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Feminism Comes of Age on Television The Portrayals of Empowered Older Women from *Murder She Wrote* to *Damages*

Myrna A. Hant

According to the Frankfurt School,¹ “So-called mass culture and communications stand in the center of leisure activity, are important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, and should thus be seen as major institutions of contemporary societies” (Miller, 2002, p. 17). The early feminist television critical examinations decried the “political reality” of females on television for the “demeaning and stereotypical images of women” (Brunsden, 1997, p. 5). Largely absent though, in previous and present feminist discourse, is the examination of older women. A feminist textual analysis of mature women on television historically revealed a surprisingly consistent media archetype. By deconstructing the politics of representation and the changes in 21st century portrayals of older women, media pedagogy may be expanded, and thus can assist in giving older individuals “power over their cultural environments” (Kellner, 1995, p. 10).

The entrenchment of ageism, particularly directed at women, has a long history in the United States of America. Ageism, a term defined by Robert Butler in 1975, is a

. . . process of systemic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender. Old people are categorized as, “senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills. (Butler, 1975, p. 12)

Kathleen Woodward warns that “the practice of ageism can also be a horrible self-fulfilling prophecy.” In terms of women, especially, “as younger women turn these very prejudices against women older than themselves, they will in effect be turning against their very future selves as older women” (Woodward, 1999, p. xiii). Prime time television shows for more than 50 years have presented a typically consistent portrayal of older people, especially women, as ridiculous, interfering, obsessed with the family, and incapable of functioning outside the home. Betty Friedan

discusses a survey conducted by Retirement Living on a cross section of people under and over 65 and the most commonly used adjectives for television's over-60 depictions were 'ridiculous,' 'decrepit,' and 'childish' (Friedan, 1993). In another survey conducted by Cohen (2002), participants stereotyped the portrayal of older women as having the following characteristics: living in the past; old fashioned in behavior, thinking, and the way they looked; not interested in sexual activity; basically cared for by families without giving in return, and largely invisible (Cohen, 2002). They are often portrayed as stubborn, eccentric, foolish, dependent, frail, vulnerable, isolated, grumpy, and a drain on society (Bazzini, 1997, p. 7). However, a feminist textual analysis of older women presently on television reveals a gradual and accelerating transformation of depictions which is the harbinger of a new politics of representation.

"The emergence of cultivation analysis (which deliberately focuses solely on television as the dominant medium) and agenda setting research...explore ways in which television can create common assumptions and ways of understanding the world, not by overt attempts at persuasion, but simply by privileging some kinds of images, representations or facts over others" (Miller, 2002). Douglas Kellner promotes media pedagogy as giving individuals "power over their cultural environment" (Kellner, 1995, p. 10). Deconstructing some common assumptions of the 'new aging' is an exercise in this empowerment. In the new paradigm, older women are seen as powerful, sexual and in control. In order to analyze this change, it is helpful to understand some demographic variables, both old and new. Secondly, a perusal of the counter-hegemonic older woman characters starting in the mid-80's elucidates the pioneers of feminist aging. And thirdly, a textual analysis of the new older woman offers an exercise in media literacy to promote the banishment of negative stereotypes not only for older viewers but for a younger audience as well.

Since 1950, the average American has added 30 years to his/her life span. For the average 65-year-old in the 21st Century, a man has 16.6 years to live and a woman has 19.5 years. One quarter of all Americans who turn 65 will see their 90th birthday, a possibility for 40% of the aging population by 2050. And perhaps, most significantly of all, the disability years after 65 number 14 years (Freedman, 2007). By 2030, 20% of the population will be over 65 (Cruikshank, 2009). Statistics alone of this cohort augur well that they will become an increasingly important segment of the population. Thus, despite being referred to as the senior tsunami, the age wave, the grey hordes, or an avalanche, older Americans are increasingly becoming an important cultural cohort. A new paradigm is partially a result of the numbers, the education level of the over 65 group (25% of baby boomers have a bachelor's degree) and the economic strength of the aging. According to Joe Flint (2012), 2.7 trillion dollars were spent by those over 50 in 2010, making the aging population a financial force as well.

