I'm hoping to be your uterus for the next nine months : mothers and motherhoods in the sitcom Friends (NBC, 1994-2004)

Jessica Thrasher

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Préparée au sein de l'université Le Havre Normandie

"I'm Hoping to be Your Uterus for the Next Nine Months:" Mothers and Motherhoods in the Sitcom *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004)

Présentée et soutenue par
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Prologue: A Kidney Stone is Born

A short scene, less than twenty seconds, midway through a half-hour episode of the American television situation comedy *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) opens with a middle-distance camera shot of two young men in a hospital room. One, wearing a dressing gown and convulsing in pain on a hospital bed, has his right arm wrapped around the other standing next to him. On his left hand, an intravenous drip is taped. Fear, anguish and fatigue contort the man's face. The other man wraps his own arms around the first, standing close to him and comforting him in his agony. The two men's hands are clasped tightly. The pain-wracked man exhorts, "Get these things out of me!" while the other responds reassuringly with, "breathe, breathe, breathe through the pain." The first man blows out a few breaths before screaming, "I want the drugs, Ross, I want the drugs!" Ross responds with the same vehemence, "I do too! I do too!" The two begin to rock back and forth against the bed, the first man's intense suffering dictating the rhythm of their ferocious cadence. The scene ends as both men scream in turns, both now tormented by pain. Seemingly incongruously, the images on screen are, throughout the scene, accompanied by audible laughter emanating from an unseen audience and coding the content not as the traumatic and disturbing scene of intense human suffering the previous description may have implied, but rather as humorous, laughable, and perhaps ridiculous.

On October 8, 1998 more than twenty-six million Americans[1] tuned in to NBC to watch "The One Hundredth," the third episode of *Friends'* fifth season, and, as its title indicates, the one hundredth episode of this overwhelmingly popular television series. The major story line of this celebratory landmark episode was the triumphant arrival of triplets borne by the character of Phoebe Buffay.[2] Interspersed among the scenes of the young woman laboring and giving birth are those of a secondary, more minor, narrative arc from which the above scene is taken: character Joey Tribbiani is diagnosed with kidney stones at the same moment his friend Phoebe is in the process of giving birth.

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[1] For *Friends* Nielsen ratings: http://newmusicandmore.tripod.com/friendsratings05.html.

[2] The one hundredth episode of a television series is generally celebrated as such a milestone not only because it is representative of a specific show's popularity and longevity within an industry in which many series never survive past a few episodes, it is also significant because a program which has reached one hundred episodes is eligible for lucrative syndication deals. For a detailed analysis of Phoebe's gestational surrogacy storyline including micro-analyses of this episode, see Chapter Four.

Within the space of a single twenty-two-minute episode, the sitcom creates two parallel narrative arcs of corporeal pain and suffering. Although parallel in their progression, the arcs also take on a valence of opposition in that they each speak to one side of that classic medico-cultural question/obsession: which is the more painful bodily experience, giving birth or passing kidney stones? The widespread resonance of the question (Google immediately suggests "kidney stones" when "childbirth vs" is typed into its search bar and comes up with over two million thirty thousand results) underscores the cultural fascination with and commitment to quantifying the discomfort of these two thoroughly *un*parallel and unrelated bodily phenomena and results in a sort of gendered competition in terms of the amount of pain a human being may be able to sustain. The question evokes not only the inherent unknowableness of pregnancy, labor and delivery for men but also seems to hint at underlying anxieties that some men would not be able to withstand the grueling pain of childbirth. That kidney stones have somehow become a male equivalent to childbirth corresponds perhaps to some sort of deep need to feel equally capable of not only doing similar bodily work but also managing the intense discomfort required to do so. If the episode does not offer a definitive answer to this medical enigma, its humorous representations clearly tap in the cultural discourses related to it.

Figure 1 Joey in labor.

A later scene follows up with the aftermath of Joey's humorous trauma. Ross is still next to Joey who is now lying calmly in the hospital bed. In the foreground, a doctor holding a tiny jar makes notes in a chart. "Oh my God," sighs Joey with evident relief. Ross brusquely thumps a jocular hand to his friend's chest, saying proudly, "You did it, man." The camera follows the jar in the doctor's hand as he brings it close to Joey in bed. "Would you like to see them?" he asks the young man. Joey begins to beam as he takes the jar between his fingers. Ross leans in closely to get a better look at its contents. Joey's face is proud as his voice rises gently to say with quiet admiration and amazement, "They're so small!" The two men's faces turn to one another as they look into each other's eyes. Pride, satisfaction, and the mutual recognition of having survived a harrowing physical experience unite the men as they lovingly turn their attention to the tiny kidney stones in the jar.

Figure 2 Ross and Joey share a special moment after the delivery of Joey's kidney stones.

Inscribed as it is within the context of the kidney stones versus childbirth debate, this narrative arc is itself structured as a labor and delivery sequence resulting in Joey's "giving birth" to his kidney stones. To accomplish this, the construction of these scenes draws heavily and comically on stereotypical cultural iconography related to childbirth. Ross, through his physical proximity, his patient coaching and his reminders to Joey to breathe, is given the role of the devoted father figure guiding the suffering mother through Lamaze breathing techniques during labor and delivery. Joey's plaintive "I want the drugs!" suggests and parodies the future mother's suffering during natural childbirth and her eventual request for epidural painkillers. The final scene depicting the two men gazing adoringly at the kidney stones as well as Joey's sweetly sentimental "they're so small!" spoofs the more traditional end to the childbirth story: adoring new parents (a mother and father) and newborn baby form a triad as the parental unit contemplates the tiny new arrival in their arms with adoration and amazement.

If these references are not explicit enough for the viewer, the scenes comprising this story line are specifically placed throughout the episode as a humorous parallel and alternative storyline to Phoebe's childbirth narrative concerning the triplets. A scene in which a doctor tells the laboring Phoebe "It's time to try pushing" cuts immediately to a similar one in which a different doctor tells Joey, "It's time to try peeing." The physical processes of expelling the respective objects from bodies (newborn babies for Phoebe, kidney stones for Joey) are thus explicitly linked. Likewise, Ross's paternal presence and coaching of Joey echoes Frank Jr.'s closeness and coaching of Phoebe in the episode's main storyline.

Figure 3 Parallel images of "giving birth" within a single episode.

Why would the sitcom include a parody of childbirth in an episode in which an actual childbirth is also represented? While the proliferation of images related to giving birth overwhelms this episode, the two stories are far from redundant and serve very different purposes. As we have said, this episode's main narrative arc centers on the birth of triplets by Phoebe Buffay. Phoebe's pregnancy and birth giving, however, are configured by the sitcom in circumstances far from traditional. As will be seen in detail in Chapter Four, Phoebe's pregnancy is an example of gestational surrogacy. The character becomes pregnant through the use of assisted reproductive techniques upon the request of her brother and sister-in-law who are unable to have children themselves. This fictional pregnancy, a solution to actress Lisa Kudrow's real life pregnancy, appears to be the earliest example of gestational surrogacy as well as of the extensive use of revolutionary (and invasive) reproductive technologies in an American sitcom. Furthermore, while the extended narrative arc of surrogacy is, in general, structured as humorous, specific moments in this story make a direct appeal to viewers at a deeply emotional level, eschewing straightforward comedy for more dramatic, potentially tear-jerking fare and straying from the traditional generic domain of the situation comedy. Indeed, taken as a whole, the episodes-long narrative arc of Phoebe's gestational pregnancy troubles a number of both ideological and generic conventions

and, this, its final installment in which the character gives up the triplets, offers a particularly bittersweet ending.

In these circumstances, the secondary narrative arc of Joey's kidney stone birth-parody neatly serves as comic relief. Its silly, and seemingly simple, outrageousness operates as an uncomplicated humorous reminder to viewers that, in spite of being made privy to Phoebe's more dramatic circumstances, this remains, in fact, a television *comedy*. Joey's "giving birth" brings balance to the episode, acting as a counterweight to the more dramatic content occurring in the neighboring story arc of childbirth, righting the generic sails steering this sitcom perilously far into dramatic waters. Additionally, it may divert attention away from the complex, and potentially controversial, ideological content of that other narrative, thereby relieving it from the pressure of potential viewer criticism. Indeed, judging from the laughter that is generated by (or constructed to accompany) the scenes in which Joey expels his kidney stones, it would seem that nothing is quite so funny as imagining a man in labor. In fact, the image of the young man expelling the kidney stones remains so culturally resonant that more than twenty years later it was used to illustrate an article in a major British newspaper describing a new treatment for the painful condition.[3]

However, thanks to the comic treatment reserved for it, the overall carnivalesque nature of the representation, and the fact that it is positioned alongside a more emotionally weighty storyline, it is easy to overlook the simple fact that this more minor narrative *shows a man in labor*, vulnerable and struggling corporeally with and against his own body, a body which is no longer under his control. The images of Joey's struggle with kidney stones powerfully depict the displacement of some of the realities of childbirth onto the body of this ultra-masculine character for the American televisual audience. Surprised by the initial diagnosis, Joey is forced to obey medical authority (represented here by a curt doctor of East Asian descent) which stipulates that his only choice is to pass the kidney stones through his urethra, the most painful remedy for the condition. In effect, Joey is condemned by a higher authority to *suffer through* the process. Here science and medicine replace religious authority, and God's decision to make woman physically

[3] De Graaf, "New Drug Combination Could End Agony of Kidney Stones by Relaxing the body, Allowing Hard Deposits to Pass Out Smoothly." https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-7747245/An-end-pain-kidney-stones-New-drug-combination-allows-stones-pass-smoothly.html The title of an article from the same newspaper definitively declared in 2017 that "Kidney Stones are Worse Than Childbirth, say Mothers who Have Endured the Pain of Both:" Adams, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-4721660/Kidney-stones-painful-labour.html.

suffer in labor as a result of Eve's original sin is replaced by a doctor's decision to make this manly man physically suffer just as intensely. The character's loss of bodily control is parallel to the loss of female bodily control during labor, his uncontrolled opening of orifices as well: part of Joey's fall from grace in these scenes includes involuntarily vomiting in front of his friends, to both his and their great displeasure. Significantly, he is accompanied by another man, whose support and guidance are depicted as necessary to help him accomplish the difficult task at hand. The care Ross takes of his male friend when he is at his most vulnerable and the physical proximity with which the two men are depicted configures the two characters' relationship as intensely homosocial, if not downright homoerotic. In relegating its most aggressively masculine character to this most passive position, in Joey's performance of childbirth even for parodic, comic purposes, *Friends* demonstrates its commitment to gender bending content, shining a spotlight on conventional gender norms to question and ridicule them.[4] Yet, lest the audience begin to confuse Joey, in his state of intense vulnerability, with an actual woman in labor, they are reminded of his masculinity thanks to Ross's hand-thumping sportsman's congratulations ("You did it, *man*!"). With Ross's comment, Joey's character remains firmly situated as male, rendering this representation of masculine vulnerability all the more transgressive. The labor of the kidney stones brings Joey to the edges of femininity and demonstrates the willingness and the ability of this sitcom to employ maternally themed narratives to question norms of gender.

Why begin this dissertation dedicated to the depictions of mothers and motherhoods in *Friends* with the analysis of a few farcical scenes of a male character suffering from kidney stones? It seems to me that within the space of twenty-two minutes, "The One Hundredth" brings together much of what is at stake in this study. This episode of *Friends* treats its audience to not one but two overlapping narrative arcs of childbirth. Together, they operate as one of the most salient examples of this particular sitcom's ability to exploit issues related to maternity in unique and complex ways in order to achieve not only *Friends*' fundamental generic goal of humor but also to further its unstated yet undeniable commitment to depicting a multiplicity of maternal images

[4] In *Friends: destins de la génération X*, Donna Andréolle, drawing on Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity, has explored most deeply the genderbending dynamics of the sitcom, see Chapter Three's "Genderbending: Trouble dans le Genre" (108-127). In *Friends*, she writes, it is a "game which consists in reversing or manipulating sex and gender roles in order to explore their limits or even to deny their existence." Donna Andréolle, *Friends : destins de la génération X* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 2015), 110. My own translation.

onscreen. Joey's comical laboring and expulsion of kidney stones and Phoebe's emotional delivery of three babies whom she will neither keep nor raise, conceived thanks to technological innovation – both of these stories individually interrogate various norms related to motherhood and maternity as well as norms related to the genre of the sitcom itself. At an ideological level, *Friends*' use of maternal storylines in this episode works variously to disturb normative gender roles, to reinforce medical/expert discourse as the appropriate framework for thinking of maternity, to illustrate the significance of scientific innovation for human reproduction and, not least, to question the very definition of "mother" in terms of identity, function and performance. At a narrative and generic level, these stories of maternity demonstrate this sitcom's unique multi-arc narrative structure, the ways in which these multiple storylines interact with each other, the repercussions these interactions have in terms of constructing meaning for the audience, the tendency to stretch maternal storylines across episodes and seasons, as well as the capacity of maternal content to rupture generic conventions by introducing drama and pathos in the otherwise humorous sphere of television situation comedy. "The One Hundredth" is just one example of these dynamics at work.

Introduction

This project began several years ago with the intuition that something of great interest had gone mostly overlooked in the critical and popular attention paid to the global television phenomenon, *Friends*. While the title of this situation comedy suggests that its content is destined to exclusively deal with the amical relationships of its protagonists, this series is, in fact, very much concerned with family formation, parenting, and specifically, the maternal role. While the series was recognized as speaking to the concerns of Generation X in coming to terms with the disappointing reality of American urban life at the turn of the millennium, and while this disappointment had been recognized as being partially located within discourses on the traditional nuclear family, it seemed that little had been said specifically concerning the series' interpretation(s) of that institution, and critically, the role of mothers and motherhood. What is striking in *Friends*, still today, is the sheer *variety* of representations related to mothers, mothering and motherhoods portrayed throughout the fictional space of its ten seasons and two hundred and thirty-six episodes: married women with children, who appear to correspond to dominant ideas and ideals related to mothering and the nuclear family; women desiring to become mothers but who are physiologically unable to, due to infertility; women who, in helping other women in their quest to become mothers, become mothers themselves if only for a limited period of time; the use of assisted reproductive technologies to access motherhood; women bearing children out of wedlock; women raising children with other women, as well as men taking on traditionally maternal tasks.

In its inventive multiplicity, in its repeated dedication of valuable narrative space to these themes and in its use (and misuse) of generic conventions to structure these representations, *Friends*, while remaining faithful to its sitcom heritage, acted as a generative space of speculative televisual fiction, inviting its viewers time and again across its broadcast run to revisit and reconceptualize the institution of the family, and specifically the maternal figure, at a precise and particular historical moment. For the turn into the twenty-first century may be understood as one

of significant and fraught ideological movement concerning parental roles and the family, encompassing, among other elements, increasingly mainstream discourses interrogating normative sexuality and gender roles in the wake of the women's and gay liberation movements as well as increasing access to powerfully promising yet inherently disruptive reproductive technologies and the concomitant possibilities and anxieties engendered by them. Through its repeated return to mothers and motherhood, *Friends* engages in these and other discourses and underscores the significant social and cultural role of the American situation comedy generally, and this sitcom in particular, as a vector of ideas and images both reflecting, drawing on, and nourishing the contemporary preoccupations of the social order.

The central idea of this project then is the following: in spite of centering on a group of friends, *Friends* is preoccupied by family and it demonstrates this in a number of ways across its series-span, each of which shines a light, in one way or another, on mothers as people and motherhood as an institution and as an experience.[5] Mothers and motherhood appear to be ubiquitous in this series and this analysis seeks to understand how and why. How does motherhood affect the sitcom narratologically and generically speaking? What are the ways in which this series interrogates the notions of mothers and motherhood? Do the representations in this sitcom uphold dominant ideologies in association with motherhood or do they oppose them? In what way does comic intent, the fundamental generic component of the sitcom, inform these representations? Put simply, in spite of consciously distancing itself from the nuclear family model, *Friends* seems to come back, again and again, to both a questioning of motherhood and the role mothers play *within* this model as well as to the possibility of expanding the notion of family *beyond* that model with an eye to the specificity of the maternal role within that project. While this series questions family structure in general, this analysis will concentrate mainly on maternal representations as they seem to be interrogated in a more salient manner than what is seen in terms of paternity (although this too will be explored). What is being said about mothers, their identities, their activities, and how it is being said by this series at this historical moment – these are the central issues at stake in this study.

[5] Motherhood as "institution and experience" is drawn from Adrienne Rich's formulation and will be developed further in this section. See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).

Friends: Creative and Broadcast Context

Friends is a fictional scripted television program which aired on the National Broadcasting Company network in the United States from September 22, 1994 to May 6, 2004. Its thirty-minute (twenty-two minutes plus advertisements) episodes, its humorous content, camera configuration and editing, performance in front of a live audience as well as audible audience laughter all correspond to the major generic conventions of the television situation comedy. The series included 236 episodes during its ten seasons. During its original broadcast run, *Friends* was consistently one of the most popular programs on television, never falling out of the top ten most popular shows as measured by the Nielsen ratings.[6] Its highest rated episode (airing after the 1996 Super Bowl) garnered 52.9 million viewers; the series finale, almost 52.5 million.[7] The sitcom was a fantastic commercial success for its production company and distributor, Warner Bros. Television, as well as the NBC network, the creative team of Bright/Kauffman/Crane and the actors and writers who were involved in its production. As of 2018, *Friends* was still earning one billion dollars annually for Warner Brothers thanks to lucrative syndication deals, and its enduring popularity pushed the streaming platform Netflix to pay WarnerMedia $100 million for the rights to stream the sitcom for an extra year.[8]

Friends was a success critically as well. After a few lukewarm initial reviews, the sitcom eventually earned sixty-two Emmy nominations, winning six; ten Golden Globe Award nominations, winning one, fourteen Screen Actors Guild award nominations, winning two, and eleven People's Choice award nominations, winning all eleven.[9] While most television critics viewed the fledgling sitcom positively, if in the same comic vein as *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), some reviewers were quite harsh. A critic for *Time* labeled it "sophomoric," "inane and

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[6] *Friends'* rankings over its ten seasons: Season One: Eighth; Season Two: Third; Season Three: Fourth; Season Four: Fourth; Season Five: Second; Season Six: Fifth; Season Seven: Fifth; Season Eight: First; Season Nine: Second; Season Ten: Fourth. See Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present* 9th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 1694-1697.
[7] Ira Madison III, "You Won't Believe What America's Favorite "Friends" Episodes Are." https://www.buzzfeed.com/iramadison/you-wont-believe-what-americas-favorite-friends-episodes-are
[8] Barbara Platts, "'Friends': The Television Show That Keeps on Giving." https://www.marketplace.org/2018/12/11/friends-television-show-keeps-giving/ and Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind, *Friends, A Reading of the Sitcom* (eBook: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 2.
[9] *Ibid*.

gimmicky," while the *Hartford Courant* suggested it was "lacking in charm or intelligence" and "anemic and unworthy of its Thursday-night time slot.[10]"

Debuting on NBC's Must See TV programming block in a coveted Thursday night timeslot at 8:30 pm between two established sitcom hits, *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-1999) and *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, whose working title had changed over time and multiple rewrites from *Insomnia Café* to *Six of One* to *Friends Like Us*,[11] debuted simply as *Friends* in 1994 and immediately garnered twenty-two million viewers. The sitcom was created, written and produced by Marta Kauffman and David Crane, both theatre alumni from Brandeis University, and executive produced by Kevin Bright. All three had previously collaborated on the HBO sitcom, *Dream On* (1990-1996). *Dream On*, which received moderately positive reviews, revolved around the family life and career of Martin Tupper, a divorced father living in New York City. After several years of writing for that series, Kauffman and Crane found the process of creating fresh material for a television show revolving around a single person to be particularly difficult and they were eager to create a vehicle for an ensemble cast.[12] The desire to write for an ensemble as well as the care in giving equal screen time to each character ultimately resulted in *Friends*' innovative three-tiered narrative structure, interweaving three distinct, though sometimes related storylines, within a single episode. Crane and Kauffman's first two attempts at ensemble sitcoms were unsuccessful. *The Powers that Be*, a parody of a dysfunctional political family living in Washington DC, aired on NBC from March 1992 until January 1993 for a total of 21 episodes before being cancelled. *Family Album*, the story of a California family who moves back to the East Coast, fared even worse. It ran for six episodes in 1993 before CBS cancelled it, leaving two episodes unaired.

At about the same time, the entertainment division of NBC, following on the heels of the success of *Seinfeld* and *Mad About You*, was searching for a new sitcom which would appeal to younger, more urban viewers, the "quality audience" or "commodity audience.[13]" Such an audience, with disposable income and "consumerist tendencies" tends to be younger, either urban

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[10] Reviews quoted in Saul Austerlitz, *Generation* Friends*: An Inside Look at the Show that Defined a Television Era* (New York: Dutton, 2019), 78-79.

[11] See Austerlitz, 2019, Chapters 1-3 for a detailed account of the sitcom's genesis.

[12] Marta Kauffman recalls, "We got to *Friends* in a roundabout way. We'd just come off of *Dream On* with one actor who was in every scene, and it was brutal. So we told ourselves, 'We want to do an ensemble comedy.'" Quoted in Littlefield. See Warren Littlefield, *Top of the Rock: Inside the Rise and Fall of Must See TV* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, 2012), 154.

[13] Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 76.

or suburban and middle to upper-middle class. With money to spend, they are a desirable target for advertisers and networks. In the early 1990s, NBC was on the lookout for programming which would fit into their Thursday night scheduling block of prime-time half-hour comedy shows between 8 and 10 pm and which would attract these coveted young consumers with disposable income. Thursday evenings are of particular importance to the motion picture industry which traditionally invests heavily to advertise its new releases on Thursdays ahead of the Friday movie openings, hoping to influence these viewers in their choice of weekend entertainment. To emphasize the importance of this particular night of television for both advertisers and viewers, NBC began branding its Thursday night scheduling block of comedy using the promotional slogan, "Must See TV." While this particular slogan was first used in the summer of 1993 to promote its Thursday night sitcom re-runs, it harks back to a long NBC tradition of putting its "quality" television shows on Thursday nights.[14]

The seven-page pitch that the Kauffman-Crane team sold to NBC seemed to match perfectly with what the network executives were seeking: a half-hour comedy about six attractive young single people working their way through the difficulties of life and love in New York City. Part of the pitch reads: "It's about sex, love, relationships, careers… a time in your life when everything is possible which is really exciting and really scary. And it's about friendship because when you're single and in the city, your friends are your family."

NBC ordered the series based on the pilot script, casting began for the six lead roles in early 1994, and the pilot was produced by Warner Brothers at their studios in California in the early summer. The cast was eventually made up of six relatively unknown actors. David Schwimmer, having worked with the creators before, was the first to be cast as the unlucky-in-love and soon to be divorced paleontologist, Ross Geller. The actress Courteney Cox was perhaps the most well-known of the six members thanks to her appearance in Bruce Springsteen's music video for *Dancer In the Dark* as well as her recurring role (19 episodes) in the late 1980s as Lauren Miller, Alex P. Keaton's girlfriend on the successful sitcom *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-1989). She was cast as Ross's neurotic and control-freak younger sister, Monica Geller, after having convinced the creators that the character of Monica would be a better fit for her than that of Rachel,

[14] As early as 1982, the NBC Thursday night television schedule was promoted as "America's Best Night of Television on Television." Earlier examples of NBC's Thursday night programming include *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *Cheers* (1982-1993) and *L.A. Law* (1986-1994).

the part she had originally been asked to audition for. The role of the spoiled Rachel Green would eventually go to Jennifer Aniston who had already appeared in several unsuccessful sitcom pilots and cancelled sitcoms such as *Ferris Bueller* (NBC, 1990). Similarly, Matt Le Blanc had appeared in several episodes of the sitcom *Married…with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997) and was cast in the short-lived sitcom *Vinnie and Bobbie* (Fox, 1992) before being cast in *Friends* as the lovable womanizer, Joey Tribbiani.[15] Matthew Perry came to be cast in the part of the sarcastically neurotic Chandler Bing after several short-lived roles in various series and sitcoms as well. Finally, Lisa Kudrow, who had had a supporting role playing the dim-witted waitress Ursula on *Mad About You*, was cast as the eccentric Phoebe Buffay, and adding an intertextual link to the two series, these two fictional characters were identified as identical twins.

Shortly into the production process, NBC executives, while excited about the product they had ordered, began to question some of the content of the programming. Specifically, they began to worry that the cast might be too young and risk alienating older viewers, who, while less attractive to advertisers, were deemed nonetheless important to court. Network executives thus sent a note to writers Kauffman and Crane asking them to add an older character, somebody to whom the older adult viewers could relate and who would be seen as a wise disseminator of sage advice to the six young adults. An attempt was made on the part of the creative production team to include such a character. However, Kauffman and Crane described the process as fundamentally anathema to their creative vision of the sitcom and ultimately the fateful (especially for the purposes of this project) decision was made to write in the young people's parents as secondary characters.[16] Warren Littlefield, President of Entertainment at NBC during this period, reflected on the creative decision to scrap the network advice and add the parents instead:

> It was a really smart move on the producers' part. The core of the show remained the same, but the show became more relevant to a larger broadcast audience when those young characters had stories that involved their parents and not just other young adults. It became generational comedy that invited the older audience in, and once they were there they never left. Eventually, almost 25 percent of the audience

[15] In a 2004 interview with Dateline NBC's Matt Lauer it was revealed that Matt Le Blanc was not originally wanted for the part of Joey by the Kauffman-Crane production team and they were pressured into casting him by NBC executives. However, they recognized an unexpected source of comedy in Le Blanc's buffoonish treatment of the character, an aspect of the role which they had not anticipated and came to appreciate. See interview transcript: "'*Friends*' Creators Share Show's Beginnings" http://www.nbcnews.com/id/4899445/ns/dateline_nbc-newsmakers/t/friends-creators-share-shows-beginnings/#.W0ciHi2B2u5.

[16] David Crane: "We tried a pass at this character, but it was like as you're writing, you're going, 'Hate myself, hate myself, hate myself.' We ended up bringing the parents in instead." Quoted in Littlefield, 178.

was over fifty. Advertisers didn't necessarily pay us for them, but it became a broad-based hit.[17]

The decision to add the main characters' parental figures is just one example of the myriad decisions at work in the creative-industrial process of bringing this sitcom to the small screen. It would have important implications for the early tonality of the series particularly in terms of generational conflict and the early depictions of maternal figures.

After a successful début, audience interest in the series grew steadily, and viewers seemed to become particularly enamored over the summer of 1995 as word of mouth recommendations led those who had not watched the original broadcasts to tune in to the reruns. Season Two debuted with over 32 million viewers and the series placed third overall for the 1995-1996 season. The popularity of the series was such that the soft drink giant Diet Coke spent $30 million in an advertising campaign which featured the six actors, hoping to reignite waning interest in the diet soft drink among the same young adult audience at the core of *Friends'* target audience. The campaign included a "Who's Gonna Drink the Diet Coke?" advertising slogan above a photograph of the six actors in character in a mock police line-up. In addition, commercial tie-ins to the sitcom were scheduled throughout the four episodes which aired in January of 1996 at the height of the young sitcom's success.

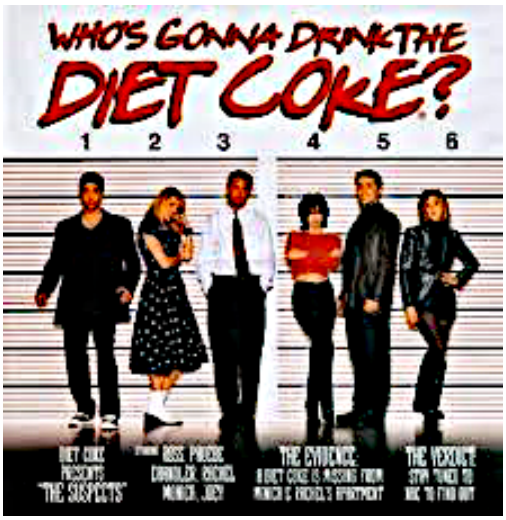

Figure 4 A still photograph from Diet Coke's Friends *ad campaign.*

Significantly, the Diet Coke campaign was ultimately cited as one of the reasons for a *Friends* backlash which was thought to have occurred because of the extreme

[17] *Ibid*.

popularity and ensuing overexposure of the six young lead actors.[18] While the media may have been worried about the actors being too available for celebrity appearances and endorsements, the audience did not seem to be particularly perturbed as the series placed fourth for both its third and fourth seasons and second during Season Five. *Friends* did fall to fifth place, its weakest showing since its first season, during the sixth and seventh seasons but bounced back to first place (the first and only time in its original broadcast run) during Season Eight. Falling back to second place during its ninth season, the sitcom ended its broadcast run at fourth place for Season Ten. The consistent ranking amongst the top-ten most popular television programs for such an extended period of time represents an extraordinary achievement in television broadcasting. The success of *Friends* is particularly significant in hindsight as the sitcom's original broadcast period coincided with enormous changes in the televisual industry.

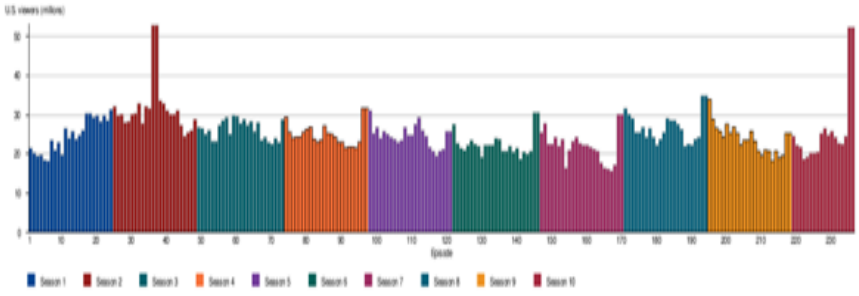

Figure 5 Audience figures for each episode of Friends.

Television scholar Jason Mittell has identified three eras in television broadcasting: the first being the Classic Network Era (also identified as the broadcast era) which spanned the early days of television to the mid 1980s; it was the foundational period for the televisual industry which gave rise to practices and norms which are still in place today. The second, the Multi-Channel Era spanning the 1980s and 1990s, was a transitional one. The third period dating from the early 2000s, the Convergent Era, is, Mittell suggests, a still-emergent era characterized by the rise of digital

[18] An article from a *Newsweek* issue dating from February 1996 entitled "Let the Backlash Begin!" speaks to the issue of overexposure and begins: "If only they hadn't done the Diet Coke ads. Then maybe we could have forgiven "*Friends*" for the hundreds of fawning magazine covers, for Jennifer Aniston's ubiquitously cloned haircut, the inescapable theme song, even that Jean-Claude Van Damme cameo. After just two seasons, NBC's huge sitcom about a sextet of demographically desirable singles is already insanely overexposed. Stop them before they endorse again!" http://www.newsweek.com/let-backlash-begin-179758

media and platforms. For our purposes, in situating the significance of the success of *Friends*, it is the Multi-Channel Era, which saw an intensification in the rise of narrowcasting while remaining largely a system based on advertising revenue, which is of interest. The Multi-Channel Era is characterized by increasing competition for and pressure on the traditional Big Three networks CBS, NBC and ABC from various sources including home video machines (VCRs and, later, DVD players and DVRs), start-up networks such as Fox and The WB (which started broadcasting in 1987 and 1995 respectively), as well as basic and premium cable channels which began airing their own original programming towards the end of the 1990s. Mittell's identification of this period with the rise of narrowcasting underscores how the increased competition and sheer quantity of programming choices available to audiences meant that fewer and fewer programs could hope to enjoy the kind of wide-spread appeal at a national level that had been possible just a few years earlier.[19]

What is certain is that the ten-year span which the *Friends* broadcast covered was one of critical significance to the industry during which audiences were offered increasingly diverse fare in the form of, for example, HBO original programming such as *Oz* (1997-2003), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007). It was, in addition, a moment when the reality television genre took hold in earnest, the earliest, most prominent example being the extraordinarily popular and long-running *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-present).

Enduring Cultural Significance

"Indisputably," write Knox and Schwind, "*Friends* is one of the most significant programmes in the history of television and media culture.[20]" Indeed their introduction to the sitcom emphasizes its global reach and popularity, noting that the "global profile" of *Friends* extends to "Australia, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, India, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, Spain and the UK.[21]" In fact, since its original broadcast run and particularly since the Internet has come to occupy a dominant role in media, *Friends* has been explicitly identified as a pedagogical tool for learning the English language. On an informal level, surveys have shown that *Friends* is the

[19] See Mittell, *Television and American Culture*, 10-12.
[20] Knox and Schwind, 4.
[21] *Ibid*, 2.

television show most appreciated for those trying to improve their English language skills.[22] Meanwhile, a YouTube channel, *Learn English With TV Series*, offers didactic and pedagogical breakdowns of a number of specific scenes from *Friends* with the explicit intent of improving its viewers' English skills.[23] *Fluent With Friends* offers a full language learning course based on the sitcom, complete with weekly PDF "Power Lessons" (which include explanations of cultural and comedic references), vocabulary flashcards, pronunciation lessons, workshops and, in choosing the Premium option, a "10 Week Deep Pronunciation Course."[24] In a short video explaining the choice of *Friends* as a pedagogical tool, one of the course's creators explains that from Australia, "I grew up watching and rewatching each episode. All ten seasons, and I learned so much about American culture." He goes on to describe it as "one of the most culturally impactful TV shows ever" and cites several newspaper stories referring to the series as a "cultural phenomenon."[25]

In the twenty-five-year period since its broadcast début, *Friends* has been able to achieve global dominance in a way that few other series from the same period have. Undoubtedly the 2015 decision on the part of Netflix to add it to their bank of streamable programs has played a significant role in the United States and abroad in terms of *Friends*' continued visibility and popularity. Yet, television critic Saul Austerlitz wonders, "How is it that a quarter-century-old show still speaks to wave after wave of new fans?" In spite of its demonstrable, and much criticized lack of racial diversity,[26] Austerlitz argues that for a new generation of viewers the sitcom is "less

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[22] A survey by the international education service provider Kaplan International Colleges found that *Friends* was cited by 26% of respondents who claimed that television series helped them improve their language skills, while *The Simpsons* and *How I Met Your Mother* were cited by 7% and 6% respectively.
https://globalnews.ca/news/315234/friends-sitcom-helps-esl-community-learn-english/

[23] For example, go to https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOC50hYce0U for a twelve-minute lesson based on Rachel's experience flirting with a police officer to get out of being fined when she is pulled over for driving on an expired license. At the time of this writing, this video had been watched over 1,300,000 times and was "liked" by over 18,000.

[24] https://fluentwithfriends.com The 48 Week Basic Course costs $99.97, the Standard Course, $166.97, while the Premium Course is offered at $249.97. There is a 30-day money back guarantee which ensures that money will be reimbursed, "no questions asked."

[25] https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=28&v=a7J8q9NW2bI

[26] See, for example, Chidester, "May the Circle Stay Unbroken: *Friends*, the Presences of Absence, and the Rhetorical Reinforcement of Whiteness," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 2 (2008): 157-174. In mainstream and popular media, the twenty- and twenty-five-year anniversaries of *Friends* act as inevitable moments of retrospection and the series has met with much criticism of late for a number of representations deemed problematic including race, sexuality, obesity and transgenderism. For this ongoing debate, see Dusty Baxter-Wright, "11 Actually Pretty Shocking Things *Friends* Couldn't Get Away with Today:"
https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a38817/11-times-friends-sexist-homophobic; Bethonie Butler, "Should We Forgive '*Friends*' for Feeling a Little Offensive in 2016?"

a promise for the future than a pleasing fantasy in which to take cover.[27]" He concludes however that,

> *Friends* is ultimately both fantasy and reality. It offers fans the opportunity to luxuriate in its vast empty spaces, left unfilled by professional, financial, or familial concerns. It allows young people to dream of a life in which the primary thing that occupied them would be their friends and relationships. Its outlines increasingly resemble the world young people reside in for a term roughly bookended by their college graduations and their wedding days.[28]

Austerlitz also notes that *Friends* is a "nostalgic tour of the past," a notion picked up on by Knox and Schwind as well. Citing *The Handmaid's Tale*'s (Hulu, 2017-present) intertextual interjection of an iconic *Friends* scene in which Monica instructs Chandler on the complexities of female anatomy and ends up simulating (or not) an orgasm herself, these writers suggest that while the sitcom may remain to a certain extent timeless,

> it is also linked to the current cultural nostalgia for the 1990s, whereby the programme becomes symptomatic of a (supposedly) more innocent time, in which the global recession, neoliberal precarity, the War on Terror, the climate crisis, the rise of nationalism and the Trump administration had yet to take place and/or to fully make their mark.[29]

Indeed, while it may be impossible to measure in any concrete way the impact of *Friends*, its continued popularity amongst both viewers and critics alike may be attested to (in addition to its continued circulation on various televisual platforms) by its inclusion on numerous Best-Of lists. A 2015 survey by *The Hollywood Reporter* listed *Friends* as the favorite television series by "industry insiders" coming in first ahead of *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998) and *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1990-2007).[30] A 2017 IMDb ranking of "The Best Sitcoms of All Times" places *Friends* in second place on a list including 86 titles, just behind *Modern Family* and ahead of *The Big Bang Theory*.[31]

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/should-we-forgive-friends-for-feeling-a-little-offensive-in-2016/2016/02/18/e8d47280-d0d3-11e5-b2bc-988409ee911b_story.html; Ruth Graham, "Chandler Bing is the Worst Thing About Watching *Friends* in 2015." https://slate.com/culture/2015/01/friends-chandler-bing-and-his-homophobia-are-the-worst-thing-about-watching-the-nbc-sitcom-in-2015.html; Ilana Kaplan, "*Friends*, 10 Times the Classic Sitcom was Problematic." https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/friends-netflix-sitcom-problem-sexism-men-joey-phoebe-chandler-ross-rachel-a8168976.html.

[27] Austerlitz, 2019, 321.

[28] *Ibid*. 322-323.

[29] Knox and Schwind, 280-281.

[30] "Hollywood's 100 favorite TV Shows." https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/best-tv-shows-ever-top-819499.

[31] "The Best Sitcoms of All Times." https://www.imdb.com/list/ls069786537/.

A list on Ranker.com lists *Friends* as number one on its list of "The Greatest Sitcoms in Television History" coming in ahead of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons*.[32] And in 2016 *Rolling Stone* listed *Friends* in 26th place on its list of "100 Greatest TV Shows of All Time."[33] The enduring, even growing, popular understanding on a global scale of *Friends* as a series of cultural importance, indeed, as a cultural phenomenon, suggests the critical importance of closely reading this series. *Friends'* current ultra-high visibility will surely diminish at some point. This rapidly-evolving televisual moment with its hunger for ever more content may eventually dissolve *Friends* into its jumble of programming, but the sitcom's enduring global enthusiasm suggests that its position in popular culture may just as likely persist. The interest with which an unscripted reunion show has been met suggests that fans are still eager to see the six actor-characters united once again.

Friends **Scholarship**

Given its popularity, commercial success and obvious cultural impact it is perhaps surprising that relatively little scholarly attention has been paid to *Friends* in particular and the situation comedy more generally. Writing in 2005, Brett Mills offers a number of arguments to explain why the situation comedy has traditionally received little academic attention including the "belief that the sitcom is simple and already understood; the belief that, as a comedic form, it has little to 'say' about social concerns and the cultures it entertains; the belief that the examination of more 'serious' forms is more pressing; the belief that it's 'only sitcom.'"[34] Indeed, Mills suggests that the dynamics that lead to the success of a sitcom are so "transparently obvious" that it is assumed that "complex analysis" is unnecessary;[35] that because the sitcom deals in humor, close analysis would somehow destroy the genre's capacity to *create* humor.

The situation comedy has, however, attracted the attention of certain scholars, media critics and writers. An early example of thoughtful sitcom criticism (which is to say criticism which does not merely criticize the medium or the genre as useless, uninteresting, at worst, harmful) is Horace

[32] "The Greatest Sitcoms in Television History." https://www.ranker.com/crowdranked-list/the-greatest-sitcoms-in-television-history.
[33] Rob Sheffield, "100 Greatest TV Shows of all Time." https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/100-greatest-tv-shows-of-all-time-105998/the-mary-tyler-moore-show-110657/.
[34] Bret Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 3.
[35] *Ibid*.

Newcomb's *TV: The Most Popular Art*. Originally published in 1974, a chapter in Newcomb's book offers an early example of a theoretical approach to the situation comedy.[36] David Marc's work, 1984's *Democratic Vistas: Television in American Culture*, also theorizes television with an emphasis on the situation comedy. His later work, 1997's *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* further explores the genre.[37] Darrell Y. Hamamoto's 1991 *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* speculates on the social and political significance of these cultural texts, while Gerard Jones' 1992 *Honey I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* offers a history of the genre through the early 1990s including rich and informative cultural and institutional contextualizations.[38] More recent edited collections including *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader* (2003) edited by Joanne Morreale as well as *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (2005) edited by Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder push analytical approaches of the genre further while offering readings of specific generic examples.[39] Mills' own *The Sitcom* (2006) and *Television Sitcom* (2009) both offer thorough, considered approaches to the situation comedy as a genre.[40]

Several works specifically link media culture, television and the situation comedy with ideologies relating to the family and women's issues more broadly. They include Ella Taylor's 1989 *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel's 1992 *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* and Nina C. Leibman's *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* published in 1995. Bonnie J. Dow's *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* also highlights the situation comedy genre as an important site of representation for and of women. In terms of the specific representation of mothers and motherhood several journal articles have

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[36] Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

[37] David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture,* 2nd ed. (Oxford and Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), and *Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

[38] Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology*, 2nd ed. (New York, Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1991), and Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St.Martin's Press, 1992).

[39] Joanne Morreale, ed. *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) and Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, eds. *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2005).

[40] Bret Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: British Film Institute, 2005) and *The Sitcom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

approached the topic including retrospective looks at notable stories of maternity in the American sitcom[41] as well as the changing roles of mothers and fathers as represented in situation comedy.[42]

In France, study of the genre has been given visibility thanks to "Gender, Race and Class in American TV Sitcoms," an edition of the interdisciplinary journal of English studies *Cercles* edited by Georges-Claude Guilbert.[43] Scholars such as Dennis Tredy and Shannon Wells-Lassagne have written about the American situation comedy in the journal *TV/Series*, for example[44] and Aurélie Blot's *50 ans de sitcoms américaines décryptées* specifically treats representations of the American family in the situation comedy.[45] Most recently, and most directly related to the object of study at hand in this work is Anna Gruszewska's *Le langage de "*Friends" which examines the sitcom from a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective in order to analyze the regimes of power at work in the situation comedy as evidenced through dialogue. The author's study takes into consideration the language of maternity and paternity at work in this series.[46]

Within the ever-growing body of television scholarship, these examples may, however, be seen as exceptions that prove the rule in terms of the relatively scant amount of academic attention paid to the situation comedy and specifically to the maternal figure within that genre. In this, Rebecca Feasey's affirmation in the introduction to her 2012 *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood in Popular Television* may still be considered valid. Feasey argues that "although much work to date seeks to investigate the depiction of women on television, little exists to account for the depiction of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal role in

[41] See Judy Kutulas, "'Do I Look Like a Chick?': Men, Women, and Babies on Sitcom Maternity Stories," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (1998): 13-32.
[42] See Tasha G. Owen, "Domesticated Dads and Double-Shift Moms," *Cercles* 8 (2003): 78-90 and Valerie A. Reimers, "American Family TV Sitcoms. The Early Years to the Present: Fathers, Mothers, and Children – Shifting Focus and Authority," *Cercles* 8 (2003): 114-121.
[43] Georges-Claude Guilbert, ed., "Gender, Race and Class in American TV Sitcoms," *Cercles* 8 (2003).
[44] Tredy examines United States military sitcoms in "'War…What is it Good For?' Laughter and Ratings: *Sgt. Bilko*, *M*A*S*H* and the Heyday of U.S. Military Sitcoms," *TV/Series*, 10 (2016) and the recycling and reworking of sitcom premises in comedies of the 1970s in "Reflecting the Changing Face of American Society: How 1970's Sitcoms and Spin-Offs Helped Redefine American Identity," *TV/Series*, 4 (2013). Wells-Lassagne has, for her part, dealt with aspects of generic adaptation in "Crossing the Pond: Adapting *The Office* to an American Audience," *TV/Series* 2 (2012) and reflexivity and intertextuality within the genre through the prism of a single character in "Transforming the traditional sitcom: Abed in *Community*," *TV/Series* 1 (2012).
[45]Aurélie Blot, *50 ans de sitcoms américaines décryptées : de* I Love Lucy *à* Desperate Housewives (Paris : L'Harmattan, 2013).
[46] Anna Gruszewska, *Le langage de «* Friends *»* (Paris : Lambert-Lucas, 2020).

contemporary popular programming.[47]" We would further specify that even less work has been exclusively dedicated to the mothers of this traditionally familial and domestic comedic genre.

Turning specifically, then, to the object of study at hand, scholarly articles concerning *Friends* tend to focus on issues of representation and identity. Naomi Rockler's studies of Jewish representation in "The One with the Holiday Armadillo" as well as women's issues in "The One Where Eddie Won't Go" both approach *Friends* from within a framework of communication theory as does Phil Chidester's consideration of whiteness and exclusion of racial Others in the sitcom.[48] From these perspectives, representational issues in *Friends* point to rhetorics of specific identity politics operating within the sitcom. Ann Marie Todd's discussion of the *Friends* series finale examines the episode as a particularly rich site for exploring fan culture while Amy Gullage's examination of narratives of fatness in the series returns to issues of identity and representation.[49] More recently, Hannah Hamad revisits *Friends* as a site of millennial postfeminism, while Judy Kutulas' retrospective look at *Friends* as a popular television hit argues that its "creative contributions have long been underrated.[50]"

Formative to this work has been Donna Andréolle's 2015 *Friends*, *Destins de la Génération X* which identifies the sitcom as a generational phenomenon and undertakes an extensive discussion of its representation of families. Andréolle's work begins to touch on the issues treated here including the sitcom's critique of a certain generation of mothers as well as some of the implications of the newer motherhoods represented in *Friends*. Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind's comprehensive *Friends: A Reading of the Sitcom* was recently (2019) published and proposes multiple perspectives on aspects related to the series' humor, aesthetics, performances, and representations. While this work has been helpful in understanding the current climate of *Friends* reception, it is not a critical look at series' perspective(s) on motherhood.

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[47] Rebecca Feasey, *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewives: Motherhood and Popular Television* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2012), 1.

[48] See Naomi Rockler, "*Friends*, Judaism, and the Holiday Armadillo: Mapping a Rhetoric of Postidentity Politics," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (2006): 453-473 and Rockler, "Be Your Own Windkeeper": *Friends*, Feminism, and Rhetorical Strategies of Depoliticization," *Women's Studies in Communication* 29, no. 2 (2006): 244-264; as well as Phil Chidester, "May the Circle Stay Unbroken."

[49] Ann Marie Todd, "Saying Goodbye to *Friends*: Situation Comedy as Lived Experience," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 4 (2011): 855-872 and Amy Gullage, "Fat Monica, Fat Suits, and *Friends*: Exploring Narratives of Fatness," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014): 178-189.

[50] Hannah Hamad, "The One with the Feminist Critique: Revisiting Millennial Postfeminism with *Friends*," *Television and New Media* 19, no. 8 (2018): 692-707 and Judy Kutulas, "Anatomy of a Hit: *Friends* and its Sitcom Legacies," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, no. 5 (2018): 1172-1189.

Two journal articles have touched more directly on issues relating to motherhood in *Friends*. The first, Jillian Sandell's "I'll Be There for You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families," was published in 1998, six years before *Friends*' original broadcast run came to an end. Sandell's work focuses on the wider family and kinship networks in the series and identifies the sitcom's investment "in making visible those kinship arrangements which challenge the dominant myth of the nuclear family." However, she interrogates the "hyperbolic visibility of some kinship networks on *Friends* over others" arguing that "the fantasy of alternative families on *Friends* not only often uses non-normative family relations as a scapegoat for jokes […] they efface and exclude other groups of people.[51]" Ultimately, Sandell suggests that, in terms of its identification of problems within the nuclear family model, *Friends* "posits only questions and no answers" and that "all is not as positive and celebratory" as would seem in the fictional world of this sitcom.[52]

Eleanor Hearsey Nickel's 2012 article "'I'm the Worst Mother Ever': Motherhood, Comedy, and the Challenges of Bearing and Raising Children in *Friends*" most clearly comes closest to this project. Nickel writes of the sitcom that "[w]hile its writers challenged the traditional view that families must include a married father and mother with biological children, they appealed to a diverse audience by exploring a liberal expansion of possible family forms rather than a radical redefinition of gender roles.[53]" Nickel catalogues each of the examples of unconventional motherhood that this analysis includes as well, and she concludes:

> *Friends* still has an important role to play for a new generation of fans who avidly watch it on television, online, or on DVD. The non-threatening, enjoyable antics of Phoebe, Monica, and Rachel still help women to engage with dilemmas of motherhood that are far from being resolved.[54]

My own analysis, based on numerous micro readings of key moments and scenes, in general tends to agree with this, although it aims to push Nickel's observations further, examining the precise mechanisms at work in these images of motherhood, while contextualizing them within a deeper history of representation of maternal content within the sitcom genre itself and more deeply probing some of their problematic implications. Additionally, my analysis seeks to link the

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[51] Jillian Sandell, "I'll Be There for You: *Friends* and the Fantasy of Alternative Families," *American Studies* 39, no. 2 (1998): 141-155, 153.
[52] *Ibid*., 154.
[53] Eleanor Hersey Nickel, "'I'm the Worst Mother Ever': Motherhood, Comedy, and the Challenges of Bearing and Raising Children in '*Friends*,'" *Studies in Popular Culture* 35, no. 1 (2012): 25-45, 25.
[54] *Ibid*., 41.

ideological implications of these representations with certain aesthetic aspects of this sitcom in particular issues related to narratology, seriality and questions of genre, issues which Nickel does not develop in her article.

As a final note it should be mentioned that the twenty-fifth anniversary (in 2019) of the sitcom's début on network television has initiated a number of both critical and popular celebratory retrospectives which reflect the enduring enthusiasm and popularity that this "show that defined a television era" continues to inspire. These include, indeed, Saul Austerlitz's *Generation Friends: An Inside Look at the Show That Defined a Television Era*, a 25th anniversary special from Warner Bros. Media entitled *Friends Forever: The One About the Episodes*, and Kelsey Miller's *I'll Be There For You: The One about Friends* as well as Knox and Schwind's work mentioned above.[55]

Theoretical Framework

To undertake this project, I have taken my initial cue from cultural and media studies which posit first and foremost that objects of popular mediated culture are worthy of study because of their fundamental, complex and ubiquitous role in the wider social and political sphere. After television studies scholars John Fiske and John Hartley, I aim to look thoughtfully at the images and stories appearing on the small screen, taking as an additional premise that "it is television's familiarity, its centrality to our culture, that makes it so important, so fascinating and so difficult to analyse.[56]" Pointing out that "television uses codes which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself,[57]" Fiske and Hartley remind us that

> Television is a human construct, and the job that it does is the result of human choice, cultural decision and social pressures. The medium responds to the conditions within which it exists. It is by no means natural for television to represent reality in the way that it does, just as it is by no means natural for language to do so. Both language and television mediate reality: there is no pristine experience which social people can apprehend without the culturally determined structures, rituals and concepts supplied to them via their language. Language is the means by which people enter into society to produce reality […] Television extends this ability, and an understanding of the way in which television structures and presents

[55] See Gary Susman, Jeannine Dillon and Bryan Cairns, Friends *Forever: The One About the Episodes* (New York: Harper Design, 2019) and Kelsey Miller, *I'll Be There for You: The One about* Friends (Hanover Square Press, 2018).
[56] John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.
[57] *Ibid*., 4.

> its picture of reality can go a long way towards helping us to understand the way in which our society works.[58]

Television then is both ubiquitous and constructed, its omnipresent stories and images each carefully crafted to look and act a certain way, each the result of a series of conscious and unconscious decisions and choices. Watching an episode of a television sitcom, for example, is watching an infinite assortment of carefully considered decisions (from which story line to write to which costume to use in which scene to which precise vocal intonation to employ to which camera shot to include to the use of a laugh track to how loud to play the laugh track and on and on) progressively unfurl on the small screen. That one or a group of human beings is responsible for each of these choices points to the exceptionally *social* process of creation and construction involved in producing content for television.

Beyond the level of analyzing one individual object of culture created by a multitude of human choices, however, Mittell's *Television and American Culture* reminds us of the necessity of keeping in mind the underlying institutional context of television production in any academic approach to television analysis. Television in the United States, he notes, is "an industry designed to benefit private interests: media corporations, advertisers, marketing consultants, and television producers," and, he adds, "its function as a privately owned profit-making industry drives nearly every aspect of the medium.[59]" Thus, just as television programs cannot be understood without taking into account the innumerable human choices which influence their content, likewise, they cannot be understood without taking into account the fact that these very choices are themselves influenced by a great number of institutional pressures. Much of the creative content that appears on screens is the direct result of television's situatedness within the market logics of corporate capitalism and consumer society in which profit-seeking and competition on the part of large private corporations is fueled by the advertising revenue promised by lucrative sponsorship deals.

Thus, the content and images appearing on television screens, what is shown and what can be seen, are subject to any number of invisible and yet very real and concrete forces circulating within the wider industrial and cultural context. In turn, what is seen on television, the representations seen on screen, are rich with meaning and Richard Dyer's foundational text, *The*

[58] *Ibid*., 5.
[59] Mittell, 2010, 99.

Matter of Images: Essays on Representation, has also been fundamental in guiding this analysis. Writes Dyer,

> How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally re-presentation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.[60]

Furthermore, Dyer reminds us that

> representations are presentations, always and necessarily entailing the use of the codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation. Such forms restrict and shape what can be said by and/or about any aspect of reality in a given place in a given society at a given time […] Without understanding the way images function in terms of, say, narrative, genre or spectacle, we don't really understand why they turn out the way they do.[61]

Dyer's invitation to understand the various aspects contextualizing cultural representation as fully as possible is particularly important to our analysis in terms of *Friends'* generic categorization. *Friends* is a program situated within television's generic category of situation comedy. The codes of creation, production, transmission and ultimately, communication, accessed by this particular genre set it apart in some critical ways from other televisual genres. Representation in *Friends* cannot be analyzed and ultimately understood on the same terms as representation in different televised genres such as science fiction, game shows or the evening news, for example. In this, Brett Mills' work on the television situation comedy in both *The Sitcom* and *Television Sitcom* has been of the utmost importance to this work and will be referenced at length in the first chapter.

As shall be seen in Chapter One chapter, the genre comes of age on the small screen at a historical moment during which a particularly powerful cultural image of motherhood under patriarchy predominates – in this case the patriarchal heteronormative nuclear family model as

[60] Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 202), 1.
[61] *Ibid*., 2.

cultural and societal ideal. In terms of mothers and motherhood, by far the most helpful work to me in thinking through this endlessly complex subject remains Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. Forty years on, Rich's articulation of the disconnect between motherhood as a foundational pillar of patriarchal society bound by and to the interests of male domination (motherhood as institution) and motherhood as the "potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children,[62]" the cumulation of lived experiences of individual women in relation to the children they care for (motherhood as experience), still resonates deeply and was foundational to my ability to grasp some of what is at stake in the ways mothers and motherhoods are represented not only in the various iterations in *Friends*, but more widely, in the sitcom genre as a whole. Rich's theorization of motherhood, her identification of two possible (and mutually exclusive) ways of knowing about motherhood inevitably points us to fundamental questions related to ideology.

Ideology and Motherhood

What does *mother* mean? Who is a *mother*? The questions are so deceptively simple, and the word so ubiquitous. For many, knowing what *mother* means amounts to common sense. Yet, as we shall see imminently, where there is common sense, there is ideology and it is in these moments where language appears most obvious that interrogating it is most necessary. A simple enough place to start is with a dictionary's definition. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines *mother* first and foremost as a, "woman who gives birth to a child." A second definition identifies "A woman whose egg unites with a sperm, producing an embryo." Two further definitions widen the scope of identity further to a "woman who adopts a child" and a "woman who raises a child.[63]" These four definitions already cover a vast terrain and include the parturient woman whose body expels a baby but who may not necessarily bear any genetic link to it nor be the person to live with it after it is born; the woman whose genetic link is assured by her own reproductive cell's unification with a sperm but who may not necessarily gestate the resultant embryo within her own body, or again live with it; the woman who, by official or unofficial means, "adopts" a child presumably from

[62] Rich, 12.
[63] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, online edition. https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=mother&submit.x=0&submit.y=0

another woman; and the woman who simply (and vaguely) "raises" a child. Uniting these definitions is the notion that a mother is a woman who has some very specific type of relationship to a child – the genetic source, the gestational carrier, the parturient birth giver, the adopter, the "raiser," some combination of these.[64]

These definitions are relatively specific and varied, and the simple fact that there are *four* seems to suggest that mother as a concept is in flux and unsettled even for this language resource. Yet these definitions only begin to hint at the complexities of what is really at stake when we speak about mothers and motherhood for they fail to take into account (although they hint at) the multiple and sometimes contradictory ideological forces at work on mother *as a concept*; the person, the role and the identity that this simple signifier alludes to. It is the unsettledness of this concept of *mother* that is at the heart of this project; it is at the heart of *Friends*' multiple representations of motherhood.

To clarify what we mean by ideology and its relationship to motherhood, Alan Sinfield, drawing on Althusser, will be helpful here:

> Societies […] need understandings, intuitive and explicit, of a system of social relationships within which the whole process can take place more or less evenly. Ideology produces, makes plausible, concepts and systems to explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works. The strength of ideology derives from the way it gets to be common sense; it "goes without saying." For its production is not an external process, stories are not outside ourselves, something we just hear or read about. Ideology makes sense for us – of us – because it is already proceeding when we arrive in the world, and we come to consciousness in its terms. As the world shapes itself around and through us, certain interpretations of experience strike us as plausible: they fit with what we have experienced already, and are confirmed by others around us.[65]"

According to this logic, we all need ideology at some level to make sense of this most fundamental relationship, to make *mother* plausible and comprehensible to us. What exactly are the "conditions of plausibility[66]" which allow us to understand the maternal figure? Images, ideas, ideologies produced and reproduced through language and the discourses of religion, culture, politics, law,

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[64] Left out of these definitions is any reference to a woman who may have responded to one or more of these definitions were it not for the insistence on the word "child." Are we to understand that the mother whose children happen to have grown to adulthood is no longer a mother? Left out too, are those who have given birth to a child, but who do not, or no longer, identify as "woman." The parenthoods and motherhoods of intersex people and transgender women, complexify and problematize maternity in an infinite variety of ways.

[65] Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 32.

[66] *Ibid*.

science and medicine among others, all contribute to a collective and common-sense understanding of what a mother is, who she is, what she does, and perhaps more importantly who she can be and what she can do.

Overlapping ideologies have tended to put an enormous amount of pressure on the concepts of mother and motherhood so that, if the definitions above appear to create space to include any number of women, varying ideological tendencies have tended to intervene outside the dictionary definition, in culture and in real life, to narrow the scope, to more clearly identify appropriate motherhood from inappropriate motherhood, to sort good mothers from bad ones in a sort of Foucauldian hierarchizing disciplinary system which necessarily emphasizes what differentiates mothers and motherhoods at the expense of what unites them. Argues Foucault in *Surveiller et punir*:

> Disciplinary apparatuses hierarchize individuals in relation to one another, the "good" subjects and the "bad" ones. Through this micro-economy of perpetual penalty, operates a differentiation which is not one of acts, but one of individuals themselves […][67]

Dominant ideological representations in culture tell us what that culture privileges as important and ideal at any given moment. Here, I would like to identify and briefly discuss three inter-related types of ideological frameworks which are of significance for our discussion of mothers and motherhood in *Friends*: ideologies which act at the level of *maternal identity*, ideologies related to *maternal behavior* and ideologies which concern *maternal procreative status*.

Maternal Identity: this type of ideological framework applies to the mother *as a person*, to questions related to her identity. Who is she? What is her marital status? What does she do professionally? Who does she live with and where? What social class does she belong to? What is her race? Her religion? What language does she speak? As stated above, and as will be seen in more depth in Chapter One, the situation comedy reached its cruising altitude during the Post WWII/Cold War Era when the dominant ideology relating to the maternal figure situated her, among other aspects, within a married heteronormative nuclear family. Thus, images from this period (and not just within the sitcom) tend to idealize the maternal figure within this specific

[67] « [L]es appareils disciplinaires hiérarchisent les uns par rapport aux autres les 'bons' et les 'mauvais' sujets. A travers cette micro-économie d'une pénalité perpétuelle, s'opère une différenciation qui n'est pas celle des actes, mais des individus eux-mêmes […] » Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir : Naissance de la Prison* (Paris : Gallimard, 1975), 183. My translation.

configuration. The idealized images of mother from this period adhere to a certain, delimiting, set of criteria. Among other things, she is a stay-at-home suburban housewife, married, heterosexual, white and middle-class. Indeed, this maternal ideology situates the mother within a *nexus* of other overlapping ideologies (patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, the ideology of whiteness). If this conception of mother appears progressively outdated, this is because dominant ideologies of maternal identity have been and continue to be in flux, although, as we will see, the impact of these images still resonates many decades later.[68]

Maternal Behavior: added to this initial framework is another set of criteria which may further delimit the culture's dominant or ideal version of this figure. These elements may be understood in their relation to idealized maternal behavior. That mother is loving, nurturing, protective, kind, warm, devoted, affectionate may or may not, depending on individual experience, be part of one's personal worldview, but even if these qualities are not, they are recognizable at a cultural conceptual level. These concepts and ideas are, in fact, all synonyms (proposed by Google) for *maternal* and they, too, are markers of an ideology at work shaping our understanding of mother as a certain type of person exhibiting certain types of behaviors. For many people thinking about mothers, these concepts may simply be understood as common sense. Later in this work I will discuss Hays' theorization of *intensive mothering* which may be understood as one particularly cogent example of an ideological framework related to maternal behavior.

Maternal Procreative Status: of the three categories of ideology, this may appear to be the most obscure precisely because of its close proximity to "tradition," "common sense" and "the way things have always been." By maternal procreative status I mean to speak to the specific ways in which women enter into motherhood. It is not an exaggeration to suggest that throughout human history, most mothers have become mothers through a relatively straightforward, though complex, set of physiological processes which I will radically simplify here: a woman's ovary releases an egg; that reproductive cell is fertilized by a sperm within her own body; the resulting embryo

[68] Indeed, in his 2020 presidential reelection campaign, Donald Trump's appeals on Twitter to "suburban housewives" explicitly evoke these representations. Whether Trump actually believes that such a group of women exists as such or whether this is merely a very cynical attempt to appeal to nostalgia for a way of life which he knows never really existed is unclear. See for example, Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) for an examination of the American family and the myths and stereotypes associated with it. What Trump's mobilization of this idea *does* demonstrate is that the concept of "suburban housewife," by definition a stay-at-home mother, is one that is still easily understood by a significant enough part of the population to be considered effective as a rhetorical tool in politics at a national level.

gestates within her own uterus for about forty weeks; labor ensues and the woman expels the baby from her body. This is not to say of course that this deceptively simple process is not subject to an infinite range of variations and complications at every step of the way and that, once begun, the progression inevitably ends with a new (live) baby *and* a new (live) mother. Nor is it in any way to suggest that all women at all times have undergone this process willingly or have wished to do so. It is to point out that the bodies of the majority of women who *have* become (what we collectively understand as) mothers have gone through *this set of things*. And it is this set of things which, since the 1978 live birth of Louise Brown (the first baby born as a result of assisted reproductive technologies), is now in the process of being reconsidered, reworked and renegotiated thanks to revolutionary scientific innovation and new technological possibilities.

