younger couple - Mike and Rita - are meant to provide a contrast with their vivacity, fondness for each other and their mutual physical attraction, there is more than one hint, in the course of the series, that with time their marriage might follow the same route as that of Alf and Else. What is certain from the start is that, because of financial restrictions, they too are trapped in a stifling environment where, as the title of the first episode announces, daily life is mostly about "Arguments, Arguments."

Verbal aggressiveness is also the rule in the Bunker household, with Archie routinely calling his Polish-American son-in-law Mike (Rob Reiner) "meathead" and his wife Edith (Jean Stapleton) "dingbat." And yet Archie does love Edith, even though he seems incapable of expressing his feelings for her. One of the glories of actor Carroll O'Connor's performance as Archie is precisely his ability to suggest the underlying presence of those feelings through non-verbal means. The fact that Archie and Edith love each other gives the American series a comforting quality that comes through even in its opening titles. This initial sequence parallels the British original in so far as we move from the city center, the place of privilege and economic power (the city of London, Westminster and Big Ben in *Till Death*; the skyscrapers of Manhattan in *All in the Family*) to a working-class area (respectively, the East End and Queens) and finally reach the door of a particular residence. In both cases a rapid montage of images emphasizes the importance of place (a key element in the two series, also powerfully conveyed by the characters' speech) and the great distance separating the macrocosm of the public sphere from the microcosm of the family. But in *All in the Family* this trajectory from public to private is framed by the image of Archie and Edith sitting at the piano and singing a sort of hymn to the past called "Those Were the Days." As Kenneth M. Pierce has noted, "Archie and Edith have wrapped their tenderness in a performance" (60). No matter what happens in the episode that follows, the opening sequence reassures us of the solidity of the Bunkers' marriage. Archie and Edith may not be the best of singers, but they literally make music together. It would be impossible to imagine Alf and Else in the same situation.

In *Till Death* the image of Big Ben, apart from introducing the obvious theme of time, also draws attention to one of Alf's obsessions, his belief that the great clock has stopped being reliable since the Labor Party came to power (in 1966 Harold Wilson was Britain's prime minister). Alf is at war with a present he does not understand; he feels threatened by change and longs for a past of cultural and ethnic uniformity, rigid class relations and national greatness. Prominent in his living room are portraits of the royal family and Winston Churchill, and one of his recurrent complaints is that the Labor Party is responsible for "giving the British Empire away." Archie is no less patriotic than Alf but the political context in which he moves is very different. During the period covered by the first four seasons of the series the United States was under the leadership of a man, Richard Nixon, whom Archie wholeheartedly supports. Like Alf, Archie longs for the past but his nostalgia has a more private, cozier quality. As the opening song suggests, he does not look back to a time of national greatness (as Alf does), but quite the opposite. The good old days, the happiest time in his life, coincided with one of the most difficult periods for the nation: the Great Depression. But no matter how hard life was at the time, it was for Archie a simpler life, one he understood, when one danced to big band music (as opposed to the 1970s rock and roll), when gender roles were clearly defined ("girls were girls and men were men," as the song says) and when, most importantly one suspects, Archie was young.

All in the Family may also seem milder than *Till Death* in the delineation of its female characters. Though the Bunkers' daughter, Gloria (Sally Struther), almost always joins forces with her husband against Archie in discussions about politics, race and religion, her attitude and remarks are not nearly as biting as those of Rita in *Till Death*. And the characterization of Edith is one of the aspects in which *All in the Family* differs from its British model most conspicuously. Apart from the fact of being housewives who are the constant targets of their husbands' verbal abuse, Edith and Else have very little else in common. If Else, in terms of verbal belligerence, gives as much as she takes and seems to enjoy nothing more than cutting her husband down to size with her vitriolic remarks, Edith almost never reacts to Archie's insults and indeed, most of the time, seems to protect herself through selective hearing. Thus she shocks her husband, and the audience, on the very rare occasions when she does lose her temper, as in the episode "Edith's Problem" (January 8, 1972) in which she is suffering the effects of menopause (a subject that had never before been treated so frankly on American TV). Whereas Else is as prejudiced as her husband, Edith is kind and accepting towards anyone. Much to her husband's irritation, she is very welcoming to her next-door African American neighbors, the Jeffersons, and indeed becomes best friends with Mrs. Jefferson (whose husband is as prejudiced towards whites as Archie is towards blacks). She is heartbroken when the Jeffersons, thanks to Mr. Jefferson's success as an entrepreneur, leave their working-class house in Queens for a posh apartment in

Manhattan (it is one of the most interesting sociological twists in *All in the Family* that while the Bunkers are stuck in their socioeconomic space, the Jeffersons, as the opening song of their own later series has it, are “Movin’ on up”).