Cruikshank's thesis is that "aging in North America is shaped more by culture than biology" (2009, p. ix). What will be the cultural messages for successful ag-

ing? Dominant values in American culture have long been the enshrinement of individualism and the need for productivity, often associated with money (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) or as Cruikshank delineates, “Self-esteem is very closely linked to the cultural value of independence, autonomy, and self-reliance” (Cruikshank, 2009, p. 17). Rather than critique these values for the older population—are they really applicable to this age group?—the media has recently made a concerted effort to promote agency and the denial of aging for the purpose of selling products. The new paradigm promotes not getting old and certainly not acting old. Accordingly plastic surgery, skin treatments, medicalizing aging, exercise, and adventure travel assist in the process of ‘youthful aging.’²

Increasingly the media and advertisers are conditioning people to expect a more youthful and energetic ‘old age.’ A magazine for baby boomers is titled *What’s Next?*; a retirement community in Laguna, California, Leisure World, changes its name to Laguna Woods in 2005; Elderhostel now calls itself Road Scholars. And Freedman (2007) reveals Paine Webber (among many advertisers) declaring,

They say retirement means the end of your working years. We say plan ahead so you can redefine retirement any time and any way you want. For many, it will be a bridge to a second career. A new business. Or true labor of love.

Or a Morgan Stanley ad declares,

Who made 60 the magical number? I want to stay in the game for as long as I can. Maybe I’ll start a company.

According to Susan Jacoby (2011), the new successful aging is a person who presents an “image of vigor and physical wellbeing, demonstrates a consistent willingness to try anything new” (p. xii), has “faith in the possibility of repeated self-transformation” (p. 57), believes that “clean and virtuous living will keep the doctor away” (p. 74), and accepts “that a combination of exercise and endless high tech surgeries will restore not only the general well-being but the athletic capacities and/or appearance of youth” (p. 76). Whether all these traits are possible or even desirable is debatable but some in the media have accepted these premises as they configure advertising and increasingly portrayals of aging on television.

Not surprisingly, producers of television programs with older characters are starting to become cognizant of the new ‘healthy aging’ mythos. Perhaps the 99 million Americans over 50 may be tapped for purchasing the products they are trying to sell. Instead of insulting the older population with tiresome stereotypes, a few shows are paving the way for innovative depictions.

Consistently for almost the entire history of television productions, older women have fallen into three categories: the other, the invisible, and the metaphor. Simone de Beauvoir (2011) in her book, *The Second Sex*, originally published in 1949, defined essential personhood as male and female while defining herself in terms of the male. Accordingly, the essential being or standard of womanhood in American

culture is youthfulness. Therefore, if a woman is ‘old,’ she is not essential woman but rather ‘the other’ and consequently different. The older woman is perceived as menopausal and hence is no longer a recipient of the ‘male gaze.’ Moreover, older women adopt this view of themselves and desperately try to be young or at least ‘pass’ as young and thus, young and old are accomplices in creating a social construct that defines being old as a negative attribute.

The ‘other’ is parodied in Sophia Petrillo in *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992), the wise-cracking, smart-mouthed senior member of the quadrangle of ‘golden women.’ While relishing the freedom of older people, she carries the twin burdens of being uninhibited enough to say exactly what she feels but is also excoriated as ‘the other.’ She sits on a stool in the kitchen when the three other women are discussing their lives. She is part of the scene but only on the periphery. Ninety-year-old Betty White in *Hot in Cleveland* (2010-present) replicates the older woman who “talks dirty and can deliver the punch line” (Flint, 2012), but is nothing more than the hackneyed stereotype revisited.