The incursion of technological innovation on this succession of biological processes simultaneously opens up the possibility of procreation to those whom "nature" had heretofore left out of the reproductive loop (men and women struggling with infertility, lesbian women and gay men), while also stirring ethical, philosophical, legal, political and cultural anxieties, as the limits of these technologies are continually pushed by scientific experimentation and discovery. To be succinct, where there was once one relatively standard path to motherhood, assisted reproductive technology now makes motherhood available to women in a dizzying variety of fashions. Mothers may raise children who bear no relation to themselves genetically and/or who they did not gestate and give birth to with their own bodies. Of course, while it may not resonate culturally or politically in the same ways, the adoption process (either formal or informal) has always made this set of circumstances possible as well.

Yet, if we return to our original set of definitions of *mother*, we find that the first two ("A woman who gives birth to a child," and "A woman whose egg unites with a sperm, producing an embryo,") appear ahead of the others. For *The American Heritage Dictionary*, then, it is a woman's parturient, biological and gestational status linking her to a child or children which must first and foremost be taken into consideration. A definition of *mother* which privileges a specific *way* of becoming a mother when multiple possibilities have been available for decades (millennia in the case of adoption) is ideology at work. Consider as an alternative, this, more inclusive, definition proposed by a Google search for "mother definition": "A woman in relation to her child or children." While the first entry does make space for the two further definitions ("A woman who adopts a child," and "A woman who raises a child."), their placement within the overall definition

is reflective of the culture's wider hierarchical standards in attributing maternal status to some women more readily than others.

In discussing ideology in relation to maternal procreative status I mean to speak to the idea that common sense would have us believe that a mother is a woman whose own egg has been fertilized and whose own embryo she has gestated and whose own baby she has delivered all within her own body. Technology has belied this easy logic for forty years (and, again, adoption for much longer), yet definitions of *mother* still evoke the physiologically straightforward path, suggesting that when we speak about a mother, we take for granted the idea that she has done all these things with her body. This indicates the extent to which assumptions help shape, through commonality and simplification, realities which are, in fact, of astonishing diversity and complexity. Dominant ideology is at work when, in the face of an increasingly vast multiplicity of real-life experiences and variations, it is a continuing assumption that *mother* refers to *one* procreative possibility.

Drawing on these three overlapping frameworks of ideologies, images emerge corresponding to the *mother as concept*. Depending on the particular cultural moment, dominant ideologies related to her identity, her behavior, and her procreative status produce differing versions of this figure, and it is one of the projects of this work to try to pin down what *Friends*, in all its multiple revisitings to this topic, has to say about this. Indeed, much of my analysis of *Friends* seeks to establish the extent to which the sitcom genre, and *Friends* in particular, may be understood as creating spaces of dissidence in its representations of the maternal figure and mothering – cracks in the dominant ideological edifices shaping motherhood. In his articulation of Cultural Materialist theory, Sinfield suggests that

> dissident potential derives ultimately […] from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself. Despite their power, dominant ideological formations are always, in practice, under pressure, striving to substantiate their claim to superior plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances […] Conflict and contradiction stem from the very strategies through which ideologies strive to contain the expectations that they need to generate. This is where failure – inability or refusal – to identify one's interests with the dominant may occur, and hence were dissidence may arise.[69]

Taking our cue then from Cultural Materialism and keeping in mind that *Friends* is a cultural text produced by and for a corporate capitalist system, this research seeks out, within its generically-specific system of representation, those possible moments of dissidence that expose and potentially

[69] Sinfield, 41-42.

question the ideological formations concerning motherhood. The mere fact that the situation comedy in general, and *Friends* in particular, continually returns to stories of the family, to parenthood, and to motherhood suggests that this is something of great significance. For Sinfield reminds us that it is those "faultline stories" which necessitate the most "assiduous and continuous reworking; they address the awkward, unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute.[70]" At this turn-of-the-millennium socio-cultural moment, the extraordinarily popular sitcom's recurring insistence on mothers indicates that this issue can indeed be considered a faultline whose corresponding dominant ideologies are under intense pressure and negotiation.

Indeed, an initial, and quite flagrant, indication that this issue is of import to *Friends* lies in the fact that the titles of many of the episodes treating motherhood include explicit reference to their (explicit) maternal contents. They include, "The One with the Sonogram at the End," "The One with the Birth," "The One with the Breast Milk," "The One with the Baby on the Bus," "The One with Phoebe's Uterus," "The One with the Embryos," "The One with the Birthing Video," "The One with the Baby Shower," "The One Where Rachel has a Baby (Parts 1 and 2)," "The One with the Pediatrician," "The One with the Fertility Test," "The One with the Donor," and "The One with the Birth Mother.[71]" While these titles do not reveal the extent to which motherhood actually imbues this series, they do hint at its place within *Friends*' wider diegetic universe.

Methodology and Progression

This study is composed of the empirical description, analysis and interpretation of the major narrative arcs and representations concerning maternity and motherhood throughout the ten seasons of *Friends* based on close readings of specific moments, scenes and episodes usually occurring within a more expansive context of serialized storytelling. In an effort to make this work as thorough as possible, I have tried, to the best of my ability, to keep my analyses holistic, taking

[70] *Ibid*., 47.
[71] These episodes are, respectively: Season One, Episode Two; Season One, Episode Twenty-Three; Season Two, Episode Two; Season Two, Episode Six; Season Four, Episode Eleven; Season Four, Episode Twelve; Season Eight, Episode Fifteen; Season Eight, Episode Twenty; Season Eight, Episodes Twenty-Three and Twenty-Four, Season Nine, Episode Three; Season Nine, Episode Twenty-One; Season Nine, Episode Twenty-Two and Season Ten, Episode Nine.

into account elements comprising both the intra and extra-diegetic universe of *Friends*. Cognizant that even the smallest details may influence in some way or another the possible interpretations open to the viewer, I have not limited myself in the elements under analysis. To that end, and depending on the examples under consideration, the analyses may take into consideration narrative structure, characterization, performance, dialogue, camera work, audience laughter, set decoration, etc. Screen shots from specific scenes illustrate many of these analyses. At the heart of this study is the recognition that this is a specific type of televisual programming (a situation comedy) created and originally broadcast at a specific historical, social and cultural moment (the turn of the twenty-first century in the United States). As such, in terms of specific representations, the analyses will consistently seek to answer the following questions: is this structured as humorous? If so, how is the humor created and why may it be funny? If not, why not? And, finally, what are the representations' possible ideological and narratological ramifications?

Chapter One seeks to situate *Friends* generically and chronologically within the wider history of American family situation comedy so as to clarify for the reader how this particular text may conform to or stray from previous fictional constructions of maternal figures and motherhood within the genre. This chapter then begins with a discussion of genre, an examination of the situation comedy as a category of popular televisual culture which traces its roots to earlier forms of social comedy. The major generic conventions of the sitcom are sketched here, including, most critically, the genre's comic intent. This first chapter also attempts to speak to some of the notable examples of the fictional mothers and motherhoods made available to American television viewers during the early days of broadcasting, through television's first Golden Era, the transition to more socially relevant programming and into the late 1980s and early 1990s to the moment when *Friends* began its broadcast. The objective here is to delineate (in the broadest of strokes) some of the major recurring themes in terms of maternal representation as well as to point out ruptures when and where they occur. Throughout, I have attempted to contextualize the evolution of this content within a wider framework of cultural and historical change and dislocation.

Chapter Two turns specifically to the sitcom *Friends* and begins where the sitcom begins, with an examination of the first maternal figures made available to the viewing public: the mothers of the six main characters, Judy Geller, Nora Bing, Gloria Tribbiani, Sandra Green, Lily Buffay and Phoebe Abbot. Secondary characters by definition, these women (though each distinctive in her own way) are nonetheless universally characterized as somehow disappointing to their adult

children. This discourse of disappointment operates differently as a function of each character and it is the goal of this chapter to explicate how this dynamic works in each case and whether space is at any point created to redeem these apparently unsatisfactory mothers.

Because of their close association with the cultural stereotype of the Bad Mother, the chapter begins with an examination of this phantasmagorical female figure, identifying her numerous cultural iterations in an attempt to contextualize her significant presence within the diegetic sphere of *Friends*. As will be seen, far from being a socio-historical constant, the Bad Mother fluctuates through time as well as through social and cultural contexts, serving various purposes according to the cultural needs of the moment. Her bad behavior is always relative. Bad mothers act differently at different moments, always in relation to some other, more socially acceptable maternal behaviors or identities, underscoring the social construction of this figure. Examining her appearance in *Friends* through the representations of these six women, as well as how this sitcom recreates the Bad Mother by bringing into action its discourse of disappointment is the purpose of this chapter.

Having established that *Friends* offers a highly critical look at a specific generation of women as mothers, Chapters Three and Four turn towards what we may think of as the "new" mothers and motherhoods proposed by the sitcom. Here, four representations suggest that the sitcom aims to propose a fresh take on family formation and motherhood. In chronological order, Season One follows the pregnancy of secondary characters Carol Willick and her partner, Susan Bunch, in this first serialized representation of lesbian motherhood in an American television sitcom. Twenty years before the United States Supreme Court ruled that marriage was the constitutional right of same sex couples,[72] these two fictional women had and raised a child together over multiple episodes without causing controversy. Season Four proposes an extended look at the processes inherent to Phoebe Buffay's pregnancy as a gestational surrogate at the request of her brother and sister-in-law. From her decision-making process to the overt depiction of then still-innovative assisted reproductive technologies to her difficult separation from the triplets, this narrative of surrogacy offers a surprisingly frank perspective on the as-yet unfamiliar process. Season Eight's narrative arc of Rachel Green's journey to chosen single motherhood is,

[72] The United States Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional all state regulations banning same-sex marriage in their *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision made public on June 26, 2015, thereby establishing a constitutional right to marriage to all United States citizens regardless of their sexual orientation.

on the surface, less pioneering than the others for, by 2001 single mothers by choice had been part of the sitcom's televisual landscape for over a decade. As we shall see, however, as the only main character shown *in the practice of mothering*, Rachel's story of pregnancy and early motherhood does perhaps manage to contribute newness to cultural discourses related to maternity. During *Friends*' final years of broadcast, in Seasons Nine and Ten, Monica Geller and her husband Chandler Bing learn that they cannot have children and this story propels a multiple-episode narrative arc of infertility and adoption which reaches its culmination during the final episode of the series as the couple adopts twins.

Chapter Three then takes on the two stories of motherhood which seem to rupture the dominant ideology of married heterosexuality as the most appropriate circumstances in which to become a mother. As lesbian mothers, Carol and Susan's presence pushes back on this patriarchal ideal and pressures the paternal figure, Ross, into a reconsideration of his role. Paternity (once again represented by Ross) is also forced to adapt when Rachel becomes pregnant unexpectedly and refuses to enter into a nuptial relationship with the biological father of the child gestating in her body. The paternal figure, however, remains present, even omnipresent, and the chapter concludes by questioning the extent to which these examples of mothering beyond patriarchy may accurately be considered as such.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the two examples of motherhoods which call into question a very different aspect of maternal ideology, that of maternal procreative status. The extensive history of that straightforward process of fertilization-gestation-parturition located within a single maternal body as the only path to motherhood has made possible the ideology that there is only one mother for one child. In each of these stories of family formation, however, diagnoses of infertility necessitate the involvement of *two* women. As a gestational surrogate, Phoebe Buffay acts as gestator and parturient to her brother and sister-in-law's genetic offspring while Monica Geller adopts the twins linked genetically, gestationally and through childbirth to another secondary character, the young unmarried Erica, in this narrative of open adoption. These stories reveal and examine the complexities related to motherhood status when childbearing does not follow the simple procreative progression of fertilization, gestation and parturition. Additionally, the series' episodes-long examination of Monica (and Chandler's) infertility also pushes the genre's limits with its apparently unfunny content.

Throughout these four chapters, I hope that it will become clear that not only does the diegetic sphere created in *Friends* unsettle (or attempt to unsettle) issues related to mothers, mothering and motherhood, but that in its regular and repeated deployment of such stories, these issues, in turn, unsettle *Friends* in terms of its generic classification. The stories related to mothers and motherhood in *Friends* stretch it beyond the boundaries of the traditional situation comedy genre and this is identifiable at different sites of sitcom convention most clearly in terms of narrative structure and comic intent.

Chapter One – The Sitcom Mom: Generic and Historical Context

This chapter situates the sitcom as a specific televisual genre with a particular history in American culture. It is a cultural object defined by specific formal and aesthetic elements which construct and delimit its meanings. Historically, it is a genre associated with the representation of family and daily life. Its operation in the comic mode allows it to "smuggle" in[73] topics which may counter hegemonic ideologies. Its use of social comedy and humor serve as a powerful means of negotiating the profound ethnic, cultural and ideological tensions coursing through American society; as such, *Friends* may be seen as a sitcom negotiating the ideological tensions within a context of the Culture Wars of late twentieth-century/turn-of–the-millennium American society, specifically in its treatment of issues related to gender and reproduction.

The chapter also includes a brief overview of some of the noteworthy representations of mothers and motherhoods in the genre's history in order to provide a better sense of how the representations made available in *Friends* concerning these same notions can be rendered intelligible. From the strong ethnic matriarchs viewed in the early television sitcoms held over from radio such as *Mama* (CBS, 1949-1957) and *The Goldbergs* (CBS, 1949-1951; NBC, 1952-1953; DuMont, 1954; syndication 1955-1956) to the gender and genre bursting representations of Lucy Ricardo's televised pregnancy in *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957) to the supposedly

[73] Paul Wells suggests that, "Significant ideas and issues are addressed in seemingly innocent and trivialized parochial situations, but are engaged with and resolved in a symbolic way through the mediation of comic exchanges and events. In many senses, the sitcom is the most appropriate site for these small acts of political and ideological "smuggling," and this is central to the genre's endurance and constant rejuvenation in the American context." Paul Wells, "'Where Everybody Knows Your Name,' Open Convictions and Closed Contexts in the American Situation Comedy," in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 180-201, 181.

quintessential models of maternal perfection and strict gender conformity exemplified by June Cleaver and Margaret Anderson in *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-1958; ABC, 1958-1963) and *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1955; NBC, 1955-1958; CBS, 1958-1960), the first decades of television sitcom's maternal representations are rich in ideological significance and more diverse than is commonly understood.

Subsequent images of mothers and motherhood in the genre are informative in that they appear within the context of the social dislocations associated with the second wave of feminism. These representations include the displacement of powerful maternal figures from a realistic mode to the realm of supernatural fantasy in sitcoms such as *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) and *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972). Only a few years later, this period also demonstrates the genre's ability to integrate more socially relevant, controversial material associated with maternity in sitcoms such as *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978). Additionally, female protagonists who chose to reject hegemonic ideals associated with motherhood are featured in sitcoms such as *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and single mothers appear, as widows and then divorcees, in *Julia* (NBC, 1968-1971, also the genre's first significant depiction of black motherhood) and *One Day at a Time* (CBS, 1975-1984).

Sitcoms in the decade immediately preceding *Friends'* original broadcast period mark both a backlash against the more diverse issues surrounding motherhood which had hitherto been seen on television screens *and* a continuation of posing probing questions concerning the traditional nuclear family and its idealization of motherhood. As such, over a short period of time, television audiences were exposed to maternal characters as diverse as the ideal mother/full time working Supermoms such as Elise Keaton, Clair Huxtable and Maggie Seaver *and* nonconforming maternal figures such as Roseanne Connor, Peggy Bundy or Murphy Brown who, in various ways, radically questioned their place within the hegemonic nuclear family model.

Friends, appearing in 1994, seemed on first regard to be another sitcom "about nothing" in the same vein as *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998).[74] Its universe, characterizations and narratological

[74] The phrase is taken from the forty-third episode of the series, "The Pitch" (Season Four, Episode Three, 1992), in which fictional characters George Costanza and Jerry Seinfeld are asked to pitch a television series to NBC executives. George's idea is to pitch the fictional sitcom as a "show about nothing." "Nothing happens on the show," George explains, "You see, it's just like life." The parallels between the fictional pitch made by George and Jerry to fictional NBC executives and the actual *Seinfeld*, a situation comedy on NBC in which plotlines revolved around the absurdities and mundaneness of everyday life, resulted in the identification of *Seinfeld* itself as a "show about nothing." While, actor Jerry Seinfeld has rejected this wide-spread appellation, noting, "That was made up by the press," the reference appears to maintain currency thirty years later as articles in the popular press continue to identify the sitcom as such.

structure however show it to be a series very much invested in questions related to and critical of traditional familial models and roles, particularly the maternal one. The sitcom's use of narratives concerning maternity and motherhood in the service of this vision is unique, both in the way *Friends* interrogates motherhood and in the way motherhood interrogates the genre. The former element will be the object of the better part of this thesis.

This chapter will thus serve multiple purposes: we begin with an overview of the sitcom as a discreet televisual category examining its unique and far-reaching history which links it to other comic modes of communication as well as an examination of the generic codes and conventions which are typically understood to define it. Following this introduction to the genre, we turn our attention to the ways in which images of mothers (as specific characters) and maternity (as an identity and an ideology) have been conceived and constructed throughout the sitcom's televisual history revealing the notions of *mother* and *motherhood* to be contested terrains in popular culture on which cultural, social and political struggles are imagined, located and acted out for the American viewing public.

See for example, Alexandra Hurtado, "*Seinfeld* Turns 30! Celebrate the Sitcom About Nothing With Over 100 Quotes from the Show," https://parade.com/1043332/alexandra-hurtado/best-seinfeld-quotes/ and Joe Sommerlad, "*Seinfeld* at 30: The 'Show About Nothing' That was Really About Everything," https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/features/seinfeld-30th-anniversary-jerry-george-costanza-elaine-kramer-larry-david-comedy-a8988081.html.

In its similar emphasis on a group of young singletons in New York who spend an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and chatting, *Friends*, was originally received by critics in a similar fashion. Seinfeld himself has suggested that *Friends* wanted "to do our show with better-looking people." Scott Feinberg, "'Awards Chatter' Podcast – Jerry Seinfeld ('Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee')," https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/race/awards-chatter-podcast-jerry-seinfeld-923565.

I.1. Understanding the Genre: Sitcom in America

Friends is a sitcom. The assertion is simple enough, but what makes it true? Is it because its installments last thirty minutes? *NBC Nightly News* (NBC, 1970-present) does as well. Or because it is meant be humorous? *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*[75] is also supposed to be funny. Perhaps because it is recorded in front of a live studio audience? This is also the case for the game show *Jeopardy!* (NBC and syndicated, 1964-present) Or because it is fictional? Any number of televised programs such as *E.R.* (NBC 1994-2009), *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993-2002) and *Law and Order* (NBC 1990-2010) respond to this criterion. Yet none of these television programs is a sitcom. Do we know *Friends* is a sitcom because we hear audience laughter? If this is true, then *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-present) is a sitcom as well. Which it is not. *Friends*, in spite of sharing specific conventions with other types of television shows, is far more different from these other examples of programming than it is alike. What then makes the statement, "*Friends* is a sitcom," intelligible as the truth?

We have been told that a sitcom is a program in which "The episodes are finite. What happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour.[76]" "What happens," the storyline, narrative or plot in *Friends* is indeed often explained or reconciled at the end of a given episode: Ross finds his lost monkey; Joey learns how to dance; Monica breaks up with a much younger boyfriend; Rachel learns she ruined the Christmas trifle. Yet Ross and Rachel's love affair is by no means reconciled at the end of thirty minutes. Nor is Phoebe's pregnancy. Nor is Joey's secret crush on Rachel. Nor is Chandler and Monica's struggle with infertility. Nor, on a wider scale, is the six characters' struggle with assuming and adapting to their own adulthood. Indeed, if this cosmic struggle had been resolved on *Friends* within the space of a discreet episode, the series would never have lasted for more than a season, much less ten. These are stories which are not meant to be contained but to endure. Yet *Friends* is still a sitcom. How can this be so?

The preceding set of questions reveals the hazardous terrain on which we tread when attempting to define the sitcom or any genre. There is not one definition that is simultaneously

[75] A web series created and directed by and starring Jerry Seinfeld. It is a comedic talk show distributed by Crackle (2012-2017) and Netflix (2018-present). Each episode features Seinfeld driving a fellow stand-up comedian to a coffee shop in one of the star's vintage cars.

[76] Lawrence Mintz, "Situation Comedy," in *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*, ed. Brian Rose (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood), 107-129, 115.

general enough to include all programs of a similar ilk while specific enough to carefully attend to the idiosyncrasies and particularities of each particular example; and adherence to and appreciation of a particular piece of televisual programming is more often than not rooted in these very quirks and characteristics which distinguish one piece of programming from another similar one. At the same time, attempting to speak to representations on television, as well as the cultural, social and political implications related to those ways of showing, is close to meaningless (or at least too vast a project to be undertaken here) unless we take into account the specific ways in which certain types of programming operate, communicate their content, and are understood by critics, audiences and the industry itself. Categorization is both risky and necessary.

Speaking in generic terms implies entering into a pact with others (critics, scholars, creators, fans) based on mutual understanding. When we speak of the situation comedy or of any generic televisual category for that matter, we refer to a conventionally agreed upon method or methods of classifying and categorizing the content which appears (and which has historically appeared) on television screens. It is crucial to remember that these are conventions, indispensable for scholars, creators and fans alike, yet perpetually open to debate. Genres organize an otherwise chaotic jumble of images into smaller, more easily digestible, morsels of knowledge which stabilize and facilitate interpretation, thinking, conversation and discussion. Genre definition, Jason Mittell, has suggested is a *discursive practice* and as such, generic classifications not only denote meaning, they create it as well. Taking the position that there is nothing inherently sitcomish about the situation comedy as a genre, yet cognizant of the reality that providing a sound basis for analysis is critical, this section will attempt to arrive at a satisfactory working definition for the purposes of this project by providing an examination of what is conventionally understood as sitcom in the United States. Before we begin using the term *sitcom* too hastily, we will define the terms of the pact. In discussing television genres, Jason Mittell notes the following:

> Genre analysis can fall into a common trap: it is easy to overstate the uniformity of any genre category. Genres are used as shorthand to highlight the similarities between shows – and thus gloss over differences – but genre programs can often be misread as more consistent and uniform than they actually are. Looking at a genre historically is one way to correct for this mistake.[77]

[77] Mittell, 238.

Following Mittell's advice let us begin with a brief history of the sitcom in order to reach a clear (or as clear as possible) understanding of what this genre is and how it has manifested itself historically before attempting to identify the formal elements which may be understood to constitute it. This historical work will begin with the medium that immediately preceded television and "was already being dismissed as an obsolete technology in the late 1940s.[78]" From this we will work back chronologically, identifying as we go along, some of the conventions which have been used to identify and understand the sitcom.

I.1.1. Historical Roots

Television sitcom's most immediate and regularly identified historical precursor is the radio situation comedy.[79] Indeed, some of the newer medium's earliest examples of the genre were established radio programs which, for a variety of reasons and in a variety of circumstances, made the transition to television. These included *Amos 'n' Andy* (NBC and CBS, 1928-1960), *The Rise of the Goldbergs* (CBS, 1929-1946), *The Life of Riley* (ABC, 1944-1945 and NBC, 1945-1951), *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (NBC and CBS, 1934-1950), *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (CBS and NBC, 1944-1954), *Father Knows Best* (NBC, 1949-1954), and even *My Favorite Husband* (CBS, 1948-1951), a Lucille Ball vehicle and the antecedent of *I Love Lucy*. The fundamental import of this earlier medium on the genre that would become recognizable as television sitcom is underlined by David Marc:

> Radio, the first great agency for the day-to-day depositing of regional and other subcultural styles and types into a central, commercial myth bank, created a model of assimilation that remains intact. The medium was a basic force for the synthesis of popular local and ethnic comedy into the national genres that would eventually dominate electronic culture.[80]

Hamamoto concurs and elaborates on the specific historical, sociological and cultural context in which these radio texts developed and were broadcast, explaining:

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[78] David Marc, "Origins of the Genre: In Search of the Radio Sitcom," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany: The State University of New York), 15-24, 22.
[79] See Darrell Y. Hamamoto's *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York, Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1991), Mintz, Newcomb, Mills and especially, Marc's *Comic Visions*.
[80] Marc, *Comic Visions*, 28.

> The situation comedy, prior to its introduction to television, developed in a milieu of rapid social change brought about by a fundamental transformation of the American economy. The transition of American society from a rural agricultural economy to an urban industrial economy was not without fitful dislocations of peoples separated by geography, language, and culture. As such, the situation comedy as popular art was born amidst labor and capital conflict, interracial hostility, regional and sectional rivalries, and the pressures of Americanization faced by millions of immigrants working in a harsh, competitive environment during worldwide economic depression. Radio assisted in building a popular, uniquely American political culture. Radio comedy in particular helped mediate the clashes of immigrant cultures and eased the sense of deprivation inflicted by the Great Depression.[81]

In a sense, this comedic form of storytelling, at this particular moment in American society, on this particular electronic media – the first with the potential to simultaneously reach virtually every person in the country – was an artistic and creative Melting Pot into which all manner of rancorous ideological conflict, ethnic and racial tensions, economic and status worries, and sexual and gender anxieties were transferred, to be mixed, more or less generously and effectively with comic relief. The resulting product, the situation comedy,[82] was disseminated across the airwaves beginning in 1926,[83] bringing entertainment while simultaneously highlighting and smoothing over all manner of tensions through humor. In a sense, the genre, having changed media and undergone a multitude of transformations, still fulfills this role.

Apart from their comic, narrative and ideological content as well as their recurrent, episodic structure and their dependence on sponsorship in an existing corporate-capitalist culture, these comic-dramas or narrative comedies[84] bequeathed to their television successors another critical piece of heritage, arguably the most important: enthusiastic mass audiences whose members, transitioning to television, followed their favorite fictional characters and invested in television sets in order to see them. This is critical. Television inevitably changed the genre but, in the early period of televisual broadcast, the underlying structure remained a more or less direct visual

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[81] Hamamoto, 4.

[82] A word here about terminology: David Marc traces the first use of *situation comedy* to an article in *TV Guide* from 1953 concerning *I Love Lucy*. Marc quotes the magazine, "Ever since *I Love Lucy* zoomed to the top of the rating ladder, it seems the networks have been filling every available half-hour with another situation comedy." The shortened form *sitcom* appeared a decade later in *Life* magazine according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. As Marc points out, using either term to describe the early radio comedy broadcasts is anachronistic. See Marc "Origins," 15-16.

[83] This was *Sam 'n' Henry*, later renamed *Amos 'n' Andy*.

[84] Both terms are Marc's in "Origins," 22.

adaptation of audio content, which is to say that the listeners-turned-spectators were sufficiently familiar with the format and content they were now *watching* that the genre was able to succeed and later thrive on the new medium. At a national scale, radio comedies engendered viewers who were savvy and sophisticated enough to understand what they were seeing and to appreciate it. Sitcoms did not, then, simply appear on television, out of thin air, and their debt to radio cannot be underestimated. As Mills notes, the genre "mutated out of other types of broadcasting, bringing together the realist settings and narrative structures of drama and the performance styles and audience interaction of theatre.[85]"

Just as American television sitcom may trace its roots to radio, radio comedy programs are replete with a specific genealogy of their own. Most of this heritage may be traceable to vaudeville and minstrelsy among other forms of popular entertainment. Radio comedy personalities who began their careers acting in sketches and musical numbers on the vaudeville circuit include Jack Benny, George Burns and Gracie Allen, Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, while *Amos 'n' Andy*'s creators Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll were more familiar with the minstrel traditions of the South.

The transition of certain vaudeville variety acts to the new broadcast medium of radio, however, imposed a number of adaptations and adjustments to better 'fit' the earlier comedic forms to the technological requirements, possibilities and limitations of radio transmission. These adaptations would, in turn, become core elements of the genre when it found its way onto television screens. This evolution was perhaps most significant in terms of content. While the same vaudeville acts could be regularly repeated for different audiences each evening, the simultaneous transmission of a particular sketch or comic routine across radio waves as well as the recurrent weekly format of radio precluded such repetition and resulted in a substantial demand for increased material as audiences could not be counted on to tune in to radio programs simply to listen to recycled content. This constant demand for consistently new material was met by an increasing dependence on writers who turned to formats better suited to continuity and endurance. The comedy act, schtick or sketch moved away, in certain instances, from its vaudevillian iteration as a discreet unit towards being one of a number of elements which could be either *integrated* into a more narrative structure of storytelling (the situation) or, eventually, expanded and enhanced to *become* the humorous situation itself onto which continuity was imposed through a serialized structure. Neale and Krutnik note that "in the mid-1930s there is a discernable shift away from the

[85] Mills, 2009, 35.

vaudeville-style show (although it was by no means displaced) towards formats better suited not just to the sound medium but especially to the institutional imperatives of commercial broadcast radio.[86]"

Neale and Krutnik give as an example *The Jack Benny Program* (on television, CBS and NBC, 1950-1965) whose eponymous star successfully made the transition across these three forms of mass entertainment, in order to illustrate the adjustments. They cite three major adaptations of Benny's act which facilitated a successful transition to radio. These adaptations inspired and were adopted by a number of other popular shows which followed. First is the aforementioned change in structure or "architecture" necessitated by the demand for new material, "Benny's thirty-minute shows came to develop a continuity lacking in the sixty-minute variety programme. They represented, in other words, a move towards the structuring principles of situation comedy.[87]" This move toward continuity enabled a particular type of relationship to develop between listeners and shows, one based on the pleasures of recognition and understanding. "Continuity existed within and across shows, and also across and between [seasons]. Running gags, catchphrases and set-piece routines were also regularly occurring features, creating a sense of familiarity […][88]" The second adaptation was related to the first and involves the notion of a recurring character. "Benny and his writers evolved a persona for the comedian which allowed the development of running gags and routines," write Neale and Krutnik, and they add, "Benny's status as a comedian was important to the *situational* context.[89]" Thus, the star, actor or comedian becomes in some respects subordinate to the wider circumstances in which he is situated; he or she no longer stands alone but is supported by an underlying context in which his or her persona acts and interacts. Part of that situation or context involves other characters which Neale and Krutnik identify as the third major transition from the vaudeville act to radio situation comedy: "the show featured a 'gang' or 'family' of regular performers, each with their own idiosyncratic characterizations.[90]" Benny's show as well as those of other stars who transitioned from vaudeville "represented the development of comedy formats which were more suited to commercial radio. The networks and the sponsors were seeking to draw listeners on a regular basis and the structures of these shows, with their firm

[86] Steve Neal and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 214.
[87] *Ibid*., 215.
[88] *Ibid*.
[89] *Ibid.*, 216.
[90] *Ibid*.

principles of continuity, aided this purpose.[91]" Radio, then, imposed a number of fundamental structural transformations, still recognizable today, on what was to become known as television situation comedy in its transition from vaudevillian humor to one of the most popular televisual forms of storytelling in America. However, while its format has changed radically, its role as comedic popular entertainment has remained remarkably similar to that of vaudevillian spectacle. In his history of vaudeville, Albert F. McLean, Jr. notes that vaudeville was a distinctly significant form of popular entertainment particularly at the height of its popularity in the early decades of the twentieth century. He writes, "vaudeville was, for at least four decades, not only a significant social institution but also a mythic enactment – through ritual – of the underlying aspirations of the American people.[92]"

A vast and loosely connected entertainment circuit, vaudeville theaters and the acts which filled them by attracting millions of Americans were, by 1915, present in the major metropolitan areas of the United States while minor theatres and circuits were installed throughout much of the rest of the country. In the decades before radio began broadcasting entertainment nationwide, these spectacles were, according to McLean, the most important form of mass entertainment. McLean's interpretation of the cultural significance of vaudeville as ritual closely echoes Hamamoto's explanation of the role of radio:

> That urbanization came as a distinct trauma within the American experience and that it shook the foundations of the established social order has been the conclusion of a generation of American historians. What has remained unclear, however, was just how the collective masses, both European immigrants and rural Americans, met this challenge to their traditions, standards, and even to their sanity. Vaudeville was one means – a primary one – by which the disruptive experience of migration and acclimatization was objectified and accepted. In its symbolism lies the psychic profile of the American mass man in the moment of his greatest trial.[93]

Vaudeville's own roots lay in a variety of itinerant forms of entertainment each appealing to mass audiences including circuses, minstrel shows, bawdy variety spectacles as well as popular theatre. Its component acts included song-and-dance routines, verbal humor, musical and animal acts, physical feats and brief narrative sketches. It was a distinctly American form of mass entertainment, although, like anything "distinctly American," its own heritage is to be found in the

[91] *Ibid*., 217.
[92] Albert F. McLean Jr., *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1965), 2.
[93] *Ibid*., 3.

Old-World comedic and spectacular traditions of Europe: British music hall, Renaissance *commedia dell'arte*, Rabelaisian grotesques and the medieval carnivalesque. What unites these various forms of popular entertainment is their use of a "discourse of frivolity" or "comic mode[94]" to communicate and mediate social tensions sparked by dislocations, transitions, social upheaval and uneven power dynamics. The American television situation comedy, then, may be situated as a member of a long tradition of humor-based institutions of mass entertainment whose comedic mode enables defamiliarization, transgressivity and, ultimately, negotiation with a possibility for conciliation thanks to its semantically unstable terrain. These interactions are complex and while comedy in general is often considered to be subversive, the situation comedy is frequently accused, thanks to its narrative structure, of being conservative. To better understand these apparent contradictions, let us return to identifying some of the generic conventions which may be associated with this genre.

I.1.2. Sitcom Conventions

As we have seen, the genre's rich history in distinctively comedic forms of mass entertainment spanning decades and transitioning across media has lent to it a number of specific attributes. Many of these have been responses to institutional demands and expectations such as a specific setting or situation involving a group of recurring characters, the thirty-minute duration of individual episodes, and narratives structured by interruptions whose purpose was to accommodate messages and advertisements from sponsors. Other conventions generally associated with the sitcom may be traced to specific early examples of situation comedies following the genre's arrival on television. These conventions include, for example, elements relating to the genre's aesthetics, style and look. In his definition of the genre, Mintz writes,

> Sitcoms are generally performed before live audiences, whether broadcast live (in the old days) or filmed or taped, and they usually have an element that might be almost metadrama in the sense that since the laughter is recorded (sometimes even augmented), the audience is aware of watching a play, a performance, a comedy incorporating comic activity.[95]

[94] Mills uses both of these terms to describe the overarching mood of the television situation comedy. Discourse of frivolity, *The Sitcom*, 6. Comic mode, *Television Sitcom*, 19.
[95] Mintz, 115.

Writing in 1985, Mintz simultaneously highlights two interrelated conventions (the studio audience and audible laughter) of fundamental importance to the television sitcoms of that era as well as to many which followed on the American networks. Both of these conventions derive from the necessities of adapting comedic performances to the new visual media. The very first television situation comedies including *Mary Kay and Johnny* (DuMont, CBS and NBC, 1947-1950), *The Goldbergs* and *Mama*, were not in fact filmed before live audiences. This was an innovation which was introduced by *I Love Lucy*'s star, Lucille Ball, who felt that her performance as a comedian suffered in the absence of a live audience because their reactions helped her gauge her act. These audience reactions became an integrated and integral element of the episode, and the genre itself, serving as a cue to the individual viewer at home by alerting them to potential moments of comedy. Audible laughter, whether emanating from a live audience or added in postproduction, has historically been one of the most recognizable aspects of the sitcom genre.[96]

The other element more implicit in Mintz's identification of sitcom's generic attributes is directly related to the studio audience: it is inherited exclusively from *I Love Lucy* and is rooted in Lucille Ball's previous experience of acting in the cinematographic industry based in Hollywood. It involves the genre's conventional shooting style. Aware that broadcasting what was, in essence, a theatrical comedic performance might lead to a flat or static viewing experience, Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz turned to renowned German cinematographer, Karl Freund, who devised a three-camera system of shooting scenes which was to become known as the "three-headed monster." Brett Mills explains its significance on the genre:

> Freund used three cameras to capture a scene involving two characters: the first covered a wide, establishing shot while the other two were each mid-shots of each performer. These shots allowed for fast editing between the two performers in any

[96] This is not to suggest that all situation comedies make use of this feature. (More recent sitcoms such as *The Office* (NBC, 2005-2013) and *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020) are not filmed in front of live audiences and do not add artificial laughter in postproduction; the fact that these two examples have been conceived of as hybrid mock documentaries explains, in part, this lack). Nor is it to suggest that any program which features either real or artificial audience laughter is a situation comedy. *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-present), *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (CBS, 2105- present), and *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-present) are all examples of television programming taped in front of live studio audiences but which, lacking episodic narrative structure and reliance on recurring characters, are not considered situation comedies.

While *I Love Lucy* was the first *television* situation comedy to feature audible live audience laughter, some radio sitcoms had been recorded in front of live studio audiences. Likewise, *I Love Lucy* was not, strictly speaking, the first television sitcom to feature audible laughter. That distinction lies with *The Hank McCune Show* (NBC, 1950) which was broadcast for only two months and, in the absence of a live audience, was the first televised situation comedy to make use of a laugh track, that is, pre-recorded laughter added in post-production.

> conversation scene, and also meant that the text offered as much weight to reaction shots as it did to those of speech. It was Freund that first noticed how important the reaction shot is to comedy, for two reasons. Firstly, in seeing a character's astonished reaction to the behaviour of another character, the audience is cued into reading such behaviour as abnormal and, therefore, comic. Secondly, while a shot of comic behaviour would get a laugh from an audience, a subsequent shot of a reaction to that behaviour would get another laugh, meaning that a programme could get two laughs from the same joke.[97]

While many other televisual genres may make use of this shot-reverse shot filming process, the sitcom uses this method consistently *in its specific quest to generate humor* and thereby distinguishes itself from more dramatic fare which may make use of the same process though in search of a radically different emotional reaction from the audience. If the sitcom may be understood as having a specific set of aesthetic conventions including a theatrical, staged quality, a particular mode of filming and editing, and (in many cases) a metatextual element of audible laughter, these aesthetic elements all share a common goal which underscores the ultimate finality of this type of programming: the production of humor, or what Mills terms the genre's comic intent or impetus. Thus, as Mills argues, "other aspects of sitcom which are commonly noted in definitions of it – its length, its domestic setting, its character types, its shooting style – can be understood as conventions through which that comic impetus is expressed and demonstrated rather than tropes which define and characterise the genre.[98]" While he admits that this "might seem reductive and tautological," ultimately, he suggests, it is the comic impetus, the element of humor which, above all else, distinguishes most effectively this type of programming from other televisual genres.[99] Because this comedic element is so essential to what is conventionally understood as the sitcom genre, we turn briefly to a limited examination of comedy. We do this not only to better comprehend the type of programming at the heart of this analysis in general, but

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[97] Mills, 2009, 39.
[98] *Ibid*, 49.
[99] I would concur with Mills in this, but suggest that arguing that it is the genre's comic impetus alone which most distinctly differentiates the situation comedy from other genres risks divorcing this dimension from that other element of the genre, equally fundamental, which is to say the situation (whether situation refers, as it alternatively and confusingly does, to the underlying premise of the show or to the specific situation exposed in each episode). Situation comedy is a comedic form of *telling a story*, of recounting a set of fictional circumstances or events bounded by a mode of communication destined to elicit laughter. By insisting on the comic impetus alone, we risk conflating the genre to include comedy programming with a lesser commitment to narration and storytelling such as sketch comedy. This distinction, which is in no way based on a judgement of value, seems nonetheless primordial. A situation comedy without comic impetus can still exist as a narrative entity only this time we would call it a drama (or perhaps more often, a tragedy). A sketch comedy act, however, without the existence of comic impetus has little left in terms of storytelling legs to stand on.

more particularly, to better apprehend what makes the attention given to mothers (or any other group for that matter) found within these generic boundaries of comedy and humor specific and particular; why, in short, they may resonate the way they do in this particular type of program but not in others.

I.1.3. Comedy, Humor and the Sitcom

The opposite of "seriousness," the comic mode is a type of communication which allows for all (or at least, some) manner of subversion, naughtiness, transgression and disobedience through the establishment of an alternative semantic terrain in which sense and meaning (of individual words, categories, representations) are no longer fixed and stable entities but are brought to the fore and deliberately highlighted to force a consideration of significance, to defamiliarize, to jolt expectations. Neale and Krutnik explain:

> All instances and forms of comic are fundamentally semiotic. Inasmuch as they involve expectation and logic, they necessarily also involve meanings and signs. This is as true of accidental or discovered instances of the comic in everyday life as it is of formal instances of the comic like the joke and the gag (which only exist in utterance, and therefore only in purely semiotic form). A man in a pinstripe suit and bowler hat striding head-in-air down the road and slipping on a banana skin can only be funny because the meanings involved produce a contradiction that leads to a surprise. (The meanings of dignity, purpose, power, and control are suddenly contradicted by the meanings of incompetence, failure, and indignity.)[100]

It is the comic mode at work in the carnivalesque world-turned-upside-down where the pauper is crowned king; it is at work in the unbridled anarchic joy of a pie in Lucy Ricardo's face; it is at work in representations of the bumbling father or the oversexed mother in the situation comedy. Comedy and humor operate paradigm shifts, if only temporarily, which create spaces to upset convention, interrogate authority, reassign meaning and transgress norms, and the popular and ritualized manifestations of comedy throughout the ages demonstrate collective attempts to exploit these spaces of potential semantic contestation.

The degree, however, to which comedy is a conservative, progressive or even revolutionary social force is the subject of much debate. In "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom,'" Umberto Eco for

[100] Neal and Krutnik, 70.

example, argues in a pointed repudiation of Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, that "there is something wrong with this theory of cosmic carnivalization as global liberation.[101]" Comedy, Eco argues, is ultimately rooted in authority for two reasons. Firstly, without the overwhelming pervasiveness of the law (authority, dominant social structures), there would be nothing to upheave or revolt against. Thus, comedy exists thanks to the presence of authority, underscoring the latter's own necessary and ultimately immutable presence. Secondly, the comic is always somehow delimited by authority. It is power which permits the very existence of comic space, not the other way around. While formerly this manifested as temporal limitation (i.e. comic carnivalesque ritual and behavior took place at certain specific and agreed upon moments) nowadays, Eco identifies this is spatial limitation (i.e. comedy is allowed to exist in certain spaces such as comedy clubs, in the cinema and on television screens, for example). Eco indeed reaches the tentative conclusion that "the comic is only an instrument of social control and can never be a form of social criticism.[102]" Eco goes on, however, to argue that, while comedy, because it is grounded in the explicit recognition, acceptance and approbation of authority, is necessarily "an instrument of social control," *humor* "is a true movement of freedom." Humor, concludes Eco, "does not pretend, like carnival [the comic], to lead us beyond our own limits. It gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from the inside.[103]"

Eco's conclusion aligns itself with other attempts to distinguish between the various concepts related to comedy including humor, wit, jokes, puns and laughter. Freud for example, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, references the comic, jest, play, jokes, wit and puns among other concepts before reaching the conclusion that jokes, the comic and humor differ thanks to the differences in pleasure they procure on a psychical level. These distinctions and differences, while fascinating and complex, are not necessarily pertinent to our project. We leave them aside in order to return to the subject at hand while keeping in mind that this remains a lively field of examination and contestation. We return to the catch-all words, comedy and humor, for the rest of our study, cognizant of the fact that these terms may remain underdefined, but relatively confident that their generalized connotation of somehow relating to the *un*-serious, to laughter, which in turn

[101] Umberto Eco, "The Frames of Comic 'Freedom'" in *Carnival! Approaches to Semiotics* ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1984), 1-10, 3.
[102] *Ibid*., 7.
[103] *Ibid*., 8.

has important implications in terms of power, meaning, as well as ways of seeing, knowing and understanding, is sufficient to apprehend the significance of what is under study: motherhood in the American television sitcom and specifically in *Friends*.

Before returning to the sitcom genre and in order to better understand the dynamic and complex relationships between comedy, power and meaning, it will be helpful to explore some of the various theories of humor. In writing about the sitcom genre, Brett Mills articulates and regrets a certain lack of consideration of theories of humor in discussions of sitcoms because attention to such theory "offers valuable insights into the specifically comic aspects of the genre. It also helps place the analysis of sitcom in a broader social context, suggesting that thinking through why humanity should spend so much time and effort making itself laugh is a worthwhile pursuit.[104]" In the discussion of Humor Theory which follows, we will closely follow Mills' concise description of the three main strands of this otherwise diverse body of theory. The discussion which follows is not meant to minimize or efface the works of other major thinkers and theorists of humor and comedy. However, in his extensive theorizing of the sitcom genre, Mills has afforded much space to the thinking through of the specifics of comedy and humor and their fundamental import to the situation comedy and here we adopt his theoretical framework as the most approachable, applicable and convenient for our own purposes as well.

The oldest of the three theories of humor is the Superiority Theory. Conceived of by thinkers and philosophers since Plato, the Superiority Theory posits that humor and laughter occur when people or groups of people feel superior to, more powerful, or in some way dominant over another person or groups of people. As Mills points out, Plato interpreted this as a negative or "immoral" effect of humor, a "malicious" act, while Aristotle is said to have referred to humor as "a sort of abuse." Thus, the earliest thinkers imagined humor as necessarily mocking and disrespectful, implicitly suggesting an incontrovertible schism or conflict between the laugher(s) and the object(s) of the laughter and viewing humor as inevitably divisive. It is perhaps because of this early and enduringly negative connotation of laughter and humor as mean and debasing that many theorists have been loath to consider it seriously until relatively recently. While mocking laughter certainly exists in everyday life, the Superiority Theory is just one explanation, and Plato

[104] Mills, 2009, 76-77.

and Aristotle's own scolding interpretation[105] was challenged by sixteenth-century philosophers, amongst them, Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes. According to Mills, Hobbes reinterpreted the Superiority Theory in a more subversive light: "For Hobbes, humour is a tactic employed by those with little power, who mock others in order to assert and demonstrate their dominance.[106]" Likewise Descartes suggests that "Those who have some obvious defect […] are observed to be especially inclined to derision. Desiring to see all others as unfortunate as themselves, they are very pleased by the evils that befall them […][107]" These two Enlightenment philosophers underscore one of the characteristics most often ascribed to comedy and humor, as well as the most potentially liberating one: their ability to highlight and call into question dynamics of power. Comedy and humor as challenges to hegemonic regimes of power may theoretically upend hierarchies by revealing them, questioning them and ultimately laughing at them. Descartes, in the previous quote, also clearly identifies humor as a source of pleasure, particularly for those who, for one reason or another, are relegated to lower positions of status within society.

However, before becoming too quickly enamored with the humor's liberatory potential in general and the television situation comedy's in particular, it is necessary to keep in mind Mills' reminder that the Superiority Theory of humor is difficult to transfer to the situation comedy genre:

> this is not to suggest that the Superiority Theory can be easily transposed to contemporary broadcasting, or that its application to the genre of sitcom is straightforward. Perhaps the most striking distinction is that whereas the Theory insists that laughter is the prerogative of the powerless who use it in order to attack those superior to them, contemporary sitcom is more commonly critiqued for its mocking of the vulnerable […] Running throughout the academic analysis of sitcom is an assumption that the genre problematically upholds power structures within society and is a useful tool for normalizing the demonization of certain social groups. It is therefore very definitely not the tool of the downtrodden, and sitcom humour may instead be one of the most powerful ways in which unequal social distinctions remain upheld.[108]

Thus, while the Superiority Theory may usefully explain humor and laughter at an abstract level, it is difficult to directly apply the workings of this theory to the situation comedy as a broadcast television genre. Simply put, while laughter may be indicative that a sitcom audience understands

[105] Aristotle, according to Mills, referred to those who enjoyed the pleasures of laughter as "vulgar buffoons." Mills, 78.
[106] *Ibid*., 77.
[107] Quoted in Mills, 77-78.
[108] *Ibid*., 79.

a joke or the humor of a given situation, and while this audible reaction may incite laughter in viewers at home, one is never able to ascertain with certainty just who is laughing (and who is not laughing) at whom and why. As suggested by Mills, the political implications of humor and laughter in the sitcom may be even less clear.

A second theory of humor, espoused by both Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, postulates that humor and laughter occur when expectations are confounded, when norms are undermined or destabilized. Known as Incongruity Theory, Kant explains it thus, "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.[109]" Likewise, Schopenhauer writes, "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation.[110]" This theory, as Mills points out, underscores the fundamental link between humor and norms. "Unless," Mills writes, "a viewer understands the way things are 'meant to be,' incongruity will be unnoticeable and laughter will not occur.[111]" While this theory may, like the Superiority Theory, be critiqued particularly in its applicability to the television sitcom genre, it does lend credence to the notion that comedic genres in general, and the sitcom in particular, may be examined in terms of their association to social norms. According to Mills, "Definitively demonstrating that comedy works in one way or the other is likely to be an impossible task and depends upon the reading strategies of individuals. However, what the Incongruity Theory does suggest is that comedy has a *relationship* to social norms and can therefore be a useful way into thinking about them.[112]" This theory, and its attendant emphasis on societal norms, will be of particular importance in this project.

A final theory of humor relevant to this study is Relief Theory. Posited namely by Sigmund Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Relief Theory suggests that jokes, wit and the comic offer a release of suppressed psychic energy. He illustrates his theory through an explanation of the mechanisms of what he refers to as the tendentious joke:

> Let us assume that there is an urge to insult a certain person; but this is so strongly opposed by feelings of propriety or of aesthetic culture that the insult cannot take place. If, for instance, it were able to break through as a result of some change of emotional condition or mood, this breakthrough by the insulting purpose would be felt subsequently with unpleasure. Thus the insult does not take place. Let us now

[109] Quoted in Mills, 82.
[110] Quoted in Mills, 83.
[111] Mills, 83.
[112] *Ibid*., 87. Emphasis in the original.

> suppose, however, that the possibility is presented of deriving a good joke from the material of the words and thoughts used for the insult – the possibility, that is, of releasing pleasure from other sources which are not obstructed by the same suppression.[113]

These "other sources," namely jokes or wit, allow for the expression of otherwise unacceptable feelings within a socially acceptable framework for the purposes of pleasure and release. The comic, according to Freud, is a pleasurable way of relieving the pressure imposed by the obstructing forces of propriety or correctness. In his other major work on the topic, an essay entitled simply "Humour," Freud both elucidates the subtle differences he sees between humor and other related terms (humor being more "fine and elevating" than wit, for example) while at the same time corroborating previous humor theorists. Humorous pleasure, for example, is derived when one person sees another "in a situation which leads him to anticipate that the victim will show signs of some affect; he will get angry, complain, manifest pain, fear, horror, possible even despair. The person who is watching or listening is prepared to follow his lead, and to call up the same emotions. But his anticipations are deceived; the other man does not display any affect – he makes a joke.[114]" Thus Freud's conceptual frameworks evoke earlier thinkers of both Superiority and Incongruity Theories while reworking them through the prism of his own psychoanalytic thinking.

I.1.4. Applying Humor Theory: Laughing at Nora Bing

Before moving forward let us examine a specific scene from *Friends* in order to better understand the ways these three theories may be applied, with more or less accuracy and success, to the sitcom. In an episode from the first season, "The One with Mrs. Bing,[115]" Chandler Bing's unconventional mother, Nora Bing, makes her first appearance in the sitcom. The very introduction of the character stands out as something quite unusual; the fictional mother figure, an acclaimed author of erotic

[113] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relationship to the Unconscious* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 166-167.
[114] From Sigmund Freud's "Humour" in *The Comedy Studies Reader*, ed. Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 74-79, 75.
[115] Season One, Episode Eleven.

novels, is a guest on the late-night talk show, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.*[116] She is there to discuss her latest book. The studio and television audience watch Nora, along with the six main characters, on a television screen in the living room of Monica and Rachel. The woman is dressed both professionally *and* provocatively, in a tight-fitting jacket and miniskirt and, in response to questions from the host, begins to regale the audience with intimate details concerning her love life and sexual proclivities. "Occasionally," begins Nora for example, "after I've been intimate with a man, I just get this craving for Kung Pao Chicken." The scene is shot and constructed in such a way as to focus on the increasingly embarrassed reactions of Chandler as he watches his eccentric mother speaking in such a frank and open way about her own sexual pleasure.

Figure 6 Nora Bing arrives on The Tonight Show *and is interviewed by Jay Leno*

At one point in the interview, Nora mentions that she has a son, and Leno, in light of what has come before, remarks that he cannot picture Nora as a mother. Nora seizes on the opportunity to proclaim that she is in fact a "fabulous mom." Then, after a pause for anticipatory comic effect, she adds, "I bought my son his first condoms." The wide angle shot that follows shows the gathered friends slowly turning their eyes from the television screen to their friend, Chandler. The next shot, a mid-shot of Chandler, emphasizes his reaction: embarrassed, humiliated, uncomfortable and seething. The studio laughter underscoring this entire sequence signals it as humorous but understanding the precise mechanisms at work is not necessarily easy.

[116] This late-night comedy-talk show aired on NBC from 1992 to 2014 with comedian Jay Leno as its host. *The Tonight Show* has been an NBC institution since 1954 and has been hosted by six different comedians during that time. Its current host is Jimmy Fallon who took over the position after Leno retired.

Figure 7 Camera work and editing construct this scene to focus on Chandler's embarrassed reaction

Figure 8 Both Nora and Chandler (above) face communal laughter alone

Following the Superiority Theory, we may interpret the studio audience laughter as directed towards the character of Mrs. Bing who, although imagining herself to be a good mother, in fact showed very poor judgement or otherwise acted inappropriately in buying condoms for her son. The studio audience thus feels superior to Mrs. Bing; they collectively know that this is not how a superlative mother behaves and she becomes the object (the butt) of the joke. Alternatively, laughter of superiority could be directed at Chandler himself, signaling that the audience feels contempt for the character, this poor fool with the wacky mother. Indeed, Chandler's characterization at this early point in the series as a sad sack who is unlucky in love lends credence to this particular interpretation as does the wide-angle shot showing the other friends directing their gaze at Chandler; Chandler is alone, placed apart from the others in this sequence. The larger group turns to look at him simultaneously as one, underscoring his outsider status and the communal nature of humor and comedy. Chandler's aloneness in the kitchen, in contrast to the community of friends looking at him from the more convivial warmth of the living room underscores his inferiority just as Nora Bing, in announcing the story of the condoms, is pictured alone on stage and on the screen contrasting mightily with the communal laughter emanating from the various audiences in front of which she is placed. The specific construction of this sequence, the choice of shots and editing, indeed makes it possible to imagine an element of superiority targeting either Mrs. Bing, Chandler, or both characters.

A second possible interpretation is made available to us by applying the Incongruity Theory of humor to this scene. In this analysis, it is once again Nora Bing's status of maternal figure which is the source of comedy. Nora's appearance, characterization and behavior as a seductive writer of erotic novels, as a woman openly discussing her sexual appetites and mishaps to a nationwide audience, and as a mother who believes she is a "fabulous" example of maternal responsibility because she offers her son his first condoms, facilitating his access to sexual intercourse, all drive home the notion that Nora does not respond to conventional notions associated with appropriate mothering. She is not particularly warm, nurturing or comforting; on the contrary she is overtly, even avariciously, sexual, and, in telling the story of buying Chandler his first condoms she humiliates her only child in front of his friends as well as a nation of strangers. The laughter associated with Nora's appearance on *The Tonight Show* which culminates in the joke about the condoms illustrates the distance between the socially agreed-upon norms associated with motherhood in America at this period and the actual behavior of the fictional character. The audience reaction suggests that they find Nora's version of mother particularly dissident in relation to the norm. Nora – sexpot and accomplished professional woman who indeed makes her living from her authority (she is an author) in sexual matters – and mother – that nurturing, caring, unselfish homebody – are entirely antithetical notions. Incongruity and hilarity ensue. Highlighting Chandler's embarrassment serves to underscore the effect.

The final example of humor theory which may be employed to assess this scene is Relief Theory. This theory is particularly difficult to apply to the sitcom as Freud's original hypothesis centered on the psychic patterns of individuals, not the groups of creators and viewers implicated in the television broadcast context of the sitcom. Even on this larger scale however, we may imagine certain mechanisms of psychical release and relief at work in this sequence. We may, for instance, interpret this scene as a sort of releasing of tensions associated with those same restrictive norms at work in the previous interpretive configuration. In this case, however, it is the point of view of the maternal figure which is privileged. If we consider the questioning of these norms as improper or as that which cannot be otherwise articulated, then it is precisely its eruption through humor which allows for the liberation of that tension. Put another way, through the veneer of humor, Nora's unconventional representation of a mother figure allows for a psychic reprieve from those very same stifling conventions which constrict mother figures. Just as possibly, however, we may imagine the release from the point of view of the humiliated adult child, Chandler. Again,

through humorous representation, the suffering adult child figure is able to obtain psychic release by safely bringing to light and laughing off the unrelenting yet unacknowledgeable-in-polite-company pressures of living with a domineering and overwhelmingly sexual maternal figure.

What makes this interpretative work so difficult as we have suggested is the nature of the medium itself. Distanced from everyday person-to-person social interactions in which the subjects and objects of humor and jokes are more or less clear, scenes and sequences such as these are complicated by the multiplicity of collaborators (creators, writers, editors) working together to produce each episode of a sitcom and which are sent out across the airwaves to be received and decoded by millions of individuals. As Mills rightly reminds us, all of these theories were conceptualized before the advent of broadcast television and their application to the study of the sitcom remains problematic in various ways for each of the three theories. What they all have in common however is an implicit or overt assumption that humor, comedy and laughter are deeply *social* activities and, while comedy's ultimate role in either holding power accountable or reinforcing existing regimes of power may be debated, Freud's Relief Theory suggests that humor, comedy and the like are indeed positive and even necessary mechanisms of human behavior, the absence of which could cause profound psychological harm through excessive repression of harmful psychical forces. In fact, Mills goes so far as to conclude that "the television sitcom is a vital force in keeping cultures ticking over" and that "the genre is more necessary to societal happiness than a whole range of other, supposedly more important, forms of programming.[117]"

In acknowledging the difficulty of applying these strands of humor theory (each elaborated to theorize or explain discreet and finite examples of jokes or wittiness) to the sitcom genre, Mills formulates a theory adapted specifically to this type of programming. This is necessary, he argues, because a sitcom (a series in its entirety, or a specific episode) "is made up of many comic moments, alongside a whole host of other narrative and aesthetic factors, which means to analyse the joke alone is to ignore a variety of tools the genre employs.[118]" This difficulty has been illustrated in our previous analysis of the sequence concerning Chandler and his mother in which it is quite difficult to identify a *joke* as such. Is it Nora's line about the condoms, or the shot which shows the group's reaction, or the shot focusing on Chandler's own reaction to his mother's

[117] Mills, 92.
[118] *Ibid.*

comment? What is clear is that each of these aspects contributes in the construction of the scene as humorous. Indeed, Mills writes, "sitcom can be seen as a text whose *every facet* is intended to ensure the pleasures of the comedy are successfully achieved.[119]" In attempting to construct a viable theory of humor which draws on the others but attends explicitly to the specificities of the sitcom genre, Mills develops what he calls a Cue Theory of humor. This theory suggests that "the way in which jokes work in a sitcom is less important than the ways in which the genre signals its intention to be funny, creating a space within which audiences are primed to laugh.[120]"

In outlining Cue Theory, Mills alludes to a number of elements which all lead in various ways to the construction of comedy and humor in a situation comedy and which enable an audience to understand that what they are watching is meant to be funny.[121] These include factors exterior to the sitcom itself (extratextual markers) such as the use of well-known or already established comedians to anchor sitcoms, a particular attention to scheduling (sitcoms are not usually broadcast before 8 pm and after 10 pm on American television, for example), specific marketing techniques, and the concentration of sitcoms on certain channels or networks (the Public Broadcasting System, PBS, for example does not broadcast American situation comedies). Other elements may be found within the space of the programs themselves (textual markers) and include subject matter (the family being of utmost importance) and characterization, theatrical performance style, use of cameras, and most traditionally, audible studio audience laughter and/or the use of a laugh track. Because the overwhelming prerogative of the situation comedy is to produce humor and laughter, every aspect of the genre may be understood to participate in the communication of its content as comic or unserious and, as we turn to the specific topic under study, our microanalyses will reveal that the humorous content in *Friends* may be interpretable through the application of any one or a combination of these complex and interrelated theories of humor.

[119] *Ibid*. Emphasis added.
[120] *Ibid.,* 93.
[121] He points out, too, that this theory has implications for generic understanding and classification as well because it explains why unsuccessful sitcoms, those which do not make people laugh, may still be considered to be sitcoms. Of prime importance in cue theory is that the program demonstrates an obvious *intention* to be read as funny through the use of some or all of the elements discussed above.

I.1.5. Sitcom in the American Televisual Landscape

Having briefly surveyed the importance of the comic element as well as the various theories of humor to the situation comedy in general, we now turn to the genre's role within the American television industry and society more broadly. As we have seen, the sitcom evolved from a rich and diverse heritage of popular mass comedy with its most immediate predecessor being the radio situation comedy. The transition to television during the post-World War II context, however, ensured that the sitcom occupied a historically specific ideological space as well. Varying sociological factors are of note at this point and each one had a more or less significant impact on the content of television in general and the content of the sitcom in particular. These interrelated factors include the return of American GIs following the end of WWII and their subsequent reintegration into economic and social life, the concomitant departure of women from the public sphere of work, the expansion of the middle class and of suburban development and housing, the dramatic rise in birth rate (Baby Boom), the rise of corporate and consumer culture, and widespread stirrings of civic discontent on the part of African Americans and women which would later give rise to the Civil Rights Movement and feminism's Second Wave. Perhaps most importantly, and serving to undergird many of the aforementioned phenomena, this period is significant for its profound and far-reaching insistence on the importance of the nuclear family.

In *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, historian Elaine Tyler May suggests that the nuclear family ideal arose at this moment not only out of a sense of collective relief from the previous decades of hardship which included the Great Depression and the Second World War, but more importantly, as a buttress against contemporary troubles incarnated in various cold war anxieties. May writes

> Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military might and territorial expansion to achieve world domination, many leaders, pundits, and observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal ones: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict, and familial disruption. To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure world, while experts, leaders, and politicians promoted codes of conduct and enacted public policies that would bolster the American home. Like their leaders, most Americans agreed that family stability appeared to be the best bulwark against the dangers of the cold war.[122]

[122] Elaine Taylor May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era,* revised edition (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 9.