Not only does Edith differ from Else in the way she thinks and talks, but also in the way she moves. Whereas Else is mostly stationary, like a solid wall against which her husband collides repeatedly leaving no visible dent, Edith dashes from the kitchen to the living room and back, usually in an effort to attend to Archie’s needs. In her video interview for the “Archive of American Television,” Jean Stapleton, who played the part of Edith, said that her character’s hurried movements were meant to reflect the rapid pace of life in NYC, as well as visualize the effects of Archie’s domineering attitude towards her. In Stapleton’s words, Archie’s “abusive demands ... pushed Edith into a run.” Like Else, Edith is not educated, and gives the impression of possessing a rather limited understanding, for which she is mercilessly belittled by her husband. But she differs from her British counterpart, who always has a certain bovine quality about her, by occasionally surprising her family and the audience with flashes of keen perception. For example, in a conversation with Mike she diagnoses, correctly, that the source of Archie’s animus towards his son-in-law is a sense of inadequacy and inferiority when confronting a far better educated and more articulate younger man. And in the episode “Gloria and the Riddle” (October 7, 1972), in which Archie and Mike try unsuccessfully to answer a question that is designed to assess one’s preconceptions (or lack thereof) about gender roles, Edith is the one who comes up with the solution. And although her speeches are most of the times hilariously devoid of logic, she is, on occasion, the voice of reason. For example, in the brilliant episode “Everybody Tells the Truth” (March 3, 1973), Archie, Mike and Gloria, in a comedic variation on the film *Rashomon*, give vastly different accounts of the same event (thus revealing their respective biases), while Edith simply describes what actually happened.

Comparing *Till Death* and *All in the Family* in their entirety, one notices that, as regards the scripts, only a handful of episodes from the British series actually provided materials for Norman Lear and his collaborators. And only two of these episodes, “Aunt Maud” (February 16, 1968) and “The Blood Donor” (January 12, 1968), were followed relatively closely in terms of plot (as opposed to the borrowing of individual scenes or situations). However, in the American versions of both episodes there are also significant departures from the originals. In “Aunt Maud” Alf engages in a fierce verbal confrontation with his sister-in-law (the character of the title) who has come to stay with the Garnetts to take care of Else, who is ill. A carbon-copy of her sister, Maud literally takes her place in the ongoing battle against Alf. For the American version, “Cousin Maude’s Visit” (December 11, 1971), Lear turned the guest character into Edith’s cousin and gave her a much stronger individuality. Not only is the American Maude assertive, liberated and bossy (and

hence totally unlike Edith), but politically speaking she is Archie's liberal counterpart and, for this reason, his perfect foil. Brilliantly played by Beatrice Arthur, the character of Maude proved so popular that she re-appeared in a later episode and subsequently in a series of her own which proved no less controversial than *All in the Family* (in a famous two-part episode in the 1974-75 season Maude became the first sitcom character on American TV to have an abortion).

In "The Blood Donor" Mike convinces a very reluctant Alf to give blood, a substance about which they have radically different ideas. While Mike believes that blood is all the same, Alf claims that there are different types depending on one's lineage (such as royal blood) or race, and that they should not be mixed. For the same reason he objects to heart transplants - which were much in the news in 1968 because of the operations performed in South Africa by Dr. Christiaan Barnard. Alf wonders what would happen in South Africa if they put a black man's heart in a white man's body. What rest-room would the poor patient use after the operation? At the clinic he is upset when he notices a black man waiting to give blood and he renews his racist tirade, much to Mike's exasperation. The corresponding episode of *All in the Family* ("Archie Gives Blood" [February 2, 1971]) constitutes a good example of Norman Lear's strategy in treating Archie's racism throughout the series. Knowing that in the US the issue of race relations was more sensitive than in Britain, Lear always made an effort to incorporate a strong rebuttal of Archie's views in the show. Thus, at the clinic, instead of a nameless and wordless black man, Archie encounters a recurring character of the series, the Jeffersons' son Lionel, a bright, articulate young man who takes particular pleasure in making fun of his bigoted white neighbor. As soon as Archie addresses him, Lionel gleefully adopts the speech patterns and manner of a docile, submissive black who knows "what his place is," and Archie never suspects that he is being put on. When the issue of transplants comes up in the conversation, Lionel, by way of facial expressions and expertly placed emphasis, manages to slip by a couple of ironic references to South Africa, implying that the condition of blacks under apartheid was not all that different from that of African Americans in a supposedly much more enlightened society. But the most significant variation in the script is the fact that in *All in the Family* the line about putting a black man's heart into a white man's body is delivered not by Archie, but by Lionel, thus acquiring a completely different connotation and function. What in the original was the direct expression of the bigot's most irrational and preposterous ideas about race, in *All in the Family* becomes, in Lionel's rendition, a way to simultaneously play upon, and parody, a white man's fears about the mixing of races.