Stereotypical Roles for Older Women

Traditionally, the older woman is only ‘visible’ in her roles as mother and grandmother. Frequently, she is a ‘Jewish Mother’ (whether Jewish or not), as she whines, devours, and complains. Historically, to depict an older woman as an intellectually vital, sexually active, productive member of society in her own right is extremely rare. Emblematic of visible mother, but invisible womanhood, are characters such as Edith Bunker (*All in the Family*, 1971-1979), Estelle Costanza (*Seinfeld*, 1993-1998), and Marie Barone (*Everybody Loves Raymond*, 1996-2005). They are women, much like the pantheon of Jewish mothers, Ida Morgenstern (*Rhoda*), Sylvia (*The Nanny*), Sheila (*South Park*, 1997-present) and Susie (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 2000-present), who “push, weedle, demand, constrain, and are insatiable in their expectations and wants” (Prell, 1999, p. 143). Too frequently we see the depictions on television of older women as a metaphor for disease, isolation, worthlessness, vulnerability, dissatisfaction, and decrepitude. Aptly depicted by Livia (mother of Tony, Barbara, and Janice) in *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), is the ‘ill’ Italian matriarch who closely mimics a Jewish mother stereotype.

Counter-Hegemonic Portrayals

Gradually, older women characters are breaking the stereotype and instead of being always presented as the other, the mother, and the metaphor, a few are defying the archetype. As early as 1984 two dynamic older women on popular television shows convinced audiences that mature women can think and be involved in society. *Miss Marple* (1984-present) and Jessica Fletcher portrayed by Angela Lansbury in *Murder She Wrote* (1984-1996) are clever agents who investigate murders. One is an

amateur detective, the model of decorum, in the British village of St. Mary Mead, and the other is a mystery writer who herself scrutinizes murders in Cabot Cove, Maine, and later New York City. Both use their wits, rather than their physicality, to solve the mysteries, applying what might be labeled a feminine approach to sleuthing. Through observation and keen insights into human behavior, these women are the heroines who are not marginalized and certainly not invisible. Noteworthy is the beginning of each segment of *Murder She Wrote* where Jessica Fletcher is shown riding her bicycle and waving at many members of the community. However, both women are ‘spinsters,’ presumably so they will have time to pursue their cases rather than obsess over mothering and grandmothering. They are the pioneers, though, for the multi-dimensional female characters in the 21st century.

In the 21st century, television increasingly departs from the older woman as parody to the more nuanced portrayals of the ‘new aging’ female. Incorporated into this new ideology of aging are mainly three categories: physical aging, mental aging, and emotional aging. In regards to the physical manifestations of aging, the primary rule is to not get old or especially don’t act old. It is essential to present vigor and well-being in an effort to ignore or deny aging or to belie stereotypes. The new picture of mental aging is agency, being in control of one’s mind and one’s destiny. This power manifests itself in influence over others and consequently, the older woman is not invisible. Emotional aging incorporates a sexual self in which love, growth and transformation exist. Childbearing is not possible but the ‘male gaze’ is still a precursor to a satisfying sexual and emotional life.

As Time Goes By, a British sitcom airing from 1992 to 2005 (and in constant reruns to the present), is a clever depiction of mature lovers who meet after 38 years without contact. Having met in 1953, he as a second lieutenant and she a nurse, they lose contact after he is sent to Korea. The title of the show is based upon the poignant song *As Time Goes By*, written in 1931 for a Broadway musical, *Everybody’s Welcome*. It is also the theme song for the opening credits. The lyrics capture the possibility that love is timeless and can still flourish after 38 years:

You must remember this.
 A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.
 The fundamental things apply as time goes by.
 And when two lovers woo,
 They still say I love you.
 On that you can rely.
 No matter what the future brings.
 As time goes by.”

—*As Time Goes By*, music and words by Herman Hupfeld, 1932

The song closely parallels the interactions between Jean (Judi Dench) and Lionel (Geoffrey Palmer), a mature couple bemused by their connection so late in life.

The dialogue constantly refers to their old age when they are interacting with young people. After a party attended by young book publishers, Lionel, who is

forced to go in an effort to promote his book on Kenya, remarks to Jean, “This was not a generation gap, it was a generation chasm.” They are comfortable with their ages although constantly reacting to ‘ageist’ comments with a smirk and a knowing wisdom. They accept the limitations of age and all its accompanying ailments (leg cramps or less energy), but are not apologetic about this stage.