What May identifies as "domestic containment" (in a knowing parallel to simultaneous geopolitical strategies of communist containment) meant nothing less than the nation-wide propagation and acceptance of an ideology in which the nuclear family (complete with breadwinner father and stay-at-home mother) was to function as a shield, blocking an array of real and perceived dangers ranging from homosexuality to juvenile delinquency to nuclear holocaust. This ideology was so pervasive at this particular moment that, as historian Stephanie Coontz points out, in a study of marriage conducted in 1955, a vast majority of respondents replied that they had sacrificed "nothing" by getting married and raising a family. Coontz further quotes an advice book of the era: "The family is the center of your living. If it isn't, you've gone far astray.[123]"

One of the foremost tenets of the nuclear family ideology of this period was a deep-seated belief in the benefits of capitalist consumerism as an expression of traditional American individualism as well as patriotic anti-communism. Thanks, in part, to a legislative agenda which favored a massive increase in home ownership, consumer spending on domestic and household items increased exponentially during the cold-war period and almost single handedly accounted for the entire increase in gross national product for a period.[124] Television, as industry and institution, may be understood to have had a critical role in this phenomenon. Lynn Spigel explains:

> The 1950s was a decade that invested an enormous amount of cultural capital in the ability to form a family and live out a set of highly structured gender and generational roles […] In this social climate, television was typically welcomed as a catalyst for renewed domestic values. In many popular sources, television was depicted as a panacea for the broken homes and hearts of wartime life; not only was it shown to restore faith in family togetherness, but as the most sought-after appliance for sale in postwar America, it also renewed faith in the splendors of consumer capitalism.[125]

Television, then, was much more than a must-have appliance. It was the post-war phenomenon responsible for bridging two American ideological behemoths of this period: the traditional nuclear family with its rigidly defined gender roles and the ethos of consumer corporate capitalism. The situation comedy was the genre which most obviously and repeatedly emphasized

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[123] Coontz, 25.
[124] *Ibid*. "Food spending rose by only 33 percent in the five years following the Second World War, and clothing expenditures rose by 20 percent, but purchases of household furnishings and appliances climbed 240 percent."
[125] Lynn Spigel, *Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2-3.

the nuclear family ideal and the nuclear family was, as a discreet unit of consumption, a prime target for advertisers and the television producers who wooed them. Jones summarizes: "By the early 1950s producers and consumers, government and citizens, advertisers and audience had pulled together in a consensus of unprecedented size, power, and harmony.[126]" The consensus was clear and could be observed in the numerous iterations of the suburban, middle-class, WASP, nuclear family theme appearing on network television: family was fundamental to the health and wealth of the nation and family was composed of a father who sustained his family financially thanks to his professional position in the public sphere of work, a mother who sustained her family morally and spiritually thanks to her separate but equal work within the private sphere of the home, and carefully gendered children who learned, in turn, how to appropriately emulate either mother or father on their journey to becoming responsible adults and citizens.

It is clear then that representations of the family, and of the nuclear family in particular, have a special resonance on this particular broadcast medium at this particular moment in American history and their multiple variations in the sitcom genre (among others) underscore the importance of the family as an ideological institution both in the post-World War II era and in more recent decades as well. Images of the family on the mass broadcasting medium of television occur at the nexus of three powerful institutions, or what Althusser identifies as State Ideological Apparatuses (ISAs): the family ISA, the communications ISA and the cultural ISA. Moreover, Althusser suggests that "ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. *This existence is material*.[127]" Situation comedies which conjure images of the family (nuclear or otherwise) may then be understood as examples of the material existence of the hegemonic ideology related to the family of this era. That representations of families are (omni)present on television screens throughout the twentieth century and continue to inform television well into the twenty-first underscores the enduring attachment to and preoccupation with this particular ideological institution and contributes to its visibility as a subject of contestation in American cultural politics.

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[126] Gerard Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 89. Jones concedes that many minority Americans, particularly African Americans, were conspicuously left out of this consensus.

[127] Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)" in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks* 2nd ed., ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 80-86, 82. Emphasis added.

Furthermore, as Bonnie J. Dow has suggested in *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women's Movement Since 1970*, "situation comedy almost invariably operates within an actual or metaphorical family relationship, which leads to the reiteration of stock character types, such as the patriarchal father figure, the nurturing mother figure, or the sibling rivals.[128]" Thus, even a situation comedy in which the diegetic universe is placed in a public or professional sphere outside the traditional domestic realm may, in fact, recreate a symbolic family in which characters adopt traits and behaviors reminiscent of family members.[129] While this argument opens up intriguing possibilities for further investigation of how fictional characters may be constructed as maternal figures, we will proceed in the following section with a brief examination of the maternal figures in situation comedies explicitly dealing with the domestic sphere or in those situation comedies which, while not necessarily operating in the domestic sphere, interrogate in some relevant way issues relating to motherhood, mothers and maternity in general.

In the section which follows we will be tracing the mother figure (or its absence) in this genre from some of its earliest examples up until the arrival our object of study, *Friends*, on television screens in the mid-1990s. As will be seen, some of the earliest examples of maternal figures which we highlight occur in sitcoms which arrive on television screens in the late 1940s before the medium had achieved its maximum impact. These mother figures were very different in tone from those who appeared only a few years later and as such it is possible to concretely observe the gradual installation of Jones' "consensus," to see the materialization of cold-war nuclear family ideology in the representations of families on the small screen. Likewise, the fictional families (nuclear or otherwise) of later television sitcoms may be understood to progressively question (or, perhaps more accurately, reflect questions about) dominant nuclear family ideology. Indeed, this process of interrogation of the nuclear family ideal on the part of the sitcom will carry us through until the mid-1990s and will continue to inform what we observe in *Friends*. In her conformity (or not) to collectively understood gender roles, in her proximity to

[128] Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 37.

[129] In her discussion, Dow gives the example of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) in which she argues that the character of Mary Richards, while having explicitly repudiated the model of the traditional nuclear family celebrated by cold war ideology, is in fact positioned within the sitcom as a maternal figure in relation to the other characters. "Like the traditional mothers of domestic sitcoms, [Mary's] value as a person comes from what she can do for others." Dow, 44.

young (and not so young) children, in her association with emotionally resonant qualities such as nurturing, empathy and morality, the maternal figure in these fictional televisual creations is pivotal. Our attention now turns to her.

I.2. Mom Throughout Sitcom

To say that maternal characters in the American situation comedy are recurrent is an understatement. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that the maternal figure is one of the *foundational pillars* upon which this type of programming is situated. The numerous sitcom titles dedicated to her in all her various manifestations bear witness to her ubiquity as well as to the importance accorded to her status: *Mama* (CBS, 1949-1956); *Mama Rosa* (ABC, 1950); *My Mother The Car* (NBC, 1965-1966); *The Mothers-in-Law* (NBC, 1967-1969); *That's My Mama* (ABC, 1974-1975); *Mama's Family* (NBC, 1983-1985); *Mama Malone* (CBS, 1984); *The Mommies* (NBC, 1993-1995); *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2014); *Instant Mom* (Nickelodeon, 2013-2015); *Mom* (CBS, 2013-present).[130] It is perhaps more convenient to think of the maternal figure as a structuring element of this type of televisual programming, present even in her absence. Images and representations of the maternal populate the sitcom just as they do many other cultural and creative genres; yet this genre's specific emphasis on the intimate and the domestic create an environment for representations of motherhood to prosper and resonate in particularly powerful ways.

[130] This is not to suggest that the maternal figure is somehow more important or valued in the eyes of the sitcom genre than the paternal one. The number of sitcom titles which make reference to fathers and father figures is just as long if not longer.

I.2.1. Early Maternal Representations: Ethnic Matriarchs Adapting to a New Media

Figure 9 Mary Kay, Johnny and baby Christopher

The earliest examples of American sitcoms demonstrate this preoccupation with figures of motherhood. Maternity figures prominently in American television's first situation comedy, *Mary Kay and Johnny*. Setting the stage for innumerable sitcoms to come (particularly *I Love Lucy*), the plot of this live sitcom centered on a seemingly mismatched couple including the more level-headed, serious husband Johnny who worked in a bank and his zany young wife, Mary Kay. The newly married couple lived in New York City and much of the plot took place in their Greenwich Village apartment. The limited cast (the couple, Mary Kay and Johnny Stearns, was played by themselves) also included Mary Kay's mother. More significantly, the sitcom was the first to feature a pregnancy narrative, meaning that the genre, in its televisual iteration, was at its outset particularly accommodating to this type of narrative.[131] When Mary Kay Stearns, the actress, became pregnant in 1948 her pregnancy was ultimately written into the sitcom's diegesis and when she gave birth to a baby boy in December 1948, the child, too, became a member of the cast at 10 days old.[132] "We wanted to be as close to ourselves as we could get so it would be effective," Johnny Stearns recounts when discussing the origins of the sitcom, suggesting that the inclusion of the real-life pregnancy was as much a conscious effort to reflect reality as it was a necessity due to Mary Kay's changing physical appearance. Stearns

[131] This fact is often mistakenly attributed to *I Love Lucy* and the mistake may be attributable to several factors. In relation to the nationwide popularity of *I Love Lucy*, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, airing only a few years earlier and in a comparatively much smaller broadcast range, received much less attention. Additionally, the episodes of this sitcom were aired live although some were recorded on kinescope. With the exception of one episode, the remaining archives of *Mary Kay and Johnny* were destroyed in a fire leaving precious little trace of this earliest example of the sitcom on television.

[132] Johnny and Mary Kay Stearns recount the process which went into the creation of *Mary Kay and Johnny* during this earliest stage of television. The early episodes were broadcast live. Later episodes were recorded by kinescope technology but have since been lost although the Paley Center for Media has one 1949 episode in its possession. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/shows/mary-kay-and-johnny

recounts the complexities of writing and staging these particular episodes given the conditions of live television at the time:

> the night that the baby was due to arrive [...] the program was live on the air, so I wrote the typical nervous husband, expectant father, pacing the corridors, doctors, hospital and if Christopher would have been a half hour late I wouldn't have had a tag because the final thing of that half hour was calling up Mary Kay's mother to tell her the sex of her first grandchild. But Christopher came through and it was fine. Mary Kay only missed two performances, again, everything was live, and Christopher appeared at the age of ten days. And the way we did that was for the long shots Mary Kay used a doll. But for close-ups we went to film of him in his bassinet.[133]

Due to the loss of the original material, it is impossible to measure the influence of the baby's appearance in the series' diegesis or narrative structure and its subsequent implications for Mary Kay's representation as a mother, but Stearns' account of the experience makes plain that the child was present in the episodes, thus definitively making Mary Kay not only the first pregnant woman but also the first maternal figure in American television sitcom. Mary Kay thus becomes a visual incarnation of the post-War Baby Boom and its concomitant turn towards domesticity and family life. The inclusion of the narrative also underscores the genre's early commitment to realism. When Stearns discusses his desire for the sitcom to be "effective" he is underscoring an imperative to reduce the distance between fiction and reality. The more the televised representation of his family life remained faithful to the reality of his family life, the more enthusiastically the viewing public would respond, suggesting not only an early understanding on the part of Stearns that viewer identification was critical to the popularity and success of a sitcom but, in addition, that what people wanted to see in this early era of television broadcast was indeed images of young nuclear families in the making.[134]

While the example of the Stearns illustrates the capacity of the nascent television industry to broadcast original material, as we have seen, other early sitcoms were adapted from earlier mediums. Two examples, *The Goldbergs* and *Mama* depict two of the most significant early illustrations of maternal figures on television. These women were strong ethnic matriarchs. Molly

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[133] Extract of the filmed interview with Mary Kay and Johnny Stearns. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/shows/mary-kay-and-johnny

[134] The actual extent to which this is true is complicated by the fact that the *sitcom* version of Mary Kay was not, in fact, a working mother, while the *real* Mary Kay Stearns was, of course, a working mother, an actress on live television. The case is representative of an underlying tension in all of the early sitcom families: the idealized, fictional stay-at-home mothers were played by hard-working female actresses who, in most cases, had children at home. This is particularly true, as will be seen, in the examples of Lucille Ball and Donna Reed.

Goldberg was figured as the unofficial head of the Goldbergs, a Jewish family living in a Bronx tenement apartment. The eponymous Mama was Marta Hansen, wife of Lars, both immigrants from Norway whose fictional universe was a look back to an earlier era. The Hansen family lived in turn-of-the-twentieth century San Francisco. Both programs were broadcast live, both saw multiple reincarnations across various media, both evoked the immigrant experience of assimilation in America and both, importantly, were based on the fictional creations of women in a landscape where popular culture was otherwise dominated by men.[135]

Unlike the fictional mothers who would arrive on American television screens only a few years later, these maternal figures, while theoretically inscribed within the traditional patrionormative nuclear family model, were the central figures in these fictions around which the others, including husbands and children, revolved. As such, they wielded enormous power and authority in their domestic realms. Although Molly Goldberg's malapropisms (so ubiquitous as to be referred to by critics as "Mollypropisms[136]") were sources of humor within the sitcom's diegesis, the character's depiction as a mother to two children was never itself the ultimate target of the sitcom's jokes. Molly Goldberg was "[u]nqualifyingly loving and accepting, no matter what your kink. She was nurturing and nourishing" and "ever faithful to her family.[137]" Her maternal nature, within the narrative arcs, was in general, the source of wisdom and strength and in episode after episode she "had the capabilities to resolve each dilemma before the final Sanka commercial.[138]" Molly Goldberg "handled her small family crises with a ferocious ethnic energy and humor as though their lives depended on it.[139]" Her characterization as an idealized maternal figure was not contained within the sitcom's fictional nuclear family but spread outwards into the

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[135] Gertrude Berg's *The Rise of the Goldbergs* had been a popular radio program for twenty years when she finally convinced CBS to adapt it for television in 1949. In 1948 Berg wrote a theatrical version of the story, *Molly and Me*. After the final cancellation of *The Goldbergs* on television, Berg attempted a sitcom comeback in *Mrs. G. Goes to College*, in which she reprised a version of her earlier role. Rick Mitz notes that Gertrude Berg "would eventually write 10,000 Molly Goldberg scripts, more than fifteen million words. That included the radio series, the television series (plural), several books, a comic strip, a Broadway play, a movie, and a vaudeville routine which had given birth to the Goldbergs in 1925." See Rick Mitz, *The Great TV Sitcom Book*, (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1980), 14. *Mama*'s fictional expanse is equally rich. Based on *Mama's Bank Account*, a short story published in 1943 by Kathryn Forbes, the fictional universe was transformed by John Van Druten into a Broadway play, *I Remember Mama*, a year later. RKO Pictures released a film version with the same title in 1948 a year before its television broadcast began.

[136] Mitz, 14.

[137] *Ibid*.

[138] *Ibid*. Sanka coffee, a General Foods product, was the sitcom's designated sponsor until they dropped it in the wake of accusations published in the 1950 book *Red Channels* that actor Philip Loeb (who played, Jake, Molly's husband) was a communist sympathizer. Loeb was forced off the show and eventually committed suicide in 1955.

[139] *Ibid*. 13-14.

sitcom's universe to other characters, both extended family and unrelated: "Molly was a good soul and was constantly involved in trying to help everybody in the neighborhood solve their problems.[140]" In spite of her sometimes mangled use of English, a reminder that this character remained rooted in foreignness and ethnicity, Molly was a matriarchal savior for her family, at the epicenter not only of the nuclear family, but of the extended family, the neighborhood, and seemingly, the wider Goldberg universe as well. Occupying the ideological space allotted to her as a mother in a patriarchal familial structure (a space which is symbolized in the framed window in which she was regularly pictured), Molly Goldberg filled it and then some, leaning outwards and stretching beyond the limits of the "reactionary social institution" in which she found herself.[141]

Figure 10 Molly Goldberg in her window, left, flashback family album from the opening sequence of Mama, *right.*

Likewise, motherhood as embodied by Marta Hansen, the Norwegian immigrant raising three children, was also figured as essential to the family's well-being and survival. Each episode of this sitcom was framed as a flashback given from the adult perspective of the eldest daughter, Katrin, and began with a close of up a photograph album. Flipping through pages of photographs, Katrin's voice narrates, at the beginning of each episode:

> I remember this album on our parlor table at home. I remember the old pictures from Norway that Mama and Papa brought with them when they came to this country; the uncles and the aunts and the cousins I have there. And I remember my family. I remember my sister, Dagmar, and my brother Nels, and of course, Papa. But most of all when I look through this album, most of all, I remember Mama.

[140] Brooks and Marsh, 545. It should also be noted that Molly, in spite of being an unambiguously Jewish mother, is *not* treated with dread and loathing by those surrounding her, a contrast to many of the stereotypical televisual representations which follow. For more on this dreaded version of the Jewish mother see Chapter Two.
[141] Hamamoto, 30.

This opening sequence, repeated each episode week after week for seven years, has the effect (along with the sitcom's title itself, of course) of explicitly (re)positioning the maternal figure at the heart of each narrative. Rick Mitz notes that it "was always Mama with her down-to-earthiness and her good humor who would put things back together. She was wise and nurturing – truly inspirational, supportive, and compassionate.[142]" Brooks and Marsh write that Katrin was "strict yet loving, she epitomized the gentleness which endeared the series to viewers for so many years" while "Papa was a carpenter who made just enough money to support his family decently.[143]"

As with *The Goldbergs*, *Mama* explicitly constructs its diegetical universe as well as its narrative structure around the maternal figure of Katrin Hansen, who becomes, like Molly, a vital source of life for her family as well as for the larger community surrounding her. Hamamoto also notes her "pivotal role" in episodes which reconcile "contradictory imperatives" revealing the character's capacity to exploit and surpass the subordinate social role into which she has been placed.[144]

Certainly, these maternal figures need to be situated in a precise social, historical and televisual context. Hamamoto reminds us that the sitcom "came of age during a time when American society was straining to realize ideological consensus.[145]" That these two women are mothers in immigrant families is significant. Commenting on the numerous manifestations of ethnic programming including *The Goldbergs* and *Mama* on early American television, George Lipsitz notes,

> Through indirect but powerful demonstrations, all of these shows arbitrated complex tensions caused by economic and social change in postwar America. They evoked the experiences of the past to lend legitimacy to the dominant ideology of the present. In the process they served important social and cultural functions, not just in returning profits to investors or attracting audiences for advertisers, but most significantly as a means of ideological legitimation for a fundamental revolution in economic, social and cultural life.[146]

[142] Mitz, 17.
[143] Brooks and Marsh, 842.
[144] Hamamoto, 30.
[145] *Ibid*, 44.
[146] George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropolo*gy 1, no. 4 (1986): 355-387, 356.

In *Mama* and *The Goldbergs*, the maternal figures are not just powerful representations of maternal strength, their absolute centrality marks them as the mediators of the economic, social and cultural changes to which Lipsitz refers and vectors of cultural assimilation as well. These examples demonstrate the crucial function played by the maternal figure, acting in general (but not exclusively) from within the confines of the private sphere, ushering her fictional family towards a more specifically American identity situated, in the postwar era, within a nuclear configuration increasingly conceived of as a basic unit of consumption.

Uniting these two fictional televisual women is the notion that maternity and motherhood are fundamental sources of power and agency. Indeed, in spite of the characters' subjugated and restricted status as wife and mother within a patriarchal family structure, Molly Goldberg and Marta Hansen are the characters without whom the family (and the sitcom) would collapse. Within the sitcom's diegetic space, these are images of immensely competent and powerful characters, who, thanks to their maternal experience and knowledge, signify in these televisual spaces (and to television audiences) as immensely important women to be respected. As the symbolic heads of their families, they are stronger and more central than the paternal figures who become, in opposition, images of an ethnic masculinity sometimes struggling in that essential task which patrionormativity reserves for fathers, the financial support of their families. The maternal qualities of these matriarchs (wisdom, kindness, generosity) are more important and ultimately more *vital* to the families and communities of these sitcoms than are the more marginal contributions of the paternal figures.

While the representations are surely problematic in that they confine these two women to a uniquely domestic, maternal role subject to manipulation by competing ideological forces, this confinement should be qualified. Marta and Molly were strong female lead characters in the newly emerging medium of television broadcast weekly into an ever-increasing number of households. *Mama* was so popular that when it was canceled in July 1956, CBS received so many letters of complaint that they brought it back for an ultimately unsuccessful eighth season. While these roles surely idealized the maternal persona, they also imagined it as a potentially powerful source of strength – a strength which, as we will see, was to be progressively drained from many of sitcom's maternal figures in the coming decade. They may be characterized as *matriarchal* in that they position the maternal role as a formidable counterpart, perhaps even a viable and preferable *alternative* to a patriarchal familial structure. The two early sitcoms which imbue the maternal role

with such familial and communal import and power offer, then, a competing discourse to the idealized nuclear family model commanded, controlled and contained by a patriarchal figure. Hamamoto succinctly summarizes the paradoxical position within which these ethnic matriarchs (here he refers specifically to Marta Hansen) find themselves:

> Viewed from one perspective, the socially restricted role of the housewife/mother character in *Mama* might be interpreted as a form of powerlessness. But it is also seen that the half-hidden oppositional stance taken against the dominant society […] builds upon the strength of kinship ties kept tightly bound by the family matriarch. Far from being just a reactionary social institution that replicates in miniature the oppressive power relations of the wider society, this story hints at how the family could function as the wellspring of social change.[147]

Hamamoto underlines in this passage the inherent polysemy of any televisual representation offering multiple interpretations and meaning-making possibilities. However, as television programming became ever more institutionalized and omnipresent in homes across the country, these vibrant discourses of maternal strength began to weaken, their ethnicity progressively erased, and by the mid-1950s as the post-War ideological consensus concerning the nuclear family was in full operation, a number of sitcoms offering a starkly different perspective on the maternal role began to appear on network television. These sitcoms, which tended to position the paternal figure as the central, pivotal character, would end up leaving an indelible influence on the American imagination in terms of the ideal family and altering the nation's epistemological understanding of that institution, by reducing, perhaps, the meaning-making possibilities available to the maternal characters. Marking something of a transitional figure within this larger transition was *I Love Lucy*, that immensely popular sitcom which debuted in 1951, "the year television grew up.[148]"

[147] Hamamoto, 30.

[148] Jones, 62. While Jones's qualification is based on a vast panoply of events concerning the televisual medium and industry as a whole, and should not be understood as being reduced to the sole issue of representation, it is intriguing to think that television's "grown-up" phase coincides with the progressive phasing out of these representations of strong matriarchal and female characters and the introduction of more containable, if not necessarily more demure, ones. In this formulation, representations of patriarchal power and preeminence within the nuclear family are imagined as a more advanced, mature version of social relations, strong matriarchal family structures more primitive and elementary.

I.2.2. Lucy is Enceinte[149]: The Sitcom and the Maternal Figure in Transition

Much has been written about the extraordinary nature of this popular sitcom which is erroneously understood by many as the first of its genre. While *I Love Lucy* was not the first television situation comedy, its influence in the American televisual landscape is more than noteworthy as much for its technological innovations as for its ideological content.[150] The character of Lucy Ricardo became pregnant and gave birth during the sitcom's second season (1952-1953) and, while this was not the first representation of pregnancy and maternity on American television screens, in the wake of the exponentially rapid expansion of television viewership in the few years separating Mary Kay Stearns' pregnancy from Lucy Ricardo's, this was the first continual and repeated contact that millions of Americans would have with a fictional, televised pregnancy and it was broadcast directly into their living rooms.[151]

On January 19, 1953 an estimated 44 million Americans tuned in to the CBS network to watch Lucy Ricardo give birth to her son Little Ricky in 'Lucy Goes to the Hospital.' To put this audience into perspective, consider that the following day only 29 million viewers watched Dwight D. Eisenhower's first presidential inauguration on television.[152] Lucy's childbirth episode was the final instalment of a seven-episode sequence focusing on her pregnancy – a narrative arc prompted by actress Lucille Ball's real-life pregnancy. One of the reasons for this episode's singular success was the concerted effort on the part of both CBS and the entertainment media to promote this pregnancy narrative as a positive and joyful experience to an audience which may have otherwise

[149] This subtitle is a reference to the *I Love Lucy* episode (Season Two, Episode Ten) in which Lucy Ricardo announces her pregnancy to husband Ricky. The English "pregnant" was deemed unsuitable by industry advisors and the sitcom turned to the French vocabulary to address this "delicate" issue.

[150] In terms of technological advances in the situation comedy format, *I Love Lucy*'s influence was enormous. The television industry had been, up until that time, concentrated largely in New York City where sitcoms were performed and broadcast live. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz lived in California due to their association with the Hollywood film industry. Pregnant with her first child, and having already suffered a miscarriage, Ball refused to move to New York and suggested that the episodes be filmed in Los Angeles and subsequently broadcast back East. Ball also insisted on having a live studio audience in order to maintain the immediacy and vivacity of the actors' performances, but she simultaneously wanted multiple camera shots to avoid the "static, single-camera look of a filmed stage play," Jones, 66. She turned to the German cinematographer, Karl Freund who conceived of the standard situation comedy filming model of three cameras. The influence of *I Love Lucy* was such that these conventions became conventional elements in the genre's formula of production.

[151] "When Lucy debuted, less than 24 percent of American households had television. By 1956, the last year of its domination, that percentage had soared to 72." Jones, 73.

[152] Stephanie Bor, "Lucy's Two Babies: Framing the First Televised Depiction of Pregnancy," *Media History* 19, no. 4: 464-478, 464.

been squeamish in the face of such intimate content on television. As Jones explains, "CBS and the sponsor [Philip Morris] were nervous; TV didn't deal with such delicate fare.[153]"

Indeed, the creators were so concerned that this narrative would be off-putting to the sitcom's loyal fans that the scripts created for these episodes were each reviewed by a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister and a Jewish rabbi in order to avoid any objectionable content. Not only did the creators go to great pains to keep the sitcom palatable to American viewers, they recognized the singular nature of the event as well as its potential not only to resonate with viewers but also to significantly enhance ratings. To that end, CBS developed a promotional campaign in order to "squeeze the maximum publicity out of the fact that Desi's wife, Lucille Ball, was going to have two babies – one in real life, the other in their filmed TV show.[154]" The complimentary pregnancy narratives, one fictional, the other real, converged in January 1953 when, as *I Love Lucy* was being watched by a record audience, Lucille Ball was delivered of her real baby by a caesarean section scheduled expressly to coincide with the fictional episode's broadcast. The fictional baby's gender having been decided beforehand, Ball was congratulated for "doing her part" by giving birth to a boy in real life as well.

As Lynn Spigel notes, sitcoms "produce a sense of intimacy and authenticity by encouraging viewers to believe that the characters [are] real families who just happened to live their lives on television" and that "by appealing to viewer's "extratextual" knowledge […], these programs [collapse] distinctions between real life and television.[155]" Spigel also notes that "advertising and product tie-ins further encouraged audiences to confuse boundaries between reality and fiction by allowing people to purchase elements of the story.[156]" In the case of *I Love Lucy*, fans of the sitcom could purchase Little Ricky dolls as well as the "fashionable waterproof bags" Lucy Ricardo used to carry around Little Ricky's bottles, thereby giving "the fictional world a material status.[157]"

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[153] Jones, 72.
[154] 'Radio: Birth of a Memo,' *Time Magazine*. 26, January 1953. http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,817789-2,00.html
[155] Spigel, 158.
[156] *Ibid*.
[157] *Ibid*.

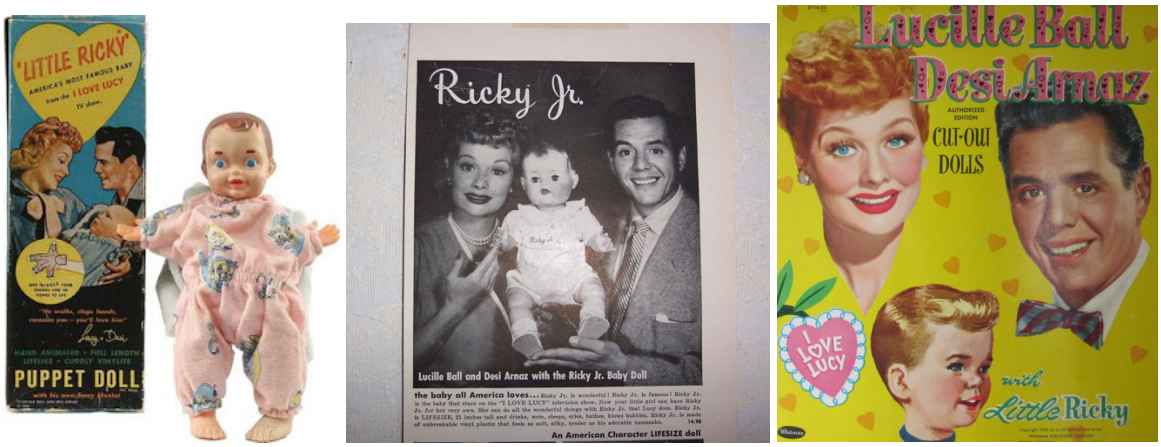

Figure 11 Various manifestations of "Little Ricky" dolls sold after the birth of the fictional character in 1953

However much Lucy/Lucille's pregnancy and childbirth may have resonated with the American viewing public, the event did not seem to affect the underlying ideological foundation of the sitcom which is to say that Lucy Ricardo's maternal status did not seem to change the character in any fundamental way, leaving the show's battle-of-the-sexes premise primarily intact. This regular episodic structure is summarized by Jones:

> The boys and girls come to a screeching impasse. Both parties are being too bullheaded, but it's the girls who overreact with the first extravagant scheme to gain the upper hand. The boys try to outmaneuver them, fail, and are nearly beaten. Then Lucy's hubris catches up with her. She comes crashing down in a humiliating exposure […] Domestic harmony is restored but not in a compromise. The patriarch's will is done. His one concession is a kiss of forgiveness for the little woman.[158]

The overarching theme of *I Love Lucy* is one of containment. Lucy's character is "the embodiment of female energy with no valid outlet[159]" according to Jones, who adds, that the character represents "what happens when a woman is allowed to go to college, tantalized with career possibilities, asked to give her all to warwork, and then told to retreat to the kitchen because that's what good girls are supposed to do.[160]" Ricky, in spite of the otherness of his Cuban ethnicity, begins to assume the role of patriarch lording power over his wife, a role which Lars Hansen and Jake Goldberg were never accorded.[161] Lucy's urgency to break out of the confines of

[158] Jones, 67.
[159] *Ibid*., 68.
[160] *Ibid*.
[161] This is explicitly demonstrated in the physical use of force that Ricky exerts on his wife on at least two occasions. Ricky is, like Lucy, a transitional figure. Bridging the representations between the ineffective ethnic patriarchs in *The*

the private sphere to which she is restricted contrasts with Molly's and Marta's energetic and cheerful tolerance of this same role. The transition to motherhood does not seem to dull Lucy's desires in any meaningful way (in fact, many of the episodes which take place after the fictional birth of Little Ricky imagine the four main protagonists on fantastic road trips to Hollywood and Europe, removing the young child from the narrative altogether) as she continues her attempts to break into the public sphere of the entertainment industry. The newly maternal character, however, never seizes on her new social role in order to establish herself as a worthy matriarchal figure in the mold of Molly of Marta even if she was in the process of "being domesticated.[162]"

Jones argues that the pregnancy and move into motherhood *did* change Lucy's character but not on any fundamental level, instead it changed

> the spirit of her adventures. Ricky became more solicitous of his wife now that she was the mother of his baby. He gave in to more of her whims and seemed far less eager to "teach her a lesson." For her part, Lucy became less rebellious, her schemes less frequent and bizarre. The show's philosophy hadn't changed, but its fires were dimming.[163]

If Lucy's motherhood quieted the character into a slightly more *maternal* figure, she nonetheless never becomes a fully *matriarchal* one exercising equal if not superior power to her husband. Her formidable energies are *not* spent resolving familial disputes and restoring harmony because, on most occasions, she is, in fact, the source of the dispute and the disharmony. Her vitality is located in her opposition to her husband's patriarchal rule but, in terms of family power dynamics, we may consider that she fundamentally loses out when compared to her matriarchal predecessors because, while it is true that Lucy offers a discourse of resistance to the traditional domestic-maternal role, the character never fully accedes to a position of full equality with her husband (she rarely ever comes close). In rejecting the fully matriarchal role, she is never able to wield power through an unabashed embrace of maternity which, as we have seen, can be configured as a position of dominance even within a traditional patriarchal familial structure. Thus, *I Love Lucy* is a sitcom which prefigures and anticipates a subsequent set of familial representations. One in which the patriarchal figure, now wholly and finally stripped of any troubling ethnic otherness in favor of a more fully hegemonic WASP sensibility, ascends to his

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Goldbergs and *Mama* and the fully WASP patriarchs of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*, Ricky's accession to power is facilitated by physical violence and intimidation.

[162] Jones, 73.

[163] *Ibid*.

position at the head of the nuclear family. The maternal figure in this configuration becomes increasingly passive and submissive in spite of her role as mother because this role is progressively, though not, as we shall see, totally, stripped of its potentiality to be a source of power.

Figure 12 In spanking Lucy (the mother of his child), Ricky fully assumes his patriarchal role and the sitcom fully assumes its role as an endorsement for the hegemonic ideology concerning the nuclear family.

I.2.3. The Golden Age Sitcom Mother: Power to the Patriarchy?

In continuing our chronological exploration of the role of motherhood and maternity in the television situation comedy, we arrive at a most significant period. If Gerard Jones identifies 1951 as the year television "grew up," Nina Leibman, in her study of representations of the 1950s family in film and on television, cites the following few years, the period of the mid-1950s to the early 1960s, as a particularly important stage:

> During this time the three major networks established and extended their dominance of the broadcasting structure; the major film studios entered the television production field and became the primary suppliers of television product; production personnel traversed the slippery slope back and forth from the large-screen medium to the small; television viewing reached its most widespread penetration; and schedules, ratings practices, and regulatory forces were formalized into a normative process that would last through the cable revolution of the 1980s.[164]

These are key elements to take into consideration when examining the ways mothers and motherhood were represented in the situation comedies of this era because they supply the wider context for the content (narratological, ideological) seen on the small screen. What the sitcoms of

[164] Nina C. Leibman. *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 1.

this era of television demonstrate is a progressive narratological diminution of the maternal role in favor of the paternal one, which takes up an increasingly preponderant space within the genre's diegetic sphere. Just as the earliest ethnic sitcoms positioned the maternal figure as the central narrative agent, these examples from television's first Golden Era emphasized the father, at the head of the traditional patriarchal nuclear family, as the fundamental unit around which the other characters orbited. This transition from maternal to paternal emphasis may be understood as one element which illustrates the effects on the medium itself in the wake of the changes described by Leibman. As the nascent industry moved further away from its early, experimental phase and towards increasingly entrenched industrial practices with an emphasis on original programming and on corporate sponsorship through advertising, the content of the medium changed. The families on television during this period, the ways in which family members interacted with each other and others, the narratives which occupied the various diegeses, the themes, messages and images transmitted by these programs all demonstrate the extent to which industrial practices were concerned with the role of the nuclear family in the wider society. The homogenization of the American family in network sitcoms of this era can generally be understood as a corporate necessity to promote an idealized image of the familial unit as a site of consumption in the aftermath of both the Great Depression and World War II at a moment when efforts were being made to both reintegrate returning GIs into the public sphere as well as to reposition American women who had participated in the war effort as competent and satisfied housewives in the private sphere.

This progression is accompanied by a second movement away from overtly ethnic characters of the early sitcoms and towards an exclusively WASP sensibility. Sitcom families no longer evoked the urban, immigrant experience in the same vein as *Mama* or *The Goldbergs* (or even *I Love Lucy* through the character of Ricky Ricardo) did. The families in the sitcoms of this period were universally white and vaguely Protestant; children may have been instructed to say prayers before going to bed and the family celebrated Christmas, but they didn't seem to regularly go to church, for example. They were composed of parents and children who adhered to normative gender roles including a father who worked in the public sphere and who was responsible for the financial wellbeing of the family and a stay-at-home mother who was responsible for the domestic duties including cooking and cleaning although she was sometimes aided by a housekeeper. There were in general either two or three children. Extended family members did not live in the same

household but were sometimes featured as guest stars. Within this configuration, narrative control was largely wrested away from mothers and transferred to fathers or children although the results of this transfer were not identical in each sitcom. In fact, the ways in which mothers and fathers were portrayed in the various programs of this era depended on a multitude of interlocking factors including the context of production (i.e. a radio adaptation or original content), the specific composition of each production unit (having a woman as a prominent member on a sitcom's production team, for example), and the specific actors and actresses who worked on the sitcom (programs tailored to specific stars often had very different tonalities and performance styles, and these elements, in turn, had repercussions on representations of gender and parenthood.)

Sitcoms which were adapted from radio often, though not always, simply transferred the existent fictional world from one medium to another with few changes. Three of the most significant Golden Era family sitcoms each transitioned from radio to television. *The Life of Riley* (NBC, 1953-1958) featured the Riley family whose paternal figure, Chester A. Riley, played by actor William Bendix, was a blue-collar worker in an aviation plant in California. Peg was a homemaker and the family included two children. It aired on the radio from 1944 to 1951 and debuted on NBC television in 1953.[165] In this televised version, Bendix was the only original cast member held over from the radio, however the underlying premise remained intact. Similarly, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966) was an adaptation of a ten-year long radio program. The program featured the real-life Nelson family: Ozzie, his wife, homemaker Harriet and their two sons. Ozzie's profession is never determined either in the radio version or in the televised one. However, the family was depicted as being resolutely middle-class and this middle-class ethos followed the family onto television. In this case, not only was the fictional universe sustained but the original cast, the real-life Nelson family, was also maintained in its transition to television. These two sitcoms both shared a similar production history of 'media-hopping' in that both fictional universes were also recreated as feature films in their transition from radio to television. A third example, *Father Knows Best* (CBS and NBC, 1954-1960) debuted as a radio sitcom in 1949 and featured the Anderson family: Jim an insurance executive, his wife, also a housewife, and their three children. In its transition to television, only actor Robert Young was

[165] An initial television adaption with Jackie Gleason in the title role of Riley was broadcast between 1949 and 1950. Gleason took the role because William Bendix was unavailable, having been cast in a feature film version of *The Life of Riley*.

kept in his original role. One further modification is of interest. The original title of the radio broadcast was *Father Knows Best?* The earlier interrogative form undermines the later assertiveness of the television version's declaration and suggests that the notion itself of a superior patriarchal epistemology is open to negotiation. The televisual version removes all uncertainty and ambiguity, thereby anchoring the paternal figure in an unshakable patriarchal authority.

These three sitcoms shared a similar industrial pedigree, but they were each a vehicle for diverse representations of the nuclear family. Darrell Hamamoto speaks to the articulation of the nuclear family and, more pointedly, to the significance of the paternal role within a wider context:

> The fundamental unit of social organisation in urban industrial America has been the nuclear family. As a cultural ideal arising from the material imperatives of capitalist production and consumption practices, the nuclear family minimizes the importance of wider, "outside" social ties. Primary emphasis here is placed upon affective bonds between parents and children in the absence of a larger network of economic and emotional sustenance. The nuclear family ideal places overriding importance on the individual breadwinner, the father, whose relative success or failure in the labor marketplace decides the family's status vis-à-vis the "outside" world of business, politics and society. This cultural ideal also determines the degree of influence the paterfamilias wields "inside," in the world of domestic life.[166]

This last point is critical. Indeed, while it is commonly understood that this era of paternal figures universally positioned the character of the father as the ultimate authority in a patriarchal familial structure, that is, one who exercised control over his children and his wife, this understanding is complicated by questions of class. The fictional status of the father in the public sphere, in turn, had, in many cases, repercussions in terms of the representations of the maternal figure within the domestic sphere. For the fictional families in which the paternal figure was not employed in a white-collar position did not always adhere as strictly to normative gender roles. This is demonstrated in the programs mentioned above. Chester A. Riley, for example, was an ineffectual paternal figure on multiple levels. Not only did his low status employment mean that he was unable to afford a satisfying middle-class lifestyle for his wife, Peg, and children, Babs and Junior, his actions within the private sphere consistently put the family in peril and it was from these situations that the humor of this sitcom was constructed. The pilot episode is an example of

[166] Hamamoto, 17.

the complex network of class, paternity, patriarchy, masculinity, and humor underlying *The Life of Riley*.[167] Babs is a college freshman running for class president. Riley desperately wants to help his daughter win but is sternly told by his wife to "stay out of it and don't interfere." Riley, having been discouraged by his wife then learns that his daughter's opponent "has a lot of influence behind her" as she is being helped financially by her own father, the rich president of a bank. Unable to help his daughter with campaign expenses because of his lower economic status, the episode details the ever-more preposterous ways in which Riley attempts to help his daughter, each one backfiring in succession and leading to greater upheaval and confusion for his wife and daughter. When Riley asks an old friend for help, the friend, a corrupt politician, attempts to stuff the ballot box on Babs' behalf but is caught (by Riley himself, too innocent or incompetent to understand the plan at hand), bringing intense shame on Babs. When this plan is thwarted, Riley extracts a promise to vote for Babs from each young man he meets in exchange for the ability to take Babs to the prom. Riley's attempt to help his daughter by literally bartering her also ends in disaster for the family: the denouement of this episode arrives when a multitude of young men come to the house, unbeknownst to Babs, to pick her up for the prom. Furious at having been lied to by Riley, they riot in the family's living room and destroy the furniture. Riley ends up on the floor being stepped on by the mass of young, college educated men. Babs is humiliated a second time at the hands of her incompetent father and Peg is furious at being 'disobeyed' by her husband, after having explicitly warned him not to interfere.

The episode, and this sitcom in general, thus create space for an extremely critical view of the central paternal figure. This is emphasized by Babs' melodramatic humiliation and, significantly, verbalized by Peg. Riley is consistently in fear of his wife's reactions in spite of a superficial masculine bluster typified by statements such as "If she yells at me, I can yell right back at her, what am I, a man or a mouse?" Peg consistently has the upper hand. "Just wait till I get my hands on your father," she says menacingly to her young son in the wake of the ballot-box debacle, "I'll teach him not to interfere." When the son wonders if the family must wait for the father to arrive to eat supper in the wake of his first paternal failure, Peg's answer is unequivocal: "We most certainly do not. The way I feel right now, I don't care if he *never* eats again!"

Peg not only explicitly expresses her profound anger at her husband in the presence of her son, she also replaces Riley as the authoritative figure for the young child. When Junior criticizes

[167] Season One, Episode One, *Babs' School Election*, January 2, 1953.

his own father's actions, Peg tells him to watch his language because, she says, "It's alright for me to criticize your father but not for you." When Babs begins to criticize him, Peg stops her daughter abruptly as well. The maternal domination during this exchange is underscored by Riley, hiding outside the family's house, listening to the conversation through an open window. Riley's hiding in the bushes symbolizes his position as the inferior parent, unable to control his wife and children to the extent that he cannot even enter his own domain.

Figure 13 Riley is portrayed variously as Peg's equal at the table, excluded from his own house altogether, at the mercy of Peg, or outside alone and humiliated

Peg's position is complex: her character is a stay-at-home wife and mother with no financial power. Like Molly Goldberg and Marta Hansen, her authority is rooted in her subordinate position in the patrionormative familial configuration, and her power, operational within the private sphere of the family (and perhaps, from time to time, within the community), is dependent entirely on her status as homemaker and mother. She never walks out on Riley in spite of the innumerable embarrassing mishaps he creates. However, like Molly and Marta, Peg Riley wields her maternal authority confidently and proactively. Yet, Peg is, in other ways, a very different maternal figure from her predecessors. She is aggressive in the use of her authority and her

aggression is turned inwards and *onto* the paternal figure, behaving in a way that Molly or Marta never do. What accounts for this change is, as Hamamoto points out, precisely the economic status of the paternal figure. With the increasing institutionalization of the television medium within a logic of corporate-capitalism, Riley's humble, working-class identity has lost the valor and respect accorded to Lars Hansen or even, Jake Goldberg. While Riley is certainly the central figure in this familial and narrative configuration, his paternal influence is a destructive, unhelpful one for his family. The authority within this domestic sphere belongs to Peg who, sarcastic, exasperated, and critical, consistently puts the more immature Riley in his place. Indeed, Riley's almost childlike innocence marks him as a character as much in need of maternal protection and understanding as his own children. And Peg *is* understanding. Episode after episode she reconciles herself to living with and caring for the ever-destructive paternal figure.

The Life of Riley offers a discourse, then, which distances slightly the maternal figure from previous incarnations. While her status as a matriarchal figure is certainly enhanced by Riley's abject failure as a patriarch, she is never revered in the same way that Mama is, for example. In fact, reverence for the nuclear family seems to be an element distinctly lacking from this example of the genre. While Peg may not be submissive to her inadequate husband, this sitcom does not revolve around her either and she is emphatically *not* its hero as the title, *The Life of Riley*, implies. She is instead reduced to the resisting victim in a system which valorizes the patriarchal family structure no matter how dissatisfying the patriarch himself may be. As sitcom production evolved and progressed, Peg's overt resistance, while never disappearing entirely, would become more subtle and contained in the maternal figures who followed.

Turning back to our other examples of radio-generated television sitcoms, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* offers a very different vision and a more idealized version of the nuclear family. While Ozzie is never explicitly situated in any professional capacity, the simple fact that this family was identifiably middle-class changed the way in which this particular paternal figure was positioned within the family unit. Indeed, Ozzie's lack of a specific employment actually serves to underscore his patriarchal authority because of his constant presence within the home. In *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television*, Nina C. Leibman notes that "Ozzie Nelson's implicit power is reinforced, continually, by his omnipresence. Ozzie is always around, is always featured as an integral member of the story events, and frequently possesses the

central position in the narrative.[168]" This interminable narrative presence does not, however, preclude opportunities for his wife, Harriet, who is otherwise represented as the most insignificant of the four main characters, to explicitly and implicitly challenge his patriarchal authority from time to time. In an episode which revolves around Harriet's birthday, for example, Ozzie's gift suggestion of a "nice floormop with your initials engraved in the handle" is met with a curt, "You do, and I'll hit you over the head with it," from this otherwise passive maternal figure.[169]

An earlier episode, "Parental Guidance" offers a subtler and more complex rendition of Harriet's challenge to Ozzie's patriarchal authority.[170] Youngest son Ricky decides that he wants to stay up late in order to watch a movie on television while at the same time older son David decides that he wants to begin an early-morning weight lifting regimen in order to improve his physique. At the beginning of the episode, Harriet expresses disapproval of both ideas (in her opinion, Ricky is too little to stay up late, and David's program is too intense) but she ultimately defers to Ozzie's patriarchal authority who explains that the boys will both ultimately learn their lesson through natural consequences: "The best thing to do is let the boys find out for themselves" he says assuredly. As the episode continues, Ozzie congratulates himself on his patriarchal prowess in the presence of a neighbor: "I'm just kind of pleased with a little thing that happened at the house. You know, when you've got a couple of teenage boys you've got to keep your wits about you all the time or they'll put one over on old Dad." Ozzie's view, however, that he "is a man of superior intelligence and genius" in terms of educating his children is refuted by the rest of the narrative arc. Over the next few days the father stays up late with Ricky to watch movies and gets up early to lift weights with David, in the process becoming progressively exhausted and eventually becoming the object of ridicule while falling asleep at the breakfast table.

The episode is resolved in ways that ultimately undermine Ozzie's authority and intelligence. Both boys eventually do decide to put an end to the activities they began at the start of the episode but not in the manner hypothesized by Ozzie. In Ricky's case, Ozzie learns that his youngest son has secretly been napping in the afternoons to make up for the lack of sleep. The revelation of the afternoon naps undermines the father's authority over his younger son's actions and the paternal figure is pictured as being clueless and out of touch. In the case of David, it is

[168] Leibman, 126.
[169] Season Five, Episode Sixteen, "The Puppy," January 16, 1957.
[170] Season Two, Episode Twelve, "Parental Guidance," December 4, 1953.

Harriet herself who directly intervenes through a calculating gesture to stop the early morning weightlifting. She reveals to Ozzie that she surreptitiously shortened a tape measure which David had been using to measure his weightlifting progress thereby giving the impression that his biceps were bigger than they really were. Harriet explains that she "had to do something. I was afraid the weightlifting was getting to be too much." When Ozzie concurs that it was getting to be too difficult for "poor Dave," Harriet retorts, "it wasn't so easy on poor Dave's father either." Thus, the maternal figure demonstrates that within her domestic sphere (the tape measure she snips is one taken from her own sewing basket) she is fully capable of changing the course of events even when this means opposing the father's stated desire. Ozzie, for his part, is shown to be an ineffective figure of authority, unaware of his younger son's napping and equally surprised by his wife's skillful manipulation of household events. In this episode explicitly positioned as dealing with parental guidance, it is the father figure who is ultimately proven wrong in favor of a maternal figure whose early misgivings are proved correct by the end of the episode.

Leibman suggests that a crucial way in which "television texts strip women of their power is by minimizing their importance to the outside world and insisting on their status as housewives and mothers" and that, in "a strident acquiescence to patriarchal hegemony, the texts work in either a two-tiered strategy of minimization and punishment for careerist desires or an explicit celebration of domestic activities." Harriet Nelson certainly never achieves significance in the "outside" world. However, in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, neither does Ozzie to any meaningful extent given that the narrative accords no space to his professional existence. In this sitcom, both parents' main sphere of action resides in the domesticity of their family circle and, while Leibman is most certainly correct that Ozzie remains *the* central figure of this diegesis, as we have demonstrated above, Harriet's character operates from time to time in ways which contradict and undermine patriarchal parental authority, quietly reasserting a hint of maternal authority. Far more subtle and subdued than the character of Peg Riley who debuted on television screens the same year, Harriet's presence is benign by comparison but not necessarily inconsequential.

In *Father Knows Best* the emphasis on the paternal figure is made glaringly evident in the title. The question mark having been erased from the title of the original radio program; this televised sitcom explicitly positions the paternal figure at the (epistemological) head of the patriarchal family. Jim Anderson, according to the title, does not share parental and familial authority with his wife, Margaret, who is, like the other maternal figures, a homemaker. Instead,

Jim's knowledge and his alone is source of truth and leadership for this nuclear family unit. He knows best, implying that his sagacity will singlehandedly guide the family through any troubles that may befall it. Margaret may know things, but Jim always knows the better way, the best way to deal with familial strife. Indeed, Margaret's role within this family does seem to be particularly marginalized though not in the same way as Harriet Nelson. If Harriet was marginalized by her relative narrative absence, a number of episodes of *Father Knows Best* do concern Margaret, specifically her "domestic dissatisfaction," but, according to Leibman, they repeatedly serve to educate Margaret as to her proper position, "reminding the viewer that strong women must learn to subjugate themselves.[171]" Leibman cites examples of episodes in which Margaret's character exercises agency by taking a course at the university, opting to fulfil her own desire in attending a charity lunch instead of accompanying Jim on a business trip, or seeking a meaningful place for herself in the Women's Aid League and concludes that "Margaret, ridiculed by her family for being merely a housewife, is equally chastised for attempting to circumvent those restrictions and punished with public humiliation in the process.[172]" In another episode entitled, "Medal for Margaret,[173]" when the family decides to build a trophy case to display the various awards earned by each member of the family, Margaret is bereft at the realization that she has no awards, no material or tangible recognition of any sort of accomplishment. Determined to win a prize in order to earn her place in the trophy case, she enrolls in fishing lessons and signs up for a fishing contest. However, Margaret, in her excitement, falls and sprains her arm just before the contest, suggesting that her pride has gotten the best of her and that her desire for recognition and accomplishment need to be contained. In the wake of her distress, her children rally around their mother and each give her a prize. Leibman summarizes:

> Crucially, these awards are not for her own activities [as a fishing trophy would have been], but for Margaret's aid with her family's endeavors (driving Bud so he can deliver his newspapers in the rain, making Betty's costume for a play, providing Kathy with PTA bake-sale goodies). While the possibility exists to do so, no accolades are given for any of Margaret's individual accomplishments (her cooking or home-decorating skis, for example). Each award thus reiterates the parasitic nature of the housewife's/mother's happiness – she has no projects of her own, and her only contribution consists of doing the physical labor for the family's creative and productive ideas.[174]

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[171] Leibman, 194.
[172] *Ibid*.
[173] Season Four, Episode Twenty-Eight, "A Medal for Margaret," April 23, 1958.
[174] *Ibid*., 199.

Leibman concludes that this episode serves as a warning against pride and self-importance on the part of Margaret in *Father Knows Best* and the maternal figure in popular culture in general. In each of these episodes the narrative appears to punish Margaret when she reaches too far out of the bounds of normative gender and social roles. As a mother, Margaret must ultimately remain dedicated to her children and to her family. Yet the disciplining of Margaret is able to occur specifically *because* the character repeatedly attempts to transgress her proscribed role. In fact, Margaret Anderson is a particularly *active* maternal figure in comparison to June Cleaver or Harriet Nelson, for example, participating from within the confines of her subordinate role in numerous activities which remove her from the boundaries of the home and place her, if not in the public, professional, corporate world of men, within a wider community of women's groups, charities and parent organizations.

Within the home, too, Margaret, in spite of her subordinate location in relation to husband Jim, is regularly positioned as being more reasonable and more rational than the father figure, who often overreacts especially when the situation concerns questions of propriety and decorum related to his children. In "Typical Father" Jim becomes irrational and paranoid when he convinces himself that his eldest daughter, seventeen-year-old Betty, is about to run off with her latest boyfriend. Margaret is convinced from the beginning of the episode that Jim is being ridiculous. "Jim!" she scolds, "you magnify the situation out of all proportion." Jim reacts unhappily when Margaret tells him he is acting like a "typical father," which presumably means overprotective and strict. As the episode progresses, Jim is increasingly depicted as irrational and Margaret repeatedly intervenes to prevent the paternal figure from interfering, at times restraining him physically. In a classic sitcom misunderstanding, Jim's suspicion that the two are about to elope appears to be confirmed when in reality the two are discussing their respective roles in a school play. Margaret, increasingly exasperated asks, "Jim! When are you going to stop acting like a comic strip father?" In the episode's denouement, Jim follows Betty and her boyfriend, convinced they are about to be secretly married. Jim's worst fears seem confirmed when he and Margaret arrive at a wedding chapel only to discover that the boyfriend's father is a justice of the peace and that they have arrived at the boy's home. Jim is ridiculous when he learns the truth, Margaret's position as the more reasonable, sensible parent who doesn't jump to incorrect conclusions and who isn't ruled

by emotional considerations is vindicated. In this, *Father Knows Best* not only undercuts its own title but does so in an intriguing operation of reversed gender roles.

Figure 14 Margaret repeatedly restrains Jim, a "typical father," who, like Riley, sometimes finds himself on the outside looking in.

Margaret's character, often a foil for Jim who is presented as more unreasonable and excessive, regularly serves to subtly undermine her husband from within the confines of the nuclear family, but this operation works at the narrative level of the sitcom as well. Just as *Father Knows Best* pinpointed Margaret for a lesson in humility (while also reaffirming her motherly essence) in "A Medal for Margaret," Jim's character too is the object of critique in an earlier episode, "Father of the Year." It's time for the annual Father of the Year award in and the children must write a short blurb to nominate their father because "every father in Springfield wants to be Father of the Year." The problem is that the three children, while happy to nominate him, are unable to come up with the right words. Meanwhile, Jim obsesses over the contest. He calls Margaret from the office in a surreptitious effort to find out if his children have nominated him. His imagination and ego get the best of him on his drive home from work. A daydream sequence shows his name in the headlines of the newspaper as firing cannons salute him and a huge crown is placed on his smiling head while onlookers applaud his achievement. Jim's arrogance and self-importance are quickly brought to a halt as he arrives home and finds that his children are still struggling over his nomination. To make matters worse, Jim quickly gets into a confrontation with each of his children and the odds of his being nominated seem to drift further away. By the episode's resolution, the children have indeed come up with the perfect nomination and father is restored to his place of honor at the head of the family but not before Jim's self-importance has been roundly mocked. To be nominated for the award, Jim has had to prove himself a humble and dedicated father working quietly to make his children's lives better, not a braggart who simply gets an award because he thinks he deserves it and whose pride goes directly to his head.

Leibman writes that mothers on television who take active roles are "reminded continually that they must maintain a patina of modesty and invisibility[175]" but this episode demonstrates that parallel lessons may be applied to the paternal figure within these fictional worlds as well. A final scene at the breakfast table complicates the episode further. The children have nominated their father and are excited to know the results (which are never actually revealed, underscoring the message that father must be content to do his paternal work without outside recognition), but at the table where Jim is seated at the head, he cannot get any of his children to pass him the sugar he needs while their petty grievances brought to light during this episode are reignited. Jim's moment of paternal glory (ambiguous as it is) is ephemeral; in fact, his authority and influence are constantly under threat, suggesting that the question mark which terminated this sitcom's title in its radio version has only been removed visually; the interrogation of the notion of father's supreme knowledge remains one of the underlying themes of this sitcom.

Figure 15 Jim's imagination (and ego) get the better of him in "Father of the Year." The reality of uncooperative and disobedient children undermines Jim's supposed paternal superiority.

This brief examination of these few examples is not a suggestion that the Golden Era programs were in any way progressive or particularly emancipatory in terms of the images and representations they created of the American family in general and the maternal role in particular. Traces of ethnicity are gradually phased out, fathers work in the outside world, mothers stay home cooking and doing chores, and although some may extend their influence to the community level through charitable work, any attempts at paid employment are the affair of one episode whose resolution ultimately reminds mother that homemaking is her definitive source of meaning and satisfaction. In this sense, the era may be understood as a Golden Age of televised patriarchy and

[175] Leibman, 198.

it is true that, at a narrative level, sitcom episodes during this period tend to give prime of place to the figure of the father (although most often the narrative revolves around the children), operating as the sort of televised "maternal obliteration" that Leibman cites in her work.[176] However, these situation comedies are, in fact, far more nuanced, offering not one simple overriding message as has been suggested, but instead multiple opportunities for a wide variety of diverse and contradictory interpretations. Close readings of each of these sitcoms demonstrates that they regularly and consistently offer multiple micro-flashpoints of opposition and contestation in which the maternal figure is elevated at the expense of the egotistical, unknowing, or ineffective paternal one. From within her sphere, mother contests, reproaches, contradicts, undermines, educates, and guides both father and children, and the sitcom, from time to time, appears to suggest that the hegemonic nuclear family model of this era is indeed fallible.

Given the institutional context of television this subtly subversive maternal role is not surprising. In her essay on the correlation between the genre and the corporate world, Mary Beth Haralovich underlines the ambiguity of the figure of the middle-class homemaker:

> She was at once central and marginal. She was marginal in that she was positioned within the home, constituting the value of her labor outside of the means of production. Yet she was also central to the economy in that her function as homemaker was the subject of consumer product design and marketing, the basis of an industry.[177]

In the post-World War Two era, American mothers were courted as prime targets for consumer culture thanks to their important role within the unit of consumption that is the nuclear family. The endless advertisements for Hotpoint appliances that litter episodes of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* are all directed at the housewife, for example. While she was not positioned as having the power to support the family financially, the mother as homemaker was understood to have considerable power over the purse strings. Thus, it was crucial not to alienate this potential consumer and this may explain her relative power – to correct, counteract or humble the father figure depending on the circumstances of each individual situation comedy – within the fictional family sphere. The fragile equilibrium that each successful sitcom had to maintain was manifested in these instances, in the representation of the delicate power balance between sitcom mother and

[176] *Ibid*., 204.
[177] Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sitcoms and Suburbs, Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 11, no. 1 (1989): 61-83, 69-70.

sitcom father. The solution: within each of the thousands of episodes of the family sitcoms from this period (and after) lay multiple possibilities of interpretation and identification.

Two other sitcoms of this era merit our attention before moving on. *Leave it to Beaver* débuted on American television screens in 1957. *The Donna Reed Show*, a year later. While both of these sitcoms configure their representations of the American family within the same hegemonic ideological structure as the previous examples (bread winner father, stay-at-home mother, white, WASP, suburban middle-class), they resonate quite differently. *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966) featured the Stone family. Alex was a pediatrician who worked from the family home, Donna was a stay-at-home mother who sometimes helped her husband in his practice. The couple had two teenage children, Mary and Jeff. *The Donna Reed Show* was one of the most popular sitcoms of its era and it stands out as having been produced in large part by Donna Reed herself (although this work largely went uncredited) who was by 1958 an Academy Award winning film actress. Reed was a remarried divorcée and working mother of four (two adopted and two biological children) at the time of the sitcom's production, which is to point out that the actress herself bared little ideological resemblance to her fictional persona. In addition, Reed was quite outspoken in her opposition to the ideological and idealized image of women and mothers, which was increasingly dominant during this period on televisions screens. In a 1964 interview with Donald Freeman from the *Saturday Evening Post*, Reed, still playing stay-at-home mother and housewife Donna Stone, expounds at length on the issue. Freeman writes:

> Since her series began, Donna has juggled a trying work schedule while maintaining a home for her husband and four children […] "I would read the articles by the 'experts' and they said I should be home with my children instead of working as an actress," Donna says. "Each time I'd read another 'expert,' I'd feel derelict as a mother, a wife, a woman. They're everywhere, the 'experts,' telling us all women should be deliriously happy bent over a stove and ecstatic while they scrub the kitchen sink. We all know they aren't so happy. When the kids leave home, these women who never had any outside interests are miserable. One morning I decided to take a close, hard look at my own family – my husband was thriving and my children were happy and well-adjusted without me patting their heads every other minute. 'My God,' I remember saying to myself, 'all these years of worry and misplaced guilt – and for what? To please some 'expert'?' I knew what was right for me – work and marriage and no guilt pangs about mixing the two. But I did want to give more time to my family, and so I did something the 'experts' would consider scandalous – I cut out the time-consuming good works for

> charities, and I cut out the P.T.A.[178] That's right – I…cut…out…the…P.T.A. Maybe the 'experts' are crazy wrong when they say an unmarried woman is 'unfulfilled,'" said TV's premier wife and mother. "Maybe every woman shouldn't necessarily be married and have children – and a lot of women would be happier and more fulfilled if they didn't." Such heresy was by no means a part of Donna's straitlaced upbringing […][179]

Reed's 'heretical' comments seem to be in direct contradiction to the role she played. However, while Donna Stone was positioned, like her contemporary sitcom maternal figures, in an inferior position to her husband Alex, this maternal character possessed a different tonality than the others. Indeed, *The Donna Reed Show* restores some of the matriarchal aspects which had vanished from television sitcom with *Mama* and *The Goldbergs*. Far from being a simple (if sometimes challenging) companion to her husband as in the contemporary programs of the era, Donna Stone was the focal point of this sitcom, a point driven home by the program's title. The choice of title was most likely meant to capitalize on the actress's popularity and stardom, but it also lends an authoritative quality to the sitcom lacking in the other major female produced sitcom of the era, *I Love Lucy*. While the Lucy title operates an implicit objectification of Lucy's character by positioning her as the object of Desi/Ricky/the audience's love, the title of Donna Reed's program suggests that the actress maintained at least a modicum of authorial and ideological control over her sitcom. As a result, Alex's position as supreme patriarch becomes less inevitable than it was in other sitcom families, and Donna Stone was less content in her role as stay-at-home mother. This is not to say that Donna Stone rejected her role outright. Instead, Donna's prime of place within the sitcom forces a reconsideration of the paternal character, Alex, and it offers a reading of Donna Stone as more firmly resisting restrictive patriarchal motherhood under the sitcom's ubiquitous cover of humor.