The limited number of direct transpositions from *Till Death* to *All in the Family* is due, at least in part, to the different scales and demands of TV production in the two countries. Whereas a season of *Till Death* comprised between seven and ten episodes (every single one of them written by Johnny Speight), a full season of

All in the Family required twenty-four episodes (written by Norman Lear, as well as by other writers under his supervision). But a more important factor to consider is how the two creators differed in their approach to comedy writing. Where Speight concentrated on dialogue as a vehicle for confrontation between the characters (with the result that in most episodes of *Till Death* not much happens), Lear and his collaborators wrote episodes that were much more structured and plot-driven. So while *Till Death* is undoubtedly more daring than *All in the Family* in terms of language (a major source of controversy, for example, was Alf Garnett's overabundant use of the word "bloody," previously almost unheard on the BBC), in terms of situation the American series is more innovative and braver than its British counterpart, tackling issues that had been considered unfit for primetime entertainment.

For example, the episode "Judging Books by Covers," which aired on February 9, 1971, is credited with paving the way for non-stereotypical representations of gay characters on American television (we know, for example, that it provided an important precedent for the first made-for-television movie to deal with homosexuality, *That Certain Summer*, which was shown on ABC in November of 1972). In "Judging Books by Covers" Archie's and, by extension, the public's assumptions about homosexuality are challenged when we discover that Mike and Gloria's friend Roger – whose appearance, demeanor and tastes perfectly correspond to the stereotypical idea of a gay man – is actually heterosexual, while Archie's bar buddy Steve, a very masculine-looking (and acting) man, is gay. Interestingly enough, one of the targets of ridicule in the episode is the distinctly nationalist flavor of Archie's homophobic remarks, namely his conviction that one of the most tell-tale signs of Roger's homosexuality is his being an anglophile (it is a well-known fact, Archie claims, that England is "a fag country"). Much to his consternation, it is instead the all-American Steve, a former professional football player, who calmly admits to being gay. As Stephen Tropiano has observed, what makes this episode stand out in comparison with contemporary representations of homosexuality on American television, is the fact that "Steve isn't ashamed, embarrassed, or troubled about being gay. The real issue here isn't Steve's sexual orientation, but the unreliability and the danger of stereotyping on the basis of appearance" (187).

The extent to which this episode could be experienced as disturbing, and even subversive, by conservative Americans can be inferred from the comments made by their most powerful political spokesman, president Richard Nixon. In the course of a conversation with his chief of staff Bob Halderman and his chief domestic advisor John Ehrlichman, on May 13, 1971, Nixon talked about his outraged reaction to "Judging Books by Covers." After watching the scene in which Archie's "handsome, virile" friend Steve reveals he is gay, Nixon had turned the TV off in disgust. What the episode did, in his view, was to glorify homosexuality "on

public television.” It was not that he objected to homosexuality on moral grounds, he claimed, but he considered it a serious danger to the nation’s strength and power, since homosexuality had been the downfall of Greece, Rome, “the Popes,” France, and Britain. By contrast, in strong societies, like Russia, there was no room for homosexuals because, in Nixon’s words, “they root them out” (“Nixon Tapes”).

Unlike *Till Death, All in the Family* ventured into areas that had been previously deemed incompatible with comedy. It violated some of the basic conventions of the sitcom genre, to the point of occasionally abandoning the mode of comedy altogether. This can be seen, for example, in the totally unexpected and genuinely shocking ending of “Archie is Branded” (February 24, 1973). In this episode someone paints a swastika on the Bunkers’ front door, having mistaken their house for that of a Jewish neighbor. Assuming the Bunkers are Jewish, a man named Paul, the leader of the Hebrew Defense League, offers them the protection of his group. Despite its unusual opening, the episode initially seems to follow a familiar pattern. Much of the humor derives from Archie’s indignant reaction to the idea that someone might think him Jewish and the fact that, despite his prejudice, he approves of the “eye-for-an-eye” philosophy of the Hebrew militant group, whereas Mike and Gloria, typically, are against any form of violence. Eventually Paul discovers that he is in the wrong house and leaves. Just when everything seems to have gone back to normal, with the family reunited in the living room, an explosion is heard. As one person, Archie, Edith, Mike and Gloria rush to the front door only to discover that Paul has fallen victim to a deadly attack. We do not see what they see, but with the camera fixed on their ashen, horrified faces, framed in the doorway, we can read it in their expressions. As the camera zooms in on Archie, visibly in shock, and he voices what everybody is thinking (“that’s Paul, they blew him up in his car”), we may easily forget that we are watching a comedy. That the mood is somber is confirmed by the absence of the theme music as the closing credits of the show roll on the screen. As Horace Newcombe noted, “and the audience is left once again to consider the meaning of the episode” (224).