The sweet poignancy of ‘what might have been’ permeates the show but never overwhelms it. In one episode, “A Surprise for Jean” from 1997, Lionel finally has the proof that he did send Jean a love letter from Korea, a letter she never received. When a copy of his letter miraculously ends up in the Imperial War Museum, Lionel remarks, “There it was, all faded in a glass case. A letter from Second Lieutenant Hardcastle to Nurse Jean Pargetter, posted in Korea.” She replies, “But it never arrived.” The letter begins, “My darling Jean,” and Jean laments that if she had only gotten that letter her life may have been completely different. “It’s a beautiful letter, Lionel. You really did love me.” And Lionel admits, “I still do.” It’s never too late to experience deep commitment and love no matter when it occurs in life. Ironically, despite all the nostalgia the emphasis is on ‘newness.’ Lionel encapsulates these beginnings by telling Jean. “I’m starting a new chapter in my life. I don’t want all the old pages. Too many were blank anyhow.”

Jean is a professional woman and owner of a secretarial service, “Type for You,” who is portrayed as a dedicated employer capable of efficiency and unquestionable agency. She is emotionally and sexually attracted to Lionel while at the same time perfectly self-aware about her age and her (and his) physical limitations. Neither she nor Lionel are subjects of ageist humor. When age-related humor exists, it largely emanates from Jean or Lionel in self-deprecating remarks about their ‘ancientness.’ At the same time Jean revels in her stage of life with no apologies for any age-related shortcomings. Health issues are just byproducts of her getting older, certainly not the metaphor for her existence.

Tyne Daly in *Judging Amy* (2001-2005) introduces the audience to a rarity, Maxine Gray. Not only is she a sought-after professional woman, a social worker with the department of children and families in Hartford, Connecticut, she is also a person who is respected for what she says and does. Not physically beautiful, not young and a little plump, she carries herself with grace and confidence and has love interests in the show—notably the rich businessman Jared Duff to whom she becomes engaged, losing him to a heart attack 48 hours before the wedding. The audience observes a gray-haired woman, not obsessed with her appearance, who knows who she is and who is not trying to camouflage her age or her wisdom. Capable of toughness, love, and humor, she is also a multi-dimensional character who represents frailties (she has not spoken to her brother in 12 years).

Her relationship with Ignacio Messina, her landscape designer, is not a demeaning one—a coupling of two old folks that are laughable caricatures (like Sophia Petrillo’s relationships). Rather they are presented as mature individuals who learn from each other and communicate their needs and feelings. Mr. Messina takes Maxine salsa

dancing and remarks that she lacks passion on the dance floor. The implication is that Maxine needs to accept her femininity and enjoy the connection with him as a partner. He is smitten with this gray-haired overweight grandmother, and the attraction is believable and poignant, not ridiculous. He formally asks Maxine if he can 'court her' and she is pleased and willing to continue the relationship. Maxine is seen throughout the series advising not only her granddaughter and daughter, but advocating, as a professional, for youngsters in trouble.

Sharon Gless in *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) manages as Debbie Notony to present a working-class woman who accepts her son and others the way they are. With her lashing remarks and her impatience with intolerance, she is the admirable advocate of justice and humanity. She is frequently contrasted with those who cannot change and must profess their ideologies no matter what the price. It is telling that Brian's mother, a lonely widow whose phone never rings and who is the antithesis of Debbie, is adamant about excoriating her gay son, telling him how sinful his lifestyle is and that he will surely go to Hell.

Despite Debbie's floozy looks and her ubiquitous t-shirt ("It's All About Me"), she is not degraded as an older woman and does not pattern her life only after her own demands. In one episode, a gay boy is found dead in the trash bin behind Debbie's restaurant. Detective Horvath labels him, "John Doe." Debbie is indignant that the detective is cavalier about the death and yells at him, "The kid has a name. You're a homophobic prick." She is incensed that no one in the community, including the detective, takes this death seriously enough to investigate fully, and she proceeds to find out the identity of the boy. Detective Horvath is so impressed with her perseverance, and her humaneness, that he wishes to date Debbie. Again, Debbie is hardly an invisible presence on the show but rather a pivotal character endowed with street-smart wisdom.