Framing the traditional family sitcom from the point of view of the maternal figure allowed *The Donna Reed Show* to consider gender roles in ways which were not available to other sitcoms of this era such as *Father Knows Best*. We may take for example a very early episode entitled "The Male Ego.[180]" This episode, whose title is evocative of the influences of Freudian ego psychology percolating throughout American popular culture at the time, revolves around Alex's feelings of

[178] Parent Teacher Association.
[179] Donald Freeman, "Donna Reed: Fire and Ice" *Saturday Evening Post*, March 28, 1964. https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2017/08/donna-reed-fire-ice/
[180] Season One, Episode Four, "The Male Ego," October 15, 1958.

inferiority in the wake of an inspiring and public speech on motherhood given by daughter Mary in honor of her mother Donna. Airing several months after the *Father Knows Best Episode* "A Medal for Margaret" in which Margaret is made to feel inferior because she doesn't have any accomplishments to be proud of, this episode may be seen as something of a response. Following her daughter's speech, Donna Stone receives so much attention that a reporter comes to the Stone home to write a feature article on her, much to Alex's jealous chagrin. "The Male Ego" ends in much the same manner as "A Medal for Margaret": ideological order is ultimately restored. In *Father Knows Best*, Margaret is shown appreciation for her real talents of homemaking and mothering, while in *The Donna Reed Show*, it is Donna Stone herself who improvises a moving and laudatory speech for her husband Alex, restoring him to his rightful place as head of the family and adored husband and father.

While the two sitcoms may ultimately reach the same conclusion (maintaining or restoring the patriarchal place of the father and containing or restoring the mother to her place *within* patriarchal motherhood), *The Donna Reed Show* arrives at that conclusion in a way which brings to light the uncertain foundations on which this ideological premise is based. Throughout "The Male Ego," Alex Stone's character, although eventually restored, is shaken in his position of patriarch through his jealously for his wife and specifically for the attention brought to her by her *maternal* role. This marks a significant break with most of the other sitcoms at the time in which the father figure may occasionally be shown to regret that he cannot spend more time with the family (professional obligations obliged) but fell far short of being jealous of his wife in her role as mother. Indeed, the episode's very name, "The Male Ego," draws explicit attention to the psychological health of the patriarchal figure in a way that suggests that his innate strength and superiority as represented in similar sitcoms could and perhaps should be subject to discussion. While this 1950s sitcom episode eventually falls in line with the hundreds of others of its time, it does so after having opened up a unique perspective made possible in part by *The Donna Reed Show*'s unique circumstances of production with the feisty Donna Reed as its star.

To complete our discussion of this critical age of the television sitcom, we conclude with an example which seems to place itself on the other end of the admittedly narrow ideological spectrum offered by this type of programming. *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS 1957-1958, ABC 1958-1963) premiered a year before *The Donna Reed Show* and aired for most of its broadcast life on the same network, ABC. *Leave it to Beaver* was, however, a very different kind of program, taking

as its focal point the youngest boy in an ideologically traditional family, Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver. The Cleaver family was also composed of Beaver's older brother Wally, their mother June (a homemaker) and their father Ward (a white-collar breadwinner). This was an unmistakably masculine household both in the composition of its members (no sitcom mother of this period, with the exception of Harriet Nelson whose family was based on its composition in reality, was more outnumbered by male family members than June) and in the pure patriarchal stature of Ward whose characterization often verged on the misogynistic. June's role, more so than any of the other sitcom mothers of this period, was reduced to a supporting one, although even in this supporting role she was capable of criticizing her husband and demonstrating independent and free thinking, and Ward Cleaver was often shown to be wrong. Nonetheless, *Leave it to Beaver* was intensely patriarchal, although usually benevolently so. Ward was consistently involved in his sons' upbringing, often at the request of June herself, who seemed at a loss for how to deal with two growing boys. Throughout the sitcom's broadcast, June unfailingly turned to her husband as the expert in child raising, unfailingly putting herself, or accepting to be put, in an inferior parental position, even though Ward often made a fool of himself.

While the overwhelming consensus is that this period in television was one of cookie-cutter suburban families corresponding to the nuclear family ideology (in which rigid gender roles were observed and respected) of the era, the complete picture is more subtle and nuanced. In many if not most cases, the family in the mid-1950s television situation comedy was indeed a reflection of the post-World War II/Cold War era ideological consensus of an idealized nuclear family unit. In this world breadwinning father worked in corporate America to financially support his family. Wielding benevolent knowledge in relation to his children's upbringing, he was to be trusted implicitly even if he sometimes got it wrong (often in a comic way). In this configuration, stay-at-home mother was "positioned" in the suburban home as the central nervous system of all things domestic, wielding relative authority from this position yet remaining fixedly inferior to her husband's status as patriarch. Although she had ample opportunity to contest father's authority, and in some cases did so willingly, even irreverently, she never tipped the scales of the balance of power to the extent that they could not fall neatly back into place. Generally, children respected both mother and father.

Yet as we have seen, certain situation comedies (*The Life of Riley*, *The Donna Reed Show*) explicitly and implicitly questioned this normalized familial configuration. Tellingly perhaps,

these two sitcoms were amongst the most popular of the era, while comedies adhering more closely to the ideological ideal were less so.[181]

It is perhaps most useful to think of this type of situation comedy as occurring on a spectrum of familial representations in which the variations respond more or less exactly to the dominant ideology of the cold war nuclear family ideal. On this continuum, *Leave it to Beaver* with its white-collar professional patriarch and demure mother figure could be placed on one end while *The Life of Riley* with its perpetually unfortunate and disappointing blue-collar bumbling father figure and perpetually exasperated and unfortunate yet authoritative maternal figure might appear at the other. These images, of course, were meant to communicate an idealized family and the mild variations in tonality and greater or lesser emphasis on questions of authority within the household only underscore the fundamental narrowness of this type of representation. What is left entirely out of these images is any real notion of diversity in terms of family composition, not only in terms of race, ethnicity and religion but also in relation to family size as well as economic and marital status. That so many purportedly naturalistic sitcoms could ignore the reality of increasingly diverse familial compositions underscores their true impact. As Jones suggests, this era's comedic programs "were beginning to mythologize the nuclear family in ways that still haunt us.[182]" The weight of these representations would burden cultural and political discourses surrounding the family in general and gender roles in particular throughout the following decades as social dislocations ultimately exposed the artificiality of these images. The venerable sitcom would be forced to adapt, disrupting the televisual consensus which had stabilized images of fathers and mothers for the better part of a decade. Writing in the 1990s, family historian Stephanie Coontz acknowledges the prolonged dominance of these visual representations. "Our most powerful visions of traditional families," she writes, "derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms.[183]"

[181] *The Life of Riley* was among the top ten in the Nielsen ratings for its first four (out of six total) seasons from 1952 to 1956. *The Donna Reed Show* was ranked in the top ten for two out of eight seasons (1961-62 and 1963-64). *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* made it to the top ten in the 1963-1964 television season: this was the only time in its fourteen-season broadcast. *Leave it to Beaver* never arrived anywhere near the top ten in all of its six seasons. As for *Father Knows Best*, it arrived in the top ten for the last three of its six original seasons from 1957-1960 (the sitcom continued airing as primetime repeats from 1960 to 1963).
[182] Jones, 86.
[183] Coontz, 23.

I.2.4. The 1960s: Lucy Transitions Again and Reconfigures the American Family

In 1960, at the end of their final television collaboration, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz divorced, bringing about a gloomy real-life end to the mythical couple who had done so much to transform the sitcom in its early days. Ball, however, was far from the end of her own television sitcom career and when *I Love Lucy*'s production company, Desilu Studios, was looking for a new situation comedy, Arnaz turned to his ex-wife to star in it. For *The Lucy Show* (CBS, 1962-1968), Ball convinced her former *I Love Lucy* co-star Vivian Vance to return to television sitcom. The two women were transformed into widow and mother of two, Lucy Carmichael, and mother of one as well as the first lead divorcée on a sitcom, Vivian Bagley.[184] Significantly, the two women and their children all lived together in Lucy's house in upstate New York. Ball's character was the benefactor of her deceased husband's generous trust fund. Vivian was paid alimony by her ex-husband and she paid Lucy monthly rent. While it may not have been explicitly acknowledged as such, this was a significant break with the traditional configuration of the nuclear family; here was a two parent suburban household devoid of any patriarchal figure at a time when *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and reruns of *Father Knows Best* were still on primetime television.

Although the two women were indeed mothers, their motherhood was not necessarily the focal point of this sitcom. In fact, all three child characters were gradually phased out over the course of the program's broadcast. Likewise, actress Vivian Vance left after the third season and, during the last three seasons of *The Lucy Show*, Lucy Carmichael was simply an older single woman working in a bank after having moved to California. Before this transition, however, the sitcom offered the intriguing spectacle of a household in which two unmarried maternal figures raised children in a cooperative and highly non-traditional familial situation. While Lucy's character was safely ensconced within the traditional familial configuration through widowhood, Vance's character, Vivian, was unabashedly divorced referring to her ex-husband in the pilot episode as a "cheapskate" who wouldn't hesitate to reduce her alimony if he could.

[184] The premise of *The Lucy Show* was based on Irene Kampen's 1961 novel, *Life Without George*. Kampen's popular book, based on her own divorce, featured two divorcées who lived together after leaving their husbands. In making the transition to television, one of the women, Ball's character, was changed to a widow as it was feared that audiences would be too offended by a divorced Lucy Ricardo/Carmichael to watch. Network television would not allow two divorced mothers to live together until *Kate and Allie* (CBS, 1984-1989).

The children appeared to be mere props present to legitimize the sitcom's premise more than fully fleshed out characters in their own right, and this is underscored by their ultimate precipitous departure. They were the backdrop against which Lucille Ball and Vivian Vance could be placed in order to reignite the glorious chaos and chemistry that existed between the two women on *I Love Lucy*. The title of the pilot episode suggested that the sitcom would be very much concerned with Lucy's role as mother. "Lucy Waits up for Chris" was originally broadcast in October 1962 and purportedly revolved around Lucy's anxiety as her teenage daughter stays out late on a date with an older boy. As the episode progresses, however, it becomes increasingly clear that this new Lucy/Lucille Ball sitcom is less a meaningful representation of a more mature maternal character and more a vehicle for the type of antics and physical comedy that made *I Love Lucy* such a popular program. While waiting up for Chris, Lucy ends up locked out of her own house and resorts to jumping on a trampoline in order to attract the attention of the sleeping Vivian. As such, she becomes the bumbling maternal figure externalized from the domestic sphere and ridiculed for being at one and the same time a smothering "mother hen" and a childlike clown character in need of rescue. Nonetheless, in positioning two single mother characters as leads of a sitcom, *The Lucy Show* single-handedly offered a vision of a female-headed household in an implicit recognition that as early as 1962, the heteronormative nuclear family model was not as universal as the dominant ideology would have suggested.

Figure 16 In spite of being mothers, Lucy and Vivian were up to their old tricks in The Lucy Show

I.2.5. The Sitcom Takes on Feminism? The 1960s Supernatural Mom

As the twentieth century progressed beyond the 1950s, pre-existing fissures in the nuclear family ideal became more and more difficult to smooth over with images of mostly harmonious white middle-class families in which father could be relied upon as the sole repository of parental wisdom as well as the sole financial provider, while mother was forever content to maintain a comfortable home in the suburbs. If racial tensions exemplified by the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement could be easily whitewashed by the sitcom – the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956 occurred during the cold war sitcom's heyday with nary a mention – it was harder for this genre with its intense spotlight focused on gender roles to ignore the nascent upheavals occurring in the lives of women as well as their increasingly loud rumblings of discontent. In 1960, the United States Food and Drug Administration approved hormonal contraceptives for women for the first time. The use of the Pill progressed throughout the decade as more and more American women were presented with a means to control their fertility. For the first time in history women had legal access to a reliable method of birth control and the seeming inevitableness linking female sexual activity to reproduction and motherhood was radically called into question. The social and sexual disruptions caused (or exacerbated) by the introduction of the birth control pill would have far-reaching consequences for the rest of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, journalist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. The work, based on results of a 1957 survey of 200 of her Smith college classmates fifteen years after their graduation, identified the now infamous "problem that has no name." Friedan's iconic introductory passage to the first chapter of her book concisely lays the groundwork for her thesis:

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut-butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night – she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question – "Is this all?[185]"

Friedan pinpointed the origin of the suburban housewife's dissatisfaction on the restrictive gender role prescribed to women, which stipulated that their femininity, their satisfaction and their very identity be based exclusively on their position as paragons of maternal devotion and

[185] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963), 1.

domesticity, to be available above all for their children, their husbands and their homes. The profound and widespread unhappiness that Friedan discovered and revealed among her compatriots had its roots in that very image that cold war era sitcoms had so carefully constructed and idealized around the maternal figure. By this point the Golden Era Cold War sitcoms were either off the air completely or on the wane: Both *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *The Donna Reed Show* stopped airing original episodes by the end of the 1965-1966 television season. Other sitcoms representing traditional nuclear families had gone off the air years earlier.

Yet the sitcom as a genre did not disappear, nor did it cease to represent American families. The one popular family sitcom which survived and even thrived in this transitional moment in broadcasting was *My Three Sons* (ABC, CBS, 1960-1972) starring Fred MacMurray as a congenial and traditional patriarchal figure to his three growing boys. However, the enduring popularity of this sitcom throughout this moment may be, in part, due to the fact that there was never any female parent to contend with: Stephen Douglas was a widower who raised his motherless boys with the help of older male relatives. In the absence of any narrative possibility for maternal disgruntlement, this sitcom was able to continue for years, unperturbed by any necessity to speak to feminist discontent.

Newer sitcoms found creative ways to obliquely address the increasingly significant issues raised in *The Feminine Mystique*. Where Friedan championed meaningful work outside the home for women, the situation comedies of this moment were not yet ready to show mothers raising young children in the home *and* being employed in the public sphere. Yet, the creative limits of the genre were stretched to include programming which moved explicitly beyond the purported realistic representations of earlier shows and, in these fictional spaces less explicitly tethered to reality, maternal characters, and their families in general, were offered a measure of liberty to explore and speak to questions of gender and the traditional nuclear family. That the sitcom had to turn to fantasy to emancipate some of its characters speaks to the continued conservative ethos of the moment and the reluctance on the part of network television to counter it overtly.

Two sitcoms from the 1960s stand out as exemplars of this type of supernatural situation comedy. *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) began its broadcast life as a rival to CBS' *The Munsters* (1964-1966) which was produced by Bob Mosher and Joe Connelly, the creative duo behind *Leave it to Beaver*. While *The Munsters* was in fact a traditional family disguised as monstrous characters (Frankenstein, Dracula), *The Addams Family*, whose members were also

monstrous, managed to create more or less subtle hints of subversion in its depiction of the family and gender. Gomez and his wife, Morticia Addams, were the parents of two young children, Wednesday and Pugsley. Morticia was refined and spoke French and while she didn't work outside the home (none of the adults in this household did), instead of relentlessly attending to the needs of her children and husband, Morticia spent much time occupied by her own hobbies. Significantly, she was portrayed as highly sexual and her husband displayed a deep sexual attraction to her. Indeed the family was such an irreverent version of the previous decade's representations that Jones has suggested that the "Addams household, creepy and kooky and ooky as it was, was a self-contained counterculture.[186]" The balance of power within the parental unit itself was unlike what had been seen as yet in sitcom parents. Their abnormality (beyond their monstrous appearance) was highlighted in numerous ways in the pilot episode.[187] A truant officer arrives at the house to ascertain why the two young children are not in school (itself an example of the antisocial and nonconformist behavior of the family) and the episode revolves around the decision to send the children to school or to have them remain at home (in what may be television's first representation of home schooling). Gomez has reservations but Morticia thinks that going to school is in the best interests of the children. When he resists, she strokes his chin and, in a seductive voice reminds him, "Gomez, darling, mother knows best. Now believe me, we'll send the children to school." It is difficult to see Morticia's affirmation as anything but a repudiation of the genre's formerly overwhelming supposition that ultimate and correct knowledge lay with the patriarch. Just a year off the air, *Father Knows Best* is unequivocally rejected by a hipper, sexier maternal figure (on a rival network). Under cover of the monstrous and supernatural, the sitcom mother was finally able to assert her equal stature, if not outright superiority.

[186] Jones, 176.
[187] "The Addams Family Goes to School, "September 18, 1964.

Figure 17 Morticia Addams is a mother with sex appeal who also "knows best" in The Addams Family

The popularity, however, of both the traditional Munster family and the more iconoclastic Addams household was limited. The gimmickry of monster families was perhaps too much to entertain for a sustained period of time. Both sitcoms were highly popular for their first season but canceled after their second. Another supernatural situation comedy, which also débuted in 1964, did endure, however. *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972) had, according to Jones, "a diametrically opposite point of view" from *The Addams Family* and "was as antifeminist, antisexual and procentrist as a sitcom could be.[188]"

The premise of *Bewitched* lay in a man marrying a seemingly normal woman[189] – that is to say, a woman who would conform to the image of the satisfied and satisfying suburban housewife which *The Feminine Mystique* so scathingly denounced as detrimental to women – only to find out on his honeymoon that she, in fact, was a witch with magical powers. With the twitch of her nose or the sweep of her hand, Samantha Stephens could tidy a room, make dinner, and clean a house, making her more efficient than the entire panoply of time saving appliances conspicuously advertised to women like her during sitcoms like hers. Yet her husband was terrified upon discovering her strange and nonconformist otherness and he made her promise never to use her magic powers. "Now, you're going to have to learn to be a suburban housewife… you'll have to learn to cook and keep house and go to my mother's house every Friday night," Darrin warns his new bride in the pilot episode. Samantha for her part is enchanted with the idea. "Darling it sounds wonderful and soon we'll be a normal happy couple with no problems just like everybody else,"

[188] Jones, 177.

[189] The introductory voice-over of the pilot episode begins thus: "Once upon a time there was a typical American girl who happened to bump into a typical red-blooded American boy." The very first sentence then suggests what is at stake in Samantha's identity.

she offers lovingly. In spite of her best efforts, however, Samantha is regularly uncompliant. Episode after episode revolves around disasters wrought (usually impacting Darrin's professional life in advertising) by either Samantha's magic or that of her out-of-control family members, also invested with supernatural powers. Whether Samantha's special powers serve as an implicit metaphor for the increasing demands of American women in general at this time is debatable. Samantha often used her powers either to help her husband or for her own personal satisfaction when she felt threatened by another woman. In either case, this sitcom's cyclical episodic structure ensures that whatever mayhem may have been reaped, all returned to *Bewitched*'s unique brand of normal by the end of each episode.

In terms of mothering and maternal figures, Samantha gives birth to baby Tabitha during the second season of *Bewitched* and a son, Adam, in the sixth. Both children are ultimately revealed to have their mother's magical powers as well. In spite of her magic, however, Samantha remains a devoted mother to her two children. Systematically attentive and loving, she regularly worries that their own powers will get them into trouble with unknowing mortals and she attempts to minimize their use while also delighting in their exploits. In spite of her powers, Samantha is as dutiful and faithful as a mother could be to her two young children, relishing spending time with them and attempting to shelter them from the eccentricities of her own particular heritage, an apologist for her own otherness and nonconformity. If *Bewitched* underscored Samantha's desire to conform, her own mother represents the absolute rejection of these conformist values, setting up an intergenerational conflict around which many of the episodes are based, as well as a striking example of mother-daughter discord in this televisual genre.

I.2.6. Sitcom's First Unruly Mother?

Endora, Samantha's meddling mother, is also a witch. Unlike her daughter, Endora is immensely proud of her witch's pedigree and eminently dismissive of the mortal world including, most especially, her son-in-law Darrin. Indeed, Endora is such a disruptive maternal figure that she may be interpreted as something of a warning of the dangers of uncontrolled and uncontrollable female power. While Samantha's father Maurice, a warlock, makes regular appearances, the Endora character is present in every episode and, like Samantha's other female family members, she consistently conjures spells leading to mishap and mischief particularly for the hapless Darrin.

Endora regularly chides Samantha for attempting to minimize and negate her own powers and cannot understand why her daughter would settle for such a conventional domestic lifestyle. The intergenerational conflicts which ensue configure Endora as the quintessential meddlesome maternal figure who wreaks havoc and chaos in what is understood to be Samantha's otherwise idyllic suburban existence.

In *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Kathleen Rowe identifies a particular type of female representation present in popular culture and comedy. This unruly woman, suggests Rowe, "reverberates whenever women disrupt norms of femininity and the social hierarchy of male over female through excess and outrageousness.[190]" Citing Miss Piggy and the actress Roseanne Barr as classic examples, Rowe describes the unruly woman as potentially possessing a number of disrupting qualities. Among these attributes: the domination or attempted domination of men. Additionally, the unruly women may be identified with excess in any number of forms, including excessive (fat) bodies, speech, laughter, or sexuality. Furthermore, the unruly woman may be old or "a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque.[191]" Rowe summarizes, "Through her body, her speech, and her laughter, especially in the public sphere, she creates a disruptive spectacle of herself.[192]"

We may draw on and extend Rowe's argument to suggest that maternal figures who respond to these characteristics may be identified as *unruly mothers*, and that Samantha's mother Endora may be the first, or at least an early and particularly cogent, example of an unruly mother character in a televisual genre which is more closely associated with containing its female characters, particularly those who have the added identity of being maternal figures. Gaudily dressed, outspoken and outrageous, alternately appearing out of thin air and disappearing at will, Endora's is the most explicitly disruptive representation of a maternal figure to date in a primetime situation comedy.[193] Endora is unpredictable and uncontrollable and her characterization as an antagonist to her own daughter additionally fixes this character as an *unmotherly* mother. The Endora character stands in many ways in opposition to the qualities promoted in the 1950s image of the idealized nuclear family mother: Endora does not exist for the sole purpose of supporting

[190] Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 30.
[191] *Ibid*., 31.
[192] *Ibid*.
[193] Darrin's mother, Mrs. Stephens, is equally meddlesome but is featured much less frequently.

her family and managing a household. Indeed, her children are grown, no longer in need, in theory, of the nurturing and constant presence guaranteed by a conventional maternal figure. Yet Endora is *omni*present in *Bewitched*, and it is her very presence, her *excess* of presence, which positions her as such a disruptively unruly mother.

Her refusal to accept her daughter's choice of life partner is underscored in her consistent misnaming (Derik, What's-his-name) of her son-in-law. *Darwin*, one of Endora's knowingly mistaken appellations of choice for her own daughter's husband, may be read as a wink to the audience, suggesting that this apparent representative of patriarchal authority could benefit from some evolution in order to embrace a world of increasingly powerful women. Furthermore, Endora is unrepentantly divorced, a single older woman and mother living life on her own terms and consistently criticizing her daughter's more conventional lifestyle. As Jones suggests, Endora "was a self-sufficient divorcée who never regretted the dissolution of her marriage; it was strongly implied, in fact, that her life reached its fullest when she dumped her husband, a pointed message to Samantha.[194]" Endora is thus the woman on top, or perhaps more accurately, the mother on top, a figure who has variously been hinted at in some of sitcom's numerous iterations but who receives her fullest and most attentive treatment to date in *Bewitched*.

As the 1960s progressed, Endora's character also permitted the sitcom to circuitously approach the growing countercultural movement. In one episode broadcast in 1969, Endora shows up at her daughter's house unannounced smoking a giant floating hookah. She explains to Samantha that she had to escape from the overfriendly Shah of Xanadu but that she was "hooked on his hookah."[195] The sexual connotation of the imagery as well as the character's own words could not have been lost on savvy late-1960s television viewers.

While Samantha's character may have doggedly done her best to remain an ideologically Golden Age sitcom mother, her own mother's enduring (Endoring?) presence was a reminder that this era was long gone if it had ever really existed in the first place. As we have suggested, the fact that the liberated, mischief-making, hookah-smoking maternal figure Endora was positioned in almost every episode as a nemesis to her own daughter and son-in-law's quest for a conventional normative family life introduces an element of intergenerational conflict between mother and

[194] Jones, 178.
[195] Season Five, Episode Fourteen, "Samantha's Super Maid," January 2, 1969.

grown daughter, which for the first time in the situation comedy serves as a structuring element around which episodes were based.

However, if Endora is indeed sitcom's first truly unruly mother (Lucy Carmichael in *The Lucy Show* may in some ways be considered a precursor), she was certainly not the last. The figure's potential for creating a humorous disruptive spectacle as well as an intergenerational narrative complication for other characters ensured her persistence and enduring resonance as the situation comedy continued its exploration of familial dynamics, while the 1950s ideological consensus fixated on the traditional nuclear family continued to disintegrate.

Figure 18 Endora, the unruly mother, is hooked on the hookah much to her own daughter's chagrin.

I.2.7. Black Motherhood arrives on the Sitcom

It was not until 1968 that an African American actress was attributed a meaningful maternal role in an American situation comedy. *Julia* (NBC, 1968-1971) starred Diahann Carroll, an actress and singer who had previously appeared in film and on stage and was the first African American woman to win a Tony Award. Lauded by *Ebony* magazine as "another step in TV's 'evolution,'" the series focusses on Julia Baker, a widow, a nurse and a working mother. The sitcom began airing on television only three years after the now-infamous 1965 Moynihan Report (full title: *The Negro Family, The Case for National Action*), written by Assistant Secretary of Labor and future senator from New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan was published. Attempting to address the "new crisis in race relations" and seemingly endemic Black poverty, the report nonetheless had the effect of severely stigmatizing African American families as pathological. The source of its pathology was clear to Moynihan:

> In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to [sic] out of line with the rest of the American society,

> seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.[196]

Its stated solution: "the establishment of a stable Negro family structure," "stable" in this case evidently meaning patriarchal. The report has not ceased to be a source of controversy since its publication, but its most immediate influence (and stated purpose) was to increase the visibility of the black family while cementing it in the cultural imagination as ailing and problematic.

Within this context, Julia Baker's maternal status appears to be painstakingly calibrated to attract as many viewers while offending as few as possible, to speak to progressives and attract a wider and more diverse audience, without scaring conservatives (and racists). Julia's profession as a registered nurse lends middle-class credibility to this African American woman, the mother of one young boy. The lack of a father figure is carefully structured through her widowhood: Julia was married to her son's father, a captain in the US Army who was killed in the skies over Vietnam. The absent father is not only accounted for, he is legitimated as an educated Black man through his rank as officer and his patriotic service to his country. In his death he is granted hero status.

Julia thus carefully threads the needle of African American maternal representation. Her situation as matriarch is both "realistic" (according to the Moynihan report) and relatable, for she is far removed from the poverty and ghetto life which would render her foreign and threatening to a white audience. What is perhaps surprising is the extent to which this patriarch-less duo (the single working Black mother and her young child) were received as a "family." *Ebony* characterized *Julia* as the "first black family series" in spite of its lack of a paternal presence suggesting the extent to which Black maternity is perceived to structure family and underscoring the double standard accorded to white and black representations of family.[197]

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[196] Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965).
Moynihan immediately continues, "There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another." The report continues to enumerate (seemingly unwittingly) all the advantages that this matriarchal organization appears to have for African American women and their daughters, who perform better in school and are more likely to hold middle-class jobs, before concluding that "the tangle of pathology is tightening." https://www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan

[197] "'Julia:' Television Network Introduces First Black Family Series," *Ebony* 24, no. 1 (1968): 56-62. No attributed author.

It was this lack of father figure which inspired much of the criticism of this situation comedy. Clean-cut, professional black men appear repeatedly, however, in the form of Julia's dating interests. As a single mother, Julia dated frequently (her son Corey expressly asked her to get him a "Daddy.") Another point of criticism was *Julia'*s inability or unwillingness to depict the poverty that afflicted African American.

If the lack of paternal figure structures Julia's maternal identity, her single mother status also offers this sitcom moments to reconsider maternal behavior. In fact, the first scene of this "first black family" sitcom opens with a remarkable inversion of caretaking. The episode begins with a close-up of a young Black boy alone in a kitchen cutting oranges with a large knife, squeezing them into two glasses and carrying the glasses on a tray over to the couch in the living room. On the couch, fast asleep, is Julia, the boy's mother. The boy lays a kiss on his sleeping mother's face, waking her up. The inversion of caretaking roles in this scene, the young African American boy expending the energy to squeeze fresh orange juice for this sleeping mother, hints that Julia, and by extension the maternal figure, is in need of caretaking as well. In waking up the sleeping woman, in preparing her breakfast, five-year-old Corey assumes the maternal role in the place of his mother. Because the sitcom has deprived (or freed?) Julia of a husband, it falls to Corey to meet her needs. Julia, then, is at once a strong Black maternal figure (Moynihan's matriarch in this decidedly *un*pathological family) and a vulnerable woman in need of caring. The displacement of the acts of care onto the child character temporarily frees the mother of some of the weight of mothering and suggests that, in spite of the comedy's best efforts to dress Julia up as a typical (white, middle-class) housewife, the responsibility for caretaking in this household exists in a relationship of reciprocity absent from preceding televised maternal figures who appear to be solely responsible for the mundane acts of nourishment and care necessary to sustain the health and life of the familial unit. At the same time, Julia's devotion to her son is implicit, in sleeping on the couch in the living room, she leaves free the apartment's one bedroom for her son. This example of egalitarian living appears to be made possible because of the comedy's choice of nontraditional family structure, itself made possible by the absence of the father figure.

Figure 19 Corey brings his mother Julia fresh squeezed orange juice, inversing maternal-child roles.

Diahann Carroll remembers the criticism of *Julia* concerning the question of accurate representation as particularly focused on the father figure's absence and quite virulent, but she recalls that she and *Julia* creator-producer Hal Kanter,

> were of the opinion that what we were doing was important and we never […] left that point of view, even though some of the criticism of course was valid. But that's not what we were doing. And we were of a mind that *that* was a different show. We were allowed to have this show. We were allowed to put this point of view on the air. We were allowed to have a comedy about a Black middle-class family. Television was going to have the kind of scope and time that would allow the ghetto situation, the middle-class situation, the upper-middle class situation.[198]

Carroll was correct, the scope of television was indeed wide enough to imagine the plight of African Americans in the "ghetto situation" and the situation comedy version of that universe arrived on American television screens a few years later with *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979). Television's first sitcom featuring a "stable," traditional nuclear African American family was situated in a fictionalized version of Chicago's infamous Cabrini-Green public housing project. In *Ebony*, the sitcom was credited as being television's "best effort to date at showing a real slice of ghetto black life.[199]" Created by two African American writers, Mike Evans and Eric Monte, *Good Times* was executive-produced by Norman Lear and offered a starring role to Esther Rolle who had played Maude Findlay's housekeeper in Lear's *Maude* (see below).[200]

Rolle played Florida Evans, wife of James, and mother of three teenagers. Far from Julia Baker's polished and studied middle-class accessibility, Florida Evans was loud, sharp-tongued

[198] "Diahann Carroll discusses 'Julia,'" Emmy TV Legends, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qC_Q-o4tGDc.
[199] Louie Robinson, "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set," *Ebony* 30, no. 11 (1975): 33.
[200] Mike Evans also had a guest starring role in Lear's *All in the Family* (CBS 1971-1979) and later, in *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985). It was his last name which was used for the *Good Times* family.

and devoted to her husband and children. James's inability to provide for the family, in spite of working multiple jobs, meant that Florida was perpetually worried for her children's safety and future. The moral compass of the sitcom, Florida struggles to maintain her family's dignity and values in the face of the corruption and degradation wrought by poverty and ghetto life. It is Florida's good sense and principled ethics which keep her children in line and keep her husband from falling for dubious promises of employment by ghetto predators. Indeed, her character suggests that the role of the Black matriarch was just as possible when a paternal figure was present as when he was absent. In fact, James (played by actor John Amos) was written out of the series at the end of the sitcom's third season.

Controversy concerning representation plagued this sitcom as it did for *Julia*, yet in this instance, it was the sitcom's stars themselves who disapproved of the direction *Good Times* was taking. As the seasons progressed, the sitcom's emphasis moved gradually away from the family's struggle for dignity in the midst of undignified circumstances and more towards the comic relief offered by actor Jimmie Walker in the role of the eldest son. "The crux of it all," writes Robinson in a 1975 article in *Ebony*, "seems to be a continuing battle among the cast members to keep the comedic flavor of the program from becoming so outlandish as to embarrass the blacks.[201]" Amos's removal and Rolle's eventual departure were in large part due to disagreements over the manner in which this Black family was portrayed on television. Upon leaving *Good Times*, Amos commented on the irony of his removal. His departure, he said, "might mean the show would revert to the matriarchal thing - the fatherless black family. TV is the most powerful medium we have, and there just are not enough positive black male images.[202]" The "matriarchal thing" continued with *What's Happening* (ABC, 1976-1979) in the form of Mabel Thomas as the divorced mother of two, raising children and struggling to make ends meet in Los Angeles' working-class Black Watts neighborhood.

Uniting these African American maternal figures is their characterization as pillars of dignity in the face of suffering and poverty (threatened and implied in the case of *Julia*, explicit in *Good Times*) as well as their obvious devotion to their children. Fictional Black mothers who were *not* harried, stressed and worrying about the survival of their own progeny were few and far

[201] Robinson, 34.
[202] Quoted in Mitz, 318.

between on television sitcom until the arrival of Clare Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* (see below) in the 1980s.[203]

I.2.8. Changing Times, Changing Moms, or, No Time to Be a Mom?

As the 1960s progressed towards the 1970s, the situation comedy increasingly positioned maternal figures as antagonistic to their adult children (adult female children in particular). They were disruptive and unruly family members increasingly dissociated from formerly identifiable maternal qualities such as calm guidance and loving nurturance. Instead of corresponding to idealistic renderings of maternity, these women fretted over and nagged their adult children, often riddling them with a guilty conscience in the process. This tendency may be understood as part of the genre's wider yet still hesitant flirtation with proto-feminist and ultimately feminist themes, one of them being a critique and eventual rejection of motherhood as the defining role of a woman's life. This gradual progression may, in hindsight, clearly be identified as beginning with *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971), coming more clearly into focus in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and culminating with *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978).

That Girl was created for Marlo Thomas[204] who was also the show's producer and played aspiring actress Ann Marie. Ann's transition from upstate New York to New York City in order to break into show business marks the beginning of a trend of young female characters struggling to find employment and independence in urban enclaves. In Ann Marie's movement from suburban to urban, in her explicit desire to focus on her own career, *That Girl* offered an alternative to the traditional script proposed for women of childbearing age in the situation comedy. Hidden underneath Thomas's bubbly, ultra-feminine persona was a nod at female empowerment through meaningful employment, the search for autonomy and the insistence on satisfying one's own desires. While the true extent of Ann Marie's independence and her dissociation from a traditional patriarchal familial structure may be debated (the character remained attached not only to a

[203] One exception to this may be found in the character of Louise Jefferson on *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985). George and Louise Jefferson are prosperous African Americans and become extremely wealthy thanks to the success of George's dry-cleaning business. They have one son. The ultra-rich African American family would again become the subject matter of a sitcom in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* (NBC, 1990-1996). While Louise Jefferson was a mild-mannered housewife, Vivian Banks (in her original iteration) was a fiery, no-nonsense Professor of English literature and mother of four.

[204] As will be seen, Marlo Thomas later played the role of Rachel Green's mother in three episodes of *Friends*.

paternalistic character in the form of steady, stable boyfriend but also to her own father), her explicit rejection of that structure remains and was the result of a conscious effort on the part of the actress that played her. In reminiscing about *That Girl*, Marlo Thomas recounts Ann Marie's numerous refusals to marry boyfriend Donald (the pressure came from her traditionalistic father figure, not from the character of Donald himself) and she refers to her character's multiple rejections of marriage as "a very very revolutionary thing to say on television at that time. That had never been said.[205]"

After five years of original broadcasts, the cast and crew were ready to wrap up the series and Thomas found herself under pressure from ABC and the sponsors to finish *That Girl* with a wedding episode. "I wouldn't do that," remembers Thomas, "I felt that really was giving the wrong message to girls who'd followed us." Feeling a tremendous responsibility to the young female fans of the sitcom, Thomas adds that finishing the series with the marriage of Ann Marie would have suggested "that this is the way every story must end," and that "was not the right way to do it. And they [the fans] were grateful. The letters I received for not doing a wedding at the last show and in fact taking Donald to a woman's liberation meeting for the last show was the way we wanted to go out.[206]"

That this "revolutionary" sitcom was, in fact, a more accurate representation of what was happening in the wider culture in terms of changes in many women's attitudes towards marriage and motherhood than, say, a sitcom such as *Bewitched*, is reflected in the way Thomas retrospectively interprets the intersection of her life as an actress with that of the fictional Ann Marie's search for fulfillment:

> [Ann Marie] didn't want to be married at that time, you know, which came very much out of my life. By the time I'd graduated from college I think I'd been a bridesmaid about seventeen times and everybody I knew was getting married. And I was just determined not to get married at that time. I wanted to pursue my own career and my interests. Marriage had stopped my mother's career. I just didn't want to go down that track and I really thought that if I was going to play a young career woman, that I be, I personify what the women of my generation were doing.

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[205] Interview with Marlo Thomas. Emmy TV Legends. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n11RYQINeM

[206] *Ibid*. The final episode was entitled "The Elevated Woman." In it, Ann and Donald are indeed on their way to a women's liberation meeting (Ann hoping to widen his horizons, Donald apparently against his will) when the two get stuck in an elevator. The episode is thus a promise of a more progressive future and a convenient pretext to show flashbacks of memorable moments from the previous five seasons. In any case, not only was there no mention of marriage, there was not even a semblance of a final kiss as one disgruntled viewer noted online. https://www.reviewstream.com/reviews/?p=78990

> And we all were putting off marriage. Not the girls I went to college with, they were going right down the mommy track. But *we* were not.[207]

Thomas's reflections on her sitcom demonstrate that she was fully conscious of the implications of her character's decisions and that Ann Marie was explicitly envisioned as an early model of feminism in the genre for women who were not ready to go down the "mommy track." Sprightly and conventionally beautiful, Ann Marie was nonetheless a character who, in unambiguously rejecting marriage and, more implicitly, its ties to patriarchal maternity throughout the entirety of this series, widened the scope of roles available to women in the sitcom genre.

Whether the fictional Ann Marie was a role model for real women is uncertain. However, that *That Girl* and its explicit rejection of conventional roles for women was a role model for the sitcom genre was proved by rival network CBS in the fall of 1970 when *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* débuted. The premise was similar to that of *That Girl*, although instead of attempting to become an actress in New York City, Mary Richards took a job as an assistant at a third-rate television news production in downtown Minneapolis. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was *That Girl* stripped of its glamourous and exciting pretense. The character of Mary Richards was originally configured as a divorcée attempting to restart her life in the big city. CBS executives would not hear of it, arguing that Americans were not ready to see a divorced woman as a main character, particularly a divorcée played by Mary Tyler Moore, on television. Creators James L. Brooks and Allan Burns relented to network pressure and reimagined Mary as a thirty-year-old single woman fleeing a dead-end long-term relationship. Thus, the character was a confirmation of the trend put forth by Marlo Thomas/Ann Marie in *That Girl* that marriage and motherhood were not the only paths available to young women – and Mary, at thirty, was already considerably older than the character of Ann Marie who was in her early twenties. While Mary dated men regularly throughout the series' seven-year broadcast run and sometimes lamented being single, she was never in a serious relationship and the sitcom went off the air with Mary, still a single woman, going on forty.

Pressure came from outside sources in the form of her parents, particularly her father, to settle down but Mary never seemed to find the right man. In the wake of *That Girl*, Mary's lack of eagerness to get married could no longer be imagined as revolutionary and, as the 1970s progressed, many in the women's liberation movement strongly criticized *The Mary Tyler Moore*

[207] Interview with Marlo Thomas. Emmy TV Legends. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2n11RYQINeM

Show as not being progressive enough – this was particularly true after *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978) began its broadcast offering a more confrontational approach to feminist issues. However, Mary was neither brash nor brassy and the character was rooted in a fragile equilibrium between firmness and frailty. The actress, Mary Tyler Moore, was Catholic and a registered Republican; she played Mary Richards as an overly polite young woman eager to please. Nonetheless, the sitcom managed in its own quieter way to push buttons. In an episode from the third season, Mary's parents come to her apartment. Her father arrives to have a father-daughter dinner of bonding while her mother goes off for a night on the town with Mary's best friend Rhoda. As the mother leaves the apartment, she calls out, "Don't forget to take your pill!" To which both father and daughter reply, "I won't.[208]" Raucous audience laughter ensues while camera editing creates a shot-counter shot effect to draw out the laughter and to highlight the confusion on the father figure's face as well as the apprehension on Mary's, underscoring the fact that she has realized she has revealed something significant.

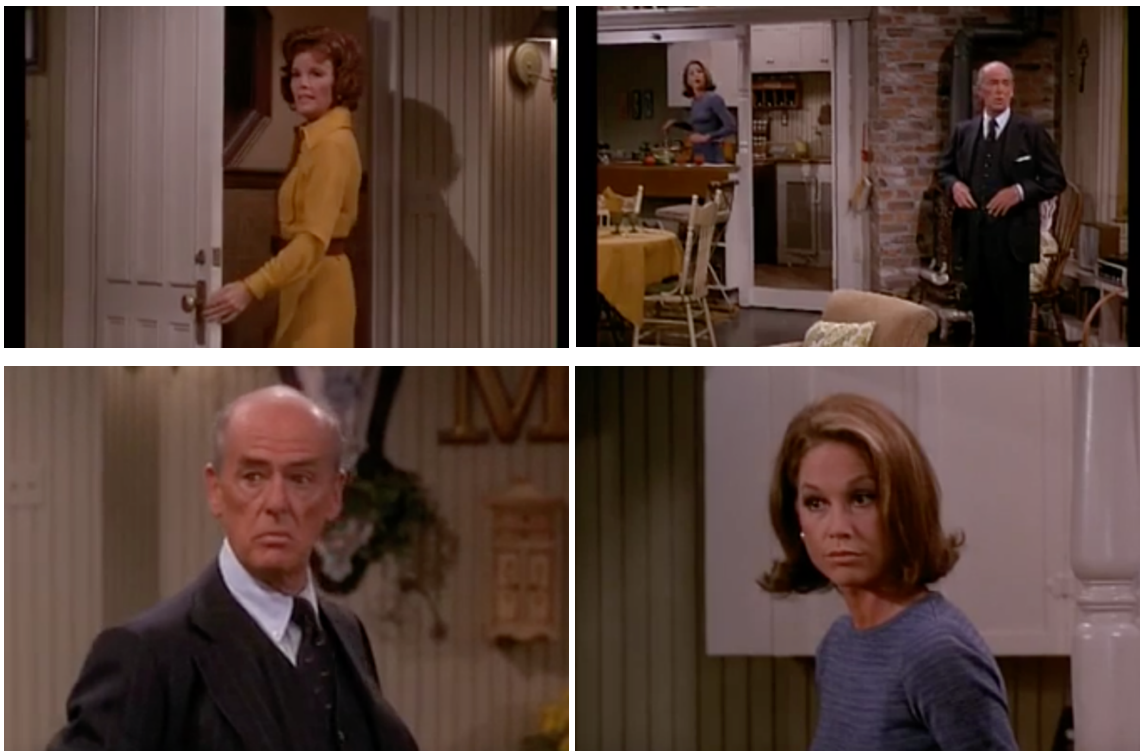

Figure 20 "Don't forget to take your pill!" says Mary's mother innocently enough. The answer reveals much more than anticipated.

[208] Season Three, Episode Eleven, "You've Got a Friend," November 25, 1972.

It was, in fact, significant. Mary's inadvertent admission that she took birth control pills revealed that she was an unmarried, sexually active young woman taking proactive measures to control her fertility. The comic uncertainty that surrounds the admission as well as Mary's flustered reaction and quick change of subject are representative of the delicacy of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s approach to feminist issues. Certainly birth control pills had been available from the early 1960s, yet their availability was not legally guaranteed to unmarried women until March of 1972, the same year the episode aired.[209] Mary's admission that she was not only a sexually active unmarried woman but one who was actively seeking to circumvent her body's procreative potentialities underscores her potential as a feminist character; soft-spoken and polite she may have been but she nonetheless had no intention of becoming a mother. Like *That Girl*, Mary Richards offered a non-militant and palatable-to-the-general-public version of the wider-scale rejection of women's traditional gender roles, including being a wife and mother.

If in the late 1960s CBS had been reluctant to put on television screens a lead female character who was divorced, only a few years later in the early 1970s a radically changing American society meant that television executives were comfortable, even eager, to exploit the obvious desire of the American television public to see more controversial content on the air. This was made evident thanks to producer Norman Lear's groundbreaking and immensely popular sitcom, *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), whose premise was grounded in the intergenerational conflict occurring between cantankerous traditionalist Archie Bunker, who overtly pined over a mythic past in which traditional gender roles were strictly adhered to and minorities knew their proper places, and his politically radical daughter and son-in-law who challenged his beliefs while living under the same roof. The character of Maude Findlay was introduced early in this series' broadcast as a liberal counterweight to the arch-conservative Bunker, and Norman Lear quickly realized the potential success of a sitcom centered on this feisty, imposing, unapologetically feminist character. *Maude*, starring Beatrice Arthur, débuted in 1972 and was immediately and enduringly popular.

Lear didn't waste time in delving into his trademark controversial content with this new sitcom. Two months after the sitcoms' début, Maude Findlay, a forty-seven-year-old, thrice-divorced mother and grandmother found herself facing an unwanted pregnancy. Two episodes

[209] This was thanks to a Supreme Court decision in the case of *Eisenstadt v. Baird* which struck down a Massachusetts law prohibiting the sale of birth control pills to unmarried people.

were dedicated to this delicate issue.[210] Ultimately, the sitcom made it clear that Maude and her fourth husband Walter were making what amounted to a humane choice: they were too old to become good parents. Maude would have a surgical abortion which, the sitcom took care to explicitly state, was "legal now in New York." Americans appeared to be ready for Lear's injection of pathos into the humorous genre. As Lear remembers, the abortion episodes were not met with any controversy. It wasn't until the episodes were rerun the same year that conservative and Christian advocacy groups began to complain.[211]

Within less than a decade, sitcom heroines had gone from gently and chastely shrugging off the idea of imminent marriage and motherhood to subtly having premarital sex while controlling their fertility through contraception to proactively ending unwanted pregnancies thanks to abortion.[212] The discourse surrounding, and the diegetic space dedicated to, issues of mothering and motherhood had radically changed and the preeminent space offered to maternal figures within many of the popular sitcoms of the earlier era had greatly diminished, implicitly and explicitly reflecting the fact that the genre had taken into account changing cultural and political discourses on normative gender roles in American society. Mothers, when they did exist, were increasingly antagonistic secondary characters seemingly dedicated to upending the otherwise tranquil existence of their children. This was particularly true in another popular sitcom of the era, *Mary Tyler Moore Show*'s spinoff, *Rhoda* (CBS, 1974-1978).

[210] Season One, Episode Nine and Season One, Episode Ten, "Maude's Dilemma: Parts 1 and 2," November 14 and November 21, 1972.

[211] Lear states: "The interesting thing about controversy is that these two episodes aired without any controversy or any problem […] But when the shows were about to go into reruns, that's when the Religious Right took off." https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/norman-lear?clip=19309#topic-clips. This would also have coincided with the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision in January 1973, two months *after* the *Maude* episodes aired.

[212] There is much to be said about the abortion episodes. The space here is insufficient but a few details should be given to contextualize this sitcom landmark: Abortion has, as a rule, been avoided by sitcom narratives since 1972. One notable exception may be found in *Roseanne*. In two consecutive episodes, "Thanksgiving '94" and "Maybe Baby" which aired on November 23 and 30, 1994, main character Roseanne learns that the child she is carrying may be afflicted with a congenital defect. While husband Dan favors ending the pregnancy if the diagnosis is confirmed, Roseanne is not so sure, and the issue is ultimately resolved when Dan and Roseanne learn that the test was erroneous; there is no problem with the fetus and Roseanne goes on to deliver a healthy baby. As such, no other female lead sitcom character on network television has had an abortion within the sitcom's diegetic space since Maude Findlay.

Figure 21 Maude is devastated to learn she is pregnant at forty-seven but is comforted by husband Walter when she finally decides to have an abortion.

Rhoda Morgenstern was Mary Richards's best friend on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. Conceived as Mary's unlucky-in-love, Jewish sidekick from New York City, the character's mother Ida Morgenstern was herself a recurring character whose narrative presence became paramount when the spinoff was created. Like Endora in *Bewitched*, Ida Morgenstern was an eternally disruptive and unwelcome maternal presence in her grown daughter's life. Unlike Endora, however, Ida was removed from the fantastical world of the supernatural and brought back to reality ensconced in an unflattering and stereotypical depiction of the overbearing, nagging and guilt-inducing Jewish mother. The presence of negative maternal characterizations in sitcoms such as *Bewitched* and *Rhoda* may be seen as offering a justification for the decision on the part of those other fictional female characters, Ann, Mary and Maude, to limit their fertility either by avoiding patriarchal maternity to begin with, or by proactively terminating pregnancies when they were manifestly unwanted.

One exception to the otherwise widespread sitcom phenomenon of symbolically or explicitly rejecting motherhood of this period may be found in *The Brady Bunch* (ABC, 1969-1974), a situation comedy that was not among the most popular, but which would become something of a cult favorite in reruns in the following decades. Yet even this sitcom harking back to the traditional construct of the nuclear family may be understood as a reinterpretation of that institution; a reinterpretation attempting to maintain or reclaim that institution's relevance in spite of a rapidly changing political and sociocultural landscape. Sherwood Schwartz, creator of *Gilligan's Island*, has stated that the idea for a sitcom concerning a family composed of remarried parents and stepchildren came to him in 1965 from an article he read in the *Los Angeles Times*:

> Usually, writers don't know where their ideas come from […] *The Brady Bunch*, I know exactly where it came from. It came from an item in the *LA Times* […] and all it said was that that year, I believe it was 1965: thirty percent of all marriages also included not just a couple but a child from either one or both parents. Thirty

> percent is a tremendous percentage! It's not just a mother, father and two kids like *Leave it to Beaver*, this is a different situation developing. It's a huge sociological change in this country. […] What it meant to me as a writer-producer is stories. Now you have a wealth of new stories.[213]

The Brady Bunch was indeed the first sitcom whose premise was based explicitly on a family in which both parents entered into the marriage with children from a previous union, and while the pilot episode made clear that husband Mike Brady was a widower, Carol Martin's status was undefined, left open to interpretation. Creator Schwartz had envisioned her as a divorcée, but this was deemed unacceptable by the three networks which expressed interest in the sitcom and thus, while the Carol Martin character had clearly been married previously, her precise status at the time of her remarriage in the pilot episode remained an ambiguous mystery.

Demonstrating the genre's remarkable ability to bridge seemingly opposing outlooks and ideologies, *The Brady Bunch* posits this recombined family as both forward-looking *and* traditional. Following their marriage, the couple embark on their honeymoon. Out of habit Mike signs his receipt, "Mr. Brady and family" and explains to the hotel clerk that he is used to having his children with him. The clerk is suspicious and asks for clarification, aren't the two on a *honeymoon*? The older man's question implies disapproval. Unfamiliar with their situation, the man assumes that the couple have had children out of wedlock. The question and the asker imply that sex and childbirth out of wedlock are sinful, immoral, and despicable. When the new Mrs. Brady helpfully tries to explain the situation and restore the couple's honor in the eyes of this judgmental older man, a representative of the previous generation, Mike interrupts her. "It's alright darling, no need to explain," he intones, "it's obvious, this gentleman doesn't dig the modern generation." The older man is disgusted and resentfully hands them their key, but the joke is on him and Mike has had the last laugh. By the late 1960s, this sitcom seems to be suggesting, you had to be either old or square not to accept that American families were changing and, while Mike leaves the hotel clerk unsettled by the belief that he has a depraved couple sleeping in his hotel,

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[213] Schwartz recounts the genesis of *The Brady Bunch* in an extensive interview: https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/sherwood-schwartz?clip=15129#highlight-clips. As Erika Woehlk points out, the figure of 30% seems unlikely considering that the United States Census Bureau in 2004 reported only 17% of American children growing up in households such as this. See Erika Woehlk, *Bradypedia: The Complete Reference Guide to Television's* The Brady Bunch (Albany, Georgia: BearManor Media, 2019), xiii. Nonetheless, Schwartz's interview makes clear that he was inspired to create this program because he found that this unique familial configuration rooted in a sociological reality offered new narrative potential for the family situation comedy genre.

The Brady Bunch goes to great lengths to reassure viewers that this family, in spite of its obvious differences, is really just a new version of the traditional nuclear family from the previous generation.

While *The Brady Bunch* did certainly offer a new type of family to television viewers, this new type of family functioned very much like those that had come before on television. Mike was the white-collar breadwinner, an architect working out of his home and such a family man that it was he who designed the family's home. Carol, in spite of having full time help in the form of Alice the maid, was a stay-at-home mother. Affirming Schwartz's intuition that the reconstructed Brady family would be a narrative goldmine, episodes touched on the unique situations that the family members encountered, particularly in the ways it forced the children to negotiate their roles as stepsiblings. Yet the remarriage was never a source of strife serious enough to rock the foundations of the solid couple Mike and Carol had formed. The Brady family was strong and cloyingly reassuring, thanks, in part no doubt, to the fact that both Carol and Mike's characters were (re)aligned to the rigid gender roles of the television families of the previous generation.

Figure 22 The Brady Bunch *was a blended but nonetheless well-ordered and loving family.*

If sitcoms of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as *That Girl*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Maude* opened up an alternative discourse for women through implicit or explicit rejection of motherhood, *The Brady Bunch* seemed to suggest that even otherwise unconventional families could attain the ideal of the nuclear family model as long as its paternal and maternal figures corresponded to the restrictive normative gender roles so prevalent in representations from the generation before. Thus, while the discourses concerning women and their roles within the sitcom may most certainly be understood as having gradually expanded during this period of televisual history, they seem to have operated as something of a binary opposition. A woman in a sitcom could either figure as a mother or a non-mother/career girl figure. Within the mother figure paradigm, there was a subsequent binary opposition at play: the maternal figure was either a doting, devoted and married stay-at-home mother or a deviant, unruly, disruptive older mother.

Significantly complexifying issues surrounding the representation of mothers in the American sitcom was another Norman Lear sitcom which débuted in 1975.

I.2.9. The Divorced Mom Comes to Sitcom

Coming on the success of *All in the Family* and *Maude*, in 1975 Norman Lear introduced American television viewers to their first divorced sitcom mother in a lead role with the character of Ann Romano, played by actress Bonnie Franklin, in *One Day at a Time* (CBS, 1975-1984). True to Lear's social realism style, the sitcom's episodes treated the trials and tribulations of the newly single mother, as she struggled to raise two adolescent daughters on her own in Indianapolis. The series followed Ann (who reclaimed her maiden name after her divorce) as she attempted to find meaningful work to support herself and her children and as she attempted to date, not necessarily with the objective of remarrying but for her own personal satisfaction. Rick Mitz has described the character as "more than one of TV's first women; she was one of television's first persons.[214]" The sitcom's almost relentless focus on this young, struggling maternal character, navigating in episode after episode, the triumphs and pitfalls of her particular situation, offered a marked break from representations of maternal characters seen in the genre up until this point.

In *One Day at a Time*, Ann Romano was the thoughtful, sensible and funny heroine and her struggles as a mother and as a woman were the narrative source of this sitcom. Her relationship with her daughters, with her lovers and with her ex-husband were all fodder for its episodes. Drawing on themes from Lear's other programs (the generation gap in *All in the Family*, feminism in *Maude*), *One Day at a Time* combined them and offered a more nuanced version of both while maintaining the dignity of its main character. Ann's relationship with her daughters was often fraught (oldest daughter Barbara threatens to leave home in the pilot episode to go live with her father) but always loving and respectful, and the mother teased her girls just as they teased her. She was a quieter feminist than Maude Findlay but, through her actions, a feminist nonetheless. Ann's decision to date a married man shocked her daughters but she continued to do what pleased her, until it didn't anymore: when the man ultimately decided to commit to Ann, she broke off the relationship because she was not ready for something more serious.

[214] Mitz, 365.

Perhaps most significantly, *One Day at a Time* was a hugely popular success without being as loudly controversial as the other Lear programs. The sitcom premiered in 1975 and was ranked in the top twenty most popular prime time television programs from the 1976-1977 television season until its final, ninth season, when it fell out of the top thirty before finally being canceled when its star was ready to leave the show.[215] For nine years in the late 1970s and early 1980s the success of *One Day at a Time* suggested that there was a taste for a comic yet nuanced examination of the life of a single, female lead character whose maternal identity as well as the character's complex relationship to it was the impetus for the sitcom's narrative. CBS offered viewers a variation on this theme with the sitcom *Alice* (1976-1985) based on the 1974 film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*. If the eponymous protagonist in *Alice* was widowed instead of divorced, the sitcom shared *One Day at a Time*'s concern with its protagonist's existence as a single woman and mother. Like its CBS contemporary, *Alice* was a popular success as well, appearing in the top twenty programs for five out of its nine seasons.[216]

While *One Day at a Time* and *Alice* suggested that intelligent and subtle representations of motherhoods on the margins of the post-war normative nuclear family structure could indeed succeed on television, the following years proved these representations to be more anomalies then enduring trend setters as sitcoms turned away from social realism and this more overt brand of politics and generally moved back to more traditional representations of conventional nuclear families. We will turn to an examination of those more normative representations shortly.

Figure 23 Ann Romano ruptured with patriarchal maternity and raised her two daughters in the wake of her divorce on One Day at a Time.

[215] Brooks and Marsh, 1688-1690.
[216] *Ibid*.

I.2.10. Gender Bending in the 1980s

In the meantime, a different theme altogether was being explored by sitcoms such as *Who's the Boss?* (ABC, 1984-1992), *Charles in Charge* (CBS, 1984-1985 and syndicated, 1987-1990), *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995) and *My Two Dads* (NBC, 1987-1990). If the dynamics of each of these programs vary, the underlying postulate for all four is the idea that men looking after children in the home and taking on daily domestic duties is inherently funny.[217] In *Who's the Boss?*, burly Italian-American, Tony Micelli, leaves a working-class neighborhood in New York City to seek a better life for daughter Samantha. He finds a job as housekeeper for the affluent and successful yet overwhelmed divorcée, Angela Bower, in the suburban Connecticut home she shares with her son. Her disruptive mother Mona drops in regularly. In the first episode, Tony shows up on Angela's doorstep asking to be hired. Angela, disconcerted by the idea of a male housekeeper, proclaims, "You're the wrong sex." Taking Tony's defense, Angela's mother Mona suggests, "A man can do meaningless unproductive work just as well as a woman." In a sly inversion of feminist aspirations to break the glass ceiling of the upper echelons of corporate management in search of intellectually stimulating and financially lucrative employment (illustrated in this sitcom by Angela herself, a vice president in a top advertising agency), Mona's comment, reflecting the cultural ethos of domestic work as unproductive and meaningless (not to mention ill-considered and poorly paid), invites Tony, and by extension all men, to aim low. Tony's assimilation into "women's" work is facilitated by his ethnic and class status and reinforces the trope of ethnically-other masculinity as somehow less virile. Richard Butsch explains the underlying dynamic of this show:

> The operating theme of *Who's the Boss?* is the gender reversal between Angela, the mother as the boss and Tony as the housekeeper. But, as the title suggests, Angela, the head of the house, is inadequate as the boss. Here we have a double message. Tony, portrayed as ethnic blue collar in origin, is a wiser parent and better home keeper than the middle-class advertising executive, Angela. The class reversal however is veiled by a simultaneous gender reversal. Angela is a failure as a housewife, while Tony succeeds.[218]

[217] Hollywood films that were part of this trend include John Hughes' *Mr. Mom* (1983) and Leonard Nimoy's *Three Men and a Baby* (1987). In *Mr. Mom* Jack Butler (Michael Keaton) is a laid-off father who assumes the caretaking role when his wife goes back to work while in *Three Men and a Baby*, three bachelors find themselves caring for a baby who has been dropped off on their doorstep.

[218] Richard Butsch, "A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms," *Cercles* 8 (2003): 30.

As Butch suggests, *Who's the Boss?* imagines an almost perfectly reciprocated exchange of traditional gender roles. Angela is the stable professional breadwinner whose work out in the world provides the financial means and shelter to keep the family safely protected in the suburbs. Tony is the caring, maternal presence who cooks nutritious breakfasts, polishes the countertops, vacuums under the couch and easily communicates with the children, attentive to their emotional and psychological needs in way that Angela, busy at the office, is not always able to be. Tony's masculinity, however, is from the outset, securely anchored thanks to his widower status, his history in professional sports, his vigorous, athletic body and his unpolished and ethnic Italian New Yorkness. Tony is so ultra-masculine that he is the object of sexpot Mona's lascivious insinuations. Angela, meanwhile, is vulnerable, decidedly feminine (in the show's second episode the audience is treated to the contents of her lingerie drawers) and worries about the psychological effects of her divorce on her young son. Angela is a mother in need of a father figure for her son, Tony, the precise opposite. After seven seasons of hints, suggestions and false starts, Angela and Tony, perfectly matched from the start, capitulate to their feelings for each other.

This is a fairy tale for men in which the lower class, ethnically-other domestic hired to help the wealthy sophisticated patron with the empty home gradually becomes the confident and eventually love interest. The crisis in authority that ensues in this sitcom's episodes and is reflected in the sitcom's very title echoes the ambiguity of the early radio version of *Father Knows Best* (complete with question mark) and suggests that scrutinizing gender roles (whether to reinforce or subvert norms) remains a salient subject matter for the situation comedy. Angela's mother Mona is the latter-day version of Endora in *Bewitched*. Far from comforting and reassuring her daughter, due to her inappropriately oversized sexual appetite, Mona's maternal presence serves to destabilize Angela. Although the two ultimately remain loyal to one another, Mona's outrageous and unruly mother character further establishes intergenerational mother-child conflict as a rich source of comedy.

If displacing its gender bending content outside of the traditional nuclear family permits *Who's the Boss?* to fully imagine the possibility of inverted gender roles, the dynamic at work in *Charles in Charge* is slightly different. Charles is a young university student, who, in exchange for room and board in the Pembroke household, takes care of their three young children. The parents work but are present and Charles has no equal and opposite character to provide balance. Instead, episodes negotiate Charles's difficulties in taking care of the children and attempting to

maintain an active heterosexual dating life. The explicit questioning of gender dynamics is thus quieted here, but this sitcom, too, offers viewers a vision of male caretaking.

This vision reaches its culmination in *Full House* and *My Two Dads*, two sitcoms which both construct their storytelling worlds in households run exclusively by men. Maternal death is the structuring absence uniting them. In *Full House*, Danny Tanner faces raising his three girls alone after his wife's death in a car accident. For help, he enlists his brother-in-law, Jesse, and their mutual friend, Joey. The three-man parenting team lives together in a large house in San Francisco and guides the three young girls through childhood and the perils of adolescence. Humor is found in watching a man try to change a diaper or balance band practice *and* babysitting. Male domesticity and caretaking are perfected across these episodes which almost invariably end in lessons learned and touching, sentimental reaffirmations of love and family.

My Two Dads started airing the same year as *Full House*. Although never quite as popular and lasting only three seasons, this sitcom's starting point was similar in its removal of the mother to make way for an entirely male-run household. Twelve-year old Nicole Bradford has just lost her mother and a judge awards guardianship to the two men who had one-night stands with the girl's mother thirteen years earlier. Joey and Michael were long term friends turned rivals for the woman's affection and that rivalry is reignited thanks to their imposed paternity. For the sake of Nicole, they agree to live together in the same New York apartment. Polar opposites character-wise, the two fathers are often at odds in their parenting philosophies and *My Two Dads* episode plots turn on the men's difficulties in parenting Nicole on the cusp of adolescence.