A surprisingly dramatic note is also struck in a number of episodes, such as “Edith’s Christmas Story” (December 22, 1973), in which Edith discovers that she has a lump in her breast, or “The Draft Dodger” (December 25, 1975), which dramatizes the sharp division of the country over the Vietnam War. But perhaps the greatest gamble was taken with the two-part episode “Edith’s 50th Birthday” (October 16, 1977) in which Edith narrowly escapes being raped by a young man who has gained entrance into her home by posing as a policeman. In her 1999 study on the treatment of rape on primetime television, Lisa Cuklanz described this episode as ground-breaking and noted how “the horror of forced ‘intimacy’ [was] made clear through the dialogue and physical contact between the attacker and Edith.” What, in her view, also made this episode unique for its time, was its

“thorough attention to the aftermath of rape for the victim and her family,” and its “fairly realistic representation of how the dynamics of post-rape trauma might play out within a family” (140-141). Recognizing that the theme of sexual violence, so unlikely for a sitcom, required a special approach, the director Paul Bogart decided to shoot the entire episode without interruptions, as opposed to the customary scene by scene. As he explained years later in an interview, Bogart did not want the studio audience to have a chance to relax and release the tension. A temporary stop, however, became inevitable when the studio audience erupted in cheers and screams on seeing Edith throwing a burning cake in her attacker’s face and running out of the house.²

The fact that, as we have seen, Norman Lear and his collaborators used a quintessentially popular genre – the sitcom – to address controversial, disturbing, and potentially divisive subject matter, appears all the more remarkable when one considers that they were subject to the unique pressures and demands of commercial television. Week after week they took risks and dared to raise the bar of what was deemed acceptable on primetime television, in a context in which a drop in the ratings and/or the displeasure of sponsors could determine their show’s premature demise. While their portrayal of the basic unit of society – the family – may be said to have followed for the most part a safer and more reassuring route than the one taken by their British model, their treatment of those social, cultural, and political issues which continually invaded the aptly-named Bunker household was often refreshingly fearless. And in a way, it was precisely that relatively comforting depiction of family life – which many have compared unfavorably to Speight’s uncompromisingly bleak view of the British household – which made the uncomfortable issues confronting the Bunkers stand out in bold relief. The basic bond of mutual affection that, underneath the perpetual bickering, kept the Bunkers together reduced the distance between fictional characters and viewers, and, thus, invited a surprisingly large segment of the American population to reflect on the ways in which their society was changing.

It is certainly a sign of the novelty of approach to family life in both *Till Death* and *All in the Family*, that the two patriarchal figures, Alf and Archie, are portrayed as authoritarian but not in the least authoritative. Archie, in particular, is a far cry from those wise, benevolent father figures so prominent in older series, such as the long-running *Father Knows Best* (as some critics have suggested, an alternative title to *All in the Family* could very well be “Father knows least”). In his analysis of *All in the Family* Roger Rosenblatt has even argued that “the Bunkers’ childishness and panic reside in the father; therefore, when a problem (abortion, death, racism) hits the Bunkers... the one member of the family who is supposed to represent order and authority” proves the least qualified to deal with it (62). Both

² On the studio audience’s reaction to this episode, see also McCrohan 134-136.

Alf and Archie have a favorite easy chair in the living room where no one else is allowed to sit. It is their throne, but one from which they watch in helpless amazement and frustration a world where they can no longer find their bearings. Unlike Else, Edith too has her own chair, placed next to Archie's, but it is evidently simpler and less comfortable than his. It is an effective visual reminder of Archie's overbearing propensities, but also of the enduring closeness and intimacy between husband and wife (which is what most differentiates *All in the Family* from *Till Death*). In September 1978 the Bunkers' chairs were put on permanent display at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. What that ceremony recognized, and paid homage to, was the fact that Archie and Edith, and indeed the whole world of *All in the Family*, had risen to the status of cultural icons, had become indeed part of the American collective imagination.

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