Frances Conroy's Ruth Fisher in *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005) reveals an exceedingly complex woman, layered with inadequacies, uncertainties, and struggles. She is an imperfect wife who resorts to an affair with Hiram (Ed Begley, Jr.), while still married to Nathaniel. Later as a widow she has an active sex life, dating her boss at the florist shop and ultimately marrying George Sibley (James Cromwell), a geologist and professor. Although she mainly dresses in a plain, matronly style, and is a self-accepting prude, she is a desirable woman who attracts many men.

In an episode of *Six Feet Under* entitled "Ecotone" (2005), she tries to rekindle her romantic relationship with Hiram, but comes to the conclusion that she is desperately disgusted with all the men in her life who have constantly made demands on her. In an epiphany of self-awareness, she dramatically 'shoots' each of the love interests in her life and comes to understand that she no longer needs or is interested in Hiram. Despite George's constant entreaties to travel together 'to close the distance between them' and even after George recovers from his mental breakdown, Ruth concludes that she wants her freedom. There is nothing 'other' about this character who struggles, as do all the characters, regardless of age, to

make sense of a world which includes the incomprehensible (the death of Nate). Her mother-daughter battles with Claire are representative of the difficulties of familial interaction. She is neither static nor is she purely defined as a mother and grandmother. Her multi-age support group, her knitting circle, accepts and discusses her problems with men in the light of all women's problems with men, not classifying her as 'old' and different. She continues to explore who she is as an employee in the florist shop and ultimately as an owner, along with her friend, Bettina, of the Four Paws Pet Retreat. There is nothing ageist depicted about her choices.

Stephanie Cole as Joan Norton is the mature emotional foil to Martin Clune as Dr. Martin Ellingham in the British comedy drama series *Doc Martin* (2004-present). The show takes place in a seaside village, Portwenn, in Cornwall, United Kingdom, where Dr. Ellingham, a brilliant vascular surgeon in London, develops a severe fear of blood and must stop practicing surgery. He becomes a general practitioner in Portwenn where he encounters a multitude of illnesses, accidents, and emergencies with the local population. Joan Norton (Doc Martin's aunt), runs a farm outside of the village and frequently offers sage advice to her nephew. Martin, as a young boy, had spent every summer with his Aunt Joan who was the only person in his youth who really loved him. Joan, a long-time widow, is physically strong as she is the sole occupant of the farm and thus is required to do the necessary manual labor as well as to tend the animals. Although she has her share of aches and pains from her physical efforts she is never obviously portrayed as physically weak or in need of special attention because she's older. She drives around Portwenn in a pick-up truck no more or less recklessly than the other inhabitants of the village. She makes her own decisions and takes responsibility for them and what happens to her. She is particularly accepting of Doc Martin's obstreperousness although she frequently points out to him the effects of his behavior on the villagers and his love interest, Louisa, the local elementary school teacher. She is a multi-layered character who experiences flirtations and love interests on the show; an indication that she is capable of love and change.

In one of the most poignant episodes of *Doc Martin*, "Of All the Harbours," aired on January 1, 2004, Joan's former lover returns to Portwenn after 30 years. The viewer learns that 30 years ago John Slater and Joan had an affair while Joan was married. Because Martin's parents felt her encounter was morally reprehensible, they threatened that Martin could never visit her in the summer again unless she gave up John. Joan decides that since Martin is like a son to her she will tell her lover to leave. Thirty years later John returns to see Joan and finds out that her husband has died. He wants to resume their relationship. There is flirtation and obvious sexual attraction. Joan feels that she's free and despite being 'a certified ancient monument,' she loves John and is ready to sail the world with him. But John is diagnosed with a fatal heart condition, hides the news from Joan and sails away from the village. As Joan and her nephew, Martin, watch him sail away,

Martin says, "All those times you brought me up here (on the cliff overlooking the ocean). Was it always to watch him sail?" And Joan responds, "I'm sorry. Affairs taint everything, don't they?" The lovers, although in their seventies, are portrayed with dignity and sexual tension. A few references to age, 'we're both 105,' do not define the relationship and the viewer shares in their love and hope and possibility for transformation. Alas, the love is star-crossed due to illness, a complication which could occur at any age.