In their emphasis on male caretaking, all of these sitcoms reinvest the father figure with paternal and patriarchal authority (although this is mitigated in *Charles in Charge* by the presence of the two biological parents). Yet the tonalities are exceedingly different, and this is due to the presence or absence of a maternal figure. Evacuating fictional mothers through death in order to reserve storytelling space exclusively for male parents (*Full House*, *My Two Dads*) may be understood as one manifestation of the "symbolic annihilation of mothers in popular culture,[219]" a resolute reestablishment of patriarchal authority after a representational period during which women laid claim to their reproductive rights (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Maude*) as well as their independent maternal identities (*One Day at a Time*). In death, these women's maternal

[219] Berit Aström, "The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: Single Father and the Death of the Mother," *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 593.

authority is taken from them and their children are left in the hands of the fathers who are now invested with exclusive decision-making power. In portraying these fathers as initially clueless, but essentially well-meaning and, ultimately, entirely capable parental figures, *Full House* and *My Two Dads* may be fantasies for men fretting over increased divorce rates as well as women's unlimited access to contraception and abortion. In contrast, absent the dead mother trope, *Who's the Boss?* and *Charles in Charge* may be understood as fantasies for women and mothers, increasingly working at jobs outside the home (whether by choice or by necessity) *and* still the main sources of domestic labor within. *Who's the Boss?* in particular, thanks to its jocular and jovial (and hunky) male housekeeper can be read, this time, as a fairy tale for harried working mothers exhausted by the "double burden" associated with Hochschild's "second shift.[220]" The immense popularity of both *Who's the Boss?* and *Full House* suggest once again that the situation comedy's interrogation of gender and parental roles continued to resonate with audiences.[221] Other sitcoms of the 1980s, however, turned their focus back to the traditional family where gender norms and parental roles were also in the process of being examined.

Figure 24 Hyper masculine Tony does it all domestically in Who's the Boss? *while three men raised three young girls on* Full House.

[220] Sociologist Arlie Hochschild's influential *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* published in 1989 (reissued in 2012) offers an account of the late-twentieth century division of labor in heterosexual households at a time (the 1970s and 1980s) when women were entering the labor market on a large scale. Compiling studies of time usage statistics, she found that over the course of a year full-time working mothers worked an extra month of twenty-four-hour days. This she identified as the "leisure gap." Other results reported by Hochschild: working mothers were more likely to get sick than their husbands and more likely to report being anxious than any other category of the population interviewed. See Arlie Hochschild and Anne Mashung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 4.

[221] *Who's the Boss?* was rated among the top ten most popular television programs for four of its seven seasons, *Full House* for two of its eight.

I.2.11. Sitcom Mothering in the Time of Backlash: Supermoms of the 1980s

In her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, journalist Susan Faludi traces the conservative reaction to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. She notes that the goals of the women's liberation movement – equality, equal pay, reproductive freedoms – were met with powerful critiques in the form of alarming articles and images in popular culture suggesting that feminism had simply made women more unhappy, overworked and regretful after having made choices which were purported to put career over family. The author's detailed analysis suggests that, throughout the 1980s, feminism and women's demands for equality came under intense conservative ideological pressure both politically (with three successive elections of Republican presidents and the eventual rejection of the proposed Equal Rights Amendment, for example) and in the popular culture. Faludi suggests that a number of popular feature films may be understood in the context of this reactionary momentum intended to reposition women in their supposed appropriate roles as housewives and mothers, including 1987's *Fatal Attraction* starring Glenn Close as a dangerous and obsessive career woman intent on destroying the idyllic nuclear family of her married lover played by Michael Douglas.

That same year, Diane Keaton played another intensely driven career woman in a popular Hollywood film, *Baby Boom*. Keaton's character improbably inherits the toddler daughter of a long-lost cousin and, through contact with the young child, eventually learns to love her and become maternal all the while realizing that her former priorities were the wrong ones. The newly maternalized character eventually moves out to the country and starts a line of high-end baby food. For Faludi, the implication of a film like *Baby Boom* is clear, "working women must be strong-armed into motherhood.[222]" In other words, the feminist ideal of female autonomy through meaningful work and personal liberty was antithetical to woman's conventional role as nurturing mother and morally upright homemaker. While the film industry of the 1980s may have been particularly prone to promoting these "backlash representations," the television industry was not immune to them either, although Faludi points to an important distinction between the two:

> TV prime-time programmers are both more dependent on women's approval than filmmakers and, because of their dependence, more resentful. Female viewers consistently give their highest ratings to non-traditional female characters, such as

[222] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1993), 162.

> leaders, heroines and comedians. But to serve a female master is not why the TV men came west to Hollywood.[223]

Television had little motivation in turning away influential female viewers by offering them programming which did not correspond to their tastes and, as evidenced by the popularity of programs such as *Maude*, *One Day at a Time* and *Alice*, in the wake of a decade of progressive representations of issues important to female viewers, tastes had grown increasingly accustomed to viewing strong female characters. Nevertheless, within the wider socio-political climate of the conservative backlash against the women's movement, such representations were falling out of favor. In the context of this paradoxical situation, some television shows, particularly sitcoms – whose very generic makeup is based on a careful mediation of conflicting ideas and ideologies through humor – managed a type of hybrid representation which presented traditional images of mothers and motherhood with a purportedly modern twist. Faludi explains:

> The networks revived the fifties family shows more subtly, inside a modern shell. On a few of the programs, the mothers ostensibly had jobs, but their employment was in title only. The wife in *The Cosby Show* may be the first attorney to hold down a full-time job without leaving home; when she does ply her trade, it's only to litigate domestic disputes in the family living room. These women are the same old TV housewives with their housecoats doffed, their 'careers' a hollow nod to the profound changes in women's lives.[224]

Television and cultural critic Saul Austerlitz concurs:

> After a lengthy detour away from family life, toward workplaces, passels of friends, and childless couples, the sitcom had returned home, aping the format and reassuring feel of the classic 1950s series while updating their content for the go-go 1980s. Nuclear families – amiable father, no-nonsense mother, lovably perky children – were back in vogue, products, in one fashion or another of Ronald Reagan's conservative resurgence […] The 1980s were the era of fatherhood resurgent.[225]

The character of Clair Huxtable, the maternal figure of the Huxtable family in the groundbreaking and successful *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), was indeed attributed the high-paid, powerful career of a lawyer, yet, as Faludi points out she is almost never pictured in her

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[223] *Ibid*., 179.
[224] *Ibid*., 188.
[225] Saul Austerlitz, *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from* I Love Lucy *to* Community (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 177.

professional environs (exceptions to this occur when she takes calls from home while on the job, which only serve to reinforce her connection to the private sphere).[226] Instead she is an updated version of the stay-at-home mother and a very fashionably dressed one at that. Her so-called career is in fact her ultimate accessory. Even within the private sphere Clair, while indeed tough talking and confrontational, remains under the ultimate guidance of this series' definitive hero, husband and father, Heathcliff Huxtable.

In this series, Cliff Huxtable is the centripetal center onto which decisive paternal authority is concentrated. This paternal, even patriarchal, authority is persistently *present* in the Huxtable household. A doctor, his medical practice is attached to the family's Brooklyn townhouse. As such, much as in the case of Alex Stone in *The Donna Reed Show*, Cliff could be at work and at home at the same time, conveniently collapsing the split between public and private sphere and managing to reign supreme in both. As such, the paternal figure is always nearby to accompany and resolve all major and minor conflicts in the home albeit with his wife at his side. However, unlike *The Donna Reed Show*, this eponymously named sitcom revolves around the paternal character. In the cultural and political context of the 1950s sitcom in which women's gender roles were more rigidly defined, the Donna Reed/Donna Stone dual role suggested a certain amount of ambiguity: Donna Stone was continuously (re)positioned as her husband's helpmate while Donna Reed was the ambitious star of her own show. In *The Cosby Show*, by contrast, things could not be more clear. Cliff Huxtable was the ultimate authority in the Huxtable household, just as Bill Cosby was the ultimate authority over his own sitcom. The wife and mother character of this 1980s sitcom was thus entirely dependent on her husband's expertise. Clair's role, while ostensibly equal to her husband's and in spite of her tough-talk and illusion of supreme confidence, is more reminiscent of June Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver*, sometimes mystified by the antics of her five children, eager to turn to her husband for reliable advice. Given that this sitcom was constructed specifically as a vehicle for Bill Cosby, a stand-up comedian, this is surely unsurprising, yet it nevertheless renders the paternal character omnipresent in each of the sitcom's two hundred episodes. Parallelly, Cliff is an obstetrician-gynecologist. As such, his character is a medical authority endowed with the necessary knowledge to shepherd even the youngest and most innocent of children into the world

[226] Clair is pictured in a courtroom in only one episode out of the two hundred broadcast. In the episode in question, Clair goes to court to defend her own daughter Sondra who has fallen victim to a scam. Thus, the character's career is depicted only insofar as that it furthers the needs of the maternal figure's own children. Clair is allowed a career but only to the extent that it burnishes her credentials as a loving mother literally advocating for her children.

as well as the knowledge necessary to advise and even surveil the fictional women under his care.[227] That *The Cosby Show* so convincingly constructs the Huxtable couple as an evenly matched team speaks to the actors' abilities to perform the bumbling father and the confident "liberated" woman roles so effectively. This, however, is a chimera of female and maternal liberation and while *The Cosby Show* may have been received by many viewers as a refreshing vision of African American familial stability in the midst of rising inner-city crime rates and the Reagan administration's War on Drugs, this 1980s Black version of the post-war ideal family sacrifices its lead female character in favor of a decidedly conventional maternal figure.

None of this was accidental. Bill Cosby's act as a stand-up comedian was largely constructed around reminiscences from his own childhood as well as his own experiences as a father of five children. Cosby holds a doctoral degree in education and, throughout the 1980s (the period coincidentally associated with the height of feminist backlash) he marketed himself as America's foremost celebrity father, effectively combining comedy and expertise. If *The Cosby Show* was at the center of this paternal media empire, Bill Cosby also published a number of popular books and comedy albums all centered on the themes of fatherhood and, lurking under their comedic trappings, the moral superiority of the traditional nuclear family, including *Fatherhood* (1986), *Love and Marriage* (1989), *Childhood* (1991) and *Those of You With or Without Children, You'll Understand* (1986).[228]

Other sitcoms corresponding chronologically and ideologically to *The Cosby Show* model of the restoration of the American nuclear family in which the maternal figure is given nominal

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[227] Given the recent (2018) conviction of Bill Cosby on charges of aggravated indecent assault as well as the dozens of accusations of further sexual abuse and rape, not to mention the actor's admission of infidelity and casual sex with numerous women, the sitcom's overarching tonality of morality and values so carefully instilled by the creators including Cosby himself has been darkly tarnished. The now-imprisoned actor and comedian has found himself stripped of numerous honorary degrees and reruns of *The Cosby Show* have been pulled from various television networks.

[228] Cosby's books are littered with misogynistic comments poorly disguised as humor. Discussing his early years in *Love and Marriage*, for example, he writes, "Even though American women had just finished spending four years building bombers in defense plants, those were still the days of the helpless female. Moreover, I never believed that women really built bombers in those defense plants. Maybe they waxed the floors and tidied up the cockpits, but surely nothing more […]" See Bill Cosby, *Love and Marriage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 30. Addressing the happiness of becoming a father in *Fatherhood* he notes that the new father's "wife is happy too, because she feels she's fulfilling herself as a woman. I've heard so many females say that they became mothers because they wanted to feel like women, as if they felt like longshoremen at all other times. And so many others have said, "I had the baby because I wanted to see if I could," which sounds like a reason for climbing Mount Everest or breaking the four-minute mile. If a chimpanzee can have a baby, the human female should realize that the feat is something less than an entry for the *Guinness Book of World Records.*" In Bill Cosby, *Fatherhood* (New York: New York Doubleday and Company, 1986), 25.

access to a career include *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-1989) which actually predates Bill Cosby's sitcom and *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-1992). While *Family Ties* may represent a slightly more progressive version of the new nuclear family in that Elise and Steven Keaton are a more equal ex-hippy co-parenting team who met at Berkeley and struggle with son Alex P. Keaton's conservative views, *Growing Pains* was almost identical in premise to *The Cosby Show* in its insistence on the predominance of the patriarchal figure. Like Cliff Huxtable, Jason Seaver was a medical authority who worked from an office in his home. Jason, however, was a psychiatrist and he was thus configured as an authority on mental health. This was no doubt helpful given that his wife Maggie had just gone back to work as a reporter, and it was up to Jason to resolve the quotidian conflicts afflicting the family, all the while reassuring Maggie as she struggled with doubts about whether or not she was doing the right thing for her family in going back to work.

While the maternal figures in each of these sitcoms are represented as being fully employed professional women in challenging and intellectually stimulating careers (attorney, journalist, architect), these shows nevertheless maintain a discourse concerning maternity and childbearing which had largely been absent in the previous decade's comedy programming and which itself speaks to an implicit backlash against certain aspects of feminist ideology. In fact, having definitively shed the taboos of representing pregnant women and childbirth on entertainment television, these sitcoms are awash in narratives of pregnancy and childbirth, creating a distinctly pro-natalist atmosphere on American television of the period. In both *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains*, the purportedly full-time working mother becomes pregnant and gives birth, expanding in each case the number of children from three to four.[229] In *The Cosby Show* it is not the maternal figure, already a fictional mother of five, who has another child but the eldest daughter herself who gives birth to twins in the sitcom's fifth season. Additionally, a *Growing Pains* spinoff, *Just the Ten of Us* (ABC, 1988-1990), featured the antics of a Catholic family with eight children, while the trend of large and growing sitcom families spanned into the new decade in *Step by Step* (ABC and CBS, 1991-1998), as matriarch Carol Foster gave birth in the fourth season to her fourth biological and the seventh overall in this updated version of *The Brady Bunch'*s blended family theme. Indeed, the pregnancy/baby theme was so omnipresent in the sitcoms of this period that, in

[229] The pregnancy of Elise Keaton in the third season of *Family Ties* was written into the program to accommodate the real-life pregnancy of actress Meredith Baxter. The fictional pregnancy narrative of the character Maggie Seaver spanned the third and fourth seasons of *Growing Pains*.

one fantasy episode of *The Cosby Show*, all the show's men were pregnant, including teenage son Theo as an unwed-mother/father-to be. The episode's ending revealed that the entire story had been one of Cliff's dreams brought on by indigestion.[230]

These pro-natalist "nesting shows[231]" offered conservative culture a respite from the previous period's preoccupation with progressive issues, notably women's liberation, all while paying nominal tribute to changing gender norms and roles through the attribution of rewarding careers (never just jobs) to their maternal characters, and they were critical and popular hits. *Family Ties*, *The Cosby Show* and *Growing Pains* were all ranked in the top twenty prime-time television shows during the bulk of their broadcast lives and all went on to second lucrative careers in syndication. Yet this period, the television nuclear family's Second Golden Age, would also prove to be ephemeral. While nesting shows continued well into the 1990s, the American television viewer's focus turned yet again, this time to a darker, less uplifting image of the nuclear family. The brief respite accorded to the traditional nuclear family appeared to be a fleeting moment in the genre's history as the sitcom continued its exploration of the family, its roles and dynamics, and found the institution to be lacking.

Figure 25 The Baby Boom in the 1980s family sitcom. Pregnancy and childbirth in Family Ties*,* Growing Pains *and* The Cosby Show *featuring, for the space of one episode, expectant men.*

[230] Season Six, Episode Eight, "The Day the Spores Landed," November 9, 1989.
[231] Faludi, 189.

I.2.12. Return of the Unruly Mom, Arrival of the Dysfunctional Family

In April 1987 the fledgling Fox network debuted its Sunday night lineup of programming. On the roster, a family situation comedy unlike any other seen before on television: *Married…with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997). The premise appeared conventional enough, a traditional nuclear family (married father and mother, two biological children) living in suburban America. Quickly though, the façade of the domestic ideal disintegrates. A first clue was the family name: Bundy. In 1987 as *Married…with Children* began its broadcast, serial killer Ted Bundy was still awaiting execution on Florida's death row. Implicated in the brutal rape and murder of over thirty women across America, Bundy was electrocuted in 1989. The sensationalistic media coverage meant that his patronym had nation-wide recognition by the time the new network began airing its original programming. Bundy was a curious choice for the name of the network's first fictional family and its gruesome resonance was suggestive of the horrendous world in which the viewer was about to enter.[232] Would-be patriarch Al Bundy is a down-and-out shoe salesman. Maternal figure Peg is lazy, a Spandex-clad smoker who relishes in neglecting her children and insulting her husband, particularly his (lack of) sexual prowess. The children are sex-crazed and stupid. For a viewership raised either on the idyll of the post-war nuclear family or on the contentious, yet ultimately loving families of the 1960s and 1970s situation comedy, *Married…with Children* is a self-aware dystopian parody of the American family sitcom; a nightmare of a family in a nightmare of a house in a nightmare of an existence.

A year later in October 1988 American television viewers got their first glimpse of a similarly unconventional nuclear family with the début of *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997). Like *Married…with Children*, *Roseanne* also offered a new take on the sitcom genre, at least in this era dominated by images of aspirational fictional middle-class families such as the Keatons, the Cosbys and the Seavers. Stand-up comic Roseanne Barr gained national attention thanks to her "Domestic Goddess" routine which had aired on HBO in 1987 in which she skewered middle and upper-class ideals of womanhood, femininity and motherhood. Her body itself was a snub to these

[232] This interpretation is contested by the creators themselves. Denise Noe, in *The Complete* Married… with Children *Book: TV's Dysfunctional Family Phenomenon,* notes that in spite of the widespread speculation, "the writers always insisted that they named the family after the flamboyant bald wrestler King Kong Bundy." See Denise Noe, *The Complete* Married…with Children *Book: TV's Dysfunctional Family Phenomenon*, (Albany, Georgia: Bear Manor Media, 2017), 2. However, at the time it is plausible to assume that more Americans would have been familiar with the widely mediatized and telegenic figure of the psychopath serial killer than with a wrestler from the World Wrestling Federation.

orthodoxies: Roseanne was not just fat, she was obese. Her manner was undignified, her voice nasal, her tone screeching. When *The Cosby Show* production team of Carsey-Werner were looking for a new project to work on in the wake of their previous success, they asked themselves which televisual spaces were left to be explored. Marcy Carsey explains:

> The way we develop shows is, often, that we kind of look at what's not on television, and what ought to be […] We kind of start as an audience, not as producers, and so what was *not* on at that time was anything about a working mother. Working mothers were part of other shows that were really about the guy, and the wife was an adjunct and she might or might not have a job, but there was no show about the absurdity and, really, the phenomenon of the working mom in America. In 1988 something like 85% of households in America included a full-time working mother […] it was a phenomenon that was relatively recent at the time, [the percentages] had been building up until America was full of these households where the mother was working eight hours or so and then came home and worked another eight with the kids and the house […] To talk about that phenomenon was something that was near and dear to my heart.[233]

Roseanne was a matriarchal television sitcom in the same tradition of *Mama* and *The Goldbergs* in that it centered decisively around the maternal figure. Yet Roseanne Conner was also an anti-matriarch. The character was disgusted with her own place in life as a working mother of three grumpy children struggling with her blue-collar husband to maintain the family's precarious position in something resembling middle-class America. *Roseanne* was not a respectful if idealistic paean to motherhood and to the fundamental strength and vitality of the maternal figure. The character of Roseanne *was*, in fact, a strong maternal figure, yet *Roseanne* the sitcom found no glory in it. Mothering in *Roseanne* was hard, grinding, unrewarding work, day-in day-out with no respite. The sitcom's humor was derived from the incongruence of this most unfeminine, unmotherly woman refusing to adhere to conventional standards of maternal behavior, and while its episodes usually, eventually, made clear that Roseanne Conner loved her family and that her family loved her, it was not before the character had had ample opportunity to express her dismay and to shine a spotlight on those real, miserable, interminable parts of the working (class) mother's existence that more traditional sitcoms deemed too offensive and distasteful to show.

The parallels between *Married…with Children* and *Roseanne* were obvious. Both featured blue-collar families struggling to make ends meet while living in unkempt, unattractive homes in

[233] Excerpt from interview with Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner. https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/marcy-carsey?clip=86434#interview-clips

suburban Illinois, representing the monotonous middle of America. Both highlighted, in ways reminiscent of *All in the Family* and, even earlier, *The Life of Riley*, issues of class that other sitcoms shied away from. Both featured parents who did not live up to the conventional parental roles of more aspirational sitcoms: Al Bundy's shoe selling literally associated him with the lowest and dirtiest element of humanity while Dan Connor worked in a number of low-wage construction jobs in which the emphasis was on menial manual labor, far from the glorified, financially rewarding and intellectually stimulating positions available in the managerial or medical professions occupied by other sitcom fathers, for example. Neither man responded to the sitcom ideal of the dependable breadwinning professional father. In this, both were failed patriarchs. Likewise, the maternal characters challenged the genre's conventional representations of motherhood. Peg Bundy was a stay-at-home mother at a time when mothers in sitcoms had, thanks to the women's movement, earned the right to a career, no matter that the career was in title only. Furthermore, Peg's status was in no way a nostalgic throwback to the sitcom mother's stay-at-home glory days of Margaret Anderson and June Cleaver because Peg didn't lovingly prepare meals to nourish her family during her time spent at home, nor did she aim to keep her home neat, tidy and respectable. While Roseanne Conner worked, this was not because she was glorying in the benefits of feminism, it was because she had to in order to ensure the family's basic economic survival. The specter of imminent poverty haunted *Roseanne* and its main character was not permitted the indulgence of a career in title only which rarely if ever troubled her maternal existence within the sitcom's diegesis. Instead, Roseanne held jobs which frequently clashed with her role as mother, causing her to lose wages *and* maternal credibility in the eyes of her own children as well as those of the wider society.

These two fictional maternal characters were indeed unruly mothers eschewing conventions and defamiliarizing the role of mother both on television and off. Peg Bundy embodied television's capacity for self-reflexivity and its capacity to poke fun at its own established representations in a wink to viewers, while Roseanne Conner expressed a more fully developed version of her stand-up comic act, itself a humorous meditation on her own life and experience as a woman and mother transgressing norms of conventional behavior both willingly and in spite of herself. Both fictional mothers implicitly and explicitly bring to light the absurdities and incoherencies of expectations concerning mothering in the social, political and cultural context

of the late-twentieth-century United States. In fact, these two sitcom mothers have so much in common that the role of Peggy Bundy was originally offered to Roseanne Barr.[234]

Figure 26 Peg Bundy and Roseanne Connor: sitcom's dystopian domestic goddesses.

If *Married…with Children* was more overtly referential, this was, in part, due to its position as the premier situation comedy débuting on a brand-new network. Unable to compete with the established Big Three networks (NBC, CBS, ABC), Fox's strategy was to narrowcast, seeking a "younger, more liberal, 'hipper' audience than that targeted by its competitors.[235]" Its creators, Ron Leavitt and Michael Moye had worked on conventional sitcoms and were fully cognizant of what they did not want to offer the new network. They "wanted a sitcom that *wasn't* imitative.[236]" The unofficial working title of what would become *Married…with Children* was in fact *Not the Cosbys,* suggesting the extent to which the contemporary sitcom landscape influenced the creators and their determination to offer television viewers and the Fox network the antithesis of the venerable traditional sitcom family.

Roseanne too had its moments of open-eyed self-referentiality. In an episode entitled "All About Rosey," Roseanne Conner comes face to face with three mothers from past sitcoms representing more conventional examples of mothers, including June Cleaver from *Leave it to Beaver*. The episode served to highlight the character's departure from these more orthodox sitcom mothers, and as Austerlitz points out, in doing so, "Roseanne is placing herself at the tail end of a tradition of sitcom mothers that began with June Cleaver, drawing attention to all that had changed

[234] Noe, 2.
[235] *Ibid*., 1.
[236] Moye quoted in Noe, 2.

in forty years. Her character still raised children, still ministered to her husband, but she also had her own career."[237]

Figure 27 Roseanne is visited by the maternal ghosts of sitcom past.

While we may object to the idea that Roseanne Conner was in fact a "career woman," she was most definitely a working mother, responsible not just for her home and family but also for maintaining the family's economic livelihood alongside her husband, demonstrating as false the notion that the nuclear family could ever hope to remain in the middle-class if the maternal figure were to stay at home as her sitcom foremothers had done.

In 1989, Fox introduced its animated situation comedy, *The Simpsons*, which would go on to become the longest running situation comedy on television. ABC, for its part, savored the success of *Roseanne* which in its first and second seasons was beaten only by *The Cosby Show* and which remained in the top ten most popular programs for five more years.[238] The network expanded its repertoire of sitcoms with a specifically working class ethos by producing *Home Improvement* (ABC, 1991-1999) and *Grace Under Fire* (ABC, 1993-1998). While the former featured a stable and traditional nuclear family anchored by the character of brawny, tool-loving patriarch, Tim Taylor, the point of departure for the latter was character Grace Kelly's[239] leaving an abusive husband to raise her children on her own.

Married…with Children and *Roseanne* were two examples in a longer lineage of working-class sitcoms in which the maternal figures become significantly detached from their previous signifying role of selfless, ever present, ever generous, ever loving caretakers who nourish, console and provide emotionally for the children. This change in representations of the maternal figure is concomitant with a change in representations of the nuclear family as a whole, from a generally stable, pro-social domestic unit in which members demonstrate mutual empathy and support, to one in which family members often engage in anti-social or aggressive behaviors corresponding to what was increasingly identified throughout the 1980s and 1990s as the dysfunctional family.

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[237] Austerlitz, 2014, 202.
[238] Brooks and Marsh, 1692-1694.
[239] The character's name referencing the iconic movie actress and Princess of Monaco underscores with knowing irony the fall-from-"Grace" aesthetic of many 1990s situation comedies. The glamourous movie star-turned-princess persona gives way to a glum version of the realities (economic dislocation and abusive relationships) facing women and mothers in the late twentieth century.

Though there is no accepted scientific definition of the term, the distressing image of the dysfunctional family saturated popular culture during this period, as self-help books, talk shows, and fictional television programs including sitcoms all turned their attention to this poorly performing familial unit which was often associated with pathologies such as drug and alcohol dependencies, physical and sexual abuse and mental health disorders. Within the generic confines of the sitcom, the adventures of this type of family were either highlighted in parody as in *Married…with Children* or subject to the treatment of more conventional humor (often verging on melodrama) as in *Roseanne*. Either way, the discourse of the dysfunctional family was fully visible in the television of the era and the maternal figure was desacralized along with the rest of the family. It was in the animated realm of *The Simpsons*, however, that the situation comedy was able to afford itself the most leeway to explore the dysfunctional family trend. Austerlitz notes,

> Early *Simpsons* episodes are rooted in the dysfunctional antics of its family. Homer regularly neglects Marge and throttles the irrepressible Bart. The family goes to a therapist and turns a trust-building exercise into an opportunity to give each other some nasty electric shocks […] Like the Conners, they were proudly flawed, their love and their rancor struggling for supremacy.[240]

Detached from any semblance of reality, the members of the Simpson family were free to abuse one another as they pleased. That *The Simpsons* was situated, like the Anderson family of *Father Knows Best*, in a fictional town called Springfield illustrates the highly referential nature of the Fox animated sitcom. In *The Simpsons*, however, the idyllic post-war American suburb of an earlier generation is metaphorized into a dystopian space of near-horror engulfed in the plumes emanating from the ever-present nuclear power plant in which Homer works.

Scholar Judy Kutulas reminds us that these images of the dysfunctional family are also tied to a most important generational aspect as well. The late 1980s and 1990s represent the era in which a new generation was coming of age, watching, critiquing and creating television with a more jaded and cynical point of view than their predecessors. Generation X, as children, had borne the brunt of the mid-twentieth century changes in the nuclear family ideal, including continual growth in the number of working mothers and an increasing divorce rate. Their experience of, and perspective on, the ideal of the nuclear family was reflected in these dysfunctional family sitcoms and critical to their success. Kutulas explains:

[240] Austerlitz, 2014, 209.

> The Gen X response to the happy family ideal first appeared on the margins of mainstream television, partially fueled by producers' desire to attract and keep the youngest edge of the young, single demographic. *The Simpsons* and *Married…with Children*, two Gen X visions of family, were crucial to the success of a new network […] The adults in these shows were boomer parents, not as boomers might see them, but as their children did.[241]

As with most televisual trends, it was a convergence of a number of factors which led to the images of motherhood and the family prevalent on American television screens by the 1990s: economic stagnation and malaise, continued increases in women's participation in the labor force, evolutions in gender role expectations and higher divorce rates all contributed directly or indirectly and over a period of decades to a moment in popular culture in which both the nuclear family and the mothers who loved them had fallen from grace. This state of affairs was perhaps best encapsulated in 1992 when the decision of one would-be television mother caused a nationwide uproar.

I.2.13. Murphy Brown: Sitcom's First Single Mother by Choice

Explicitly rejecting the conservative backlash against feminism, CBS and producer Diane English débuted the sitcom *Murphy Brown* in 1988. The eponymous character and heroine of the sitcom was a single woman over forty years of age, engaged in a challenging and high-powered career as a political journalist living and reporting in Washington, D.C. Brown was a tough-talking recovering alcoholic, divorcée and feminist who dated and enjoyed men but had little interest in remarrying. The fourth season of the sitcom is dedicated to Murphy's unplanned, out-of-wedlock pregnancy and stirred unexpected controversy in the context of the 1992 presidential campaign as well as a national debate over so-called family values, becoming a touchstone issue of the Culture Wars.[242] Within the conservative ideology of the family-values paradigm (itself a catchall for any

[241] Judy Kutulas, "Who Rules the Roost? Sitcom Family Dynamics from the Cleavers to the Osbournes" in *The Sitcom Reader: America Viewed and Skewed* ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 49-59, 57.

[242] For a discussion of the family values debate within the American political context, see Seth Dowland's *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*. Dowland writes: "The encouragement of families with a breadwinning father, stay-at-home mother, and well-tended children became a major goal of national [conservative] policymakers." Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

number of issues related to conservative social policy), the existence of a feminist character such as Murphy Brown was offensive enough. When the fictional character decided to have her child outside of the traditional confines of marriage, no less than Vice President Dan Quayle opined about it in a most public forum setting off a media firestorm.[243]

On May 19th, 1992, the day after the *Murphy Brown*'s season four finale, in which the fictional Murphy gave birth to her son, Quayle made a speech to the Commonwealth Club of California. In the wake of the deadly Los Angeles riots stemming from pent-up anger over racial inequalities, Quayle invoked the character's out-of-wedlock pregnancy and childbirth to criticize popular culture's lack of respect for traditional family values saying,

> marriage is a moral issue that requires cultural consensus, and the use of social sanctions. Bearing babies irresponsibly is, simply, wrong. Failing to support children one has fathered is wrong. We must be unequivocal about this. It doesn't help matters when prime time TV has Murphy Brown – a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman – mocking the importance of fathers, by bearing a child alone, and calling it just another "lifestyle choice." I know it is not fashionable to talk about moral values, but we need to do it. Even though our cultural leaders in Hollywood, network TV, the national newspapers roundly jeer at them.[244]

The reality of the vice president of the United States lecturing popular culture, the television industry and a fictional sitcom character about family values caused an unparalleled media stir. However, according to English, the decision to have Murphey conceive was not taken lightly and was based not on a desire to stoke national controversy but on a creative choice to make the venerable character face the "biggest challenge" possible: becoming a mother. In speaking about the decision, English underscores the care that was taken on the part of the writers who understood that Murphy was admired by millions of women. Like *Maude* two decades earlier, *Murphy Brown* dedicated an episode to the difficult decision of keeping the pregnancy or opting for an abortion. Unlike Maude Findlay, Murphy chose the former. Diane English's criticism of

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2015), 9. For an examination of the Culture Wars, see Andrew Hartman's *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[243] The feud between Dan Quayle and *Murphy Brown* actually precedes this moment. Recurrent jokes about Dan Quayle had featured regularly within the sitcom's fictional sphere. Producer Diane English explains, "We were so mortified that Dan Quayle was a heartbeat away from the presidency that we just felt it was our job to do a Dan Quayle joke every week. And so every week we did one." Excerpt from interview with Diane English, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/diane-english?clip=33612#about.

[244] Excerpt from Dan Quayle's "Address to the Commonwealth Club of California," May 19, 1992, http://www.vicepresidentdanquayle.com/speeches_StandingFirm_CCC_3.html.

Quayle suggests that he did not fully understand the context in which the sitcom's creative decisions were made. "He made the mistake of blaming the fall of western civilization on a fictional character and he hadn't seen the episode, so he was assuming that it was all very frivolous and that we were just sort of making light of single motherhood.[245]"

In fact, no one would end up taking the episode lightly. Opinion writers across the country weighed in on the matter in columns that continued to argue the polemic well into the twenty-first century.[246] The September 21, 1992 issue of *Time* magazine featured a cover story on "Hollywood and Politics" with a close-up of Murphy Brown actress Candice Bergen wearing a mock-"Murphy Brown for President" campaign button while a September 1992 issue of *TV Guide* also featured the star, as well as a reference to "TV's most famous baby," in anticipation of the sitcom's season five début.

Indeed, the sitcom did not disappoint. The production team of *Murphy Brown* was quick to seize on the opportunity in order to capitalize on the nationwide attention. The first episode of the fifth season positions Murphy in her new role as a mother struggling with a new-born baby and back at work in her professional role as news journalist. The sitcom uses Murphy's fictional position of power to speak directly to the vice president's comments. The hour-long episode was also an opportunity to showcase a number of other non-traditional, yet loving and stable, families in order to provide a counternarrative to the family-values ideal of traditional nuclear family conventions.

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[245] Diane English interview, https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/diane-english?clip=33612#about.

[246] See for example, Candice Bergen, "Murphy Brown's Values," https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/23/opinion/l-murphy-brown-s-values-543110.html; Isabel Sawhill, "20 Years Later, it Turns out Dan Quayle was Right About Murphy Brown and Unmarried Moms," https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/20-years-later-it-turns-out-dan-quayle-was-right-about-murphy-brown-and-unmarried-moms/2012/05/25/gJQAsNCJqU_story.html; and Lori Stahl, "No, Dan Quayle was Wrong About Murphy Brown, " https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/post/no-dan-quayle-was-wrong-about-murphy-brown/2012/05/31/gJQAnV3h4U_blog.html.

Figure 28 The Murphy Brown controversy makes headlines in the media.

The most remarkable sequence in the episode depicts the character watching the vice president's speech and specifically, his comments related her, on her own television within the confines of her home. It then switches to a direct address from Murphy in her fictional newsroom setting, now in her role as television news anchor to the real-life vice president, to the American people, as well as to the televisual audience watching the sitcom. Using her platform, the fictional character chastises the vice president of the United States from within the confines of the sitcom:

> The American family and American values. This reporter has a unique perspective on the topic because in a recent speech Vice President Quayle used me as an example of the poverty of values in this country and implied that I was a poor role model for our nation's youth. While some might argue that attacking my status as a single mother was nothing more than a cynical bid of election year posturing, I'd prefer to give the vice president the benefit of the doubt. These are difficult times for our country and in searching for the causes of our social ills we could choose to blame the media, or the Congress, or an administration that's been in power for twelve years, or we could blame me.[247]

That the television audience understood and sympathized with the character's scathing sarcasm directed at the vice president is suggested by the approving laughter emanating from the sitcom's studio audience. Quayle's "performance" as vice-president during this controversy, already under criticism, was further ridiculed, reinforcing the already wide-spread perception that he was not right for the "role" of the second highest office in government. On November 3, 1992,

[247] *Murphy Brown*, Season Five, Episode One, "You say Potatoe, I say Potato," September 21, 1992. The title of the episode is itself a jab at Quayle. On June 15, 1992 during the sitcom's summer hiatus, video circulated of Quayle attending a children's spelling bee in New Jersey, intervening in the correct spelling of the word potato. Quayle encouraged the child to add an "e" at the end of the word for which he was widely ridiculed.

American voters opted for the Democratic ticket of Bill Clinton and Al Gore after a single term of Republicans George H. W. Bush and Dan Quayle.

Figure 29 Murphy Brown watches Dan Quayle's speech about her single motherhood, then reacts by directly addressing him.

The polemical discourse surrounding the *Murphy Brown* single mother narrative exposed a number of social anxieties plaguing late-twentieth century American society including the evolution of the family as well as its cultural-socio-political role and, in conjunction with this, changing expectations related to gender. As we have seen, these are recurrent anxieties which the sitcom genre in particular has addressed and attempted to soothe throughout its existence, its comic impetus effectively bringing to the fore uncomfortable questions while at the same time smoothing them over from episode to episode by poking fun at them.

Having briefly examined five decades of televised representations of the family in the situation comedy as well as some of the more significant maternal roles presented by them, we will move on in the following chapter to a closer look at the sitcom which will be the focus of the remainder of this study, *Friends*. Arriving on television screens in 1994, the sitcom is the heir to all of these televised discourses surrounding the nuclear family.

Mothers in sitcom evolved slowly but persistently from Mary Kay Stearns whose real-life pregnancy set the stage for much of the genre's future content in an era when televisions were just beginning their phenomenal expansion into American homes, to Murphy Brown whose fictional pregnancy touched off nationwide hand-wringing over who could be a mother, in which circumstances, as well as who could and would be in the position to act as arbiter of appropriate motherhood. The mother character in the situation comedy stands out in this already domestically absorbed genre as particularly fertile terrain for highlighting, questioning and negotiating the often-contradictory ideological discourses pulsing through the politics and culture of the United

States in the second half of the twentieth century. Within the generic limitations of this fictional televised form, the maternal figure has been alternatively celebrated for her generosity and upstanding morality, domesticated and confined to the restrictive private sphere of the home, critiqued and rejected for her disruptive influence and/or old-fashionedness, reconfigured as an avatar of dystopian domesticity and, in some cases, given the narrative space to imagine her own existence on her own terms.

How does *Friends* fit into this televisual context and how can a sitcom which explicitly situates its diegesis outside of the nuclear family structure carry on the work related to our understanding of the genre's maternal figure? As we have seen, discourses surrounding sitcom maternity are not necessarily restricted to those series which concern themselves specifically with the domestic universe and the traditional nuclear family, and the following chapters aim to demonstrate the extent to which a sitcom focused on "that time in your life when your friends are your family[248]" is ultimately a reflection on the traditional nuclear family configuration, its limitations and disappointments but also, significantly, its possibilities.

[248] From the Crane/Kauffman initial pitch for the sitcom.

Chapter Two – A Generation of Bad Mothers in *Friends*

Having arrived at the chronological and televisual moment in which *Friends* made its small screen début, our analysis now shifts to focus specifically to the fictional mothers and motherhoods of this iconic sitcom. This chapter focuses on one specific set of maternal representations in *Friends*, those secondary characters who appear and reappear in the sitcom, the mothers of the six main characters themselves: Judy Geller, Gloria Tribbiani, Nora Bing, Sandra Green, Lily Buffay and Phoebe Abbot. We will see that in each particular case, these women as mothers are characterized as being deeply problematic, indeed hurtful, to their children. Rooted in the comedic mode of communication necessary to the sitcom genre, this set of depictions constructs a vision of a subtle yet pernicious mode of bad mothering. Under the guise of humor, these maternal characters are configured in various ways as being psychologically harmful to their adult children. In this, we may identify echoes with some of sitcom's earlier problematic maternal figures: Endora from *Bewitched*, for example, or Ida Morgenstern from *Rhoda*; fictional mothers whose presence complicated the lives of their grown children, often to the humorous benefit of the genre. In *Friends*, however, this intergenerational maternal conflict combines with the specific malaise of Generation X to produce a wider discourse of disappointment concerning the nuclear family model in general and the maternal figure in particular. In so doing, *Friends* taps into another, far more deeply rooted discourse of mother blaming, iterations of which reverberate seemingly endlessly through the ages.

The chapter begins, then, with a discussion of the figure of the bad mother in culture and across history. Who are these women and just what is it that makes them bad? What are they to blame for and where does that blame come from? Why is this figure so prevalent throughout Western history and culture? Next, we look at how the sitcom uses familiar stereotypes to construct

the problematic representations of the maternal figure in *Friends* including those evoking the Jewish mother. This interfering, nitpicking fictional character demonstrates great favoritism for her male child at the expense of her daughter. In *Friends*, the construction is embodied by the Judy Geller character, the mother of the characters Ross and Monica. While Judy's Jewishness is never fully made explicit, her characterization strongly suggests this reading of the mother and her daughter Monica is, particularly in the early seasons, shown to be negatively affected by Judy's words and deeds.

Two further stereotypical representations also do the sitcom's work of humorously presenting bad motherhoods. The mother of main character Joey Tribbiani, although making only one appearance, manages to convey a number of stereotypical understandings of Italianness which are also wrapped up in questions of class and more widely, non-white or ethnically other motherhood. This is the only representation of its kind in the series. Joey's mother's secret destabilizes his deepest notions of right and wrong and makes him nostalgic for the better days of the American family. Finally, the character of Nora Bing appears as an oversexed *femme fatale* who may also be read as an unruly woman in her seemingly insatiable appetite for men. The juxtaposition of voracious sexuality and maternity within the Nora Bing character collapses the traditional Madonna/Whore binary, providing effective comedy at the expense of her psychologically fragile son Chandler. His ambiguous sexuality and ineffectiveness with women in the early season of the series seems, in part, to be attributed to his mother's inability to "correctly" mother and recalls the mid-twentieth century experts' analyses that attributed effeminate masculinities to overpowering, domineering mothers.

While the characters at the heart of these three representations are all imagined as having been part of the Baby Boom generation, only one, Nora Bing, through the explicit embrace of her own sexuality seems to embody any part of the women's liberation movement associated with Second Wave Feminism.[249] Two further representations (and one non-representation) implicating this same generation, however, do seem to embody some of the elements associated with 1960s and 1970s feminism: the characters of Sandra Green, Lily Buffay and Phoebe Abbot, respectively the mothers (biological or adoptive) of main characters Rachel Green and Phoebe Buffay.

[249] Although Nora Bing's presentation more as aggressive corporate careerwoman than as active proponent of women's liberation, may more closely align this Boomer with Feminism's Third Wave.

Again, these maternal characters are all constructed as being disappointing in some way for their adult children. Sandra Green, for example, confides to her daughter that as a middle-aged woman she is no longer fulfilled in her role as simple wife and mother and wants more out of life. Instead of celebrating an individual woman's discovery of possible liberation from patriarchal norms, this feminine mystique narrative displaced into the context of the 1990s is represented as being a disappointing embarrassment to the character of Rachel Green in spite of the fact that (or perhaps more correctly because) Rachel is cited as being the inspiration for this decision. Likewise, the character of Phoebe Buffay is also disappointed by a pair of mothers whose representations evoke Second Wave feminist sexual liberation discourses. One of the Season Three cliffhangers depends on the prospect that Lily Buffay, the woman who raised Phoebe is not actually her biological, birth mother as Phoebe had believed. This is revealed by another woman, Phoebe Abbot, who confesses that she is Phoebe's biological mother. The 'free love' context in which the young woman was conceived is suggestive of the discourses of feminist sexual liberation and the birth mother's decision to give up the twins to another woman is reminiscent of the rejection of motherhood on the part of certain radical feminists.

While any televisual text is necessarily open to multiple interpretations this chapter will demonstrate that these particular representations are, on the whole, constructed as disapproving and condemnatory depictions of the maternal figure and we will conclude our analysis by attempting to account for this phenomenon. Let us now turn to the historical and cultural figure of the bad mother.

Lauri Umansky and Molly-Ladd Taylor propose in their introduction to *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* that there is no universally accepted definition of bad mothering nor of who may or may not be considered a bad mother. Instead, the authors suggest that Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous observation concerning hard-core pornography may be applicable to the phenomena of bad mothering, that is: "You know it when you see it.[250]" Which is to say that bad mothering should be difficult, if not impossible, to define. Yet bad mothers have existed and continue to exist, brought into existence thanks to the inferior

[250] Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky, *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 2.

hierarchical and reciprocal relationship they maintain with that other, idealized and equally difficult-to-define maternal figure, the good mother.

To qualify something as bad (or good) for that matter, a first and necessary step is to agree upon what, exactly, is being evaluated. Before we can even begin to speak about bad mothers, we must first agree on what a mother is and what that figure's role is supposed to be. Writing in 1998, Umansky and Ladd-Taylor never define these terms, but their collection of essays implicitly suggests four elements which also apply to the maternal figures under study in *Friends*. A mother is a woman (1) who carries and gives birth to (2) and/or who raises a child (3) and who is considered by herself and/or by others to be legally and morally responsible for that child as well as for their health, education and behavior either on her own or within the context of a relationship (4). More simply, a mother is a woman who carries and gives birth to a child and/or parents a child. Once the child has reached the age of adulthood, the woman still remains his or her mother in spite of the fact that she no longer bears any legal responsibility for that young adult.

Each of these component parts can, in theory, be evaluated either on their own or collectively as being "good" or "bad." Which is to say that the maternal figure may be judged for any number of reasons including but not limited to: not identifying as a woman, not responding to traditional notions of femininity, being unable or unwilling to conceive or carry a child, renouncing (officially or unofficially) the responsibility of caring and raising her children, being unable or unwilling to act in the best interests (however those may be defined at a given moment by whomever is in a position of authority) of the child they are responsible for. The potential for bad mothering is everywhere and indeed Umansky and Ladd-Taylor confirm that "all mothers are 'bad' sometimes.[251]" They also suggest that a baseline definition for "bad" mothering *is* possible: "Everyone agrees that mothers who beat or kill their children are bad.[252]" But, they concede, beyond that there is little consensus about what, specifically, qualifies a person as a bad mother.

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[251] *Ibid*, 3.

[252] *Ibid*, 2. We may suggest that the authors' use of "everyone" here is problematic. Their comment that a maternal figure who beats or kills children is universally understood to be bad cannot be proved and instead belies a specific historic and cultural situatedness. What, in fact, is to be understood by beating? Is it slapping a child's face or buttocks once or repeatedly whelping a child with fists? Behind this one concept there is a continuum of behaviors which surely do not all merit the same evaluation. Indeed, the use of corporal punishment has been seen as the correct way to rear children in different historical moments and places. In terms of child killing, this is most certainly a horrendous and tragic occurrence, but the simplistic evaluation of these mothers as bad is complexified by literary characters such as Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* who killed her baby so as to prevent her from living a life of slavery in this fictional account of a woman who did exist. Likewise, what of a pregnant woman who, upon learning that her fetus is afflicted with a condition incompatible with life, chooses to terminate the pregnancy during the third trimester?

II.1. Constructing the Good Mother and Creating the Bad: A Historical Perspective

While the bad mother may be impossible to define, there is something of a historical consensus concerning the *existence* of the bad mother figure.[253] We may not be able to say who she is or why, but we know she is present, lurking in the stories which have been told for millennia. What follows is a review of the cultural and historical mother figure with an emphasis on the twentieth century American mother. If we choose to trace the roots of the bad mother to such extensive lengths it is because the figure has reverberated throughout history and throughout culture, at times with terrific resonance, at other times more quietly, but she is ever-present. The descriptions leading up to the moment in history with which we are primarily concerned will be necessarily more developed due, on the one hand, to their chronological proximity with our topic of research, and on the other, to more easily accessible documentation. Throughout this section we will be alternating between images of the good mother and images of the bad as the two figures necessarily appear hand in hand, the one dependent on the other for its existence. What we find is that the bad mother figure, by which we mean images and representations of the maternal figure which are predominantly negative and harmful, appears somehow to be more significant, more striking, more resonant in cultural and historical import than her more positive manifestations.

Although pre-historic evidence suggests a veritable veneration for the life-giving, life-sustaining mother figure as represented by full-bellied Venus figurines, it is the bad, evil or malevolent mother who has haunted culture since history has been recorded. Classical mythology is rife with the tales of notorious maternal figures such as Medea of Euripides' killing her own children out of revenge for her husband's infidelity. Clytemnestra, in one classical version abandoned her son, Orestes at birth, and later become an early victim of matricide. The later Roman period is notorious for the scheming, manipulative mothers of Nero (Agrippina) and

[253] The maternal figure, good or bad, has inspired awe for millennia as suggested by psychologist Shari L. Thurer. Thurer writes in *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, the period before recorded history (the Old Stone Age and Neolithic) was, according to much archeological evidence, one of worship for the Great Mother, a maternal divinity and the source of life. This period has been fetishized by some feminist thinkers who postulate that matriarchal societies were the precursors to patriarchy. As Thurer points out, however, in spite of evidence that the Great Mother was a revered *symbolic* figure, no evidence exists to suggest the presence of any society ever operating on a practical level as a matriarchy where women and mothers were held as *superior* to men. Shari Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 7.

Tiberius (Livia) who engaged in sometimes murderous machinations to ensure that their sons became Emperor.

In spite of, or perhaps thanks to, the spread of Christianity and its concomitant worship of the Madonna, the Virgin Mary, the purest example of maternal devotion and the mother of Christ, bad mother figures continued to be a presence in culture throughout the medieval and early modern periods thanks to their representations in fairy tales most notably as wicked step-mothers intent on ensuring their own progeny's survival over that of the children of others.[254] Shakespeare has been taken to task for the lack of maternal figures in his works. But this lack underscores the importance of two (anti) maternal figures who *do* play predominant narrative roles, Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*) who claimed she would "bash the brain of the babe that sucks her breast,[255]" for example, and Gertrude (*Hamlet*) whose marriage to her dead husband's brother is one source of the young Hamlet's great sorrow.

However, "the invention of the good mother[256]" which opened up the conceptual space necessary to more clearly identify and castigate the bad one, arose in earnest during the historical convergence and complex relationship of scientific discovery, Enlightenment and Romantic thinking, the rise of the bourgeoisie and middle classes, as well as the Industrial Revolution during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Yvonne Knibiehler points out that Pierre Roussel's 1775 medical treatise *Système physique et moral de la femme* not only went a long way towards collapsing the boundaries between the female body, woman and mother but that it was widely read and extremely influential in the burgeoning fields of general medicine, gynecology and obstetrics.[257] Enlightenment doctors came to view women and their bodies as weak and passive, whose sole destiny was biological: to bear

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[254] Thurer notes that the maternal figures in fairy tales such as Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and Cinderella were originally the protagonists' *biological* mothers. They were transformed into stepmothers during the Romantic period when the tales were recorded by the brothers Grimm. Neither version is particularly complementary to the character of the mother figure. Thurer, 151.

[255] Stephanie Chamberlain takes the position that Lady Macbeth may be viewed as the personification of all women who had been accused of, committed or desired to commit infanticide in early modern England. While Jenijoy La Belle suggests that in her desire to "make thick the blood" and "stop up th'access and passage to remorse," Lady Macbeth expresses her desire to be unequivocally and permanently dissociated from motherhood. See Stephanie Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England," *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (2005): 72-91 and Jenijoy La Belle, "A Strange Infirmity": Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1980): 381-386.

[256] This term, a section heading in *Histoires des mères et de la maternité en occident*, is borrowed from Knibiehler. See Yvonne Knibiehler, *Histoires des mères et de la maternité en occident* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 2000), 62.

[257] *Ibid*.

and nourish children.[258] At the same time, changes in attitudes towards babies and children (again, heavily influenced by the Enlightenment) meant that there was a newfound indignation towards infant mortality as well as abortion: "Enlightenment doctors impose the dogma that every child conceived must be born and live in the best possible conditions.[259]"

Both Knibiehler and Shari Thurer point to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the quintessential proponent of idealized maternal affection. Knibiehler reminds us that Rousseau was raised without a mother[260] and Thurer adds that he abandoned five illegitimate children,[261] but in between he managed to theorize the ideal mother for the fictional young boy at the center of his 1762 novel, *Émile ou de l'education*, an early and controversial though influential version of later, expert-guided child rearing manuals. Of Rousseau, Knibiehler writes, "He displaced the sacred, by detaching it from religion and inscribing it in the family, centering it on the good mother.[262]" Elisabeth Badinter adds, "It is Rousseau […] who crystallizes the new ideas and truly kicks off the modern family, which is to say, the family founded on maternal love.[263]" In moving the formerly religious Sacred to the heart of the family, in anchoring this family in idealized mother love, Rousseau relegates women to an exclusively supporting role in men's lives:

> …the female is female throughout her life or at least throughout her youth; everything always reminds her of her sex, and in order to fulfill these functions she must behave appropriately…On the mother's good constitution depends firstly that of the children's; on women's care depends the early upbringing of men; furthermore, on women depend men's morals, passions, tastes, pleasures, even their happiness. As such, women's entire upbringing must be relative to men's.[264]

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[258] *Ibid*., 63.
[259] *Ibid*., 64. « Les médecins des Lumières imposent le dogme que tout enfant conçu doit pouvoir naître et vivre dans les meilleures conditions possibles. » My own translation.
[260] *Ibid*., 65.
[261] Thurer, 196.
[262] Knibiehler, 65. « Il a déplacé le sacré, en le détachant de la religion pour l'inscrire dans la famille, et le centrer sur la bonne mère. » My translation.
[263] Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus : histoire de l'amour maternel*, XVIIe-XXe Siècle (Paris : Flammarion, 1980), 55. « C'est Rousseau […] qui cristallise les idées nouvelles et donne le véritable coup d'envoi à la famille moderne, c'est-à-dire à la famille fondée sur l'amour maternel. » My translation.
[264] « […] la femelle est femelle toute sa vie ou du moins toute sa jeunesse ; tout la rappelle sans cesse à son sexe, et pour bien remplir les fonctions il lui faut une constitution qui s'y rapporte […] De la bonne constitution des mères dépend d'abord celle des enfants ; du soin des femmes dépend la première éducation des hommes ; des femmes dépendent encore leurs mœurs, leurs passions, leurs goûts, leurs plaisirs, leur bonheur même. Ainsi toute l'éducation des femmes doit être relative aux hommes. » Rousseau, *Émile ou de l'éducation* quoted in Knibiehler, 65. My translation.

Woman, as mother or potential mother, was to be a secondary character whose destiny was to serve man first as his wife then as mother to his children. Her femininity (understood as passivity, sweetness, tenderness, patience, selflessness) was ideally suited to raising children who were, thanks to Enlightenment philosophers, now understood to be innocent and in need of nurturance and protection; *tabulae rasae* freed from the Original Sin which had formerly been prescribed to babies and children. Furthermore, the ideal mother must be worthy to raise a man who was now believed to be the inheritor of Locke's natural rights, an eminently reasonable creature capable of acting with moral rectitude so long as he had been correctly brought up to do so.

Not only would the good mother fulfill these weighty maternal responsibilities she would do so happily, sacrificing her own needs and desires. Indeed, her very happiness depended on sacrifice, a fact supposedly rooted naturally in her femininity:

> …motherhood as it is conceived in the 19th century since Rousseau, is understood as a religious vocation, a joyous experience which also necessarily implies pain and suffering. A real self-sacrifice. If this aspect of motherhood is insisted upon, with a certain complacency, it is always to show the perfect match between woman's nature and her motherly function.[265]

As early as the mid-eighteenth century, then, maternity was idealized as the essence of femininity:

> After 1760, publications abound recommending that mothers personally take care of their children and 'ordering' them to breastfeed. They create the obligation that the woman be a mother above all and gave birth to the myth still alive two hundred years later: that of maternal instinct, or the spontaneous love that each mother has for her child.[266]

The myths swirling around motherhood – that all women must fulfill their motherly destiny, that a maternal instinct existed and was rooted in feminine nature, that good mothers breastfed their children, that mothers happily sacrificed themselves for the good of their children – contributed to

[265] Badinter, 255. « […] la maternité, telle qu'on la conçoit au XIXe siècle depuis Rousseau, est entendue comme un sacerdoce, une expérience heureuse qui implique aussi nécessairement douleurs et souffrances. Un réel sacrifice de soi-même. Si on insiste sur cet aspect de la maternité, avec une certaine complaisance, c'est toujours pour montrer l'adéquation parfaite entre la nature de la femme et la fonction de la mère. » My translation.

[266] Badinter, 149. « Après 1760, les publications abondent qui recommandent aux mères de s'occuper personnellement de leurs enfants et leur 'ordonnent' de les allaiter. Elles créent l'obligation pour la femme d'être mère avant tout, et engendrent un mythe toujours bien vivace deux cents ans plus tard : celui de l'instinct maternel, ou de l'amour spontané de toute mère pour son enfant. » My translation.

an increasingly normative model of appropriate behavior against which mothers, and by extension all women as potential mothers, could be measured. We may suggest that if the good mother is a product of the particular historical, social and philosophical convergences of the late eighteenth century, the bad one is as well.

Figure 30 Gin Lane*, William Hogarth, 1751*

This trend became particularly evident during the eighteenth-century Gin Craze in London and is exemplified by William Hogarth's print, *Gin Lane*, which underscores this nascent propensity to blame mothers for the misfortunes that befell their children. While this print was part of a wider reformist agenda to call attention to societal ills on Hogarth's part and appeared a decade before Rousseau's *Emile*, the print's central focus is on the drunken mother, too drunk even to notice that her child (a boy) has slipped out of her arms, falling to his presumed death in the gin cellar bellow. The image is the antithesis of Rousseau's gentle, self-sacrificing mother. The mother is the embodiment of lust (her syphilitic leg sores betray her status as a loose woman), greed and dereliction of maternal duty as she reaches for a pinch of snuff letting slip her child. While Hogarth's intent may not have been to criticize a victim of addiction and poverty, the print's focus and shock value rests on the flagrant lack of a protective maternal instinct which serves, in turn, to reinforce the belief in its existence.

The image also drew on a contemporary familiarity with such stories. It is telling that gin, the distilled spirit and the object of Hogarth's artistic wrath as well as officials' fears, was known as *Mother's* Ruin. Two notable cases concerning gin were reported in the press which involved the death of children under the supervision of their maternal figures.[267] The deaths sparked public outrage leading to the passage of legislation aimed at reducing the consumption of gin. Again,

[267] Olivia Williams describes these accounts in *Gin Glorious Gin: How Mother's Ruin Became the Spirit of London.* In 1734, Judith Dufour, a poverty-stricken French immigrant, along with another woman took Dufour's two-year-old illegitimate daughter out of the workhouse she had been left in and went out drinking with her. They took the toddler's clothes to sell them and left her in a ditch where she was later found dead. The women spent the money on two quarterns of gin. In 1736, Mary Estwick, an elderly childcare worker, fell asleep in a drunken gin-induced stupor with the baby she was minding on her lap. The baby died when her clothes caught fire after falling from Estwick's lap into the hearth. Olivia Williams, *Gin Glorious Gin: How Mother's Ruin Became the Spirit of London* (London: Headline Publishing Group, 2014). 53-55.

particularly shocking in these cases was the fact that the two women involved were responsible for young children. By selfishly giving themselves over to their gin habits their ability to care for others was impaired. The focus of outrage was on the marginalized mother figures and their dereliction of duty. Furthermore, foreshadowing trends that would continue until the present day, the two women, a poor immigrant and a poor elderly woman were undoubtedly also the cause of outrage due to prejudices of class and ethnicity.

Historians note that as the Industrial Revolution picked up steam in the nineteenth century, a more clearly distinct division of labor further defined motherhood particularly in the United States.[268] As production and employment opportunities steadily moved into the public sphere of factories and offices reserved primarily for men, the private sphere of the home and family was left to women and particularly mothers. As Knibiehler and others have pointed out, this division of two spheres was seductive as it established a moral equivalence between the importance of men's work and women's. This was also a period which saw "an even grander elaboration of childhood innocence. Enlightenment-era ideas about human perfectibility were amplified by Romantic nineteenth-century cultural values of emotion and expressiveness.[269]" In terms of motherhood, this era represents what Jodi Vandenberg-Daves refers to as *moral motherhood*, a Victorian glorification of moral righteousness which was the particular domain of women and mothers. Mothers, thanks to their significant power and influence in the home were tasked as moral compasses in a society which was being steered in the unknown waters of capitalism. Moral motherhood was a facet of the Victorian ideal of "true womanhood," aligning femininity with purity, piety, domesticity and submission.[270]

However, as Vandenberg-Daves points out, while this newfound importance and responsibility may have been satisfying recognition for a formerly undervalued or even unnoticed role:

> moral motherhood ideas both heightened women's authority in the family and increased their susceptibility to guilt and regret. Their children's health, development, and spiritual destiny were measured by their own individual actions, as opposed to the broader actions of many family and community members or those of the patriarchal father.[271]

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[268] See for example, Jodi Vandenberg-Daves's *Modern Motherhood: An American History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2014), but also Knibiehler, Badinter and Thurer.
[269] Vandenberg-Daves, 22.
[270] Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 7.
[271] *Ibid*., 25.

Ideologically, motherhood at this point becomes the affair of the individual woman, whose isolation within the nuclear family and, eventually, within an individual house creates more pressure and simultaneously more space for deviance from socially acceptable appropriate mothering. Left out of this ideological conception of motherhood were those who, for reasons of class and race, for example, were unable to conform to the increasingly rigid criteria. Mothers under slavery and later, freed black mothers, under systematic and economic pressure to work could not remain at home to be the moral compass for their children and were often obligated to create alternative family structures to ensure the survival of their children. Immigrant women, too, arriving in the United States seeking economic opportunity, were not in a position of being the romanticized keepers of hearth and home like their middle-class counterparts. Even for women who were able to adhere to the standards of the day, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, was a reminder that the pressures on upper-class bourgeois women could have catastrophic consequences[272] and by the end of the nineteenth century further changes in thinking would continue to add increasing demands on mothers and women.

II.1.1. The Rise of the Experts

Three complimentary tendencies converge at or near the beginning of the twentieth century which are of particular concern to us in our attention to the figure of the bad mother. The first, an increasing veneration for scientific thinking and the scientific process based on experimentation, quantification and evidence which was itself a prolongation of the emphasis on reason championed by Enlightenment thinkers (Thurer goes so far as to suggest that "The impetus for mother's fall from grace was the rise of science.[273]") With this, came an increasing esteem for and interest in

[272] *The Yellow Wallpaper*, first published in 1892, is a first-person account of an unnamed mother and is loosely based on Gilman's own experience with post-partum depression. The young mother is 'treated' by her husband, a doctor, who diagnoses her with 'temporary depression' and a 'hysterical tendency,' a common diagnosis of middle-class women at this time. He imposes the then-typical treatment of bed rest, isolated in a room with barred windows and torn wallpaper. The narrative follows the woman's eventual descent into psychosis.

[273] Thurer, 225. I am less convinced that the rise of science is the impetus behind a "fall from grace." Thurer positions this twentieth-century fall in relation to a more forgiving, nineteenth-century romantic notion of motherhood. But this romantic idea of motherhood was only ever accessible to a certain type of mother, leaving others in the margins. And even within this minority of middle-class mothers, the pressures were such that many, for example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman succumbed to them at the expense of their mental health. My view is that the increasing popularity and accessibility of scientific discourses exacerbated pressures which were already present. Thurer is correct in suggesting

the medical professions to which pediatrics and psychology were integrated. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this period saw the advent and influence of psychoanalysis and its concern with and description of the unconscious whose processes and structures were postulated to have their roots in the earliest experiences of childhood.