In a later episode, "The GP Always Rings Twice," initially airing on October 15, 2007, Edward Melville, a young painter, becomes smitten with Joan. He feels she has a neo-classical look and would like to paint a portrait of her. Despite a 50-year age difference, Edward and Joan commence a sexual relationship and are even caught on the kitchen table when Martin barges into Joan's house. When the shocked Doc Martin tries to convince Joan that, "Sex on the kitchen table with a man 50 years your junior does not qualify as a real relationship," and that her behavior is grossly inappropriate, she responds, "I'm not going to watch time kick by. My life is not over." When Martin protests, she quietly explains, "I'm going to continue to see Edward. It won't last forever and it certainly isn't true love, but it's what I want. Get used to it." In these episodes Joan embodies all aspects of 'the new aging.' She is physically fit; she has control over her decisions (agency); and she is a sexual being. No one is going to convince her that her remaining years should or should not be 'appropriate' to her age.

Maggie Smith who plays the Dowager (Countess of Grantham, Violet Crawley) in *Downton Abbey* (2010-present), is an iconic figure in the panoply of aristocratic British characters from the early 20th century. Violet Crawley, the Dowager, represents not so much a deviation from the caricature of the older British elite but an affirmation of the expected respect that someone in her position demands. Nonetheless, as a depiction of an older female character, she is admirable in her strength and visibility. Physically she neither deigns to deny or accept aging; it is simply not an issue. Although most of the scenes are shot with her sitting down, she is erect and presents herself as vigorous with a sense of well-being. It is in the area of agency that her character illuminates the difference between the stereotype of the ineffective and invisible elderly and the influence she exerts on all the members at Grantham.

The Dowager is a consistent character mired in her sense of respectability based upon the mores of the second half of the 19th century and pre-World War 1 (WW1) England. She predictably mirrors the standards of the aristocracy about titles, positions and money by disdaining those without the proper heritage. She also embodies the old era perplexed by the newfangled gadgets invading Downton Abbey. When confronted with a telephone, she cryptically decries, "Is this an instrument of communication or torture?" The plot centers around the loss of The Dower House, in Downton, Yorkshire, to Matthew Crawley, a cousin and a member of the upper middle class rather than nobility. Interspersed throughout all the episodes

are her derogatory comments that reinforce the distance between her class and ‘the others.’

The Dowager, Violet, is extremely upset when *Downton Abbey*, The Dower House, is turned into a convalescent home for wounded soldiers during WW1. “Oh really, It’s like living in a second-rate hotel, where the guests keep arriving and no one seems to leave.” Or consistent with her station in life she’ll admonish, “Don’t be defeatist, dear, it’s very middle class.” Her nemesis is Isobel Crawley, the mother of Matthew, the prospective inheritor of *Downton Abbey*. They participate in constant verbal exchanges invariably with the dowager trying to demean Isobel. Isobel, mistakenly assuming the Countess is saying something pleasant to her responds, “I take that as a compliment” to which the Countess immediately retorts, “I must have said it wrong.”

Despite the stereotype, the Countess is a much more multi-layered character than would be predicted and she is capable of change and transformation. Mrs. Crawley, the embodiment of the ‘new’ woman is an activist and pits herself against the Dowager in several instances. Mrs. Crawley advocates for modern medical practices at the *Downton Hospital*, much against the wishes of the Dowager. Ultimately, the Dowager must share power over the hospital when Mrs. Crawley is appointed Chairman of the hospital Board. Although disconcerted by change, the Dowager Countess accepts it without excessive fuss. Another instance is the expected awarding of the Best Bloom in the Village Award, an automatic honor bestowed yearly on the Dowager. In the end, the Countess announces that the father of the butler will be the winner. These instances represent the Dowager’s willingness to accept change, although reluctantly, with dignity. William, the footman, is seriously wounded in a WW1 battle, and because he’s not an officer is not eligible to be nursed at *Downton Abbey*, but the Dowager goes against the military officials and makes sure that William can be cared for at *Downton*.

Both Isobel and Violet in their distinctive roles represent women who can make decisions and who are capable of change. They are empowered within their environments and are respected by all of the younger characters. Sickness befalls younger members of the household, not them. Violet is a stalwart of tradition whereas Isobel defies tradition but each in her own way, struggles to embrace the England that is necessarily and profoundly changed by WW1. They epitomize the ‘new aging’ on television, the physical aspects of vigorousness and well-being and the mental capacity that promotes agency, control their minds and their destinies.

In a contemporary setting but just as imbued with agency is Kathy Bates as Harriet (“Harry”) Korn in *Harry’s Law* (2011-2012). She portrays an indefatigable lawyer who was fired as a patent lawyer mainly because she lost interest in her work. Instead she’s chosen to establish a tiny law firm, initially running her office out of a shoe store. Her clients are often ones who desperately need the services of a smart, no-nonsense lawyer who really cares about her clients. Always trying to find the positive qualities in others, she sometimes hides her compassion with

humor and sarcasm. The cast of clients consist of a panoply of believable yet bizarre characters who often appear guilty, except to Harry. From a third grade teacher who moonlights making sex tapes (“Reproach Time”) to a mother accused of killing her encephalitic baby (“Mercy or Murder”), Harry is tough, reasonable, and emotionally involved. Usually the cases have moral components but often they represent the ambiguities of the law and of life. In “Mercy or Murder,” after the nurse proves to be the killer of the baby, Harry remarks “the DA was right. This was mercy killing; he just had the wrong angel of mercy.”

One possible explanation for Harry’s persona is her explication of what happened to her when she was 12 years old. She and her father were shooting quail and her father said as a special treat that they would go afterwards to the local “private club.” When they got there they were not allowed in because they were Jewish. Harry never forgot what her father said that day—“America is not supposed to be this way.” Harry laments that now “America is less and less inclusive every day and that’s not what America is supposed to be.” She views herself as a force to improve this.

Harry is a large woman, not sexually involved with anyone but a force that represents the predominance of the mind as a conduit to agency. In many ways she’s an androgynous figure who is visible in whatever environment she inhabits. She is not physically, emotionally, or mentally weak, and if she is a metaphor it is for empowerment through promoting a moral order.

Another series, *Damages*, starring Glenn Close as Patty Hewes (2007-2012), has been specifically designated a television program highlighting the intricacies of power. According to Daniel Zelman (2009), one of the writers, “What really motivated us to write about this world, first and foremost, was our interest in power dynamics, the dynamics of power in society.” The fascinating choice of an older woman, Glenn Close, as the conduit for examination of what power is and to what extent people will manipulate others to achieve it, is indicative that older women, *per se*, do not just represent weakness and illness. One world in which women now command power and influence is the legal realm. Patty Hewes (Glenn Close) is the head of the law firm, Hewes and Associates, located in New York City. Her foil is a young and originally quite impressionable protégée, Ellen Parsons (Rose Byrne). Together they perform a waltz of attraction and detestation towards each other as they work on cases dealing with such contemporary issues as insider trading, environmental issues, and banking. They are both presented as smart and calculating—Patty as far more experienced in deviousness than the naïve Ellen. Juxtaposing two highly intelligent women for and against each other who are intoxicated with power, sends a message that women, both old and young, are no different from men in their motivations.

Patty is unrelenting in her ruthless endeavors to control all situations. She’s a thin and very attractive woman who dresses stylishly in the latest fashions and is precisely adorned with earrings. She’s tough, smart, strong, and feared. Egomaniacal in her pursuit of justice she is also a passionate champion of her clients. One

fellow lawyer calls her “a real hard dick bitch. If you were a man, I’d kick the shit out of you.” She’ll do absolutely anything to maintain her agency from pretending to fire a ten year employee to having a potential witness’ dog killed to embolden the witness to testify in Patty’s favor. Even she admits that she’s lied and manipulated. “I’m ashamed of myself. I have a lot of flaws.” One of her fellow lawyers proclaims, “Your cases have a stink to them.”