Each of these would influence in some way or another women and mothers and, in general, give rise to the expert thinking and advice described at length in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's 1978 survey, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of the Experts' Advice to Women*. This convergence would lead to a newfound emphasis not only on the physical health of children but also, importantly, on their mental health as well. Ladd Taylor and Umansky tell us that "this shift had dire consequences for mothers.[274]"

However, before the psychoanalytic discourse became widely accepted or even accessible, the newly fashionable notion that parenting and mothering in particular could be managed as a laboratory experiment, indeed that this was the thoroughly *modern* way to do things, led to the early twentieth century enthusiasm for *scientific motherhood*. This largely middle-class ideology was welcomed, promoted and disseminated by experts and mothers alike who, lulled by the promises of precise measurements, known quantities, easy-to-use tables, rigorous schedules and repetitive behaviors, believed that mothering could become akin to a science, suggesting perhaps a sense of professionalization for educated women who had few avenues for action in their day-to-day lives. This type of thinking was imbued with the industrial and capitalistic ethos of the era:

> If the home could attain the industrial standards of discipline, efficiency, and thrift, then its little child-products would be able to roll effortlessly along the conveyor belt leading from the family into the big world of business. A mother's success would be measured, ultimately along a yardstick calibrated in a distant factory.[275]

However, scientific motherhood was accessible only to the mothers who were aware of it, who could buy the books and guides promulgating it, who were able to afford to stay at home and dedicate the phenomenal amount of time and energy necessary to impose the rigid sleeping, eating and toileting schedules which were recommended for raising healthy, well-adjusted children. Even

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that the expansion of the scientific discourse devalued a mystical and mythical notion of motherhood, but individual mothers had not necessarily benefited from these romantic ideas to begin with.

[274] Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 10.

[275] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *For Her Own Good: Two Centuries of The Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005 [1978]), 231.

for those mothers who were able to dedicate their lives to this particular way of raising children, scientific mothering was a relatively short-lived fad, though remnants of it still resonate in current child-rearing manuals.

The experts concerned with social sciences in general and child-rearing in particular were at no loss to express their ever-evolving, sometimes conflicting opinions about the best ways to mother and raise children. With each of these prescriptive approaches to mothering came further opportunities to be considered deviant, noncompliant, or simply incompetent. Indeed, the dominance of childrearing experts is identified by Ladd-Taylor and Umansky as one of the "aspects of modern American life [which] exacerbated mother-blaming in the twentieth century.[276]" With Progressive Era zeal, maternalists argued for welfare services to help mothers in need and fought to enact pro-child legislation such as the regulation and eventual abolition of child labor. But in enacting certain (laudable) policies, distinctions were inevitably made which crystalized delineations of appropriate and inappropriate behavior.[277] Unsurprisingly, women already marginalized by class or ethnicity were all the more so when it came to evaluating their motherhoods.

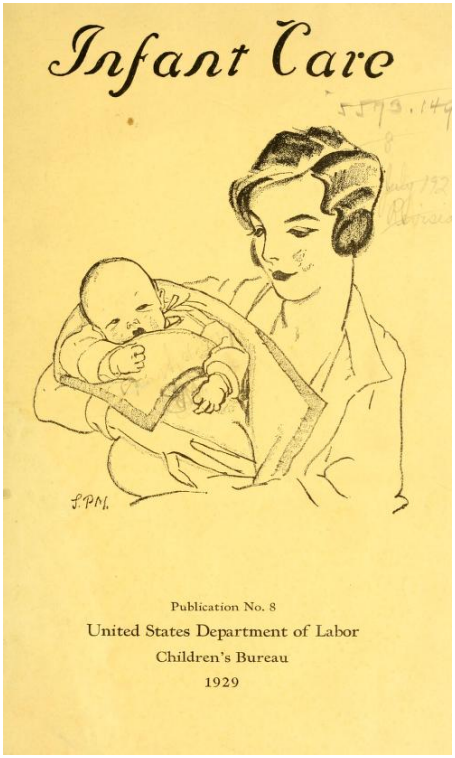

Figure 31 The 1929 edition of the popular Infant Care baby manual

In the early decades of the twentieth century, xenophobia and fears of overpopulation combined in distinct ways to distinguish ideologically acceptable mothers and motherhoods from the rest. Social workers, for example working in immigrant neighborhoods, instructed women not to swaddle babies or give them certain foods such as garlic and other spicy fare. Mothers' pensions were available mostly to widows who were found to maintain suitable homes, not women bearing children out of wedlock or divorcees. African American and immigrant mothers who worked were scolded by child welfare agencies as were mothers who, also due to economic necessity, sent their children

[276] Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 10. The two other aspects identified by the authors are "the growth of state power, and the flux in gender roles manifested in the growing number of women in the work force and in feminist movements."
[277] For example, pensions for mothers were made available to those women who were deemed eligible after evaluation by social workers. Mothers who did not provide an appropriate environment were not eligible. Similarly, the social reformist zeal to aid immigrant women through education about hygiene and childcare had the effect of explicitly marginalizing these women and their mothering.

out to work. Women who were designated insane or "feebleminded" bore the greatest brunt of the state's power in dictating maternal policy through forced sterilization. These laws, meant to weed out "unfit" mothers, were upheld by the Supreme Court in 1927 and by 1939 had resulted in over 30 000 sterilizations throughout the United States.[278]

Meanwhile early twentieth-century child-care experts such as pediatrician Luther Emmett Holt and behavioral psychologist John Watson published influential treatises on how to best raise babies and children. Holt's 1894 *The Care and Feeding of Children* was reprinted twelve times over the following decades. The Department of Labor's Children's Bureau manual, *Infant Care,* first published in 1914 was even more popular.[279] It helpfully warns:

> the parents must remember that the character building of their child is closely tied up with the way his physical needs are met. His future mental health, as well as physical health, will depend largely on the habits he builds during the first year of life, especially the early months. Some of these habits can be started as soon as the baby is born.[280]

In spite of this excerpt's gender-neutral language, in the entire illustrated 120-page manual, there is one image of a father who is pictured curiously peering at the newborn child in a bassinette from a safe distance while the baby's mother reassuringly puts a hand on his shoulder. The only other image of a man in this guide is a doctor examining the child in his office. Both the doctor and the baby are referred to throughout the manual with masculine pronouns. Under the chapter titled "The Sick Baby," all pretense of shared parental responsibility is discarded as the first section is entitled *What a Mother Should Note*. Thus, even the language used by the federal government indicates that child-rearing was the near-exclusive domain and responsibility of the female parent. Consequently, when things appeared to go awry, it was logically the mother's fault.

More explicitly, Watson's 1928 *Psychological Care of Infants and Children* was cynically dedicated to the "first mother who brings up a happy child[281]" suggesting that this woman did not yet exist but could, perhaps, after buying and thoroughly reading his book. His fetishism for dispassionate, scientific, behavior-based child-rearing was so complete that he longed for a time

[278] Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 12.
[279] Thurer, 235.
[280] United States Department of Labor, Children's Bureau, *Child Care* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Publishing Office, 1929), 1.
[281] Quoted in Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 11.

when parents (mothers) would become completely unnecessary and castigated mothers who showed too much (or any) affection for their children lest they become spoiled. The shift in focus from the child's physical health to the child's mental health is, in part, thanks to precisely the type of educational information these guides provided for mothers: as knowledge of the spread of disease was understood and utilized, as sterilization and eventually, vaccinations and antibiotics were developed to vanquish childhood disease and drastically reduce infant mortality, conceptual space was created to worry less about the child's physical survival and more about his or her healthy emotional and mental development. Concerns for *physical* stability, normality and thriving were displaced onto concerns for *psychological* stability, normality and thriving. The experts were there to give advice, as well.

II.1.2. The Advent of Psychoanalysis

Freudian theories were not immediately of interest to the American public, smitten as it was with scientific "assembly-line mothering.[282]" And scholars remain divided over these theories' actual contribution to mothers, to how mothers were viewed, as well as to how mothers viewed themselves. Thurer notes that one of Sigmund Freud's greatest contributions was in moving "fathers to the fore in the drama of child development. This had the advantage of sparing mothers from blame for mental illness in their children […] but it also trivialized their contribution to their children's lives.[283]" Badinter disagrees, suggesting that "the psychoanalytic discourse largely contributed to making the mother the central figure of the family.[284]"

Thorny distinctions must be teased out between the actual writings of Sigmund Freud (which were themselves subject to his own reworking and reinterpretation), the reworkings and reinterpretations of his various critics and disciples, and the resulting ideas and theories which trickled into popular culture through vulgarizations not only on the part of experts such as psychologists, pediatricians and child development specialists but also through newspaper and magazine articles, advice columns and later, radio and television programs. The extent that Freud's

[282] Thurer, 240.
[283] *Ibid*.
[284] Badinter, 302. « Le discours psychanalytique a largement contribué à faire de la mère le personnage central de la famille. » My translation.

original theoretical inquiries were ever or remain the basis for what may be collectively and popularly referred to as Freudianism, or perhaps more precisely pop-Freudianism, is unclear, although it seems that what may be thought of as classic psychoanalysis in the popular imagination has relatively little in common with Freud's actual writings. So, the interpretations of the two scholars are indeed compatible. Sigmund Freud did not have a lot to say about the role of mothers in his theory and, importantly, in his analysis of his neurotic patients. Yet, subsequent reworkings of Freudian theory by later psychoanalysts envisioned a more significant and consequential maternal role.

How, then, can Thurer suggest that Freud "set in motion ideas that would forever change the face of motherhood,[285]" while at the same time claiming that Freud's "true legacy" to mothers was "their benignity;" relegated as they were to a supporting role in the family drama?[286] The answer is complex but merits explanation. One of Freud's theories which caught the attention of future psychoanalysts and was of particular influence on child development experts was drive theory. Put very simply, the infant and young child was subject to impulses that were "natural, expectable and amoral[287]" and neurosis was the abnormal or unhealthy fixation on or manifestation of frustrations related to these impulses and desires. From there, misunderstandings, misreadings and updated interpretations of drive theory seemed to suggest that frustrating a child's natural drives and desires could and would lead to psychopathological behavior. It became incumbent, then, on mothers as primary caretakers to display great empathy and patience with their children, and, after World War II, the key to child-rearing became *permissiveness*. Eschewing the timetables and routines of scientific motherhood, young mothers were encouraged to interpret the needs and desires of their babies and young children and to respond to them with empathy and care. Thurer writes:

> Freud's benign, ineffectual mother did not remain benign and ineffectual for long. For better or worse, following WWII, Freud's followers (including his daughter, Anna) replaced her with a far more powerful and potentially malevolent model. Suddenly mother was of great moment. Whatever she did during baby's first years became the strongest factor in its development. By the end of the decade mother was held to be the cause of her children's miseries, and, indeed, of the ills that beset humankind. Given the magnitude of her responsibilities, it is no wonder that mother became self-conscious about her performance.[288]

[285] Thurer, 240.
[286] *Ibid*, 247.
[287] *Ibid*, 244.
[288] *Ibid*, 247.

While it may be tempting to reduce the entire twentieth-century enterprise of mother blaming to Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic disciples, this view is simply too reductionist and speaks more to the confusion and misinterpretation surrounding psychoanalysis in the American imagination than to any careful reading of Freudian theory. In reality, mother-blaming discourses in the twentieth-century arise out of a far more nuanced set of processes combining not only the theories of psychoanalysts from varied (and sometimes competing) schools of thought but also the burgeoning mass media (print, then radio and television) with its desire to widely spread often sensationalist information within profit-making business models, other medical professions intent on keeping up to date with the latest scientific theories, as well as families and mothers themselves eager to do the best for their progeny and increasingly worried that they were falling short. As we have seen, there was no shortage of guilt-inducing discourses facing mothers even before psychoanalytic thinking took hold in the mainstream American imagination.[289]

Mothers, who had been urged to follow scientific regimens in their child-rearing practices, were now encouraged to do almost precisely the opposite. Permissiveness was the key word that took hold in the mid-twentieth century as experts, drawing on drive theory, warned mothers that children's fragile egos may be harmed by too much frustration. Gone were the instructions to inculcate discipline from the earliest moments. It was much healthier for children to be allowed to follow their natural instincts. The good mother was no longer supposed to impose schedules on her child, but instead follow her child's natural one. The inversion in authority was nearly complete: from the in-charge, emotionally stoic mother inflicting eating and sleeping timetables on her young charge whose needs were to be vigilantly contained and compartmentalized to the loving, ever-tolerant mother who need only furnish the appropriate stimulation then get out of the way to let her naturally all-knowing child lead the way. The only actor who managed to maintain

[289] However, Badinter reminds us that early psychoanalysts did not seek to blame mothers in a moral sense. On the contrary, the medicalized discourse of psychoanalysis served to depersonalize the problem: "The bad mother is no longer personally responsible, in the moral sense of the term, because a sort of psychopathological bad luck may weigh on her." This mother is less bad than simply unable to mother according to a psychoanalytically-defined definition of normal mothering because she herself has been frustrated somehow, the victim of an unsatisfactory feminine upbringing. This explains why many psychoanalysts recommended (and modern therapists still may recommend) that mothers undergo their own analysis when they consulted experts for their children. Badinter, 303. « La mauvaise mère n'est donc plus personnellement responsable, au sens moral du terme, car une sorte de malédiction psychopathologique peut peser sur elle. »

his place in this hierarchy of authority was the ever-present expert who continued to offer (sell) his advice to women who were just as eager, in an increasingly consumerist society, to buy it.

With permissiveness now all the rage in child-rearing, mid-century psychoanalysts emphasized intuitive and instinctual mother-love as the basis for healthy child development and families:

> The psychoanalysts had constructed the ideal mother to go with the permissively raised child – one who would find passionate fulfillment in the details of child care. Through her newfound biological instincts, this new "libidinal mother" was an even better match than the "household engineer" for the liberated child of permissive theory. Not only would she naturally fulfill her child's needs, but she would find her *own* fulfillment only in meeting the needs of the child. The libidinal mother would rejoice in pregnancy and breastfeeding. She would seek no richer companionship than that of her own child, no more serious concern than the daily details of child care. She instinctively needed her child as much as her child needed her. She would avoid outside commitments so as not to "miss" a fascinating stage of development, or "deprive" herself of a rewarding phase of motherhood. No longer would motherhood be reckoned as a "duty" or child raising as a disciplined profession. Instead, mother and child could enjoy each other, fulfilling one another's needs perfectly, instinctively, as if Nature in her infinite wisdom had created them, two happily matched consumers consuming each other.[290]

This newfound emphasis on maternal instinct would serve as yet another cudgel with which to differentiate the good mother from the deviant, pathological, bad one. The stress put on instinct would be particularly guilt-inducing for many as instincts can neither be learned nor faked. A number of expert works from mid-twentieth century America attest to the trend of blaming mothers for their own inadequacies and, directly related, for those of their children, including Philip Wylie's *Generation of Vipers* (1942), David Levy's *Maternal Overprotection* (1943), Margaret Ribble's *The Rights of Infants* (1943), and Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham's *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* (1947), "a pop-Freudian diatribe against women.[291]"

The studies of two European psychoanalysts working during the post-World War II era held particular sway over American child-rearing experts. The Austrian American René Spitz and the British John Bowlby separately conducted research on orphans which demonstrated the dire consequences for babies and young children who were neglected and uncared for in institutionalized settings. The alarming results seemed to prove the frightening consequences of

[290] Ehrenreich and English, 243.
[291] *Ibid*, 259.

"maternal deprivation" for Spitz and confirmed the need for effective maternal "attachment" in early life for Bowlby. The research of both men, whose work was based on the highly specific conditions of post-war Europe, became influential to child development experts in the middle-class United States and was used to proclaim and reaffirm the necessity of healthy and immediate mother-child bonding as well as to confirm the need for a constant maternal presence in a child's life thereby precluding the needs and wants of mothers themselves; a particularly guilt-inducing discourse for those women who had no choice but to leave their children to go to work.

René Spitz would go on to publish in 1965 *The First Year of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study of Normal and Deviant Development of Object Relations*, an extension of his 1951 article, "The Psychogenic Diseases of Infancy – an Attempt at their Etiologic Classification," which attempted to associate purportedly abnormal childhood disturbances with a corresponding unhealthy maternal behavior such as Primary Anxious Overpermissiveness, Hostility in the Guise of Manifest Anxiety, Oscillation Between Pampering and Hostility, Cyclical Mood Swings, and Hostility Consciously Compensated. These maternal comportments, according to Spitz, resulted in three-month old colic, infantile eczema, infant rocking, fecal play, and hyperthymic children, respectively.[292] Bowlby's 1951 *Maternal Care and Mental Health* was republished in 1953 for a wider audience under the title *Child Care and the Growth of Love* which became a best seller and was the basis for the attachment theory parenting which influenced future child-care expert gurus from Dr. Benjamin Spock to T. Berry Brazelton.

Throughout this period, psychoanalysts of various stripes held mothers to be responsible for all manner of ills which befell their young and even adult children. Harry Stack Sullivan and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann "traced schizophrenia back to the relationship with a 'bad' or 'schizophrenogenic' mother.[293]" Child psychologists Leo Kanner and Bruno Bettelheim suggested that cold and detached mothers were one of the causes of autism giving rise to that most wretched of expressions, the "refrigerator mother," although Kanner later nuanced his position. Meanwhile, the British pediatrician, psychoanalyst, and author of *Mother and Child: A Primer of First Relationships* (1957), D.W. Winnicott, helpfully pointed out that a mother need not be perfect, she just needed to be "good enough." What entailed being good enough, however, was an exhaustive

[292] *Ibid*, 249.
[293] Thurer, 282.

laundry list of qualities difficult for even the most devoted and privileged American mother to fulfill.

Holding individual mothers responsible for the ills of their children did not exclude others from holding mothers, as a group, responsible for the ills of society at large. As early as 1942, in the aforementioned best-seller, *Generation of Vipers*, Philip Wylie identified "Momism" as a great risk to American masculinity and the United States in its entirety:

> […] megaloid momworship has got completely out of hand. Our land, subjectively mapped, would have more silver cords and apron strings criss-crossing it than railroads and telephone wires. Mom is everywhere and everything and damned near everybody, and from her depends all the rest of the U.S. disguised as good old mom, dear old mom, sweet old mom, your loving mom, and so on, she is the bride at every funeral and the corpse at every wedding.[294]

None other than the psychiatric consultant to the Surgeon General of the United States Army and Navy, Dr. Edward Strecker, contributed to the national conversation concerning motherhood. Alarmed at the nearly 3 million (out of 15 million) young American men rejected or discharged from the armed forces during World War II for neuropsychiatric causes, Strecker wrote, in his 1946 opus, *Their Mother's Sons: The Psychiatrist Examines an American Problem*, the

> mom is a woman whose maternal behavior is motivated by the seeking of emotional recompense for the buffets which life has dealt her own ego. In her relationship with her children, every deed and almost every breath are designed unconsciously but exclusively to absorb her children emotionally and to bind them to her securely […] Anything children need or want, mom will cheerfully get for them. It is the perfect home […] Failing to find a comparable peaceful haven in the outside world, it is quite likely that one or more of the brood will remain in or return to the happy home, forever enwombed.[295]

If the "undermothering" of emotionally reserved and undemonstrative refrigerator mothers was responsible for one set of societal problems, "overmothering" on the part of the emotionally smothering, overprotective mothers was responsible for another set, one which was particularly threatening to American men. Indeed, even FBI director J. Edgar Hoover suggested that

[294] Quoted in Ehrenreich and English, 260.
[295] Quoted in Friedan, 223-224.

communists and other subversives including homosexual men were "the products of 'neurotic' mothers.[296]"

Ultimately, as Thurer notes, "the pervasiveness of mother blaming in psychoanalytic theory after Freud is too extensive to be overlooked, even if it was not expressly meant as a blanket indictment of all mothers.[297]" What is undeniable is that Freudian theories and their multiple psychoanalytic offshoots offered a vocabulary which proved to be particularly useful throughout the twentieth century to hold mothers almost exclusively responsible for not only the physical but also the psychological health of their offspring. If abnormalities were detected, those were the exclusive responsibility of mothers as well.

If this newly available vocabulary aimed at mothers and motherhood resonated to the extent that it did, it was undoubtedly because a number of other factors were converging which lent urgency to the cause of mother-blaming. Mothering was, and is, a lightning rod for all manner of anxieties including fears about the moral, physical and psychological health of America's youth, loosening sexual mores and shifting gender roles, the transition to a fully consumer-capitalist society, the decline in the role of religion, and the continuing assimilation and integration of immigrants and African-Americans among others into mainstream America. Mothers have been a prime target for those seeking easy and quick blame in lieu of understanding the complex multiplicity of dynamics which underscore these societal shifts.

Strikingly, throughout the vast period that we have surveyed, there were very few instances of resistance, as if the vocabulary of mother-blame was not able to generate an alternative discourse to explain or defend the choices, circumstances and forces which lead to the immeasurable range of women, mothers and their mothering practices (including not-mothering). One of these voices did arrive in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 and translated into English in 1953. This translation was one of the inspirations for Betty Friedan's 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, often credited with igniting American feminism's Second Wave. Friedan's best-seller pinpoints, among other observations, the pernicious role of psychoanalysis in constructing the bad mother:

> Under the Freudian microscope […] singled out for special attention was the "mother." It was suddenly discovered that the mother could be blamed for almost

[296] Vandenberg-Daves, 178.
[297] Thurer, 280.

> everything. In every case history of troubled child; alcoholic, suicidal, schizophrenic, psychopathic, neurotic adult; impotent, homosexual male; frigid, promiscuous female; ulcerous, asthmatic, and otherwise disturbed American, could be found a mother. A frustrated, repressed, disturbed, martyred, never satisfied, unhappy woman. A demanding, nagging, shrewish wife. A rejecting, overprotecting, dominating mother.[298]

Friedan's was perhaps the first widely read work in the United States to recognize the trend of mother blaming and acknowledge its sometimes devastating consequences. And while her identification of "the problem that has no name" inspired a movement, it did not necessarily stop the identification of individual bad mothers, nor the trend of blaming mothers and women *en masse* for the perceived problems of America's youth. It did, however, contribute to laying the groundwork for major societal changes including widespread access to birth control and government guaranteed universal access to abortion.

II.1.3 Birth Control, Abortion and Motherhood

Women have always struggled to limit their fertility, but in the modern period, knowledge of and access to birth control in the United States had been severely restricted by the 1873 Comstock Law,[299] a federal regulation which, along with similar state legislation, prohibited the circulation of information about birth control and abortion in a purported attempt to combat obscenity and immorality. These laws and the ideology that accompanied them, meant that for decades women and mothers had very little control over their fertility and relied on careful planning, luck, and, if necessary, illicit information and intervention. Margaret Sanger who opened the first birth control clinic in New York City in 1916, was jailed for protesting the Comstock Law. The Supreme Court did not invalidate all versions of Comstock Laws until 1972, marking a 100-year reign in the existence of these laws which forbade women from accessing information that could lead to their reproductive freedom.

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[298] Friedan, 220.

[299] In reference to the Postmaster General, and evangelical Christian, Anthony Comstock. The legislation, sponsored by Comstock, was actually entitled: Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use. It forbade circulation by the Postal Service of materials including details about birth control and abortion, effectively curbing the circulation of information. Some states made it illegal to have conversations about such topics as well as to be in possession of written instructions. Vandenberg-Daves, 62

Abortion, which had been practiced widely if not commonly by women seeking to terminate pregnancies, was also victim to the moralizing crusade of Victorian America. Practitioners in male-dominated disciplines such as obstetrics and gynecology, as well as professional associations such as the American Medical Association (AMA), actively campaigned to eradicate abortion on moral grounds but also, as Vandenberg-Daves points out, to distinguish themselves from midwives and other "non-doctors" who did perform abortions. An opinion from the AMA's 1871 Committee on Criminal Abortion suggests the extent to which women who sought abortion care were perceived as shirking their maternal responsibilities – an opinion not entirely without resonance in some circles still today:

> She becomes unmindful of the course marked out for her by Providence, she overlooks the duties imposed upon her by the marriage contract. She yields to the pleasures – but shrinks from the pains and responsibilities of maternity […] She sinks into old age like a withered tree, stripped of its foliage; with the stain of blood upon her soul, she dies without the hand of affection to sooth her soul.[300]

In spite of the criminalization of abortion as well as the circulation of information about it and birth control, the birth rate for white middle-class women continued to decline throughout this period suggesting that women were ever more eager to limit their fertility, were adept at circulating their knowledge through informal means and were willing to get the information they needed even if it meant breaking the law.

However, this decline in the fertility rate brought with it additional anxieties as birth rates among immigrant women continued to outpace native-born white American women. President Theodore Roosevelt maintained that the middle-class white women who did not (or could not) choose motherhood or who did not have enough children were "criminal against the race.[301]" A continued demand for access to birth control among both immigrant and native-born American women persuaded the AMA to endorse its use if prescribed by a physician in 1937, a year after the Supreme Court made this legal. Abortion, meanwhile, was relegated to illegal interventions performed in often dangerous conditions or to hospitals in major cities where women were often obliged to receive a psychiatric diagnosis by a panel of experts before being permitted to terminate a pregnancy.

[300] *Ibid*., 61-62.
[301] Quoted in Vandenberg-Daves, 132.

Full reproductive freedom for American women, theoretically achieved in the 1970s thanks to the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, liberated women from mandatory motherhood. However, while access to birth control has gradually grown less controversial, the struggle to ensure that abortion remains legal and accessible is far from resolved and reflects the ever-present nexus of anxieties surrounding women, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class and motherhood.

II.1.4. Second Wave Feminism and Motherhood: A Contentious Relationship

The influence of Feminism's Second Wave on motherhood is complex and we do not pretend that the issue can be adequately addressed in this restricted space. However, the movement was able to give voice to, lend a vocabulary, and create a forum for those women who were unsatisfied with hegemonic, heteronormative motherhood, as well as for those who did not want to or could not become mothers at all. Two particular strands of Second Wave feminisms may be identified which carried very different, even opposing, messages concerning motherhood. Some feminists embraced motherhood or potential motherhood as the dynamic which united all women, and which belied a fundamental difference between women and men. This strand of *difference feminism*, criticized today for essentializing differences which are now viewed as socially constructed, culminated in works which suggested that women thought and behaved differently from men based on women's purportedly different approaches to morality (Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, 1982) and specifically, woman's role as mother (Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*, 1990). Gilligan's and Ruddick's works, steeped in the ethics of care, may be viewed as problematic in that they universalize particular modes of thinking and behavior (often based on the mothering experience) to *all* women and lend support to those who would argue that women are *naturally* born to the role, underscoring much of what many feminists tried to contest.

On the other hand, certain radical feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone were among those who rejected the motherhood role altogether as one which inevitably led to women's subjugation in a society based on patriarchal values. Firestone, in her 1970, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, identified reproduction and the gendered division of labor as the root cause of female oppression. Her work asserted that equality would only be assured for women when artificial reproduction, collective child-rearing and the end of the

nuclear family model had become routine. Jeffner Allen, suggests in her essay "Motherhood, The Annihilation of Women" that motherhood can only exist within patriarchy, and as such must inevitably lead to women's subjugation. These thinkers may alienate the millions of women who are mothers or who desire to become mothers and who do not necessarily believe that equality must come at the expense of a cherished and fulfilling role.

Motherhood, then, proposes something of a conundrum for feminists by pitting outspoken radical voices against equally outspoken maternalist voices and leaving plenty of mothers, who enjoy the maternal relationship but not necessarily all the concomitant restrictions of patriarchy, in limbo. Within this discordant space, the opportunity is created to discredit not only feminist goals of equality but also to put further pressure on what may or may not be considered appropriate mothering behavior. It is this breach which seems to be perfectly exploited in the late decades of the twentieth century and early decades of the twenty-first when motherhood continues to be a lightning rod for the opposing forces of Culture War politics in the United States.

II.1.5. Culture War Politics and Motherhood

As we have seen, in 1965 then-assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a politically liberal Democrat from New York, submitted his report on the African American family structure entitled, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Referring to these families as a "matriarchate" and a "tangled web of pathologies," Moynihan pessimistically concluded that the high rates of poverty and unemployment prevalent in black communities would continue and even increase as long as this particular family structure was in place. The image of the "disintegrating" African American family gained political and cultural traction throughout the late twentieth century, culminating in the stereotype of the black welfare mother or "welfare queen," typically an unwed, unemployed African American mother who continued to reproduce in order to collect government benefits with which she could maintain a lavish lifestyle, free even to use or abuse illicit substances. Then-presidential candidate Ronald Reagan was the first politician to exploit this stereotype on the 1976 campaign trail and again, more successfully in 1980.[302] This was a

[302] Reports suggest that Reagan may have loosely based his oft-used campaign trail story about a welfare woman playing the system on a 47-year old Chicago native although it is thought that he wildly embellished the details. He claimed that she had "80 names, 30 addresses,12 Social Security cards. ... She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over $150,000." While

particularly pernicious stereotype playing on racist, sexist and classist fears that poor and minority women were ruthlessly and fraudulently manipulating a system for their personal benefit. Over time this view coagulated into support for welfare reform legislation which was created by congressional Republicans and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1996.

The national discourse surrounding welfare reform, and the role that the welfare mother played, is indicative of the motherhood-as-lightning rod dynamic which plays out throughout this period and which places blame on individual mothers and mothers as a group in political clashes set off over topics as diverse as racial tensions, religion and abortion, technological innovation, sexual orientation, infertility and adoption, immigration and even popular culture, including the sitcom. The ability to cultivate and manipulate anger by mobilizing racist ideas surrounding the supposedly indigent African American mother is one example of how this dynamic played out in the context of the United States' torturous relationship to race relations.

Technological innovation and particularly technologies related to reproduction have pushed boundaries, forced ethical questions and created new ways of envisioning motherhood as both normal and abnormal, good and bad.[303] A typical example may be found in the controversy surrounding the infamous Baby M surrogacy case which was first brought to the public's attention in 1987. Mary Beth Whitehead agreed to be a surrogate for William and Elizabeth Stern. Whitehead was inseminated with Stern's sperm and gave birth to the child in 1986 but refused to give the baby to the couple. The Sterns filed a complaint charging that Whitehead was in breach of the contract she had entered into with Stern. The drama unfolded over several months and was widely reported, riveting public opinion and dividing the nation. A 1988 ABC television miniseries based on the events was popular and earned Emmy and Golden Globe nominations. The judge's decision was based on the best interests of the child, meaning that the question lay in the fitness of Whitehead as a mother. Tapes played during the trial of Whitehead threatening to "take [the baby's] life away" to keep her out of the hands of the Sterns convinced the judge to award custody to the couple. Eventually Whitehead was granted visitation rights which the child, Melissa Stern, legally severed once she reached adulthood.

Reagan never specified her race, he didn't necessarily have to. "People assumed she was black because of rhetorical clues Reagan dropped," says John Hinshaw, a history professor at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. Quoted in, John Blake, "Return of the 'Welfare Queen.'"
https://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/23/politics/weflare-queen/index.html

[303] These technologies have also brought countless children into the lives of those who were once unable to conceive. This topic will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Four.

The case stands out for inciting a national debate about issues of surrogacy, parenthood and motherhood in the wake of the arrival of reproductive technologies which opened the door to a reconfiguration of the traditional nuclear family script. In terms of mothering, both women involved in this case were at times brought to task for not responding to ideals of good motherhood and these questions touched on adjacent issues of class and consumerism as well. Whitehead, a high-school drop-out married to a truck driver, had agreed to be paid $10,000 to have the baby for the Sterns. The Sterns were a professional, highly educated couple, William, a biochemist and Elizabeth, a pediatrician. If Mary Beth Whitehead was portrayed by the media as an uneducated and overly emotional, unstable woman, Elizabeth Stern also came under scrutiny as remote, cold and selfish because she was not willing to put her own health at risk (Stern had multiple sclerosis) to have her own baby.

Cases of similar cultural impact, though they resonate for different reasons, occurred throughout the following decades including the case of Susan Smith, a young Southern white woman, who reported her two young children missing after having been, so she claimed, carjacked by a black man. In fact, it was Smith herself who reversed her own car into a lake, drowning her two sons in the process. The media portrayed Smith as having acted out of selfish impulse in a futile effort to win the affections of a man who had recently ended a relationship with her. While Smith claims this was never her real motive, there was no public sympathy for the 23-year-old woman with a troubled childhood, with the exception, perhaps, of the jury members who voted to sentence her to thirty years in prison instead of the death penalty. Similarly, there was very little public sympathy, although the media did a better job of contextualizing the events, in the case of Andrea Yates, a Texas mother of five young children who was convicted of capital murder for their 2001 deaths after she drowned each of them in the bathtub of the family home. Yates' conviction was later overturned on appeal and she was acquitted by reason of insanity after a thorough investigation revealed a long history of troubled mental health including battles with schizophrenia and postpartum depression and psychosis. Yates would spend the rest of her life in a minimum-security mental health facility. If these cases captured national and international attention, violence is not the only element which seems to inspire the public's fascination in situations of maternal newsworthiness.

In 2009 Nadya Suleman gave birth to what is as of this writing the world's only surviving set of octuplets. Quickly dubbed the Octomom, Suleman almost instantly became the object of

public scorn and derision when it was learned that she had undergone in-vitro fertilization with twelve embryos as a single mother on food stamps who already had six children. An unemployed woman of color with fourteen children seemed instantly to reignite public reactions similar to those associated with the welfare queen of decades earlier suggesting that anxieties surrounding motherhood, race and class have yet to be fully resolved.

II.1.6. The Bad Mother as Scapegoat

Whatever the circumstances, as Ladd-Taylor and Umansky point out, those accused by society of being bad mothers tend to fall into three categories, "those who did not live in a 'traditional' nuclear family; those who would not or could not protect their children from harm; and those whose children went wrong.[304]" In their conclusion, the two authors suggest that, at its most basic level, "the 'bad' mother serves as a scapegoat, a repository for social or physical ills that resist easy explanation or solution. Scapegoating, as a process, does not engage principles of equity or evenhandedness; it seeks pockets of vulnerability.[305]" Mothers, as women in a patriarchal society, as lesser members who nonetheless bare responsibility for the future generations, are indeed vulnerable figures. Those who, thanks to class, sexual orientation, ethnicity or marital or fertility status are members of minority groups, are marginalized even further.

The mother figure, whatever her particular circumstances, becomes an easy target for those who seek, often for political or personal expediency, to place blame. As a figure in culture and literature she becomes a discursive space upon which the anxieties and worries of a particular moment may be inscribed, discussed, argued and debated. The figure has historically (with notable exceptions) been unable or unwilling to maintain agency over her personal narrative and, as such, remains vulnerable to the interpretations of others: husbands, experts, children, other mothers.

Within this cultural and historical backdrop of negative images surrounding motherhood, the fictional television series as a cultural object constructed within a consumer-commercial industry is nourished by and nourishes in turn, the dominant ideological, political, cultural and philosophical discourses of its era. Through its content, a series may adhere to and support these discourses just as it may highlight and encourage alternative ones. In the case of the sitcom, as a

[304] Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 3.
[305] *Ibid*., 22.

particular television format based on comedy, a series may appear to adhere to a particular set of discourse while subtly undermining it. Alternatively, it may seem to propose radical departures from dominant social discourses all the while reasserting these same discourses through the use of humor. An effective and popular sitcom will often manage to do both which ultimately explains its wide audience appeal and industry longevity. *Friends* is such a sitcom and we now turn to an examination of the representations of one set of mothers in this series. These maternal characters, while varied in their levels of complexity, have in common that they may be understood by viewers as being predominantly detrimental maternal figures for the characters who represent their children. What role do these bad mothers play in this sitcom? How are they constructed? Are there possible alternative interpretations for these depictions? We now turn to answering these questions by analyzing each of these maternal characters.

II. 2. Bad Mothers in *Friends*

If, in spite of the fact that any mother may at some point in history and in culture be targeted as a bad mother who is somehow failing to adhere to some part of the complex standards to which she is held, it is mothers of certain minority groups who are more likely to be subject to these negative characterizations, one may imagine that, as fictional characters, the particular group of maternal figures in *Friends* might be spared much negative representation. After all, these mothers are not African American, poor, dependent on welfare, overt drug users or any of the other things that have historically been used to label women as bad mothers. Yet, as we shall see, in each particular case, the sitcom does manage, implicitly and explicitly, to excavate, out of even the most hegemonically constructed representations of motherhood, material which serves to marginalize them in an effort to mine these secondary characters for humor, the fundamental intent of the sitcom genre.

This process is heavily dependent on stereotyping. In his 1922 *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann coined this term which, as he describes at length, is fundamentally a mechanism for bringing order and stability to "the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world.[306]" This

[306] Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 2012, *1922*), 63.

"economy of effort[307]" is a "short-cut[308]" which allows for the speedy synthesis of the otherwise unintelligible amount of real-life information with which we are constantly confronted. Richard Dyer points out that Lippmann's understanding and explanation of stereotypes was far from the overwhelmingly negative connotation today's usage usually suggests. For Lippmann, as Dyer explains, "this activity of ordering, including the use of stereotypes, has to be acknowledged as a necessary, indeed inescapable, part of the way societies make sense of themselves, and hence actually make and reproduces themselves.[309]" In Lippmann's view, stereotypes are indispensable sense-making phenomena which act to categorize and render intelligible complex and nuanced data which would otherwise be overwhelming.

In addition, Lippmann identifies a second important function of stereotypes of particular importance in this examination of motherhood in *Friends*. They are essentially, a defense mechanism which serves to defend one's position in society:

> They are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. We know the way around. There we find the charm of the familiar, the normal, the dependable; its grooves and shapes are where we are accustomed to find them. And though we have abandoned much that might have tempted us before we creased ourselves into that mould, once we are firmly in, it fits as snugly as an old shoe.[310]

Stereotypes then may not be entirely accurate, but they are quick and easy, familiar and comforting explanations of the confused world in which we live and thereby persist in cultural representations, particularly in the sitcom which must convey complex information in short, comprehensible episodes without the luxury of expansive narrative arcs available to television dramas, for example. Significantly, Lippmann also makes reference to "what we have abandoned," what is cast aside and left unsaid or unexamined by the inevitable, complex deletions of reality that stereotyping implies. Their deceptive simplicity serves to underscore what Dyer identifies as "the most important function of the stereotype: to maintain sharp boundary definitions, to define clearly

[307] *Ibid*, 73.
[308] Dyer, 12.
[309] *Ibid*.
[310] Lippmann, 73.

where the pale ends and thus who is clearly within and who clearly beyond it.[311]" Which is to say that stereotypes have a normalizing function delineating appropriate from inappropriate, good from bad, odd from ordinary. Turning to our analysis of maternal characters in *Friends*, we will take note of how particular stereotypes may be employed to construct particular meanings.

II.2.1. Judy Geller: Jewish Mother?

We will begin our discussion of these mothers with the first explicitly maternal character[312] to appear in this sitcom, Judy Geller. Judy, played by the British theater, film and television actress, Christina Pickles, is the wife of Jack Geller and the mother of *Friends* characters Ross and his sister Monica. Prior to her role in *Friends*, Pickles was best known for her role as the nurse Helen Rosenthal in the television medical drama *St. Elsewhere* (NBC, 1982-1988). In *Friends*, she appears in 19 of the series' 239 episodes and as such is one of the show's most frequent guest stars. Judy is of particular interest in this study in that she is the only mother who is shown to interact with more than one of her children throughout the sitcom's diegesis. Judy's representation is enriched and complexified, and indeed, constructs meaning thanks to the character's comparable treatment of her two children, a situation which is not made possible for any of the other mothers in this series.

In many ways Judy is reminiscent of Margaret Anderson or June Cleaver, mothers from the classic sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver*. Judy Geller is a white, upper middle-class mother from the suburbs outside of New York City, married with two children. We learn from her husband Jack that Judy stayed at home with her children, that it was she who "really did all the work" while Jack "was busy with the business.[313]" No mention of a job or any other activity is mentioned in relation to Judy despite the fact that she appears throughout the series' ten-year run. Yet Judy is ascribed certain characteristics which fly in the face of a normative view of mothering, particularly in how she relates to each of her two children. Indeed, Judy Geller is represented as being profoundly biased in favor of her older son Ross at the

[311] Dyer, 16.
[312] I make this precision because I believe that the character of Monica Geller is in fact the first maternal character and the predominant one throughout the series. Indeed, her character was conceived as such. She is not, at this point in the series, a mother in the sense of having given birth to or been charged with caring for a child character.
[313] Season One, Episode Sixteen, "The One with Two Parts-Part 1."

expense of younger daughter Monica. Supportive and in admiration of everything Ross accomplishes, she is consistently hypercritical of Monica who makes no secret of suffering from this lack of consideration. The theme of Judy's unfair treatment of Monica begins in one of the show's very first episodes and is used to humorous purposes throughout the series. Moments of genuine kindness and affection toward Monica are rare and Judy's appearances on the sitcom are often dominated by her hyperbolic veneration of Ross. In addition, Judy is portrayed as being exceedingly preoccupied with Monica's physical appearance as well as her daughter's behavior. The few occasions where she treats Ross as disparagingly as Monica occur when Ross' behavior does not correspond to what Judy has interiorized as socially normative.

Through the favoritism that she exhibits for her first child and only son, Ross, Judy's representation aligns her with the stereotypical Jewish mother, a maternal figure whose presence evolved throughout twentieth-century American culture.[314] Joyce Antler suggests that, "Because of its persistence and versatility, the Jewish mother image is in fact the dominant Jewish American stereotype – with more energetic and longer life than the JAP **[**Jewish American Princess**]** idea or negative images of Jewish men such as the schlemiel.[315]" Antler credits three themes, "tensions regarding acculturation and modernization, parent-child struggles over autonomy, and gender role imbalances" as being responsible for the fertile terrain which permits the growth of "multiple points of connection for audiences[316]" to this recurring stereotype.

In Judy's first scene (Season One, Episode Two, "The One with the Sonogram at the End") two of these elements (acculturation and struggle over autonomy) are already highlighted as this first example of a maternal figure interacts with her two children simultaneously. She disparages Monica both for her lack of professional accomplishments and for the way she maintains her home. This last point is particularly galling for Monica because the character sees herself as an extremely organized and tidy person. Judy's dismissal of Monica begins when she explains that she has suggested that the daughter of a family friend (the Ludwins' daughter) contact Monica at some point for career advice. While this could have suggested that Judy is proud of her daughter, she

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[314] Throughout much of *Friends*, the Geller family's religion remains relatively ambiguous. It is not until the later seasons that Ross and Monica are overtly identified as Jewish. In Season Seven, Episode Ten, "The One with the Holiday Armadillo," Ross makes a concerted effort to teach son Ben about Hanukkah. In Season Ten, Episode Nine, "The One with the Birth Mother," Chandler reminds Monica that she is Jewish when she falsely impersonates a Protestant reverend. This episode will be discussed in Chapter Four.

[315] Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write! A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 10.

[316] *Ibid*. 9.

soon undercuts this interpretation. When Monica asks why she will be contacted by the Ludwin daughter, Judy replies dismissively that the young woman has recently graduated from university and wants to "be in cooking or food, or I don't know." In addition, Judy has led the woman to believe that Monica owns a restaurant. At this point, Monica is forced to interject: "No Mom, I don't *have* a restaurant, I *work* in a restaurant." Judy replies, "Well, *they* don't have to know that."

This brief maternal performance has signaled several elements: Judy has been deceitful in how she characterizes Monica's professional position to the outside world, suggesting that she is embarrassed by her daughter's relative lack of status. Monica, at this early stage of her career, is indeed an assistant chef in a New York restaurant but this does not seem to be impressive enough to the mother character who does not just embellish the daughter's position but leads the family friends to believe an outright lie, that Monica is a restaurant owner signifying not just a more lucrative financial position but also a more respectable one including greater responsibility and status. The character also subverts conventions of maternal morality by signaling that lying is acceptable in order to preserve the family's appearances of prestige and respectability. Judy's obvious scorn towards Monica underscores her favoritism of her older child, Ross, who holds a PhD in paleontology, regularly publishes papers in scientific journals and, in the early seasons of *Friends*, works in a museum before being offered a position as a professor at the prestigious New York University. As such Ross has fulfilled to a greater and more prestigious extent the immigrant's mythical American dream of full assimilation (as a scientist, an authority, a holder of knowledge, Ross has not just assimilated, he has indeed joined the elite rank of the experts, creating, dictating and disseminating knowledge himself) and Judy's investment as a stay-at-home mother has been more fully realized with her beloved son than with her daughter.

In this, Ross (who is referred to at work and who refers to himself as a doctor) and Judy correspond to the mother-son dynamic at play in the strand of Jewish mother jokes known as "my son, the doctor." These jokes poke fun at the smothering and overwhelming maternal and materialistic pride that Jewish mothers supposedly heap on their adult sons who have reached a certain professional status. At a deeper level, this pride may be explained as symptomatic of the acculturation processes through which Jewish immigrants passed in their assimilation into American culture. Through these jokes, Jewish mothers were ridiculed for their prideful materialism, but it was this very materialism (as represented by access to and attainment of high-status professional positions) which represented a successful transition from Old World culture to

Americanization. Professional success on the part of sons and grandsons meant that the painful processes of dislocation and assimilation into a foreign and often hostile society had been worth it.[317]

It has only taken a few minutes for the audience to fully appreciate the extent of Judy's favoritism to Ross. In these few lines Judy has managed to find fault with and belittle Monica's careful and painstaking preparations: "What's that curry taste?"; "Spaghetti. That's… easy"; the act of refluffing the already fluffed cushion. She has also shown a disparaging, dismissive attitude toward Monica's choice of a culinary career in her treatment of the Ludwins' daughter's identical decision to be "something in cooking, or food, or I don't know." By lying to the Ludwins about Monica's position at the restaurant, Judy has simultaneously implied that not only does she not respect her daughter's career choice, she is also disappointed by what she perceives as a lack of professional accomplishment on her daughter's part and she must somehow cover this lack by lying.

Furthermore, by observing that at least Rachel "had the chance to leave a man at the altar," Judy criticizes Monica for still being single, for not conforming to heteronormative standards concerning marriage and the family, and she expresses doubt as to whether Monica will ever get married. The fact that Rachel spent a significant amount of time in an unhappy relationship prior to leaving her fiancé on their wedding day is of no importance to Judy. This view is reinforced by Judy's exclamation: "What that Rachel did to her life!" as though Rachel has ruined her life in refusing to go through with a marriage that she knew would not make her happy. As such, the audience understands that for Judy, the life of an adult woman must include heterosexual marriage (preferably to a young orthodontist with high earning potential). This comment serves then, not only to criticize Monica but also to impose Judy's own view of how her daughter (and all women) should live her life. In so doing she leaves little space for Monica to imagine any possible alternatives outside of marriage: remaining single to focus on her career or hobbies, marry late, not have children, or live an alternative lifestyle with another woman.[318] An offended Monica,

[317] "In its origins, a joke about the Jewish mother boasting about her 'son, the doctor,' drew on the enormous pride of the Old-World mother that her Americanized son had achieved the immigrant's dream of success. But this joke, contemporary when it was first performed in the 1950s, also carries embedded memories of the Jewish mother's tradition of sacrifice for her beloved son." Antler, 5.

[318] Although in Season Four, Episode Three, "The One with the Cuffs," Judy hires Monica to cater a party. When Monica asks Judy why she was hired, Judy mentions Carol and Susan's wedding which Monica had previously catered commenting, "I assume you weren't sleeping with anyone there… though at least that would be something." Here

asking for clarification, is rebuffed by Judy's lie that her cynical comment is just "an expression." Monica, not to be duped, responds "No, it's not!"

It is significant that it is Jack who jumps in to defend his daughter, saying, "don't listen to your mother, you're independent and you always have been, even when you were a kid, and you were chubby, and you had no friends, you were just fine." This intervention is notable for several reasons. Firstly, his interruption eliminates the possibility that Judy respond to Monica and be held responsible for what she has said to her daughter. Secondly, the fact that Jack manages to make his daughter feel worse by reminding her of her lonely childhood masks the fact that his original intention was to comfort her (he calls her independent and says she was "fine" as a child) and that he took her side in an argument with Judy. Jack's well-intentioned intervention serves to defuse the nascent conflict between mother and daughter but in the process reflects audience attention back to him as he blunders his way through an awkward and humorous number of reasons for Monica to feel good about herself. In the process it is possible to lose sight of the fact that in this scene it was the paternal figure who attempted to nurture and comfort the upset child while the maternal one seemed intent on making her feel as badly about herself as possible while denying her true intentions.

The culmination of this scene comes after Ross finally relates the improbable situation in which he finds himself with Carol and Susan.[319] Jack and Judy listen with increasing disbelief and the representation of Judy as an outrageously unfair mother to Monica is cemented as she turns to her daughter and in shock, accusatorily demands, "And you knew about this?" Not a word is addressed to Ross about his problematic situation, which, considering Judy's fault-finding of Monica, would be likely to cause considerable comment. Instead, Judy's attention is turned entirely to her daughter. The implication is that Monica has been a bad daughter by dishonestly withholding important information and, in concentrating entirely on Monica, it is as though, in this instant, Judy cannot look at her beloved son who is in the process of so profoundly disappointing

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again, Judy belittles her daughter's romantic life (or lack thereof), to the point of teasing Monica. And while seeming to suggest a relative openness to the idea of Monica in a same-sex relationship, the audience laughter, as well as the reaction shot of a ruffled Monica, signals that we should read this attitude as being ultimately untrustworthy and that it only serves to underscore the desperation Judy feels about her daughter's marriage prospects as well as her future in general.

[319] Ross's former wife, Carol, has recently left him for another woman. In this episode, Ross has just learned that she is pregnant with his biological child and that she intends to raise the baby with her new partner, Susan. This episode and the wider narrative arc in which it is inscribed will be the subject of in-depth analysis in Chapter Three.

her expectations. In reacting this way, it is Monica who bears the brunt of her mother's disappointment despite the fact that she had nothing to do with the situation described by Ross. The unfairness and the difference in treatment displayed by Judy to her two children are blatant and undeniable and would seem to subvert cultural ideals of a fair and non-judgmental mother who loves her two children, differently perhaps, but equally nonetheless.

Figure 32 Judy criticizes Monica's cooking and (re)fluffs her daughter's pillows.

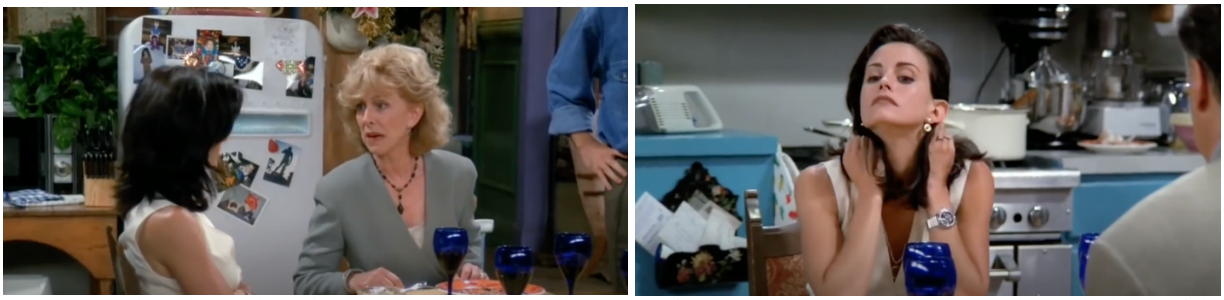

Figure 33 "And you knew about this?" Even when Ross is the source of maternal disappointment, Monica bears the brunt of their mother's criticism.

This scene exemplifies the type of behavior and attitude that come to be associated with Judy Geller throughout the series. While Jack Geller is also implicated in unfair treatment of Monica (in Season Seven, Episode Thirteen, "The One Where Rosita Dies," it is learned that he has inadvertently ruined all of her childhood memories by protecting his Porsche from the garage's annual flooding with cardboard boxes full of her toys and items while Ross' are kept neatly stacked on shelves), his behavior does not resonate in the same way. Indeed, he frequently uses an affectionate name for her, "our little Harmonica," and out of paternal love he comes to her apartment to check on her when she is in mourning after an emotional romantic breakup.[320] In addition, Jack's representation as buffoonish not only serves to exculpate him from direct blame for undue partiality towards Ross, it also serves to contrast with and foreground Judy's own lack of empathy towards her daughter. Jack can be tender to both of his children while Judy is rigid and

[320] Season Three, Episode One, "The One with the Princess Leia Fantasy."

cold to her daughter. For Judy, Ross can do no wrong, Monica can do no right. The series suggests that the reason for this unfair treatment stems from the fact that Ross was "a medical marvel." In "The One Where Rosita Dies," it is made clear that Judy was thought to be infertile, therefore Ross' birth was a miraculous surprise to the couple, perhaps especially to Judy. This polarized representation of motherhood is destabilizing and ambiguous and is classically summed up by Monica herself when she turns to her brother Ross and quips, "I know you can't choose your parents, but if you could, boy, I'd want yours.[321]"

The representation of Judy is pushed to the extreme in Season Nine, Episode Seventeen, "The One with the Memorial Service." After a tasteless prank between Ross and Chandler ends up with Ross faking his own memorial service, Ross is forced to explain the situation to his mother over the phone. The audience is privy only to Ross's side of the conversation leaving them to guess what it is that Judy may be saying:

> No, Mom, I am not dead…I know it's not something to kid about… Anyway, it was just a practical joke between Chandler and me but it's over, okay?... Actually no, even if I had died, you would not be left childless. [Audience laughter] … Monica?!

The dialogue suggests that Judy, in her distress over Ross' faked death, has completely forgotten that she is the mother of *two* children, not just Ross. In this instance, the show pushes Judy's representation as biased to its limits in suggesting the actual negation of Monica as her own daughter. A further example of her cavalier attitude toward her daughter's very existence comes in Season Nine, Episode Seven, "The One with Ross's Inappropriate Song," when Rachel, giving Phoebe advice on how to get along with her boyfriend's parents promises, "Take it from me, moms love me. Ross's mom one time actually said I am like the daughter that she never had." Monica, sitting at the table with the two other women looks at Rachel questioningly as the audience reaction of surprised laughter suggests that they understand the significance of what has just been said. Monica, in shock and disbelief queries, "She said what?" These examples, though exaggerated, work to reinforce the representation of Judy as bad mother, in this case, one who demonstrably favors one of her children over the other.

Judy's depiction as a nitpicking maternal figure for her daughter continues through the first season and reappears notably in the eighth episode, "The One where Nana Dies Twice." Ross and

[321] Season One, Episode Two, "The One with the Sonogram at the End."

Monica are urgently called to the hospital because their maternal grandmother is dying. At the hospital the brother and sister are greeted by Jack and Judy Geller as well as Judy's sister. On their arrival, the nuclear family, united in the sad anticipation of the impending death of a loved one, affectionately hug one another. Monica kindly asks Judy how she is feeling, and the mother responds appreciatively that she is fine before cocking her head to one side, taking a critical look at her daughter and asking, "what's with your hair?" Monica, nonplussed, asks for more precision and Judy obliges in a critical voice, "what's different?" The daughter responds that nothing has changed, to which Judy responds dismissively, "Oh maybe that's it." With an exasperated, "She's unbelievable," Monica seeks comfort in Ross who kindly but sarcastically reminds her that their mother is sure to bring up other sensitive subjects such as boyfriends and careers. The tone is set for one of the episode's recurrent sources of humor revolving around Monica's strained relationship with her mother.

Later as Monica, Ross and their friends get ready to leave for the grandmother's funeral, Monica reveals that Judy has phoned expressly to remind Monica not to wear her hair up because her ears are "not her best feature." Once at the funeral, Judy's not so subtle criticisms of Monica's appearance continue. As the two women walk through the graveyard after the ceremony, Monica comments that it was a lovely service and Judy agrees before warmly embracing her daughter for what appears to be a moment of genuine connection. However, the moment is undermined by Judy who, dabbing a tear off of her daughter's face with a handkerchief, suggests to Monica that, "it might be time to start using night cream." A medium shot of Monica's disbelieving face as well as audience laughter confirm that Judy's maternal behavior is out of the range of normal. These examples, focused as they are on the daughter's physical attributes, clearly illustrate the extent to which Judy's maternal expectations are rooted within rigid expectations of specifically gendered behavior and conformity.

Figure 34 Judy wipes a tear from her daughter's eye before suggesting that Monica start using anti-wrinkle cream.

II.2.2. Subjective Space for Judy?

This episode is significant in that it anchors Judy, a secondary character, within a familial context of her own, thereby offering this maternal figure a space, albeit a restrictive one, for her own subjectivity to be explored instead of relegating her solely to the objectified role of a dysfunctional mother. Within this episode, the character of Judy makes use of this subjective space in two specific scenes, one in which she interacts with Ross and the other with Monica. Ross and Judy, along with Judy's sister, are in the grandmother's room choosing an outfit for the deceased woman to wear in her coffin. Ross's evident exasperation as well as the mountain of clothes on the bed suggest that this is an arduous process as the two older women appear to be excessively picky in their choice. Frustrated, Ross insists the two make a choice. Judy's sister remarks, "Whatever we pick, she would have told us it's the wrong one," and Judy, liberated from having to make the right choice, chooses a dress for her mother. This scene places Judy within her own complicated family dynamic. The sister's comment suggests that it was also one full of mother-daughter tension, a demanding mother and an eager-to-please daughter. This dynamic is again referenced more explicitly and directly in a second scene during which Judy and Monica speak about the deceased maternal figure:

> **Judy to Monica**: Your grandmother would have hated this.
> **Monica**: Well sure, it being her funeral and all. [Studio audience laughter]
> **Judy**: No, I'd be hearing about "Why didn't I get the honey-glazed ham." Or, I didn't spend enough on flowers. If I spent more, she'd be saying, "Why're you wasting your money? I don't need flowers, I'm dead."
> **Monica**, **nodding and laughing**: That sounds like Nana.
> **Judy, sitting on couch next to Monica**: Do you know what it's like to grow up with someone who is critical of *every* little thing you say?
> **Monica**: I can imagine. [Laughter]

Judy: I tell you, it's a wonder your mother turned out to be the positive, life-affirming person she is.
Monica: That *is* a wonder! [Laughter, Monica takes a sip of wine] So tell me something, Mom. If you had to do it all over again, if she was here right now, would you tell her?
Judy: Tell her what?
Monica: How she drove you crazy? Picking on *every* little detail. Like, your hair for example.
Judy, **suspicious**: I'm not sure I know what you're getting at.
Monica: Do you think things would have been better if you'd just told her the truth?
Judy, hesitating: No… I think some things are better left unsaid. I think it's nicer when people just get along. [Laughter] More wine, dear?
Monica: Oh, I think so. [Laughter]

This scene, in spite of its comic intent, creates an opportunity for intimate dialogue between the two adult women and it is Judy who approaches her daughter seeking comfort and validation in circumstances during which she knows she has necessarily fallen short of her own mother's unreasonably high expectations. The older woman's misguided attempt to connect with and confide in her daughter falls short as Monica (and the audience) recognizes the irony of Judy complaining about an exasperatingly fastidious maternal figure. Yet the two women seem to come to an unspoken understanding, for although Judy rejects Monica's pointed query about being frank with one's mother, Judy's character does implicitly acknowledge Monica's unspoken complaint. Monica, out of frustration, pushes her hair back to reveal her ears, the features which Judy has already criticized within the space of the episode. Judy instinctively reaches out to replace her daughter's hair, but Monica's body language causes her to pause. The older woman, reading her daughter's unspoken language, has understood her daughter's perspective and, instead of replacing the hair behind her ear, reaches out to caress the earring Monica is wearing. The mother compliments the daughter on the earrings, a rare gesture, and Monica responds that they in fact belong to Judy. Judy corrects her daughter, the earrings belonged to the deceased Nana. The women have bonded and created an authentic moment of gentleness and compassion, a moment during which the relentless expectations of normative gendered behavior transmitted seemingly organically from mother to daughter have been confronted and acknowledged.

For the duration of a short scene the mother-daughter tensions which the sitcom has exploited for humor have been mollified, the lack of studio audience laughter reinforces this moment as one of complicity. United by the death of a loved one, the earrings symbolize the imperfect but shared heritage of the two women. However, the recognition of the earrings

symbolically closes the space in which Judy is permitted to control her own narrative. This scene, while nuancing Judy's pejorative characterization, does not signify a permanent truce in the tense relationship which continues between Judy and Monica and which permeates the sitcom's diegesis.

Figure 35 The two women share a moment of complicity after the grandmother has been laid to rest.

Figure 36 Judy is finally able to compliment her daughter. It is a short-lived moment.

II.2.3. Judy as Emotionally Harmful

A further noteworthy moment in which the dynamic of mother-daughter conflict serves as narrative impulse occurs in the third episode of the fourth season.[322] Judy asks Monica, temporarily out of work, to cater an important event at the Geller home and Monica, desperate for money, agrees although she very much dreads the prospect and feels that she is degrading herself by working for her mother. Monica is doubtful of Judy's true intent and suspects that this is just an occasion for her mother to humiliate her. Accepting the position out of financial necessity, Monica, with the help of Phoebe, goes to her mother's house to cater the party. In an attempt to avoid her mother's criticism over her nail-biting habit (a habit indicative of Monica's anxious nature in general but also symbolizing the specific tensions between the mother and daughter) Monica has

[322] Season Four, Episode Three, "The One with the Cuffs."

applied fake fingernails to cover up the actual state of her nail-bitten fingers. Unfortunately, and comically, she loses a fake nail in the food she is preparing for her mother's guests and the entire meal is ruined. Upon hearing news of the disaster, Judy Geller is surprisingly calm, she shows Monica that she has a freezer full of frozen lasagnas which will feed the guests. Monica, however, is devastated to learn that Judy is gleeful about being forced to turn to the frozen food. The mother admits that in anticipating Monica's catering for her, she entered into a bet with her husband, Jack. Jack bet that Monica would fulfill her catering obligations without incident while Judy bet that Monica would "pull a Monica." This painful expression is one which Judy used when Monica was a young child to indicate that Monica had done something shameful, embarrassing or inadequate. The term is suggested to have had a particularly detrimental effect on her self-esteem. Indeed, when Judy uses the phrase in the catering episode, Monica's reaction is unequivocal as she flees the kitchen to take refuge in her childhood room: "You promised Dr. Weinberg you would never use that phrase!"

This seemingly throw-away piece of dialogue which serves an immediate comic effect as signified by the studio audience laughter is, in fact, replete with significance. The daughter's reply signifies that the mother-daughter tensions precede the narrative space of the sitcom and are in fact entrenched in a pre-narrative history which was so painful for the younger character, as well as, perhaps for the maternal one, that it required some sort of outside intervention. The reference to Dr. Weinberg suggests that the characters have engaged in some sort of therapy, perhaps having had recourse to expert advice in the form of psychological or psychotherapeutic mediation. In this, Judy Geller's character is constructed as having had the maternal awareness deemed necessary to dedicate the time, energy and finances available to help her daughter while simultaneously underscoring that this help was necessary in the first place because she was an insensitive and uncaring mother.