In one episode in Season One, Patty reveals to her new employee Ellen, her protégée, some of her weaknesses. Patty is married for the second time, apparently successfully, and has an incorrigible 17-year-old son. He appears to be the only part of her world that she cannot completely control. She and her husband are frequently called to the boy’s school to deal with his problems. She confesses to Ellen that she should “do herself a favor; don’t have kids. They ruin your ambition. You can leave husbands, but you can’t leave kids. Kids are like clients; they want all of you, all of the time.” This is a dramatic difference from older women typically portrayed on television whose only identities are as mothers and grandmothers. Children for these women are the essence of their identities even though their television roles center around admonishing and teaching their adult children.

Thus, Glenn Close’s Patty Hewes is another example of a fit older woman whose physical ailments play no part in her persona. She both demands and commands attention and for those who will not accept her power she will destroy them. Agency is the fiber that feeds her ambition. She is never invisible but always is scheming to win. She is not asexual but projects the image that overt sexual behavior is inappropriate in the work world. In many ways she is the metaphor for the feared “feminist” who will emasculate men and eventually destroy them. The fact that she’s an older woman radiates a unique message—powerful, in control, visible older women are forces within society.

The decoding of media stereotypes of older women and the awareness of increasingly counter-hegemonic empowered women helps to promote agency for this cohort. It was only 14 years ago that McQuaide (1998) wrote:

Women doing well are aware of a troubling discrepancy between the positive way they see themselves and social devaluation they perceive and they feel challenged to live lives that contradict the “over the hill” stereotype. Their sense of ‘personhood’ is stronger than ever, yet society and media are fading them into invisibility that does not sit well with the baby boomer generation. They are aware of dissonance between the increased freedom and power they feel and negative cultural stereotypes and media portrayals. (McQuaide, 1998, p. 21)

Too often, males in the media business determine who and how women shall be presented on television.

Male contempt for the older woman as unfit for the reproducer/sex object roles filled by younger women (still the primary source of female power in the patriarchy) is the foundation of the old woman’s position...If we are not sex objects or

breeders or caretakers or wage workers, we are loathsome since it is these roles which makes females legitimate in male judgment. (Copper, 1997, p. 122)

There is still a multitude of examples of egregious stereotyping but the politics of representation of this cohort is changing from the debilitating depictions of helplessness, fragility, and aimlessness. It is being replaced by a more identifiable new older woman, one who is strong, motivated, and still a sexual being. This image not only helps the mature woman to be hopeful about this stage in life but allows the young as well to look forward to a time of new possibilities and opportunities filled with increased agency and renewed activism. Younger women and older women alike can learn that “one’s age is not necessarily the principal signifier for an individual and is not the barrier to life’s riches and enjoyment that some young people (and program makers) seem to believe” (Healey, 2002, p. 112).

Notes

¹ The Frankfurt School, one of the three theoretical schools of cultural studies, was first developed in Nazi Germany in the 1930’s. This school focused on how the Nazis used media and culture to indoctrinate people. “During the 1930’s the Frankfurt school developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to culture and analysis of texts, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications.” (Miller, 2002, p. 17) When the founders of the Frankfurt School were forced to flee Germany, they continued their work in the United States finding that American mass culture was every bit as ideological as Germany’s. According to Douglas Kellner, they found that the United States was a culture of consumer capitalism, heterosexuality and competition.

² Cenegenics, sometimes labeled “youthful aging” is “the world’s largest age management practice and the recognized leading authority in its field” according to their website, www.cenegenics.com. Their focus is on healthy aging that promotes low-glycemic nutrition, exercise, nutrition supplements and hormone therapies. Featured on 60 Minutes on April 23, 2006 Cenegenics detailed their program of providing supplements of testosterone and human growth hormones.

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