Ultimately the resurgence of the phrase "to pull a Monica" demonstrates that Judy has not, in fact, been "cured" of being a damaging maternal figure for her daughter, now an adult still significantly affected by her mother's words and actions. It is left to Monica's friend Phoebe to convince Monica to appropriate the phrase through a resignification: instead of indicating an embarrassing mistake, Phoebe argues that "pulling a Monica" should now refer to a positive result or event. In this, Phoebe, as Monica's best friend, has helped her find a way out of a painful situation which was inflicted on her by her mother. Monica is able to leave her childhood room,

which has been turned into a gym, symbolically growing up and now capable of confronting her mother thanks to the intervention of Phoebe. Indeed, this episode comes to an end when, after Monica creates a new dish for her mother's guests, Judy admits that she was wrong to have doubted her daughter, that her cooking was delicious and that she was "a bitch." Judy's *mea culpa* is gratifying to her daughter who has the last word in reminding her mother not to bite her own fingernails.

In contrast to Judy's overtly strained relationship with her daughter, her connection to her son Ross is generally much less critical and demeaning and he largely continues to be a source of pride for her. It is however, in her interactions with Ross that Judy proves to be a particularly meddlesome character with a propensity to embarrass and cross boundaries. From a narratological standpoint, it is Judy who is the source of the confused engagement ring love triangle which is the impetus for the cliffhanger of Season Eight's final episode. Convinced that because Ross and Rachel are about to have a baby together, they should be married, Judy visits Ross in the hospital where Rachel is giving birth to give him an engagement ring. She insists that Ross must give it to Rachel telling Ross that Rachel "is not just some girl you picked up in a bar and humped" and that "a child should have a family." Judy forces the ring on Ross who grudgingly accepts it but only so that his mother will leave the premises. Later, after the birth, as Rachel is in bed recuperating, Joey finds the ring which has slipped out of Ross's pocket onto the floor. Picking it up, Joey appears in front of Rachel on his knee as if to propose to her and, without waiting to be asked, Rachel says yes, accepting his inadvertent and unintended marriage proposal. The scene fades to black and the episode and the season come to an end, Rachel having agreed to marry Joey just after giving birth to Ross's baby. In this muddle of narrative, it is easy to overlook the fact that the convoluted circumstances which demand considerable narrative space in the following season to unravel were set in place by Judy's intrusive ring giving and her insistence that Ross ask Rachel to marry him. Thus, even when she sincerely believes she is acting in the best interests of her son, her actions result in unwanted, but narratologically, significant consequences.

II.2.3. Judy: Hybrid WASPy-Jewish Mother

While the Judy Geller character may indeed bear resemblance to the stereotypical Jewish mother through her disparagement of her daughter and her favoritism of her son, this characterization is problematic and simplistic. Even this secondary character reflects a certain amount of depth and complexity which create opportunities for multiple and diverse interpretations. The stereotypical Jewish mother's negative image was nourished and refined in the mid twentieth century Jewish stand-up comedy acts of the Borscht Belt hotels and summer resorts in the Catskill Mountains. It was a creation of the Jewish male comedians who honed their skills in these clubs and, as a target for humor, she served to ease the tensions which accompanied the full assimilation of Jews into mainstream American life. Suggests Joyce Antler, "Their jokes gave recognition to the bonds between mothers and sons yet announced that the sons were, in fact, moving on.[323]" A number of theories seek to explain how this maternal character came to be such a "notable Borscht Belt export.[324]" Was she a product of deeply ingrained misogyny in the American Jewish community? Was this a nostalgic figure who nonetheless embarrassed because of her Old-World antics? Was she the ultimate "other" who served to deflect Jewish male discomfort in assimilating to American ideals of masculinity? Whatever the reasons, in her mid-century heyday her main traits seem to have been a smothering overprotectiveness evidenced by anxieties that her children were not eating enough, were not careful enough, were not working hard enough in school, where not maintaining enough contact with her once they had reached adulthood. While more flattering representations of this maternal character were prevalent in American culture in the early part of the twentieth century (indeed, Molly Goldberg may be considered one such example), Antler writes that, "increasingly, after World War II she was portrayed as a threatening, intrusive, guilt-inducing 'vampire.[325]'"

While Judy Geller is certainly over-protective, showing overt favoritism to her son, Ross, and while she is clearly nagging and nitpicking towards her daughter, Monica, in many ways, her character is not typical of other representations of Jewish motherhood in culture in general and in

[323] Antler, 114.
[324] *Ibid*, 120.
[325] *Ibid*, 8.

the sitcom in particular. The Geller family is only very loosely associated with Judaism and neither Judy nor Jack ever identify themselves nor are they explicitly identified as Jewish. Several references suggest that the Geller children identify or are identified as Jewish. But Judy does not use Yiddishims in her speech, for example. Her accent is refined and carries the hints of Christina Pickles' native British English. Instead of being excessive and tacky in her mannerisms and clothing, she is refined and even elegant. She even serves pork at her own mother's funeral. Furthermore, Judy Geller never brings food to her adult children and never insists they eat more. In fact, food, and its symbolic relationship to nurturance and providing are never explicitly associated with Judy. This particular aspect of the Jewish mother persona seems to be displaced onto the character of her daughter Monica both in her profession as a chef and in her role as provider of food and nurturance to her reconstructed family represented by her friends.

Indeed, in her discussion of Jewish mothers in 1990 sitcoms, Antler does not mention Judy Geller.[326] The maternal figures she does analyze, however[327] are all domineering, excessive and guilt-inducing influences on their adult children's lives to such an extent that the Judy Geller character seems by comparison to be much more subtle, less resonant as Jewish. She is a toned down, less brash version of her contemporary Jewish American Mothers.

In many respects, Judy may be understood more as an updated version of the June Cleaver character. Like June, Judy Geller engages in fulltime motherwork, confined to a private, interior world while her husband works outside the home to support the family financially.[328] Both women raised two children in a suburban, upper middle-class context. Judy Geller then may be interpreted as a WASPish incarnation of the Jewish mother stereotype. She is a hybrid maternal figure whose characterization subtly incorporates elements of a dominant comic stereotype into an alternative idealized maternal figure constructed in an earlier sitcom era. This amalgamated portrayal collapses the existing boundaries erected between the equally restrictive and misleading maternal stereotypes of the overpowering Jewish mother and the all-perfect WASP. In bringing an acerbic and blatant favoritism to the maternal role, the character deconstructs the image of the perfect stay-at-home mother typified by mid-century sitcoms. In this, she disappoints and destabilizes the

[326] *Ibid,* 183.
[327] Sylvia Buchman of *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-1999), Sylvia Fine on *The Nanny* (CBS, 1993-1999), Mrs. Seinfeld and Estelle Costanza on *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998), Grace Adler's mother on *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2008), Edie Groener on *Suddenly Susan* (NBC, 1996-2000) and Sheila Broslovski on *South Park* (Comedy Central, 1997-present).
[328] One can even find a phonological link in the names of the two mother figures: Judy/June Geller/Cleaver.

relationships of her adult children. On the other hand, by being put in her place by her adult daughter when she has been deemed to have been acting unreasonably as in the episode with the catering incident, she softens the Jewish mother stereotype rendering her less embarrassing and more accessible.

This transition may be interpreted to correspond with and reflect societal trends such as "interracial and interfaith marriage, conversion, and cross-cultural adoptions" meaning that "the traditional, monolithic Jewish mother 'type' has been replaced by a much more diverse, and universal model.[329]" In this interpretation, Judy Geller is a new sort of late-twentieth century mother, a cultural fusion, both Jewish American and All-American mother, who understands that American motherhood necessitates a quieter demeanor, a less domineering personality but who nonetheless attaches great value to status and appearances. She has finally let go of the Old-World fears that her children may succumb to sickness and starvation, she is no longer nostalgic for the customs and inflections of language which connected her to the urban immigrant experience. She is fully suburbanized. She continues to value, for herself and for her children, the visible signs of upward mobility (advanced degrees, positions of responsibility and power) which stand as markers of status and success in late-capitalist America.

However, while Judy Geller may represent a blending or softening of the boundaries separating the idealized maternal WASP stereotype from the vilified JAM stereotype, she does little to recuperate or overturn the all-encompassing bad mother stereotype. Judy is not the smothering over-protective mother who frets constantly about her children, on the contrary and particularly in association with her daughter, Judy is generally negligent. Her characterization suggests not so much that Jewish mothers can now be good mothers, but instead, that the All-American mother and, by extension, all American mothers have, or have the potential to have, negative impacts on their children.

[329] Antler, 233.

II.2.4. Gloria Tribbiani: Images of Italianness

If *Friends* deconstructs and complicates the stereotypical representation of the Jewish mother through its configuration of the Judy Geller character, its treatment of another maternal figure is less nuanced. Gloria Tribbiani is the mother of one of the sitcom's main characters, Joey Tribbiani. The Joey character, from his earliest conception in the series' pilot episode, is portrayed as a dim-witted yet lovable Italian-American man with a particular partiality to sleeping with women. As the series begins, Joey is a struggling actor who, like the other more peripheral character, Phoebe, has not gone to college. Joey is thus separated from the rest of the group by his ethnicity, his status (or lack thereof), as well as by his excessive consumption of sex and women. He is an ideal foil to his roommate Chandler who, more articulate and intelligent, does not have the same magnetic sex appeal. Joey's representation is encoded in a complex nexus of issues relating to masculinity, intellect, ethnicity and class. It is telling that the series creates space for his parents on only one occasion. The representation of both his father and his mother employs and thereby reinforces stereotypical images of Italian Americans and does little work to question or dismantle them.

Joey's parents make their sole appearance in the series during episode thirteen of the first season, "The One with the Boobies."[330] The paternal figure, Joseph Tribbiani, Sr is portrayed by Robert Costanzo, an Italian-American character actor whose film and television credits include a number of roles which indicate that he is perceived as a reliable vector by the film and television industry for portraying Italianness and working-class characters including mafia members and policemen.[331] The role of Gloria Tribbiani is played by the Academy Award-nominated actress Brenda Vaccaro.[332] Both actors were born in Brooklyn, New York into Italian-American families. Their inclusion in the *Friends* cast as Joey's parents may be understood as an explicit desire on the part of the sitcom to communicate specific ideas about Joey's family and his personal life. Corresponding to perceptions of ethnicity transmitted by these parental characters, questions of class are also strongly communicated: Joey Sr. is a pipe fitter, a manual, blue collar laborer and,

[330] Although Joey's father reprises his role in 2006 for an episode the *Friends* spinoff, *Joey*.
[331] For example, his numerous acting credits include Sgt. Vito Lorenzo in *Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1990), Sal in *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood, 1991), Lester Franco in *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), Vinnie La Rosa in *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-1994), Alfonse Giardella in *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2005), Jimmy "Jimmy Naps" Napolitano in *NCIS* (CBS, 2003-present), and Salvatore "Sal" Bandino in *Days of Our Lives* (NBC, 1965- present).
[332] Vaccaro was nominated for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the 1975 film, *Once is Not Enough* (Guy Green). She won the Golden Globe. She also starred in *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) for which she was also nominated for a Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress.

although it is suggested that he owns his own business thereby implying a relative attainment of social status and monetary success, this success remains relative. His profession is manual not cerebral, hierarchically inferior to the more socially prestigious positions represented by two of the other paternal figures in the sitcom such as Rachel's father, Leonard Green, a surgeon, or Jack Geller, a businessman in an unidentified, though clearly white-collar sector. Additionally, unlike most of the other characters who grew up in the suburbs of New York, the Tribbiani family hails from Queens, an urban area with a high concentration of Italian Americans, thus rooting the family within the rich history of the American immigrant experience. Furthermore, in the only episode in which Joey Sr. appears, it is revealed that he has had a long-term mistress, an animal taxidermist named Ronnie Ravalano, also coded as Italian-American, working-class and brash. The episode's main narrative arc treats the fallout of the younger Joey's discovery of his father's betrayal.

As for Gloria, in her sole appearance and through various references to her throughout the series, she is never attributed a position outside the private sphere of the home. Indeed, she is the mother of between seven and nine children, of which Joey is the only boy.[333] As such, the Gloria Tribbiani character, through her hyperfertility (Gloria was even pregnant in her wedding photo[334]), is evocative of the immigrant maternal experience. The uneducated and unskilled immigrant woman who was typically poor and had numerous children was denigrated in early twentieth century America when fertility rates for white American women were beginning to fall dramatically. Ensuing anxieties surrounding fears of "race suicide" were, at times, exploited for political purposes. White American women were encouraged to fulfill their civic and maternal duty by reproducing while President Theodore Roosevelt announced that he hoped "very much that the wrong people could be prevented entirely from breeding.[335]" As we will see, the characterization of Gloria in *Friends* does little to dispel or nuance the stereotype of this lower class, overly-fertile ethnically-other mother.

[333] The actual number of children varies within the series. Joey is sometimes identified as having six sisters, although a seventh, Dina, appears in one episode of Season Eight. An additional actress (Drea Di Matteo) portrays another sister, Gina, in the spinoff, *Joey* (NBC, 2004-2006).
[334] Season One, Episode Eleven, "The One with Mrs. Bing." Joey shows Ross a picture of his mother and father on their wedding day and tries to convince him that Gloria was a very attractive young woman: "Just try to picture her not pregnant."
[335] Quoted in Vandenberg-Daves, 132.

II.2.5. Gloria: Ethnic Matriarch or Moral Martyr?

Within the narrative space of the sole episode in which she appears, Gloria Tribbiani is represented as a strong, no-nonsense, practical woman who knows what she wants. She is simultaneously tough and tender with Joey. The character's sole apparition comes at the end of an episode in which Joey has learned that his father has been involved in a six-year affair with another woman. Shocked by his father's betrayal of his mother, Joey insists that the father break it off with his mistress. His father acquiesces to the younger Joey's demands and the scene in which the maternal figure appears depicts the aftermath of this decision. Mrs. Tribbiani comes to visit her son to discuss his actions. Gloria is a large and imposing woman and, as she enters her son's apartment, the physically strong and hyper-masculine Joey is struggling to put away a fold-out couch on which he has slept.

> **Joey**: Ma! What are you doing here?
> **Gloria**, **hands Joey a bag of groceries**: I came to give you this, and this [*slaps the top of his head*.]
> **Joey**: Ow, big ring! [Audience laughter.]
> **Gloria**, **moving into the kitchen and speaking expressively with hands**: Why did you have to fill your father's head with all that garbage about making things right? Things were fine the way they were. There's chicken in there [*indicating bag of groceries*] put it away. For God's sake Joey, really. [*Pushes the open bed back into couch with one easy push. Audience laughter.*]
> **Joey**: Hold on. You knew?
> **Gloria**: Of course, I knew, what do you think? Your father is no James Bond! You should have heard some of his cover stories. I'm sleeping over at my accountant's. I mean what is that? Please.
> **Joey**: So then, how could you? I mean how could you?…
> **Gloria**: Do you remember how your father used to be? Always yelling, always yelling. Nothing made him happy, nothing made him happy, nothing. Not that woodshop, not those stupid little ships in the bottle, nothing. Now he's happy. I mean it's nice, he has a hobby! [Audience laughter.]
> **Joey**: Ma, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but what the hell are you talking about?! [Audience laughter.] I mean, what about you?
> **Gloria**: Me! I'm fine. Look honey, in an ideal world, there'd be no her and your father would look like Sting. [Audience laughter.] And I'll tell you something else, ever since that poodle stuffer came along, he's been so ashamed of himself that he's been attentive, he's been more loving, it's like every day's our anniversary.

Once again, this very short interaction between mother and son is packed with significant information. Several elements are of import in this scene. To begin with, Gloria Tribbiani arrives in Joey's home with food. The brown paper bag filled with food is symbolic of a maternal desire

or imperative to nourish offspring, to stave off starvation and to ensure their survival. The explicit attachment of this symbolism to Joey's mother is particularly significant and draws its meaning in comparison to the other maternal (and paternal) figures in this series who do not bring food to their adult children. Gloria is the only parental figure who brings sustenance to her child, implying a continuing worry for his health and survival and reminiscent of the stereotype of the Jewish mother for whom food and adequate (and excessive) nourishment are recurrent themes. Gloria is not a Jewish mother, she is heavily coded Italian, yet the issue of food is one aspect that these two stereotypical representations have in common and stems from a shared history of scarcity, lack and legitimate anxieties related to the survival of one's offspring both carried over from the Old-World experience of poverty and rooted in the early immigrant experience of hardship, privation and want. Joyce Antler notes that the link between immigrant mothers and food is also a question of linking new generations, who were rapidly assimilating, to the traditions and customs of Old-World communities. In positioning Gloria Tribbiani as a nurturant Italian mother who brings food to her child, *Friends* invites a reading of this character which anchors her in a long tradition of immigrant women and their experience of raising children in America.

Another important and easy-to-overlook aspect of Gloria's mothering is the quick but decisive slap she delivers to her son's head. This is the character's second action after handing her son the bag of food suggesting that her maternal love (as represented by the food) may be her primary connection with her son but that this is closely followed by violence. Widely held middle-class views of normative mothering leave no place for violence towards children (remember that, according to Umansky and Ladd-Taylor, "everybody" agrees that a mother who beats her child is bad). However, the fact that the studio audience reacts with laughter as Joey responds in pain to his mother's slap suggests that this maternal violence is socially acceptable, if not expected, for certain categories of mothers. The violence associated with the Gloria Tribbiani character is reiterated at the end of the scene when she asks her son if she would be able to physically dominate her husband's mistress, "Could I take her?" she asks her son. Again, the audience laughter reflects the incongruity in associating violence with a maternal character but the simple fact that this association takes place within the space of the sitcom suggests that this type of behavior may be interpreted as funny for certain mothers, in particular those who are, in some way, hierarchically inferior to the hegemonic white, middle-class mother.

The slap is particularly problematic in that, just as with the symbolic bringing of food, this type of maternal interaction occurs with a maternal figure who, thanks to her ethnicity and lower class, is more rigidly excluded from ideologically dominant motherhood than the others. It is also suggestive that Gloria, as a blue-collar mother, has not read those expert guides which appropriate middle-class mothers procure in the hopes of educating themselves. Whether Gloria is unaware of, unable to access, or simply doesn't care enough to educate herself is not necessarily important; she is the only maternal figure in *Friends* to exhibit a tendency (even through humor) towards violence. Moreover, it would be difficult to conceive of Judy Geller, Nora Bing or Sandra Green slapping any of their children; this representation in *Friends* manages to reinforce the stereotype that violence towards children is reserved to certain categories of mothers, specifically mothers of marginalized classes and ethnicities.

Finally, this scene depicts a peculiar type of confrontation between mother and son. The mother has come to berate the son for interfering in her personal life. His actions have led his father to break up with his mistress and Gloria is upset. She is willing to forgo idealistic visions of a perfect marriage through her practical decision to leave things as they are. In this way, she has supposedly been able to achieve what she wants, happiness and satisfaction for herself and her husband at the expense of marital fidelity. No mention is made of any infidelity on her part, however, and although she claims to be satisfied with her situation, a close reading of her reasoning demonstrates that she loses out twice in her negotiation for happiness. "In an ideal world, there would be no her [the mistress] and your father would look like Sting." This is a dual admission that not only does she find her husband physically unattractive, she is content to be the victim of this unattractive man's infidelity. She has thus made a double concession while her husband has made none. In explaining her reasoning to Joey, Gloria supposedly imparts her pragmatic, tough-minded worldview that nothing in life is perfect and that one must make peace with that fact in order to be content. In fact, this maternal figure has taught her son that women must make sacrifices to remain happy in marriage while men may do as they please. In so doing, she has reinforced the notion that men, in particular her husband, are too weak to respect their vows of fidelity. Her outward appearance of a strong matriarchal figure gives way to a vision of a one-sided, negotiated happiness. Again, it seems that this concession is related in some way to her status as a woman and mother of marginalized class and ethnicity further away from the socially accepted norm. Few

of the other maternal figures are confronted with questions of adultery during their appearances while, in Gloria's case, it is the narrative thrust of her one and only scene.

Gloria Tribbiani, then, offers another rupture with normative prescriptions of motherhood. Although white, she is an ethnic Italian and her character, just like her son Joey, is strongly encouraged to be read as such. Whilst she is a stay-at-home mother, she is also a lower-middle/working-class one and thus must exist outside of the white, stay-at home, upper-middle class, suburban set of norms. Her excessive family size also complicates her easy connection with normative motherhood. The character's decision to accept a less-than ideal situation in life may be interpreted as a necessity for survival in a patriarchal familial configuration. Gloria is not independent and must rely on her unfaithful husband in order to meet her most basic needs. Alternatively, her decision to remain in this particular situation may be read as an act of great generosity and understanding. In this interpretation, Gloria, in spite of her non-white ethnicity, becomes the ideal sacrificial moral mother of Victorian America, putting the needs of her hard-working husband and beloved family before her own and doing everything possible to maintain a stable and peaceful private sphere. In this, as was the case with the Judy Geller character, Gloria Tribbiani also offers a hybrid maternal personage. The stereotypical ethnic mother is reinterpretable, thanks to her husband's infidelity as that most ideal of all women, the Victorian-era Moral Mother who makes home a haven and has no discernable needs of her own.

This interpretation, however, is undermined by Joey's reaction to his mother's attitude as the effect that this discovery has on him is portrayed as being devastating. Just as Monica turned to Phoebe for support when she found herself in conflict with her mother, Joey too, turns to his family of friends for emotional support when his nuclear family has disappointed him. When Ross asks Joey if he is coping, Joey responds, "Yeah, I guess. It's just, you know, they're parents. After a certain point you got to let go even if you know better, you got to let them make their own mistakes." This exchange between the friends elicits laughter from the studio audience, who recognize the humor in this incongruous situation which posits an adult child in the position of responsibility and authority for wayward parents who, in this instance, occupy the position of the mistake makers in need of understanding, empathy, and patience. The inversion of authority depicted in this scene suggests that Joey's world has literally been turned upside down not just by the discovery of his father's infidelity, but, more accurately, by the discovery that his mother wants to maintain the status quo. What in fact spurs Joey to assume the position of responsible yet world-

weary parent in this situation is not his father's actions – his father has shown himself amenable to correction, open to listening to reason and a return to a normative relationship with his wife – it is his mother's refusal to accept her son's intervention, her insistence that Joey Sr. continue his adulterous relationship with the taxidermist. Joey's mother is the actor in this family drama who refuses to be disciplined into restoring the normative parental relationship. In her resistance, she denies her son needed emotional and psychological stability. In light of Joey's reaction, Gloria Tribbiani's character shifts once again, this time away from the self-sacrificing moral mother who puts her family's needs first, towards a more complex combination of innocence (she is a child who doesn't know any better) and maternal menace (she is knowingly keeping her son from the gratification that his parents live in a heteronormative configuration.) The resulting effect is a second representation of a disappointing maternal figure having a negative impact on her adult child's life.

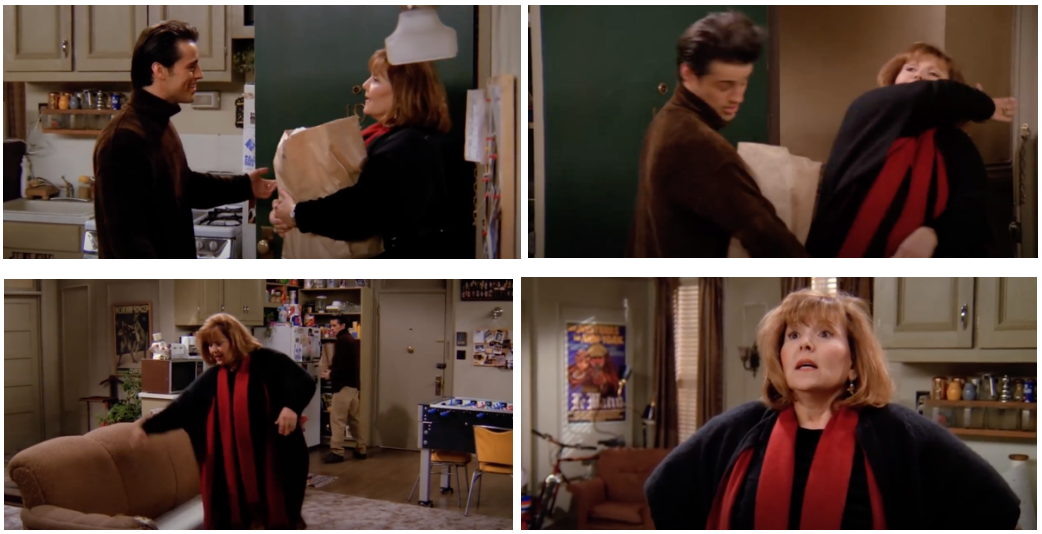

Figure 37 Gloria Tribbiani arrives disrupting her son's idyllic vision of marriage and family.

II.2.6. Nora Bing: Freudian Nightmare

Nora Tyler Bing, the mother of *Friends* main character, Chandler Bing, is portrayed by actress Morgan Fairchild and this casting choice, like those of the other maternal figures we have discussed, lends a particular tonality to this secondary character. In 1994 when Fairchild first assumed this guest role in *Friends*, she was known to television audiences for her previous roles

in various soap operas as a seductive and glamorous, high-powered blonde.[336] In many ways she reprises these portrayals to play Nora Tyler Bing, a well-known erotic novelist, and these same qualities are depicted as incongruously clashing with her role as mother for comic effect. As such, she is represented as a highly untraditional, unconventional mother who puts her career and personal life ahead of her son's emotional and psychological needs. Nora Tyler Bing's first appearance halfway through the first season announces many of her most recognizable qualities: highly sexual, confident and successful and this section will focus on the ways in which Nora Bing is associated with another familiar stereotype, that of the femme fatale, as well as the ways in which this stereotype is deployed to construct and deconstruct this particular maternal figure.

The femme fatale stereotype is a recurring figure in culture, literature, film and television. "She is as old as Eve, and as current as today's movies, comic books and dime novels.[337]" She is a woman whose character traits include seduction, consumption of men, and deception. She is often a villain who uses men and who ultimately either kills them or destroys their masculinity, symbolically achieving the death of their manhood. In addition, the femme fatale, in her rejection of maternity and the maternal role, also brings about the destruction of man: in denying him access to her reproductive capabilities, the femme fatale refuses to let the male figure reproduce, eventually leading to his extinction. The femme fatale's ultimate power lies not in her seduction but in her capacity for destruction, she is lethal to the male sex.

Nora Bing is the most overtly sexual maternal figure in *Friends*. The actress's previous roles associated as they were with the femme fatale trope encode this character within a specific interpretative framework. Almost every aspect of Nora's character reinforces a particular interpretation of her. In her few appearances in the sitcom, she regularly dresses in a sultry and revealing manner. She has been married and divorced multiple times. She has published numerous romance novels and is thus an authority, an expert herself, on sexuality and seduction. In her role as best-selling author, she travels widely. She is a worldly woman. Nora speaks openly and frankly about her desires including sexual gratification. She is, in short, the precise opposite of the socially constructed normative mother confined as she is to the private sphere of the home. She revels in her independence instead of catering to the needs of her family, an older woman, she overtly enjoys

[336] For example, see her portrayals of Jennifer Pace in the soap opera *Search for Tomorrow* (CBS and NBC, 1951-1986), of Racine in *Paper Dolls* (ABC, 1984) and of attorney Jordan Roberts in *Falcon Crest* (CBS, 1981-1990).
[337] Place quoted in Helen Hansen and Catherine O'Rawe, *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

sex instead of remaining demure and circumspect about the sexual act. She has given birth to only one child, further reinforcing her attraction to the specifically recreational aspect of sexuality. She travels internationally instead of remaining in the private sphere of the home. To promote her books, she is literally put on display, or puts herself on display, on television. She shares intimate secrets about her son's life on national television (for example, that she bought him his first condoms) while Chandler is depicted as suffering from this invasion of privacy.

Perhaps most problematically, the Nora Bing character, specifically in her role of femme fatale, disrupts her son's happiness. Her actions are particularly devastating for Chandler because, not only do they destroy the adult child's already compromised trust in his mother, they also bring into question his relationship with his closest friend, Ross. Similar to the previous examples of maternal figures we have discussed, Nora Bing's character is also introduced in the first season. Unlike the other two characters, she is given the distinction of being named in the title of the episode, "The One with Mrs. Bing," which suggests that her arrival in the sitcom's narrative is especially noteworthy.

In this episode, Ross, nursing a secret crush on Rachel, is distraught because Rachel has eyes only for her handsome Italian boyfriend, Paolo. The six friends plus Paolo and Nora meet at a Mexican restaurant for dinner, an occasion which proves to be particularly difficult for Ross because Paolo and Rachel are intensely romantic. Tequila flows freely during the meal. Significantly, the tequila is served by Nora herself to the entire table of young people. The scene begins with a close up of a hand pouring shots of tequila. As the camera pans out, the hand holding the bottle is revealed to belong to Nora. This is another subtle reminder of Nora's inappropriateness as a mother. That the children are adults of drinking age is not important here: she is a maternal figure rupturing the conventions of ideologically appropriate motherhood in serving her child, and other people's children, tequila – an alcohol whose popular reputation implies loss of control, wild partying and excess. That the consumption of the tequila is referred to later on in the episode to explain Ross and Nora's kiss only underscores the importance of this seemingly insignificant framing shot which already positions Nora not just as a maternal iconoclast but one who may very well be a danger to the younger generation.

By the time Ross and Nora happen to meet outside the restaurant's bathroom, the dinner party participants have had a bit too much to drink. Ross confides to Nora that he is unhappy because he wishes he could be in a relationship with Rachel and she comforts him assuring him

that eventually it will indeed be Ross that Rachel chooses. The two discuss Ross's dilemma. Nora tries to reassure him that he will eventually end up with Rachel because he is the "hero" of this story, rooting her knowledge of the situation within her authority as an erotic novelist. Nora asserts that Ross is "smart" and "sexy," saying, "oh, listen to me kiddo, you're going to be fine, believe me," before giving him a small kiss on the cheek. Then she slows, and draws back a bit, giving Ross a sultry look of desire. Ross is caught off guard, saying "uh-oh," as Nora moves in to kiss him on his lips. Nora is thus portrayed as the seemingly reassuring adult presence who takes advantage of her authority as an expert on romance to kiss the unsuspecting, innocent, and vulnerable young Ross. Her use of the word "kiddo" takes on a sinister and menacing undertone, ironically highlighting her maternal status only to undercut it all the more effectively. They kiss, but they are quickly interrupted by Joey who arrives to use the bathroom. The awkwardness on Joey's part and the manifest guilt displayed by both Ross and Nora are constructed as being humorous, a fact which is underscored by the laughter heard from the studio audience. Throughout this scene it is Nora Bing who, in spite of her role as Chandler's mother, is portrayed as an aggressive manipulator in a situation where Ross is in a vulnerable emotional state.[338]

The inappropriate nature of the kiss is confirmed in a following scene which plays as a sort of modern-day comedy of manners in which Joey schools Ross on what he refers to as "the code." Ross, hoping to avoid telling Chandler that he and Nora kissed, seeks reassurance from Joey who does not comply and instead explains why Ross's kiss is in fact a "big deal." Joey's code delineates who, among a friend's familial relations, it is and is not acceptable to kiss.

> **Ross**: We don't need to tell Chandler, right? I mean it was just a kiss. One kiss, no big deal, right?
> **Joey**: Right, no big deal. In bizarro world! [Audience laughter]. You broke the code!
> **Ross**: What code?
> **Joey**: You don't kiss your friend's mom! Sisters are okay, maybe a hot-looking aunt. But not a *mom*! *Never* a mom! [Audience laughter].

Joey's behavioral code permits the kissing of a friend's sister and even allows for the intimate act with an aunt so long as she is physically attractive. However, completely unacceptable ("never") is a kiss with the friend's maternal figure. Joey does not expand on this precept and Ross

[338] Later in the episode, Joey asks Ross, "How could you let this happen?" Joey's formulation ("how could you *let* this happen, "instead of a more directly incriminating, "How could you do this?") suggests that, although Ross bears some responsibility for the kiss, he is also a victim (and Joey is engaging in victim blaming) of Nora's charm. As such, the dialogue implicitly reinforces the characterization of Nora as a sophisticated and beguiling charmer.

does not seem to need more explanation as to why this specific interaction may be forbidden. The character's confusion later in the scene helps us to understand why this may be so. To Joey, Ross explains that the kiss with Nora took place because, "It's not like she's a regular mom… She's, she's sexy." Ross (and the television audience) don't need Joey to explain why it is unseemly to kiss a friend's mother, because a "regular" mother is, apparently by definition, devoid of sex appeal. A regular mother should not be kissed by her child's (adult) friend because a regular mother is not sexy, by implication, a regular mother is *unsexy*, unattractive and uninviting as a potential partner in intimacy. Whether this means that she is unattractive *because* of her maternal status or that her maternal status *renders* her unattractive is not made clear by Ross and Joey's conversation. However, by this point, *Friends* had already presented its audience with one example of an unsexy mother, Judy Geller, and another, Gloria Tribbiani would appear two episodes later. What is explicit, then, is that Nora Bing, as an attractive woman exuding sex-appeal, is not a regular or normal mother. Ross, in succumbing to the woman's charms, has potentially put his friendship with Chandler in peril. If we consider that the friendship ties between the six young adult characters in *Friends* are representative of replacement kinship relationships for malfunctioning nuclear family ties, Ross in his moment of weakness for Nora, has put one of his strongest relationships at risk. Nora is indeed a femme fatale. The action (the kiss) brought about by her strong sexual desire has put a man at risk of losing something vital to him: a necessary, functioning and fulfilling relationship, his friendship with Chandler.

Figure 38 Nora's is the hand that serves the tequila.

Figure 39 "Uh-oh" Ross is helpless in the face of Nora's overwhelming sexual magnetism.

One of the most humorous sequences in this episode follows Joey and Ross as they continue to argue about why it is necessary (and how) to relate the incident to Chandler. The dialogue between Joey and Ross is continuously interrupted, first by Chandler himself who steps into the hallway as the two other men are speaking, secondly by Rachel and Paolo who exit from the opposite apartment and finally, once they have entered Monica and Rachel's apartment still in deep discussion, by Monica. On each occasion Joey and Ross must quickly improvise an alternative conversation so as not to inadvertently reveal the true topic of their discussion, the illicit kiss. To explain themselves at each successive interruption, they evoke and elaborate upon a fictional game of racquetball which they were to have played. As the questions from the interrupting parties continue, the answers from the two men about their invented game become more incongruous and incomprehensible for the other characters and more amusing for the audience who has been privy to the information necessary to understand the sequence as humorous.

Chandler: What are you guys doing out here?
Ross: Joey and I had discussed getting in an early-morning racquetball game. But apparently [*indicating Joey*], *somebody* overslept.
Joey: Yeah well, you don't have your racket.
Ross: No, no, I don't, because it's being restrung. *Somebody* was supposed to bring me one.
Joey: Well, you didn't call and leave your grip size!
Chandler: You guys spend way too much time together.

Rachel: What are you guys doing out here?
Ross: Well… not playing racquetball!
Joey: He forgot to leave his grip size.
Ross: He didn't get the goggles!
Rachel: Well…sounds like you two have issues.

Monica: What are you guys doing here?
Joey: Uh… he's not even wearing a jock strap. [Audience laughter]
Monica: What did I ask?

Monica's simple question, "what are you guys doing here?" (the same question that has been asked in the two previous interruptions) is met with a nonsensical answer signifying the complete breakdown of understanding and communication between the two men and the other friends. The culminating point of this sequence explicitly illustrates the potential for disruption associated with the femme fatale character. Ross, Joey, and the audience know what this conversation is really about. The others, most notably, Chandler, do not. The humor is couched in what each character, as well as the audience, knows about the kiss. Nora's action has resulted in the "epistemological trauma" identified by Mary Ann Doane in the introduction to her seminal work on the femme fatale.[339] Ross, Joey and the audience know about Nora's kiss but the others do not. The sequence uses the dichotomy of knowingness-unknowingness to demonstrate the breach in communication and the "discursive unease" which results because of this departure from maternal norms. Nora Bing has introduced awkwardness and disquiet into the otherwise harmonious communication and interaction of the group's members and this disquiet is made evident at the level of discourse. The humorous culmination comes in Monica's question to herself, "what did I ask?" as she doubts the efficiency of her own use of language in the wake of Joey's nonsensical (to her) reply, "he's not even wearing a jock strap."

The disruption to language and the havoc wreaked on communication by the character of Nora Bing is more fully illustrated when Ross finally admits the truth to Chandler. Unable to bring himself to clearly state what happened, the character stutters and stumbles over his words as he explains what occurred. "I was really upset over Rachel and Paolo and I think I had too much tequila and Nora, um, Mrs. Mom, your Bing, was uh…just being nice." Ross's confusion as to how to name Nora Bing to her son, Chandler, underscores the confusion which surrounds her character at this point in the episode. She is an unknowable muddle of sexuality and maternity and this situation is, in this moment, as untenable for Ross (he lacks even the basic vocabulary to speak of who and what she is) as it will become untenable for Chandler by the end of the episode.

[339] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 1.

II.2.7. Evoking (Pop) Freudianism to Configure Nora Bing

Following the embarrassed interruption of the illicit kiss between Nora and Ross, Ross is convinced by Joey to confess his misstep to Chandler, who is indeed devasted when he learns what happened. Chandler's feeling of betrayal at the hands of his best friend is accentuated by being framed within the specific context of the adult child's preexistent dissatisfaction with his maternal figure. Learning about Ross and Nora's kiss, Chandler reproachfully reminds Ross, "You know, of all my friends, no-one knows the crap I go through with my mom more than you." The comment suggests that this character (like Monica in the earlier example) has endured a long and painful prenarrative history of maternal disappointment, that the "crap" his mother has made him suffer through has had a significant impact on his life, and that it is something which he had been able to confide to Ross in particular, above and beyond other close friends. It is for this reason that Nora and Ross's kiss is so deeply painful for Chandler. This particular pain is constructed as having a deep-rooted history in the character's past.[340]

Chandler's initial reaction is one of visible anger at Ross (he yells at him, storms out of the apartment slamming the door behind him and later refers to him as "motherkisser"). However, Ross defends himself and reminds his friend that his mother was also implicated: "Chandler, can I just say something? I know you're still mad at me, I just want to say that there were two people there that night, okay? There were *two* sets of lips." Ross's attempt to redirect Chandler's anger at his mother is initially unsuccessful. However, Chandler's reaction is revealing not because he comes to his mother's defense but precisely because he is so familiar with this type of behavior from Nora that he has become inured to it. Chandler tells Ross, "I expect this from her. She's

[340] For example, in one episode of the fifth season, ("The One with All the Thanksgivings"), it is Chandler's mother (the role is again played by Morgan Fairchild) who figures in a painful flashback from his youth even though the actual story Chandler is recounting to his friends concerns his *father's* declaration that that he is gay and leaving the family. It falls to the mother (the father figure is pictured in this scene but only from behind and has no speaking role) to tell the young Chandler that his parents will be divorcing. In the flashback which is situated twenty years before the narrative in this episode, Nora announces, "now Chandler, dear, just because your father and I are getting a divorce doesn't mean we don't love you. It just means he would rather sleep with the houseboy than with me." As Nora finishes her statement in a vindictive tone, she takes a swig from the whiskey glass in her hand, the audience laughs, and the young Chandler looks distraught. While Chandler's father is significant through his *absence* in this vignette, his mother's *presence* is far from a reassuring one. She uses the occasion to passively communicate her aggression and anger at her husband while the child Chandler is literally in the middle of the two adults. The maternal figure's actions are constructed as being less than ideal in a situation (the separation of his parents) which is already a very difficult one for the child. It is not without significance that this flashback of a Thanksgiving dinner takes place during a Thanksgiving episode of the sitcom. Indeed, Chandler's character is famous for his hatred of this particular holiday because of this very event.

always been a Freudian nightmare." The studio audience laughter which follows underscores the fact that the *Friends* television audience either understands, or is expected to understand, the psychoanalytic allusion in Chandler's use of the term "Freudian nightmare," and that this refers to a parent whose behavior is in some way dysfunctional, that she is therefore responsible for the tormented psychological and psychosexual state of the adult child. The construction of Chandler's character throughout the previous episodes has indeed depicted him as something of a loser, failing to adhere to normative standards of masculinity.[341] Not only is he woefully inadequate when it comes to attracting women (particularly in comparison to his manly roommate, Joey), he is also at a professional dead end, stuck in a job which he hates, and which was only supposed to be temporary. In the dual realms of professional and romantic life, Chandler is failing. When he refers to his mother as a "Freudian nightmare" in the wake of her kiss with his best friend, the allusion to the overwhelming, domineering, oversexed bad mother is clear. Nora's predatory femme fatale behavior is (and has been) psychologically damaging to her son. The audience laughter is one of recognition suggesting that they are in on the joke and understand Nora's conduct as a transgression of socially constructed norms of maternal behavior: any mother who would kiss her son's best friend must clearly be a disaster for the son's psychic health.

Chandler's inability to behave as a mature, fully functioning adult is reinforced by Ross who questions why, if Nora's behavior upsets him, Chandler has never confronted his mother about it. The adult Chandler reverts to a child-like state, first losing his ability to argue rationally then finally resorting to a childish put-down when he is unable to effectively formulate his argument:

> **Ross**: If she always behaves like this, why don't you say something to her?
>
> **Chandler**: Because it's complicated. It's complex. It's… Hey! You kissed my mom!

Ross and Chandler's conversation takes place in the crowded coffee house, Central Perk, and as Chandler loudly announces, "You kissed my mom!" the other patrons in the coffee shop begin to stare curiously at the two men. Studio audience laughter confirms that this is indeed an awkward moment. Ross, seeking a face-saving explanation for Chandler's surprising outburst, announces

[341] Three episodes before "The One with Mrs. Bing" in "The One where Nana Dies Twice," one of the narrative arcs overtly treats Chandler's supposedly ambiguous masculinity. The character is dismayed to learn that many people think he is gay when they meet him.

that they "are rehearsing a Greek play." Once more, the dialogue playfully adopts psychoanalytic undertones in its reference to a "Greek play." This may be interpreted as a humorous allusion to *Oedipus Rex*, the classic Sophoclean tragedy in which Oedipus inadvertently falls in love with his own mother, Jocasta. The play also inspired Sigmund Freud's theorization of the Oedipus Complex, in which he postulated that a boy's first, unconscious, object of sexual desire was his mother, that this coincided with hatred for his father and that this was a universal human experience and a normal part of psychosexual development. In this case it is not the son's sexual desire for his own mother which is the cause of narrative tension and this situation does not reveal a true Oedipal configuration. However, by associating the themes of maternity, sexuality and adult-child frustration with allusions to Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the sitcom's narrative and dialogue manage to conjure an image of a dysfunctional mother-child relationship, one which is particularly harmful to the protagonist, Chandler.

An alternative more progressive reading of this episode – one in which Nora's actions are viewed as a liberated expression of an older woman's confident sexuality – is precluded by the episode's conclusion during which Chandler, after having been encouraged by Ross to confront Nora, finally addresses his mother's behavior. As Nora prepares to leave his apartment, Chandler finally takes the opportunity to communicate honestly with her. His difficulty and hesitation are apparent even in the dialogue:

> **Chandler**: You kissed my best Ross! Or, something to that effect.
> **Nora, standing in the doorway**: Okay. [Steps back into the apartment and closes the door]. Look, it, it was stupid.
> **Chandler**: Really stupid.
> **Nora**: Really stupid, and, I don't even know how it happened. I'm sorry, honey, and I promise it will never happen again. Are we okay now?
> **Chandler**: Yeah… No. No.

Once again, the depth of the trouble caused by the maternal figure is reflected in the characters' speech as Chandler grasps for the adequate vocabulary to speak about his friend. The kiss and its revelation have altered the friendship between the two men. Now that Chandler knows the truth, he stumbles, like Ross did, for words. Ross is not, for the moment, Chandler's best friend, he becomes his "best Ross," just as Ross was unable to refer to Nora Bing as Chandler's mom in the earlier scene and resorted to "Mrs. Mom" and "your Bing." The maternal-femme fatale hybrid has again sown confusion and disorder at the level of dialogue just as she has at a narratological level and, more broadly at an ideological one as well, blurring sexuality and maternity and

renegotiating maternal stereotypes. Chandler's obvious confusion appears to bring about a recognition on the part of the maternal character and to stimulate a more conciliatory attitude from Nora. Indeed, she seems to intuit at this point exactly what her child needs to hear, saying, "it was stupid," "I'm sorry," and, "it will never happen again." In this, the character is, in part, retrieved and given a more conventional maternal attitude evidenced by anticipation, intuition and subsuming her desires in order to meet the psychological needs of her child. However, Nora's apology is not adequate for Chandler who is not yet sufficiently at ease. The scene fades without audience laughter, marking a rare non-comedic moment in the sitcom and underscoring the seriousness of this scene between mother and son.

At this point there is a shift in perspective and the camera is no longer focused on the mother and son in Chandler's apartment. The scene changes to a shot of the hallway separating Chandler and Joey's apartment from Rachel and Monica's, the location of the earlier confusion, humor and intrigue surrounding the kiss. Joey is outside his door with his ear up against it, listening as Ross comes up the stairs. The two men are together again in this familiar space and the mother-child conversation occurring behind the door is related by Joey who acts as narrator to Ross as well as to the *Friends* audience:

> **Joey**: He did it! He told her off! And not just about the kiss, about everything.
> **Ross**: You're kidding!
> **Joey**: No, no! He said, "When are you going to grow up and start being a Mom?"
> **Ross**: Wow!
> **Joey**: Wait, then she came back with, "The question is, when are you going to grow up and realize I have a bomb?"
> **Ross**: Are you sure she didn't say, "when are you going to grow up and realize *I am your Mom*?"

While the reported speech is incorrectly communicated by Joey (his mistaken addition of "bomb" in lieu of "mom" further blurs the lines between maternal figure and sex bomb), the exchange between mother and son is clear enough: Chandler and Nora are engaged in a tussle over appropriate maternal behavior. The grown son is taking his mother to task for being immature, selfish and unresponsive to his needs. In asking her when she is going to start to be a Mom, he is suggesting that Nora has not been engaged in the type of behavior that Chandler perceives to be maternal in spite of Nora's own view which directly contradicts this. Her character is seemingly given space to defend herself and yet, the audience not only does not hear it directly from the character herself but can also not be entirely sure of her exact words as they have been

misrepresented by the unreliable narrator, Joey. Within the closeted space of Chandler's apartment (the dialogue literally takes place behind closed doors), made unavailable to the viewer directly, Chandler apparently dresses down his mother, disciplining her for her inadequate and selfish maternal behavior. Indeed, Nora's clothing seems to foreshadow what may be interpreted alternatively as a surrender of the character's subjective self or as a reassuring reappropriation of a more traditional maternal role: gone is the short, fitted black dress with the plunging neckline she was wearing during her kiss with Ross. In coming to say goodbye to her son, Nora is dressed in a fully-covering, buttoned-up, conservative white pant suit. Nora has literally been "dressed down," disciplined out of her formally sexual self. In her final confrontation with Chandler she has been "dressed up" in a more modest, even, virginal white. Dressed out of her femme fatale role and dressed into a maternal one.

Mother and son finally part ways in the hallway. Kissing Chandler, she asks, "Are you okay, kiddo?" This time, the character's use of the word "kiddo" may be understood as an appropriate term of maternal endearment for her adult son. She reminds him to "be good" before turning and seeing Ross. They salute each other formally as "Mrs. Bing" and "Mr. Geller." In this hallway which has been the scene of so much confusion and misunderstanding, things are now clear. Nora and Ross, in using each other's formal titles have decisively moved beyond the intimate and disruptive moment they shared a few days (a few minutes, in the space of the episode) earlier. The physical and lexical distance between the two allows Nora Bing, now dressed in white, to shift into a more clearly defined maternal performance. Nora turns to smile at Chandler who easily smiles back at her signifying that the son has at last been satisfied and appeased by his mother's new and improved maternal attitude. Just as the mother-child relationship is restored in the hallway, so is the frayed friendship: the episode comes to a close as Chandler puts his arm around Ross's shoulder and the two friends walk back inside the apartment.

Nora Bing in seducing Ross, not only reinforces Chandler's mistrust of his maternal figure (who is also, at this point in the series, his only parental figure) but she also intrudes upon and defiles the symbolic space of friendship which he, like the other main protagonists, has constructed around himself to counterbalance and compensate for the lack of nuclear familial support. The maternal character of Nora is constructed as being doubly inappropriate, both in who she is (unable or refusing to conform to the needs of her adult child) and in what she does (actively perturbing her son's relationship with his close friend and confident.) The liminal area of the hallway acts in

this episode as a space of epistemological negotiation where the confusion and misunderstanding highlight the chaos this maternal femme fatale has brought to the sitcom's diegesis before ultimately resolving the confusion and the unknowableness of her character. Nora Bing arrives in *Friends* as a potentially dangerous mystery, she leaves the episode a known quantity. She is, of course, a mother, she just needed to be reminded of her appropriate role by her son, Chandler. Again, *Friends* has positioned another maternal figure as a source of disruption, a bad mother, to her adult child.

II.2.8. Sandra Green: Marlo Thomas Returns to Sitcom

The character of Rachel Green's mother, Sandra, is portrayed by the actress Marlo Thomas. As was the case with the choice of Morgan Fairchild to play Nora Bing, the choice of Thomas to play Mrs. Green is highly significant. At the time that *Friends* began its broadcast in 1994, Marlo Thomas was already well known for her own television sitcom *That Girl* which aired on ABC from 1966 to 1971. She interpreted the role of Ann Marie, a young woman who had left her home in upstate New York to move to New York City in order to pursue an acting career. The role was among the very first representations of a single, young woman and was groundbreaking in that it showed Ann leaving her parents' home in search of a career and independence just a few years after more ideologically constrictive sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* finished airing. The fact that Marlo Thomas was one of *That Girl*'s executive producers was also groundbreaking for a 1960s television series[342] and when Thomas decided to end the show after five seasons to move on to other projects, she rejected the network's desire to see Ann marry her boyfriend on the grounds that she didn't want women to view marriage as their only option in life. As Thomas stated in 2003 concerning *That Girl*:

> We opened up the window for young women. You did not have to be the wife or the daughter of somebody or the secretary of somebody, but that you could be the somebody. The story could be about you and what you wanted in life. Once that happened, I think that really paved the way for a lot of other shows.[343]

[342] The only other female producer of a sitcom up until that point was Lucille Ball.
[343] "Marlo Thomas, Actress" https://interviews.televisionacademy.com/interviews/marlo-thomas.

Thomas is also known for her feminist activism as co-founder of the Ms. Foundation for Women and co-creator of "Free to be…You and Me," a 1970s children's musical album and later book, celebrating gender equality and promoting equal opportunity and self-determination for girls and boys.[344] The role she assumed on *Friends* as the privileged, upper-class, socialite wife of Dr. Leonard Green a prominent cardiologist, and mother of their three spoiled girls is the antithesis of the actress' previous work and a knowing wink to those audience members aware of her previous roles in television and in American culture more generally. Her three appearances on *Friends* present a stay-at-home mother of three grown children feeling stifled and frustrated by the rigidity of her role. The character finds inspiration in the example set by her eldest daughter Rachel who is herself leading a life very similar to that sought out by Ann Marie in *That Girl* three decades earlier in the early days of feminism's Second Wave.

Yet the representation of Rachel's mother is not, in general, created in such a way as to encourage a positive interpretation of the character. Instead of configuring Sandra's desire for happiness in an affirmative, approving manner – the courageous story of an older woman finally ready to thrive and start her life over after having merely survived for decades within the confines of a stultifying patriarchal marital configuration – the sitcom's treatment of this maternal character is, as in the case of the other maternal representations we have examined, ambiguous at best: while they do offer some semblance of narrative autonomy to the maternal character, the narrative arcs occupied by Sandra mostly serve to destabilize her daughter, Rachel. In this way, she is reminiscent of the corrupting influence of the Nora Bing character, of the disappointment wrought by Gloria Tribbiani as well as the unfair, pestering presence of Judy Geller. This is particularly evident in the first episodes in which she appears, although her initial appearance in Episode Eleven of Season Two, "The One with the Lesbian Wedding," is characterized by a clear sense of pride in her daughter.

[344] The album was explicitly conceived by Thomas to combat gender stereotypes. Songs and skits include "Boy Meets Girl" featuring two newborn babies who erroneously apply gender stereotypes to each other: the boy baby convinces the girl baby the she is a boy because she is able to keep secrets (real girls can't) while he himself is certain he's a girl because he wants to become a cocktail waitress when he grows up. The moment of truth comes at the end of the skit when a nurse comes to change their diapers and they 'see' what they actually are. Another song, "William's Doll," tells the story of a boy who is teased by his friends and family for wanting a doll more than anything else until his wise grandmother explains to William's father that he needs to have a doll to learn how to be a loving father in preparation for when he has children of his own one day.

Sandra appears at the Central Perk coffee house where Rachel works as a waitress. In fact, in anticipation of her mother's visit, Rachel is anxious that she will be judged for having walked away from the life that she was to have led if she had married her ex-fiancé, Barry. A distracted Rachel explains: "I just don't want her to think that because I didn't marry Barry my life is total crap, you know?" However, her stress is shown to be unfounded when the maternal character finally enters the café. She is well dressed and slightly out of place in the more casual décor of the café. The women hug warmly and are excited to see each other. Rachel introduces her mother to the other main characters:

> **Rachel**: Here, meet my friends.
> **Sandra**: Monica! You look gorgeous! Oh my, the last time I saw you it was eat or be eaten! [Audience laughter.]
> **Rachel**: Uh, this is Joey, this is Phoebe, and this is Chandler. And you remember Ross.
> **Sandra**: Oh, hello Ross. [Ross extends a hand to shake which Sandra ignores. Audience laughter.] So, what do you think of my daughter, in the apron, with the big job!
> **Rachel**: Oh Mom!
> **Sandra**: Oh hey! If you didn't pour the coffee no one would have anything to drink.
> **Chandler**: Believe me, sometimes that happens. [Audience laughter.]
> **Sandra**: This is just so exciting! You know, I never worked. I went straight from my father's house to the sorority house to my husband's house. I am just so proud of you!
> **Rachel**: Really?

As Rachel's mother, Sandra is shown to be loving, supportive and proud. The two women are physically close, hugging when they first see each other and remaining in close proximity as Rachel introduces Sandra to her friends. The older woman exhibits an undisguised and sincere pride in her daughter's waitressing job to the great surprise of the latter who was so recently dreading the possibility that her mother would view her new life in the city as "total crap." That Rachel's precarious employment as a waitress is objectively not a prestigious career is beside the point for Sandra. Her daughter has achieved an important measure of independence, one that she was never able to achieve having gone straight from her childhood home to college to marriage. The insistence on the terms "my father's house" and "my husband's house" underscore Sandra's almost exclusive existence within patriarchal institutions. Sandra's pride in her daughter is unmistakable and sets up the intriguing *mise en abyme* of Marlo Thomas playing Sandra Green resembling (physically) Ann Marie played by Marlo Thomas admiring Jennifer Aniston playing

Rachel Green resembling (professionally) Ann Marie played by Marlo Thomas. The admiration flatters Rachel and leaves her all the more unprepared for the unpleasant surprise her mother has in store for her.

Sandra Green's introductory scene sets the stage for what follows in Rachel and Monica's apartment and just as importantly imparts an initial impression of Mrs. Green as loving, proud and in admiration of her daughter, Rachel. However, the simple fact she is so in awe of Rachel's modest professional achievements suggests the underlying innocence of someone who has never had to earn her keep in spite of all her outward sophistication. In effect, wearing an apron and pouring coffee are hardly the marks of a high-powered career in spite of Sandra's enthusiastic exclamations. That Rachel is a terrible waitress (underscored by Chandler's sarcastic contribution to the dialogue) makes Sandra's pride seem all the more naïve, absurd, and downright ridiculous. Thus, the character of Sandra is represented simultaneously as elegant and polished but also slightly preposterous. While this first scene portrays a devoted mother beaming with admiration and support for her young daughter, the audience and Rachel will be required to reread Sandra Green almost immediately.

Figure 40 Marlo Thomas arrives to play Rachel Green's mother, Sandra on Friends.

II.2.9. Treacherous Sandra

Sandra Green's pride in her daughter's modest accomplishments are revealed to be less altruistic than they initially appeared in the episode's following scene which takes place in Rachel and Monica's apartment and depicts the two women preparing dinner together. The maternal support continues as Rachel broaches the difficult subject of her failed engagement and wedding to the orthodontist, Barry:

Sandra: You have some life here, sweetie!

> **Rachel**: I know! And Mom, I realize you and Daddy were upset when I didn't marry Barry and get the big house in the suburbs with all the security and everything. But, God, this is just so much better for me, you know?
> **Sandra**: I do know. You didn't love Barry, honey, and I've never seen you this happy.

At this point, Sandra's enthusiasm and admiration for her daughter's current way of life will be exposed to be something more sinister and far less noble: envy.

> **Sandra**: I look at you and I think, "Oh this is what I want."
> **Rachel**: For… me.
> **Sandra**: Well… not *just* for you.
> **Rachel**: Well, what do you mean?
> **Sandra**, **hesitatingly**: I'm… uh… considering leaving your father.
> [*Monica enters the apartment announcing that for the wedding of two lesbians she will be catering she has decided to make chicken breasts.]*
> **Rachel**: Oh, God, I think I'm going to be sick.

Sandra's revelation that she will be splitting from Rachel's father literally sickens her daughter. However, Rachel's violent reaction may also be interpreted as reaction not just to the imminent demise of her nuclear family but also to the betrayal of her mother's maternal qualities. Rachel took Sandra's enthusiasm to be a purely selfless expression of maternal pride, yet the mother's disclosure exposes her attitude toward her daughter as something very different: a self-centered fixation on her own desires ("this is what *I want"*). The maternal figure, in wanting to adopt the same sort of lifestyle (single, free, independent) that her daughter is currently leading, in disguising envy of her daughter as pride in her daughter, in fact falls far short of idealized maternal behavior, rendering the younger character not only psychologically ill at ease, but physically ill.

The extent to which this is a disruptive moment in the young woman's life is signaled by the fact that the following scene features Rachel sitting in the center of the couch in Central Perk surrounded on either side by Monica and Phoebe, and, more peripherally, by the three main male characters, Joey, Chandler and Ross. The substitute family has rallied around one of their members in need suggesting once again the extent to which the nuclear families in *Friends*, and mothers in particular, are deficient in providing appropriate emotional and psychological support. As Rachel commiserates with her friends, Joey asks her if her parents fought a lot, and Rachel replies, "No, they didn't even talk to each other. My God how was I supposed to know they were having problems?" The extent to which she has been caught unawares by her mother's news is revealed. However, Rachel also inadvertently (and ironically) exposes one of the causes of Sandra's

dissatisfaction with her situation. The subsequent studio audience laughter suggests that they understand the significance of what the young woman has just said: an utter lack of communication is undoubtedly one of the reasons Sandra is eager to leave Rachel's father. The five friends, in exchanging knowing glances, also seem to consider that Rachel has been naïve, yet instead of pressing the character on her mother's possibly legitimate unhappiness, the dialogue turns back to Rachel who continues to complain: "Oh, I just can't believe that this is happening. I mean, when I was little everybody's parents were getting divorced, you know? I just figured as a grown-up I wouldn't have to worry about this." Rachel reveals the extent to which she took for granted her parent's marital status which was predicated on the comparatively marginalized status of Sandra in comparison to her surgeon husband, Leonard Green. Whilst Rachel nominally recognizes herself as a grown-up, she is unable, for the moment, to muster a more objective perspective of her mother's subjective position. Likewise, when Monica suggests adopting a flattered outlook – Rachel is indeed positioned as the inspiration for Sandra's decision – the young woman is dismissive, suggesting that her mother could have copied her haircut instead of her way of life.[345]

Rachel's dismay at her mother's unmotherly behavior becomes more profound in a following scene which takes place once again in Rachel and Monica's apartment. While the two younger women prepare for Monica's catering event, Sandra carefreely drinks wine and dances around the living room. She cheerily remarks, "Oh this is so much fun, just the girls! Do you know what we should do? Does anybody have any *marijuana*?" A shocked Rachel shrieks while Monica rejects the idea because they are cooking. Undeterred, Sandra continues in the same breezy manner, "So, what's new in sex?" She explains to her horrified daughter, "the only man I've ever been with is your father," "I mean this is no offense to your dad, sweetie, but I was thinking there might be more." The shocked reaction of the two younger friends constructs Sandra's interrogations as embarrassing, outrageous and inappropriate. Monica attempts to ignore the conversation, steeping herself in her food preparation while Rachel berates her mother, "I cannot have this conversation with you," "God, you just come here, and you drop this bomb on me before you even tell Daddy! What? What do you want, do you want my blessing?" Sandra ultimately

[345] Rachel's reply is also a self-reflexive comment on the capillary cultural phenomenon of "The Rachel," an extraordinarily popular type of haircut which was directly inspired by the *Friends* character/actress duo. In suggesting that Sandra copy her haircut instead of file for divorce, she is further marginalizing the maternal figure, reducing her to the level of the thousands of anonymous fans who attempted a vicarious connection with Rachel Green and/or Jennifer Aniston by getting a similar haircut.

reveals her real intention, she is seeking understanding and compassion from her daughter; as she says to Rachel, "I guess of all people I thought you'd understand," and then quietly, "You didn't marry your Barry, honey, but I married mine." "Oh," replies Rachel simply, as the scene ends without laughter on a minor-keyed guitar thread and a fade to black, another rare non-comedic moment for this sitcom.

As we have seen with some of the previous mother characters, Sandra Green is offered here a limited space of narrative autonomy to develop her own subjective perspective for Rachel and for the *Friends* audience; the lack of laughter accompanying Sandra's admission that, in marrying 'her Barry,' Rachel's father, she has led an unhappy and unfulfilling existence, suggests that the audience is to read this as the opposite of comic. But the interpretation that we are to take Sandra's feelings, wants and desires seriously is short-lived and is not supported by a reading of the rest of the episode for, while Rachel may at last be sympathetic with her mother's unhappiness, this altruistic reaction is short-lived as soon as her mother once again begins to discuss frankly and openly the possibilities for expanding her narrow perspectives. At the wedding uniting Ross's ex-wife, Susan, with her new companion, Carol, Sandra is again lightly carefree and insouciant; again, her reflections rankle her adult daughter. Drinking another glass of wine, Sandra affirms that she is having fun, "I just danced with a wonderfully large woman, and three other girls made eyes at me over at the buffet, I'm not saying it's something I want to pursue, but it's nice to know I have options." Rachel's reaction is more measured than in the previous scene in the apartment although it remains significant: she asks Monica if there is "more alcohol?" Again, the maternal figure's words and actions put the daughter in such a state that, instead of being physically ill as she was in the previous scene, Rachel feels compelled to resort to alcohol in an attempt to relieve the tension and cognitive dissonance caused by her mother's unmotherly behavior.[346]

Through her decision to put an end to her unhappy marriage, Sandra Green ruptures her daughter's sense of stability. Rachel can no longer count on the sacrosanct nature of her parents' relationship to bring her adult self a sense of stability. The parental relationship is not ruptured here by the natural force of death, nor is it brought about by her father. In this episode, the person responsible for upsetting the character's equilibrium is once again the maternal figure. Not only

[346] Rachel's request for alcohol echoes Monica's obvious need to imbibe following the intense mother-daughter conversation with her own mother in Season One, Episode Eight's "The One Where Nana Dies Twice" and contributes to the sitcom's overall project of portraying its secondary maternal figures as exasperating, emotionally draining and, in general, disappointing maternal figures for their grown daughters. Mothers, in *Friends*, drive their children to drink.

does Sandra's action distress her daughter but the way in which she does so is particularly painful for Rachel. Her carefree nature in the face of her finished relationship, her evident curiosity in matters conventionally understood to be inappropriate for good mothering (non-heterosexual sex, illicit drugs), all make an already psychologically fragilizing situation even more difficult for Rachel's character to handle. Sandra then is a further reincarnation of the bad mother, one who is not up to the task of taking into account her child's psychological needs.

Figure 41 Sandra's announcement that she intends to leave Rachel's father is met with shock and disgust...

Figure 42 ...as is her newfound curiosity towards drug use and recreational sex.

If this episode demonstrates the havoc Rachel Green's mother brings about through her decision to divorce Rachel's father, the negative effect it has on the younger woman is underscored in a later episode of the same season, "The One with the Two Parties.[347]" Planning Rachel's surprise birthday party takes an unforeseen turn when both of her parents unexpectedly arrive at her apartment to celebrate her birthday. Rachel's friends struggle to keep the two divorcing parents apart so as not to spoil the birthday and the chaos and confusion which reigns throughout the episode is symbolic of the turmoil that Sandra has brought about more generally by leaving her husband. The episode begins by foreshadowing the mayhem to come. Rachel arrives frustrated at work after having attended her younger sister's college graduation. What was supposed to have been a celebration (it is implied that the sister's academic success is surprising) turns out to be a

[347] Season Two, Episode Twenty-Two.

disaster because of the level of animosity between the Green parents. It was, as Rachel recounts to her friends, "the graduation from hell." The sitcom constructs a telling parallel between the divorcing Greens and a divided nation as Rachel continues to explain that her parents had to be "shushed" during the commencement address by none other than Archbishop Desmond Tutu, symbolic here as one of the major figures who attempted to lead South Africa to reconciliation in the post-apartheid era.

The need to keep Leonard and Sandra Green apart and unaware of each other's presence is the source of the major narrative arc of this episode and numerous gags result from the fact that the two parents are kept in two different apartments with Rachel splitting her time between the two trying with more and more difficulty to maintain a fragile equilibrium. The episode reaches an uncharacteristic dramatic climax as a succession of alternating scenes features Rachel listening to each parent (Leonard in Joey and Chandler's apartment and Sandra in Rachel and Monica's) complain with increasing anger about the other:

> **Leonard**: Did you know your mother spent twelve hundred dollars on bonsai trees? I felt like Gulliver around that place.
> **Sandra**: You work, and you work, and you work at a marriage, but all he cares about is his stupid boat.
> **Leonard**: You work, and you work, and you work on a boat…
> **Sandra**: He always ridiculed my pottery classes…
> **Leonard**: And you sand it and you varnish it…
> **Sandra**: But when all is said and done, he *still* drinks out of the mugs.
> **Leonard**: And her yoga and her *Bridges of Madison County*…
> **Sandra**: The scotch, the cigarettes…
> **Leonard**: The bonsais and the chihuahua…
> **Sandra**: I may have only been in therapy for three weeks now, dear, but…
> **Leonard**: What the hell does she want with half a boat?

The fragmentary and contradictory bits of dialogue indicate the overall incoherence of the situation Rachel now finds herself in. The split between the two parents, the rupture of the heteronormative marital status which was initiated by the maternal figure leads to a nonsensical situation for the young adult character, who struggles mightily to search for meaning in the mess, as well as for the studio and television audience. The psychological toll the predicament takes on Rachel is made clear as the character is filmed in slow motion turning in bewilderment while Joni Mitchell sings "Big Yellow Taxi" ("you don't know what you got till it's gone") in the background. The following scene shows a dejected Rachel sitting on the floor of the hallway separating the two apartments,

having finally found a quiet and neutral space away from the two warring factions of her parents who are, in this scene, quite literally on opposite sides. The character, torn between her two parental figures, is consoled by Chandler, himself a child of an interrupted heteronormative configuration.

Rachel's manifest unhappiness, touchingly evoked by a story of the Greens' former familial solidarity which Rachel recounts to Chandler, precludes any possible alternative interpretations of Sandra Green's narrative role. Indeed, the story from Rachel's youth describes the paternal figure as something of an angry tyrant ("my dad would be upset because nobody was helping and then when we did help, he would *scream* at us for doing it wrong"), a representation which is confirmed by the father's portrayal within this episode as particularly difficult and unkind. There is in fact much evidence available to imagine a radically different conception of this divorce: after having lived in such constricting and unhappy circumstances for so long, the mother is finally seeking liberation, self-sufficiency and independence. Rachel's reaction, from the perspective of an adult child, could have been constructed as being relieved, supportive and happy for her mother. Instead, the character is portrayed as being in need of consolation first from her friend, Chandler, and then – when he literally hands her off to Ross – from her boyfriend. The fact that Rachel finds ultimate consolation in the arms of her boyfriend, as opposed to her platonic male friend or her female friends for example, may be interpreted as a further implicit condemnation of Sandra's decision: Sandra's rejection of heteronormative married couplehood and the dramatic effect it has on Rachel becomes the justification for placing (again) the daughter in the open arms of Ross, here a symbol of the heteronormativity and patriarchy which the daughter's mother is in the process of repudiating.

A final element confounding a more open interpretation of Sandra as a strong female character taking control of her destiny occurs in the last scene of this episode. Rachel's birthday party comes to an end and the two parents, still unaware of each other's presence, both decide to leave at the same time. As Sandra says goodbye in the hallway, Leonard exits Rachel's apartment at the same time. The six friends panic as it seems the two are, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, about to meet face to face. Joey makes a split-second decision. Saying, "Thanks for coming, Mrs. Green," he seizes Sandra in his arms, kissing her and turning her around at the same time so that she cannot see Leonard emerge from the apartment. The other friends position their bodies in front of Joey and Sandra so as to prevent Leonard from seeing her. He is quickly escorted down the

stairs by Rachel, and Joey lets go of Sandra. In its pairing of a young male character with an older maternal figure, the kiss is in some ways a parallel to the kiss which occurred between Nora Bing and Ross. However, the intimate moment resonates in a very different manner. In this episode, Joey, the young, sexually aggressive male character is the initiator while the maternal figure is the one who is acted upon. Yet, Sandra's reaction is peculiar. She does not resist the kiss; her consenting body falls into it. Nor does she actively participate in it, remaining passively slumped as Joey embraces her. In not responding passionately to Joey's kiss, Sandra avoids being portrayed as a femme fatale in the way that Nora Bing is. However, through her submission to Joey's advance, the character is also denied her own subjectivity and agency. Sandra is subdued by the kiss, she is tamed bodily by the younger generation in a way that Leonard is not subjected to; a confrontation between two angry adults is avoided at the expense of Sandra's bodily integrity. Her exclamation as Joey releases her that it "is the best party (she has) been to in years" subtly reinforces her ridiculousness as a character. That Sandra can be so easily duped by the least-intelligent *Friends* character does not lend the character credibility as a respectable narrative agent. This in turn reinforces the interpretation of Sandra as another maternal character whose motives are antithetical to her child's wellbeing and by extension, whose integrity as a maternal figure is compromised. The character of Sandra Green joins the ranks of the other maternal characters we have analyzed (Judy Geller, Gloria Tribbiani and Nora Bing) in the predominantly damaging impression she transmits in terms of motherhood.

Figure 43 Her parents' warring dispute during her own birthday party (brought on by Sandra's decision to divorce) pushes Rachel to the brink. She finds solace with Chandler, another product of ruptured heteronormativity.

Figure 44 Joey's kiss makes Sandra go limp, and she likes it.

II.2.10. Phoebe's Mothers 1: Absent Lilly

We will now turn to a pair of representations, the dual maternal figures of the *Friends* main character, Phoebe Buffay. The *Friends* diegesis posits Phoebe as having lost her mother to suicide at the age of fourteen. This event is indeed an integral part of the young woman's origin story and explains in part the character's unconventional childhood.[348] Attempting to analyze the representation of Lily Buffay, Phoebe's mother, is made difficult by the fact that, having committed suicide more than a decade before the beginning of the *Friends* narrative, she never appears on the show. However, considering the willingness of the series to rely on analepsis as a narrative technique (multiple flashback scenes exist explaining or clarifying parts of Monica, Ross, Chandler and Rachel's histories) it is not inconceivable that Lily Buffay *could* have made an appearance in one of these contexts. As it is, Phoebe herself is the main source of information about Lily and her tendency to manipulate her mother's suicide to her benefit in the most ridiculous of circumstances marks her testimony as questionable and unreliable.[349] At the outset then, we are dealing with a maternal figure who is marginalized and objectified in particular ways. She is never seen nor heard, the character's perception depends entirely on indirect sources, namely her daughter. She exists only as an object of other people's recollections, fantasies and motives, relegated as she is to the nether regions of the sitcom's universe. Her absence, however, is far from neutral; she is not simply *not there*. Her absence is present from the earliest moments of the sitcom,

[348] Phoebe's father left the family early on, while a stepfather was imprisoned for reasons which are not elucidated in the series.

[349] In one episode, Phoebe tries to exploit her mother's suicide in an attempt to get the last available blueberry muffin as well as to be given access to a cellular phone belonging to a handsome stranger (Season Seven, Episode Fifteen, "The One with Joey's New Brain"). Phoebe's tendency to rely on Lily's suicide to turn a given situation to her advantage is so common that her friends no longer take her seriously.

she is the second maternal figure alluded to during the pilot episode.[350] In fact, the character's existence, its essence, is *rooted* in its absence.

The maternal lack in Phoebe's life is complicated by the specific circumstances surrounding it. Phoebe is not just a simple orphan. Indeed, Lily takes her own life, she removes *herself* from her children's existence. She actively chooses to leave her children, twin girls, without a maternal figure, without any type of parental figure, and this not at a tender age where the girls may have had only faint memories of their erstwhile mother but at the age of fourteen, that critical period of adolescence and entrance into adulthood. That Phoebe was a teenager at the time of her mother's suicide represents a particular set of vulnerabilities, for if Phoebe was old enough to fend for herself, she was also, as a pubescent young woman, particularly exposed to sexual manipulation and exploitation, circumstances which seem to be alluded to in some of the character's stories of living on the street. As such, the character of Lily may conform to one of the worst iterations of the bad mother stereotype, a mother who knowingly, willingly and permanently abandons her children through suicide.

Given Lily's lack of narrative agency, how then is the character constructed? How does she resonate within the sitcom? According to Phoebe, Lily committed suicide by putting her head in an oven when she and her sister Ursula were fourteen years old, leaving them to fend for themselves on the streets of New York City. This unusual method of suicide would appear to be an implicit reference to the American poet Sylvia Plath, who died of carbon monoxide poisoning after putting her head in a gas oven in her London apartment. If this is the case, the sitcom exploits this reference but leaves much unsaid. For example, Plath died after years of suffering from clinical depression for which she underwent psychoanalysis, treatment with antidepressants, as well as electroconvulsive therapy. After a number of suicide attempts throughout her adult life, Plath's final, successful attempt occurred when she was a single mother (she had separated from her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, when she learned of his infidelity) living alone with two very young children suggesting that the poet may have succumbed to postpartum depression or psychosis. Phoebe's reference to her mother's putting her head in an oven occurs in a humoristic context in

[350] Nora Bing, through her presence in Chandler's dream, being the first. In the pilot episode, Phoebe succinctly recounts her life story to Rachel, "I remember when I first came to the city, I was fourteen, my mom had just killed herself and my stepdad was back in prison." The difference between the two allusions of course is that Nora Bing appears physically several times in the series both in flashbacks and within the temporal space of the series itself. Lily Buffay as a deceased character does not appear in the series' narrative space, nor does she appear in flashbacks.

Friends and is indeed the source of studio audience laughter. By exploiting the unconventional suicide for humor, the sitcom obscures the profound desolation which, in Plath's case at least, led to such a drastic act. In ascribing an identical fate to Lily Buffay, while silencing the character herself, the sitcom refuses to contextualize Lily's suicide. Instead, this is left to the adult daughter who provides a very perfunctory version of her mother's death. The end result of this representation is that of a careless and eccentric maternal figure who deserted her children at a most critical moment in their upbringing.

Other information given by Phoebe over the course of the sitcom's ten seasons is that Lily was a drug user and dealer as well as open to unconventional sexual relationships. Indeed, Phoebe and her twin sister Ursula were conceived during a threesome which included Lily, Phoebe's father (Frank Buffay) and a third woman, Phoebe Abbot. Additionally, it is made clear that Lily lied repeatedly to her young children although this was done in the hopes of protecting their feelings. In one episode[351] for example, Phoebe is disabused of the notion that the man featured in several picture frames throughout her grandmother's apartment is her real father. In fact, the pictures in the frames are the stock photos used to fill the frames for sales purposes and Phoebe's grandmother was instructed by Lily to lie to the girls. When confronted by Phoebe, her grandmother explains that it was Phoebe's mother's idea: "She didn't want you to know the truth about your dad," that he was a neglectful father who had walked out on the family. What Phoebe believes to be her familial heritage turns out to be a simulacrum of parental presence and love. Several episodes later,[352] Phoebe is surprised to find out that at the end of the classic movie *Old Yeller* (Walt Disney, 1957) the family dog is shot dead because he has rabies. When watching the movie as a child, Phoebe explains to her friends that her mother would turn it off before the dog was shot by its owner. Here too Phoebe explains that Lily Buffay wanted to protect her daughters from the harsh truths of life. Phoebe, discovering the true ending of *Old Yeller*, comments with bitter sarcasm that proves humorous to the studio audience, "my mom did not show us the ends of sad movies to shield us from the pain and sadness. You know, before she killed herself." The manifest irony at work here is that a mother so concerned for her children's psychological welfare that she was willing to lie to them repeatedly was able to make the ultimate decision that resulted in their being

[351] Season Two, Episode Nine, "The One with Phoebe's Dad."
[352] Season Two, Episode Twenty, "The One Were Old Yeller Dies."

put in harm's way. Thus, Lily is not only an abandoning mother, she also becomes an object of ridicule for Phoebe as well as for the *Friends* audience.

A deeper irony is that Lily Buffay's suicide is used as a comic device throughout all ten seasons to explain why Phoebe is such an offbeat and peculiar character. Phoebe's outrageous (mis)adventures are variously hinted at, mentioned offhand and bluntly stated to construct her idiosyncratic and eclectic character and these details are often explicitly linked to Lily's suicide as its direct consequences. Among other peripeteia, at the age of fourteen Phoebe lived in a car with a man named Cindy, her step-father used to sell his blood to buy the twins food for their birthday, she contracted hepatitis after a pimp spit in her mouth and as a fourteen-year-old she was forced, out of desperation, to turn to violent crime, mugging a young Ross by threatening him with a metal pipe. Danger, lack and violence were integral ingredients of Phoebe's history and Lily, in her absence, is held to be responsible.

Through her suicide, this maternal figure left Ursula and Phoebe to fend for themselves, and if Phoebe was ultimately able to reconstruct a life for herself (thanks, in part, to Monica who became her roommate/mother figure and to the other friends who became her family), her identical twin sister Ursula represents what Phoebe could have become without these stabilizing figures: a part-time waitress, low budget porn-star, and compulsive liar.[353] Ursula is Phoebe without the reconstructed family. While the twins' father, Frank Buffay Sr. is also held responsible, it is to a lesser extent. Indeed, Phoebe confronts her father about his abandonment in one episode[354] and he manages to gain her sympathy by claiming that he was "a lousy father," burning the formula and making up lullabies that only made the girls cry harder. Whether Phoebe (and the *Friends* audience) finds him credible is beside the point; what is striking in this episode is that Frank has been given an opportunity to offer his subjective point of view of his own fathering experience, an opportunity denied to Lily even through analeptic techniques such as flashbacks or letters.[355] Lily, as such, remains the object of disapproval. Her absence not only creates an unfulfilled lack in

[353] Season Two, Episode Twelve, "The One After the Super Bowl – Part One"; Season Six, Episode Fourteen, "The One Where Chandler Can't Cry"; Season Eight, Episode Six, "The One with the Halloween Party."
[354] Season Five, Episode Thirteen, "The One with Joey's Bag."
[355] The one mention of a letter from Lily is her suicide note which is turned into fodder for humor when Ursula, having previously destroyed it, blatantly forges a new one which she unceremoniously reads to Phoebe: "Dear Ursula and Phoebe, I'll miss you. Ps. Your mom lives in Montauk." (Season Four, Episode One, "The One with The Jellyfish.")

Phoebe (replete with unsavory consequences), it also leads to her objectified representation. She is unable to give her own point of view, to explain her actions, to defend herself as Frank can.[356]

In fact, Lily Buffay *is* granted one occasion for a physical appearance during the series in Season Four, Episode Two, "The One with the Cat,"[357] when Phoebe, after having learned that Lily was not her biological mother, believes that a local child's lost cat who takes refuge in her guitar case is the reincarnation of her mother's spirit. Lily is thus literally rendered less than human, an animal unable to communicate, a child's pet, an object. It is striking here that Phoebe, the daughter, is responsible for objectifying her mother Lily into a cat. It is a concrete and literal demonstration of the mother/object-child/subject dichotomy which enables and perpetuates the objectified representations of mothers while refusing them the opportunity to account for their subjective selves. In projecting her dead mother onto a stray cat, Phoebe is able to reconstruct a mother for herself; however this reincarnated cat/mother is still mute, with no access to human language to express her own desires, motivations and opinions which could conceivably have the effect of humanizing the character and contextualizing her actions. Furthermore, even under these objectified circumstances, the cat/mother is shown to be distant. At one point in the episode Phoebe struggles to keep the cat in her arms commenting, "She keeps squirming and trying to get away, just like when she was alive."

While her friends seem dubious of the claim that the cat is in fact the reincarnated spirit of Lily, Phoebe is resolute and in explaining her conviction she mentions "the feeling." Thus, Phoebe's justification for believing that the cat is her mother may be interpreted as a sort of daughter's intuition, an ironic displacement of the more familiar and traditional notion of mother's intuition, an idea which has been used for centuries to mythologize women and mothers as being innately and instinctively in tune to their children's needs and desires. Yet, even Phoebe's daughter's intuition is erroneous. The cat which has suddenly appeared in her life has testicles, responds to the name Julio, and is being looked for by a young girl in the neighborhood. Phoebe's

[356] However, it is unclear that, even had the character been permitted some sort of narrative agency, she would have been able to redeem herself in the eyes of her adult daughter. It seems that while the incompetent father trope (exemplified here by Frank, Jr.) is a reliable source of humor in sitcoms, the incompetent mother one is virtually inexistent (although this may be subject to change for the new generation of mothers as will be examined in the case of Rachel Green in Chapter Three). Furthermore, the previous analyses have demonstrated the multiples ways in which the maternal figures in *Friends*, even when they are autonomous narrative agents, are generally portrayed pejoratively in this series.

[357]This episode is dedicated to the showrunner Marta Kauffman's own mother, Dorothy, in the wake of her death in 1997.

baffling explanation of her confidence that the cat is her mother's reincarnated spirit is equally far-fetched: the cat went into Phoebe's guitar case lined with orange felt. Lily's favorite fish was orange roughie. Cats love fish, ergo, to Phoebe the cat is without doubt a reincarnation of Lily. Perhaps these erroneous intuitions and interpretations are again indicative of the ineffective maternal care to which the character was subjected as a child; even Phoebe's strongest convictions are subject to mistake and ridicule. In any event, Ross posits Phoebe's misguided belief as being the result of guilt over spending time with Phoebe Abbott, Phoebe Buffay's newly discovered biological mother.

II.2.11. Phoebe's Mothers 2: Phoebe Abbot

Lily Buffay's complete lack of narrative agency over her own story stands in contrast to the circumstances involving Phoebe's biological mother, Phoebe Abbott, whose character *is* given the opportunity to appear in the *Friends* narrative space. As such, this maternal figure is able to give her own account of her story which led her to give up her twin daughters after their birth. While Phoebe initially rebuffs her biological mother's explanations and apologies, the two women eventually reconcile, representing another opportunity which is denied to Lily Buffay through her narrative absence. This suggests perhaps a subtle favoritism for the role of biological mother as more genuine and thus more worthy of asking for and being granted forgiveness than that of the adoptive mother Lily.

However, just because this particular maternal character is attributed narrative space does not necessarily translate this opening into an exclusively flattering representation for Phoebe Abbot as a maternal figure. Abbot is played by the actress Teri Garr and appears in three episodes of *Friends*. Another significant casting choice on the part of the show's creators, Teri Garr appeared frequently throughout the 1970s and 1980s in films such as *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks, 1974), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Stephen Spielberg, 1977), *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982) and *Mr. Mom* (John Hughes, 1983). She received an Academy Award Nomination for best supporting actress for her role alongside Dustin Hoffman in *Tootsie*. Garr's portrayal of Abbot on *Friends* is an extension of her previous performances as a good natured, slightly ditzy blond and these qualities lend credibility to one of Season Three's cliffhanger discoveries that she is in fact Phoebe Buffay's biological mother. The surprising plot twist involving the unexpected

revelation of a secret birth mother has more in common with a daytime soap opera than a network sitcom, yet this narrative arc is mined for humor with precision, imposing comedic treatment on an otherwise melodramatic, even dramatic narrative. However, the dramatic reveal does not lead to a simplistic happy reunification of the two women. Instead, it is treated with a complexity which underscores this sitcom's general positioning of maternal figures as disappointing and unreliable.

In the final episode of Season Three, "The One at the Beach," Phoebe Buffay obtains information that she hopes will lead her to her biological father who she has been searching for. The information leads to Phoebe Abbot and the younger Phoebe appears unannounced at Abbot's house on Long Island. Buffay questions Abbot as to the whereabouts of her father. She is disappointed to learn that the elder Phoebe has no information, that she "lost touch with everyone after high school." Unconvinced and undeterred, Phoebe decides to break into Abbot's house to look for possible clues that could lead her to her father. Instead, Abbot catches Phoebe in the process of breaking in and reaffirms that she really does not know where Frank Buffay is. However, agreeing with Phoebe that she has a right to know where she comes from, Abbot goes on to reveal that she is in fact Phoebe's biological mother.

> **Phoebe Abbott**: I'm very sorry but I really don't know where your father is. And that's the truth.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: Oh.
> **Phoebe Abbot**: But, um, you're right. I think that a person should know where they come from. Which is why I, uh…uh…okay…I'm your mother.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: Heh? [Studio audience laughter]
> **Phoebe Abbott**: See, you know, I wanted to tell you yesterday, but I just, you know, I felt all floopy… [Audience laughter as the camera shows Phoebe Buffay's stunned face.]

The scene ends with Phoebe's speechless reaction and is picked up the following season after the summer hiatus.[358] Several aspects of this interaction are of note here including, for example, the amount of dialogue accorded to each of the women. The elder Phoebe is given comparatively ample time to express herself; in addition, she is visibly angry at the younger woman for having broken into her home at night. On the other hand, Phoebe Buffay is reduced to monosyllabic utterances, she must passively receive and respond to the information the older Phoebe provides.

[358] This maternal cliffhanger is largely overshadowed by another cliffhanger, perhaps more compelling for the *Friends* target audience: Ross must choose between two women, his current girlfriend Bonnie and his former girlfriend Rachel for whom he has again been having romantic feelings. The scene in which Ross hesitates between the two women's doors is the final scene of the season's final episode. The scene in which the confrontation between the two Phoebes takes place comes just before.

After having been caught in the act of trespassing on the older woman's property, the younger Phoebe is now reduced to a passive receptor of information. Compared to the dynamic which Phoebe Buffay maintains with Lily Buffay's persona, this is a dramatic reversal in the authoritative positioning of the mother-daughter duo. Secondly, couched in the middle of this piece of dialogue is the ultimate melodramatic reveal, "I'm your mother.[359]" Yet as we have stated, this revelation is not given melodramatic treatment in the sitcom. In fact, the cliffhanger narrative spanning two seasons is actually resolved within this scene. The suspense (is this woman really Phoebe Buffay's mother?) is relieved almost immediately when Phoebe Abbot explains that she felt "floopy" the previous day. This neologism, as well as the older woman's eccentric body language, is recognizable to the *Friends* audience as being identical to the way in which the eccentric character Phoebe Buffay often expresses herself. The two Phoebes are linked in their unusual manner of communication and the younger character recognizes that she is finally rooted in a lineage of which she was heretofore unaware. If Phoebe Abbot's speech has made it clear that she is indeed the biological mother of Phoebe Buffay before the end of this season finale, the suspense then, lies in the way the younger Phoebe character will react to the discovery of this newfound maternal figure. This is the crux of this season-spanning maternal narrative.

Four months after this episode, the first episode of Season Four, "The One with the Jellyfish," was broadcast on NBC.[360] The episodes' seriality is made explicit by a short recap in which the character of Joey speaks directly into the camera while he summarizes the events of the previous episode. The importance of the maternal narrative is highlighted by its prime position in Joey's recounting. A short extract of the most dramatic moment of the final scene between the two Phoebe characters is replayed (Phoebe Abbott, "I'm your mother," Phoebe Buffay, "Heh?") before Joey summarizes the two other narrative arcs being bridged over to the new season. After the opening credits, the scene with the two Phoebes picks up where it was left off; the two women still in Phoebe Abbott's kitchen. Far from being a joyous occasion of mutual rediscovery, the scene instead constructs Phoebe Buffay's reaction as one of betrayal and anger.

> **Phoebe Abbott**: So, I guess you'd like to know how it all happened.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: Well, I, I mean, I think I can figure it out. I guess, you know, I was born and then everyone started lying their asses off.

[359] This line may be understood as a softer, more apologetic version of Darth Vader's now-iconic "I'm your father" from George Lucas's original *Star Wars* trilogy.
[360] Season Three, Episode Twenty-Five aired on May 15, 1997 while Season Four, Episode One was broadcast on September 25, 1997.

The younger Phoebe turns in disgust towards the door to leave while the older one attempts to clarify the context for Phoebe Buffay so that she may better understand the situation which resulted in her being adopted by Lily Buffay.

> **Phoebe Abbott:** No! No, it wasn't like that. Remember how I told you that Lily and Frank and I were close? Well, we were very close.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: How close?
> **Phoebe Abbot**: Well, the three of us, we were kind of, uh, um, a couple.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: I don't even know how that would work!
> **Phoebe Abbott**: Well we would…
> **Phoebe Buffay**: I'm not asking!
> **Phoebe Abbott**: Well anyhow, *somehow,* I got pregnant, and I was… scared. I was stupid and selfish and scared. I was eighteen years old. I mean, you remember what it was like to be eighteen years old, don't you?
> **Phoebe Buffay**: Yeah, Let's see, my mom had killed herself and my dad had run off and I was living in a Gremlin with a guy named Cindy who talked to his hand.
> **Phoebe Abbott**: I'm so sorry. I thought I was leaving you with the best parents in the world. I didn't even hear about your mom and dad till a couple of years ago. By then, you were already grown up. I don't know, you're here and I would really… I would like to get to know you.
> **Phoebe Buffay**: Yeah well, everybody does. I'm a really cool person. And, you know, you had twenty-nine years to find that out, but you didn't even try! You know what? You walked out on me and I'm going to do the same to you.
> **Phoebe Abbott**: Wait!
> **Phoebe Buffay**: I don't ever want to see you again!

This rather long exchange presents several elements which complexify and darken the nascent relationship between the mother and daughter. Phoebe Buffay learns that her conception was the result of an unconventional sexual relationship, a teenage threesome including Phoebe Abbot, Lily and Frank Buffay. Phoebe accidently conceived the identical twin girls and Lily and Frank agreed to raise them. The younger Phoebe is at first confused then horrified as her biological mother attempts to explain the specific sexual configuration which led to the unintended pregnancy.[361]

[361] It is curious that throughout this scene Phoebe Abbot is holding a coat hanger. The object is initially presented as a clumsy attempt to protect the character during the younger Phoebe's "break-in" into her home, however, as the older woman begins to explain the circumstances of the unintended pregnancy, the coat hanger takes on a particular resonance. Phoebe Buffay says she is twenty-nine in this episode which was broadcast in 1997, establishing the fictional character's birth in 1968 at the height of the sexual revolution and countercultural movements but before abortion was legalized in 1973. Is this wooden hanger an implicit reference to the crude yet symbolic tool (a wire coat hanger) representing the unknown number of women who attempted to induce miscarriages of unwanted pregnancies in the period before abortion was legally available? And if so, is this reference a subtle way of communicating that Phoebe Abbott's action, while despicable in the eyes of her daughter, could, in fact, have been much more sinister had she so decided; that while Phoebe Abbott refers to herself as stupid and selfish in this scene, she in fact made a very

She is seemingly so embarrassed by the biological mother's reference to the recreational, non-heterosexual, non-monogamous sexual practices not specifically associated with reproductive purposes that she refuses to listen to the older woman's clarification.

The older woman's appeal to her daughter's empathy also falls short. In asking Phoebe Buffay to identify with the "scared" and "stupid" eighteen-year-old that she was, Phoebe Abbott manages only to reinforce the younger woman's sense of abandonment and dislocation (at eighteen, Phoebe Buffay was living in a car) as well as the potential danger facing her (she was sharing the car with a deranged man). The younger Phoebe later refers to her mother as "a big fat abandoner" in seeking solace from her friend (and surrogate family member) Monica. Phoebe Abbott's attempt to rekindle a connection between the two women is also rejected by the younger one. It is too late. Because Phoebe Abbott did not take the opportunity over the previous three decades to contact her daughter, Phoebe Buffay is adamant that she will reject her biological mother's attempts just as she feels she was rejected by the mother at birth. Phoebe Buffay effectively aborts this initial attempt at a rebirth of the mother-daughter relationship, seizing back control from the older maternal character.

Figure 45 Phoebe Buffay refuses to see her biological mother, Phoebe Abbot.

When Phoebe Abbott arrives in a subsequent scene in Central Perk to again attempt a reconciliation with her biological daughter, the younger woman continues to resist before finally acquiescing. However, the possibility for a mutually satisfying and lasting parent-child relationship is undermined by the very terms on which it is predicated. In response to Phoebe Buffay's observation that the two women are not "losing anything" by not getting to know each other because they have nothing in common, Phoebe Abbott objects, suggesting that she likes pizza and The Beatles. The fact that the biological mother character mentions an almost universally appreciated food and musical group underscores how little the two women really know each other

selfless decision in maintaining the pregnancy through the birth of the twins, giving them life before handing them off to two people who she believed would be responsible parents?

and lends a precarious and ridiculous tone to the emerging relationship. The studio audience laughter may be interpreted as a recognition of the absurdity of this moment. In order to impart a more serious and thoughtful reading of this reconciliation, the scene could have been constructed without the audience laughter, bringing gravity to this moment instead of ridicule and humor. As it is, the character of Phoebe Abbott remains a distracting and silly one within the sitcom's universe.

Phoebe Abbott, then, becomes another maternal figure who is positioned as having a deleterious effect on her adult child. Like Nora Bing, Abbott's unconventional sexuality leads to tumult for the younger protagonist. Like Sandra Green, her desire to evade a heteronormative nuclear family configuration results in psychological distress for the adult child. Like Lily Buffay, Phoebe Abbott, also abandoned her children at a critical moment. Indeed, the two maternal characters' dereliction of maternal duty mutually and negatively reinforce one another: Phoebe Buffay left her two children in the care of the maternally incapable Lily who eventually committed suicide. Lily's suicide represents a *second* abandonment for the character of Phoebe Buffay whose biological mother "walked out on" her at childbirth. The character of Phoebe then is revealed to have been disappointed by two maternal figures, neither of whom is represented as corresponding to culturally defined understandings of mothers as nurturing and selfless caretakers.

II.3. Reversals and Upheavals

The preceding analyses have consistently demonstrated the unusual dynamics at work in the mother-adult child relationships represented in *Friends*. The disappointments wrought by these maternal characters situate the younger adult characters in positions of moral and intellectual authority in relation to the selfish, immature, incomprehensible or embarrassing actions of their mothers. Monica manages to get Judy to admit that she is "a bitch" and scolds her not to chew her nails. Joey laments that he can only watch from an affectionate distance as he lets his parents "make their own mistakes." Chandler confronts his mother, telling her to "grow up and be a Mom." Rachel contents herself with alcohol as she watches her mother flirt with other women at a wedding, while Phoebe frustrates her newly discovered mother by repeatedly refusing to engage

in a relationship. In each circumstance the young protagonist must develop a strategy to deal with the inadequately behaving maternal figure and *Friends* may be interpreted as something of a televisual expert guide for grown children seeking advice (some perhaps more effective than others) on how to handle their misbehaving mothers, suggesting a complete reversal of ideological authority.

While their presence certainly responds to narrative and generic imperatives to create tension and humor in this fictional art form, it cannot escape our attention that it is repeatedly the maternal characters who stir such trouble for the main protagonists. It is certainly true that other recurring characters create problems for the narrative structure of the sitcom to resolve, for example Janice, Chandler's annoying girlfriend, as well as various colleagues and bosses. It is, however, the parental figures and specifically the maternal characters whose presence during the first formative seasons of *Friends* consistently creates the most narrative commotion, repeatedly troubling the young adults and, most significantly, allowing for and even necessitating this reversal of authority.

How can we account for these consistently disapproving representations, this multitude of "bad mother" figures in *Friends*? These are adult characters who need to be dealt with or handled somehow, tolerated and put up with by the younger generation instead of managing to coexist in a harmonious, mutually respectful relationship. They are not, in any meaningful way, kind, supportive, encouraging and stable figures in their adult children's lives. For the most part, the representations of these women and their behavior as mothers openly conflict with what sociologist Sharon Hays has identified as *intensive mothering*: "a gendered model which advises mothers to expand a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children.[362]" While Hays's model of intensive mothering is based on the care of minor, dependent children and not adults, she emphasizes that among the most important tenets of this "contemporary model of socially appropriate mothering[363]" are its child-centeredness and emotional absorption. Hays suggests that this ideology dictates that "a mother must recognize and conscientiously respond to all the child's needs and desires, and to every stage of the child's emotional and intellectual development.[364]" The main characters in *Friends* may indeed technically be adults but the entire series is predicated

[362] Sharon Hays*, The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), *x*.
[363] *Ibid*.
[364] *Ibid*, 8.

on the difficult adjustments necessary for the transition from late childhood to adulthood and the need to be surrounded by a caring group of people for understanding and support during this transition. The maternal characters in this series not only do not satisfy this need, they actively destabilize their own children's existences during this most critical and difficult time. Indeed, these women's primary narrative function in *Friends* seems to almost consistently drive their adult children to seek help and support from the alternate family that the main characters have created for themselves, amply confirming the creative pitch behind the genesis of the sitcom that "it's a time when your friends become your surrogate family."

Yet the particular emphasis on the maternal figure as the ultimate troublesome secondary character warrants close analysis and we may propose several possible explanations for these repeatedly disrupting performances. Firstly, these representations may be indicative of a generalized generational conflict occurring at a specific moment in American cultural history. Secondly, given the repeated iterations of the faulty maternal figure it would be naïve to ignore the possibility of misogynistic backlash against women in general, women as mothers and women associated implicitly or explicitly, as these characters are, with feminism's Second Wave. Thirdly and relatedly, these negative portrayals of motherhood may reveal tensions between different generations of feminists themselves as well as between different strands of feminism. Finally, the expression of a deeper-seeded psychological need identified by psychoanalysts such as Julia Kristeva may be at work in this series, that of a necessary separation, an imposition of borders separating and clearly distinguishing the fledgling subjectivities as represented by the young adult characters from their sources of origin, their maternal figures.

II.3.1. Generalized Generational Conflict

To understand these representations as a manifestation of generational conflict we must keep in mind that *Friends* was (and remains) identifiable as a series which specifically explored the lives of members of Generation X.[365] We may understand these fictional characters as having been born

[365] See Andréolle. Helene A. Shugart on the other hand suggests that *Friends* should not be interpreted as an accurate reflection of Generation X but is instead more appropriately "understood as a *commercial* attempt to represent Xers and their take on life, neatly force fit into a very traditional situation comedy format and plot." Emphasis added. See Shugart, Helene A. "Isn't it Ironic?: The Intersection of Third-Wave Feminism and Generation X," Women's Studies

during the mid to late 1960s, implying that their parental figures were young adult Baby Boomers or slightly older parents of the preceding Silent Generation during this "unusual" period when "[e]rratic behavior became common across the political spectrum."[366] This period including the countercultural liberation movements of Americans of color, women and homosexuals, as well as the protests of students on university campuses across the country, challenged normative America, suggesting that alternative ideologies and values were possible, that alternative ways of living and thinking were available and that strict conformism to traditional gender and familial roles could and should be questioned. That these challenges were not simply superficial but had profound and measurable consequences is made clear by the "empirical decline of the traditional family, as measured by rising rates of divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, premarital sex and nonmarital cohabitation."[367] Members of the Generation X cohort are thus the first to be born and to come of age in the aftermath of this period of intense contestation, the first to be raised within the interstices opened up for the normative American family during this period. Influential demographers Neil Howe and William Strauss describe, in the most incriminating terms possible, the toll these liberation movements had on this particular generation which they refer to as Thirteeners (Generation X being the thirteenth American generation born since the period of the Founding Fathers). "Thirteeners may not be a 'bad' generation," they write, "but what is not debatable is that their *condition* is bad […] whatever badness they are is a reflection of how they were raised – of what other people did to them, thought of them, and expected from them – and of what happened in the adult world throughout their childhood years.[368]" Writing in 1993, they also provide a frightening (and uncontextualized) litany of statistics illustrating the effects of generalized adult and parental neglect on Generation X, emphasizing among other societal ills the breakdown of the nuclear family model.[369]

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in Communication 24, no. 2 (2001): 131-168. Whether for commercial, cultural or ideological reasons, *Friends* remains explicitly associated with this specific generation.

[366] Hartman, 9.

[367] *Ibid*., 37.

[368] Neil Howe and William Strauss, *13th Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?*, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 33. Emphasis in the original.

[369] "Every day, over 2,500 American children witness the divorce or separation of their parents. Every day, 90 kids are taken from their parents' custody and committed to foster homes. Every day, thirteen Americans age 15 to 24 commit suicide, and another sixteen are murdered. Every day, the typical 14-year-old watches 3 hours of TV and does 1 hour of homework. Every day, over 2,200 kids drop out of school. Every day, 3,610 teenagers are assaulted, 630 are robbed, and 80 are raped. Every day, 500 adolescents begin using illegal drugs and 1,000 begin drinking alcohol. Every day, 1,000 unwed teenage girls become mothers." *Ibid*.

This tendency is easily identifiable in *Friends*. Chandler, as a child of two divorced and gender-nonconforming parents and Phoebe, as a product of non-heteronormative sex and non-normative family structure, are the two characters who most exemplify these trends in the sitcom. However, even those characters whose backgrounds are rooted in more traditional heteronormative familial configurations (Monica and Ross, Joey, Rachel) do not remain unaffected by the reach of the period's ideological disruption. Gloria Tribbiani is complicit in the long-term infidelity of her husband, preempting a normative interpretation of the Tribbiani family. Sandra Green evokes the logic of feminist liberation in explaining her decision to leave her husband. Even Judy Geller, through her fractious relationship to her children and her loose association to Jewishness, troubles normative familial and maternal expectations. Yet, far from framing these societal disruptions in the traditional family as being liberating or progressive for the characters affected by them, the multiple discourses of disappointment created by the dysfunctional family narrative arcs in *Friends* suggest, as do Howe and Strauss, that the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s were fundamentally destructive and damaging for the subsequent generation, creating the need, time and again, to seek solace and refuge in a reconstructed family of one's peers. Created from the point of view of a group of disillusioned young adult protagonists, *Friends* becomes a cultural repudiation of the wider countercultural ethos of the preceding generation, specifically its deleterious effect on the sacrosanct nuclear family.

II.3.2. Backlash to Second Wave Feminism

As we have seen, this repudiation in *Friends* seems to fall with more force on the female, maternal characters than on the paternal ones who remain less salient because of their comparatively minor narrative implication. Several maternal characters are associated more or less explicitly with the feminist and women's liberation movements of the Silent and Baby Boom generations. Nora Bing, in her overt sexuality, in her uninhibited enjoyment of the sex act, in her authoritative position as an expert on romance, in her lack of conformity to the maternal role, in her relative lack of fertility (in *Friends*, she is the sole mother of a single child), corresponds in various ways to different elements of Second Wave feminism. Yet she is configured as a threat and must be corrected by her own son for these very same reasons. Chandler is not a character who proudly accepts his

mother as a liberated woman of a certain age. On the contrary, he is ashamed of her, embarrassed by her and afraid of her. His character is only truly satisfied after he has found the courage to put her in her place and remind her that she is and should be, first and foremost, a maternal figure, not an independent-minded individual.

Similarly, Sandra Green becomes the object of the sitcom's ridicule as seen from her daughter Rachel's perspective when her character begins to shed its normative plumage revealing a nascent feminist eager to escape from the confines of patriarchy and experience a more fulfilling existence. Like Chandler, Rachel is unable or unwilling to dignify her mother's nonconforming behavior with respect, focusing explicitly on her own sense of loss in spite of real evidence that the paternal figure was a source of profound displeasure in her mother's life.

The character of Phoebe Buffay is initially and repeatedly unable to extend sympathy or attempt to understand the complexities of the biological mother's situation in spite of the fact that Phoebe Abbott explicitly pleads with the daughter to imagine herself in her position, young, immature and unexpectedly pregnant. What is particularly difficult for the young adult character to accept is that she was conceived unintentionally during a nonnormative act of recreational sex. While this suggestion of sexual liberation does not necessarily confer on the Phoebe Abbott character association with the women's liberation movement, it does connect her to the overall ethos of "free love," counterculture and contestation of the period. That she flatly rejects motherhood by giving up the twin girls for adoption, that she does not spend the next decades pining after her biological children but goes on to lead a successful life as a single real estate broker with passions of her own does communicate certain feminist connotations.

What these bad mother representations have in common is that they are generally treated with derision by their adult children who demonstrate a lack of empathy towards their mothers as *individuals.* The supposition that feminists are selfish individualists responsible for overall societal degeneration is one of the underlying misogynistic assumptions at work in some of the reactions (both implicit and explicit) against Second Wave feminism. This type of feminist backlash, most notably theorized by Susan Faludi, typically arises "in reaction to women's 'progress,' caused not simply by a bedrock of misogyny but by the specific efforts of contemporary women to improve their status.[370]" After a short but impactful period of activism on behalf of women's political, economic, social and sexual liberty, a cultural "counterassault" occurs. This sitcom's construction

[370] Faludi, 13.

of these maternal figures as being irresponsible, selfish, embarrassing and in general inappropriate as *mothers*, while ignoring or minimizing them as *individuals* suggests that some form of implicit feminist backlash may be at work in this particular cultural object. Its deployment within the sitcom suggests that, at some level, such a reaction was understood to potentially resonate as humorous for audiences.

The preceding conclusion is not to suggest that *Friends* is a reactionary sitcom universally condemning American feminists and women in general as selfish and maternally irresponsible. This sitcom is not devoid of feminism or lacking any thinking-through of feminist issues.[371] The three main female protagonists represent in many ways, aspects of liberationist thinking. Indeed, Rachel Green's decision to leave her fiancée moments before their wedding (one of *Friends'* founding and sustaining narrative sources) signals an un- or under- articulated desire to turn away from the same constraining normative existence which her own mother eventually seeks to escape as well. While never explicitly identified as feminist, the young character's decision extracts her (at least for a time) from the reliable patriarchal path which she had been comfortable traveling, and which included economic dependence on her father to economic dependence on her husband. Rachel's choice to run towards a freer and more independent existence in New York City is an implicit feminist rejection of the normative patriarchal suburban existence criticized by Betty Friedan, whose thesis sparked Second Wave feminism in the United States. Likewise, the series' second foundational narrative arc, Ross's newly divorced status, exists thanks to a choice similarly resonant with feminism: Susan's decision to leave her husband and to create a new life for herself with another woman.

In terms of female sexuality, too, the female protagonists of *Friends* may be understood to be vehicles for certain strands of feminist thinking. In their mid-twenties, these young women show little interest in starting families and becoming mothers. While the character of Monica does yearn to have children, she along with the other female characters, is also perfectly comfortable with and willing to engage in non-marital, recreational sex. Female sexual pleasure is hardly taboo in this sitcom and the women engage with multiple sexual partners throughout the series. Indeed, if sexuality, sexual exploit and sexual pleasure are clearly and most immediately associated with

[371] However, in her analysis of *Friends*, Naomi Rockler does lay out a convincing case that feminist issues are regularly *depoliticized* in this sitcom thanks to a therapeutic discourse which "discourages citizens from contextualizing their personal problems within structural power dynamics." See Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper:' *Friends*, Feminism, and Rhetorical Strategies of Depoliticization.".

the hypersexualized character of Joey, they are also deemed attainable and desirable for the young female characters as well. Female sexual agency is celebrated as appropriate for the young female protagonists in *Friends* to the point where the character of Rachel Green is teased by the others when she admits that the most exotic place she has ever engaged in sexual intercourse is "the foot of the bed.[372]" Additionally, sexual agency may be a source for female solidarity: when Monica and Rachel teach Chandler how to sexually please his girlfriend, not only does Monica seemingly achieve orgasm simply by discussing it, but the girlfriend later thanks Monica profusely.[373]

As such, the characters of Monica, Rachel and Phoebe may be best understood as characters representative of Third Wave feminism: they do not explicitly view women as victims of men or of patriarchy, yet the lives they lead and the decisions they make at times implicitly reject patriarchal values; they do not engage in collective action nor in explicit consciousness raising activities yet they exhibit a consistent solidarity between themselves as well as with their male peers. They do not engage in, nor even suggest political action to advance equality between men and women, yet their behaviors in their professional and personal lives implicitly suggest expectations of equality. While the extent to which *Friends* may or may not be understood as a feminist cultural text (or post-feminist, or Third-Wave) is debatable, the young female protagonists are portrayed making decisions about their lives and engaging in sexually liberating behaviors for which the older, maternal characters are almost systematically criticized within the sitcom's universe. The explicit criticism aimed at the older generation of characters as dysfunctional mothers due to their association with traditional feminism can be interpreted as a criticism of that traditional feminism itself in favor of a more contemporary approach to questions of gender equality.

II.3.3. The Abject Mother: A Psychological Necessity?

Finally, in searching for explanations for these repetitively negative representations of mothers, we may turn to a more philosophical approach, one based in psychoanalysis and put forth by Julia Kristeva; the notion of abjection. The storytelling universe of *Friends* is dedicated to recounting

[372] Season One, Episode Seven, "The One with the Blackout." Compare this to Monica's admission of "senior year in college on a pool table."
[373] Season Four, Episode Eleven, "The One with Phoebe's Uterus."

the humorous events and inglorious minor traumas of six young people in their twenties trying to survive and thrive in New York at the turn of the millennium and throughout this analysis we have repeatedly referred to these characters as young people or young adults. Yet their predicaments and behaviors, even the very pretext of the series, suggest that these six characters cannot be considered fully fledged, capable, independent adult subjects. More like fully grown children (hence their fountain frolicking in the introductory sequence), they are constantly in need of help from one another, unable to successfully navigate the perils of early adulthood alone. To greater or lesser extents, these characters are fully *dependent* subjects relying on their reconstructed family for emotional, psychological, material and financial support throughout the series' ten-year narrative span; furthermore, their identities are consistently in flux, changing in relation to one-another as well as in relation to the secondary characters with whom they interact. As such, it is useful to consider these not yet fully formed characters as Kristeva's *sujet en procès*, a model of the self which breaks with Enlightenment thinking of the subject as an autonomous independent rational being. Unlike this stable ideal conception of the self, the *sujet en procès* is inherently unstable, "always in process and heterogenous.[374]" The youthful protagonists in *Friends* indeed inhabit this unformed, embryonic space where their autonomous identities are continuously under negotiation. In this light, the bad mother representations of the maternal figures in *Friends* illustrate the role of the abject, that which is neither subject nor object, but which serves as a delimiting boundary in the processes of subjectification.

As Noëlle McAffee explains, abjection is "a process of jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself. The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself: sour milk, excrement, even a mother's engulfing embrace.[375]" What is abjected is that which violates the borders of the *sujet en procès* and Kristeva observes that that which is universally and necessarily abjected is the mother, for "[i]n order to become a subject, the child must renounce its identification with its mother; it must draw a line between itself and her.[376]" However, this differentiation is, according to Kristeva, never fully realized and remains in negotiation. Both the maternal figure and the "fear of falling back into the mother's body, metaphorically at least, of

[374] Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva: Essential Guides for Literary Studies*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 41.
[375] *Ibid*, 46.
[376] *Ibid*. 48.

losing one's own identity" endure as "a looming presence[377]" forever in need of being renounced, pushed back and dealt with in the *sujet en procès*'s persistent tug of war over identity. Negative representations of bad mothers serve as convenient psychoanalytical foils for the young adults in *Friends* on their journey to autonomy.

This chapter has briefly traced the bad mother figure through history and culture; through close readings we have identified and analyzed the representations of the secondary maternal characters in *Friends* and suggested several possible reasons for their repetitious and salient iterations. While offering some narrative space for nuanced interpretations of these mother characters, in general, they remain literally laughable examples of how not to be an appropriate mother. Their dominating presence throughout the first seasons of *Friends* not only continues the situation comedy's tradition of maternal-based intergenerational conflict set in motion by *Bewitched* and *Rhoda*, for example, it also sets a precedent against which a subsequent set of representations of maternal figures located within *Friends'* own diegetic sphere may be analyzed and understood: those of a younger generation of female characters (Carol and Susan, Phoebe, Rachel and Monica). This will be the focus of the following two chapters.

[377] *Ibid.*

Chapter Three – Mothering Beyond Patriarchy? Female-Headed Families in *Friends*

In 1976 the American poet Adrienne Rich published her influential meditation on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. If Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* drew attention to the plight of unhappy suburban homemakers eventually serving as a source of inspiration to the women's liberation movement, Rich's work, while perhaps less culturally resonant, was one of the first to theorize motherhood exclusively. *Of Woman Born* both explicitly articulated heteropatriarchal motherhood as a site of women's oppression *and* situated it as a potentially rich and generative avenue for female identity. Her work was thus an attempt to grapple with the profound paradoxes plaguing the role of the mother in patriarchal society or what she terms, "The Kingdom of the Fathers." Her aim in the book was

> to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.[378]

The volume, which draws its inspiration from the author's personal experience as a mother in mid-twentieth-century, upper-middle class America, as well as from numerous historical, anthropological, sociological and psychoanalytic influences, points to "the individual family unit" as the core of patriarchy and "which originated with the idea of property and the desire to see one's

[378] Rich, 13. Emphasis in the original.

property transmitted to one's biological descendants.[379]" Rich describes the foundations of patriarchal society as well as its consequences on mothers and women:

> A crucial moment in human consciousness […] arrives when man discovers that it is he himself, not the moon or the spring rains or the spirits of the dead, who impregnates the woman; that the child she carries and gives birth to is *his* child, who can make *him* immortal, both mystically, by propitiating the gods with prayers and sacrifices when he is dead, and concretely, by receiving the patrimony from him. At this crossroads of sexual possession, property ownership, and the desire to transcend death, developed the institution we know: the present-day patriarchal family with its supernaturalizing of the penis, its division of labor by gender, its emotional, physical, and material possessiveness, its ideal of monogamous marriage until death (and its severe penalties for adultery by the wife), the "illegitimacy" of a child born outside wedlock, the economic dependency of women, the unpaid domestic services of the wife, the obedience of women and children to male authority, the imprinting and continuation of heterosexual roles.[380]

Inherent in this description of patriarchy, and in Rich's epistemological approach to motherhood in general, is the notion of power. The power of female bodies to reproduce and the power of patriarchal structures to inhibit, constrain and curtail that power. In the evolving socio-political environment of late twentieth-century America, *Friends* is an example of a creative work of popular culture whose diegetic universe creates space for not one, but two narratives of motherhoods that *explicitly* repudiate this patriarchal family structure. Two children are born out of wedlock in this televisual comedy, one to a lesbian couple and one to an unwed mother.[381] Neither of these children is recuperated, or made "legitimate," through the formal institution of heterosexual marriage by the time the series finishes its original television broadcast.[382]

This chapter then regroups and examines the two representations of motherhood in *Friends* which most obviously question the patriarchal system, that is, "a social system in which the father is the head of the family" and by extension "[d]ominance of a society by men, or the values that uphold such dominance.[383]" The two examples we will study are the narratives of secondary

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[379] *Ibid*., 60.
[380] *Ibid*., 60-61.
[381] Two more babies, the twins born to the teenage Erica, are assimilated into a patriarchal family structure thanks to their adoption by the characters of Chandler and Monica, a married couple. This narrative of maternity will be examined in the next chapter.
[382] Carol and Susan are, to use the term employed by the sitcom itself, married, in an episode from Season Two. The civil union between the two women, while officially marking the women's commitment to each other as a monogamous couple, does not change the status of the child they raise together. The biological mother and the biological father remain unmarried.
[383] *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. https://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html?q=patriarchy

characters Carol and Susan and primary character, Rachel Green. In the first season of *Friends* Ross's ex-wife Carol announces she is pregnant (with Ross's child) and that she intends to raise the baby with her partner Susan. In Season Eight, Rachel Green discovers she is pregnant after a one-night stand with ex-boyfriend Ross. She decides to keep the pregnancy but refuses to marry the biological father. Thus, both of these stories present circumstances in which the biological father is not married to the biological mother: he is therefore not the "head of the family" and his traditionally assumed "authority over women and children" is thus potentially limited. In these two cases, lesbian motherhood and *choosing* single motherhood,[384] the paternal figure is theoretically distanced or removed altogether, effectively eschewing the traditional patriarchal, patrionormative model of the nuclear family.[385] In the analysis that follows, we will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which these representations manage to effectively repudiate the patrionormative model by offering emancipatory discourses of maternity (the *experience* of motherhood in Rich's articulation) but also the ways in which this potential liberation remains contained.

We begin, respecting the chronological sequence of events offered by the sitcom's narrative, by looking carefully at the representation of lesbian motherhood constructed around the secondary characters of Ross Geller's ex-wife, Carol Willick and her partner (and later, wife) Susan Bunch. The first of its kind (that is, significant, recurring roles in which two women specifically identified as lesbians are shown throughout the pregnancy, birth and early childhood periods) in a sitcom and on television, this narrative arc was met with no perceptible controversy. The representation of the two maternal figures, while "positive" in the sense that the two characters

[384] The question of choice is a crucial one here as variations on single motherhood abound and may include widowed as well as divorced mothers. The social, legal and moral implications for these different forms of single motherhood are not the same. A woman who chooses to have and raise a child on her own raises the specter of bypassing father figures, patriarchy and, in general, men, entirely on purpose. This mother could have made other decisions but did not. It is a rogue decision. Regarding the social "hierarchy" reserved for single mothers, see an opinion article by Kimberly Seals Allers, "There's a Single-Mother Hierarchy, and It Needs to Stop" from *The Washington Post* in which she writes "the highest levels of respectability are afforded to those who were once married – 'validated' by a patriarchal structure, which has become the defining element for valuing a woman's mothering journey and, by extension, valuing her children when that structure no longer exists." Seals Allers notes that widows "receive sympathy, compassion and understanding" and divorcees also receive a "level of social acceptance" because of their former link to a patriarchal family structure. Women who have chosen this type of motherhood, however, receive "little but shaming and struggle" unless, as the author notes, they are celebrities such as Sandra Bullock or Angelina Jolie whose adoptions of third-world orphans are positively, even, admiringly represented in popular culture. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/parenting/wp/2016/06/10/the-single-mother-hierarchy/?utm_term=.97c90200d4ed

[385] We use the term patrionormative to describe the way in which this traditional, father-headed, familial configuration has, through cultural, legal, religious and historical discourses, become the *normative* familial model, achieving hegemonic status, in late capitalist American society against which other familial models are situated and evaluated.

are constructed as being a loving, respectful couple and excellent maternal figures, remains nevertheless ambiguous and open to interpretation. On the one hand it offers narrative agency, choice and representation as maternal figures to a marginalized societal group: lesbian women; and it progressively presents queer(er) families as healthy, loving, normal, indeed ideal spaces for children. It also opens narrative space for interrogating the maternal role of non-biological maternal figures (exemplified by Susan). Yet, while the two women are the primary caretakers of Ben, they are rarely seen alone on screen together, suggesting that this story is not really *their* story. The perspective is almost always framed from Ross's point of view. Indeed, Carol and Susan's very roles as secondary characters serve perhaps to undercut the progressive nature of this representation. Their eventual disappearance (fading) from the series as well as the mostly comic references to their sexual orientation when they are not on screen also contribute to this undermining.

The chapter will then turn to an examination of the narratives of pregnancy and motherhood concerning the character of Rachel Green which also both occur outside the legal, moral and religious institution of marriage to the child Emma's biological father, Ross. As something of a much quieter echo to the highly controversial representation of single motherhood depicted ten years earlier in the sitcom *Murphy Brown*, Rachel's experience was met with no nationwide controversy. May this be understood as a sign of changing times or could it be due to the fact that the pregnancy, occurring in Season Eight (2001-2002), was revealed in the weeks following the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, a time when the American viewing public was eager to invest in the hope-filled narrative of a new life? In any case, Rachel's pregnancy and single motherhood offer perhaps some of the most compelling examples of emancipatory discourses surrounding mothering in the series – she is adamant in refusing Ross's marriage proposal, she is overwhelmed by the expectations of becoming a new mother, she is happy to go back to work after the birth of her child. At the same time, the character is constrained by her pregnancy and newfound motherhood: she wants to continue dating but finds she cannot, she is unprepared for the challenges of new motherhood and must be educated by those around her. Additionally, as in the case of the representation of lesbian motherhood, Ross remains a highly salient figure throughout, suggesting that Ross's patriarchal position is not particularly endangered by his second experience with out-of-wedlock paternity.

Finally, having discussed these two representations, we will question whether, given the prominent role played by the father figure of the two children produced by these two representations, it is really possible to assert that these cases effectively disavow the patrionormative family. While in many ways Ross is represented as a lost and bumbling father figure and patriarch, this is not exclusively the case, and his character remains ever-present within both these representations. Having experienced the pregnancy, childbirth and young childhood of one child, Ross plays a particularly important expert role in educating Rachel in her upcoming role as mother, often appearing in opposition to her so as to position her as an inefficient or ineffective maternal figure. Ultimately these two representations of female-headed families may in fact be recuperated and normalized by the ever-present representative of patriarchy, Ross.

III.1. My Mommies ♥ Me:[386] Carol and Susan

The promise of the presence of a lesbian character in *Friends* is hinted at within the first three minutes of the sitcom's pilot episode. As the morose Ross Geller is comforted by his friends in the Central Perk coffee shop, it is progressively revealed to the studio and television audience that the reason for Ross's desolation is that his soon-to-be ex-wife, Carol has moved her belongings out of their shared apartment. When Ross admits to being furious, Joey, the least tactful member of the group of friends confronts him directly with the question of Carol's sexual orientation: "And you never knew she was a lesbian, huh?" The hearty laughter heard from the studio audience marks the extent to which this bit of information is an unexpected and surprising twist in an otherwise familiar story of a man being rejected by his lover. Ross's plaintive retort to Joey ("No! Ok? Why does everyone keep fixating on that? She didn't know. How should *I* know?") underscores the extent to which Ross is characterized as a victim in this situation: not only has his wife left him against his wishes, but she has left him for another woman; to add insult to injury, it is implied that Ross is dealing with an uncomfortable and untactful level of curiosity on the behalf of outsiders fascinated by the unique nature of the situation. The character of Ross is, from the outset, figured

[386] From a t-shirt that Susan buys for Ben, shown in Season Two, Episode Two, "The One with the Breast Milk."

as a failure of hegemonic masculinity:[387] not only has his wife deserted the institution of marriage, but she has left it and him for another woman resulting in a double rejection of patrionormativity.

In 1994 when this episode aired, lesbian characters on prime-time television, and American television in general, were far from common; recurring characters such as Ross's ex-wife, Carol Willick, even less so. In March of that year, several months before the September airing of the *Friends*'s pilot, the ABC network broadcast an episode of its top-rated sitcom *Roseanne*, in which the main character Roseanne Connor visits a lesbian bar called *Lips* where she is kissed by a lesbian friend.[388] The episode stirred much controversy at the time, and ABC, under pressure from advertisers, threatened not to broadcast it. At the same time, the sitcom's star Roseanne Barr, threatened to take her successful product to another network. Ultimately ABC relented and aired the episode with a parental guidance advisory. This fleeting occurrence of non-normative sexual activity is one of only several which appeared on American television screens in the early 1990s to more or less controversy.[389] Within the sitcom genre however, the characters of Carol and her partner, Susan Bunch, represent the first recurring lesbian characters on scripted prime-time television.

Interestingly, in retrospect, the characters of Carol and Susan seem to be particularly associated with one specific episode, "The One with the Lesbian Wedding" (Season Two, Episode Eleven), in which the two women celebrate their love with a commitment ceremony or civil

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[387] By this we refer to the notion as theorized by R.W. Connell in *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987) and more fully in *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). Connell, drawing on Gramsci, writes in *Gender and Power*, "'Hegemonic masculinity' is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. The interplay between different forms of masculinity is an important part of how a patriarchal social order works," 183. Also, "[t]he most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage," 186.

[388] *Roseanne*, Season Six, Episode Eighteen, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

[389] In *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV*, Stephen Tropiano presents a chronology of representations of homosexuals and homosexuality in American television programming reaching as far back as 1954. Tropiano includes not only fictional representations of gay and lesbian characters but also homosexuality as treated on talk shows, news programs and in reality television. In the sitcom genre, a 1971 episode of *All in the Family* (CBS) deals with cantankerous and bigoted main character, Archie Bunker, and his realization that he has a gay friend; in 1972 an unsuccessful ABC sitcom, *The Corner Bar*, featured the first recurring gay character, Peter Panama; another short-lived and controversial sitcom from 1975, *Hot l Baltimore* (ABC, 13 episodes) included a gay couple amongst its cast of characters; and Billy Crystal played an openly gay man, Joadie Dallas, in the sitcom's parodic take on the soap opera genre, *Soap* (ABC, 1977-1981). In terms of female representation in scripted television, prior to Roseanne's same-sex kiss in 1994, a female bisexual character on *L.A. Law* (NBC, 1986-1994), C.J. Lamb, kissed a heterosexual female colleague in 1991, and two years later, the family drama, *Picket Fences* (CBS, 1992-1996), dealt with teenage female homosexuality in a controversial episode. Stephen Tropiano, *The Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (New York: Applause Theatre, 2002).

union.[390] That the episode represents a particular milestone, a first representation of same-sex union or marriage on prime-time network television, is undeniable. Yet this episode from the second season takes place *after* Carol and Susan have had recurring roles in episodes throughout the entire first season, indeed *after* the audience has watched the two women prepare for and welcome their son, Ben, born in the penultimate episode of the sitcom's first season. As such, the extent to which Carol and Susan also represent television's first lesbian *mothers* seems to be comparatively overlooked in much of the literature, popular and otherwise, that deals with the characters.[391]

This seems peculiar. One of the arguments most often employed by those who object to non-normative sexualities (as well as their concomitant representations in popular culture) is that these so-called lifestyle choices fall outside the margins of the hegemonically accepted optimal model for forming families and, importantly, raising children, what Samuel Chambers refers to as the sanguinuptial family or what we have already referred to as the patrionormative family.[392] This type of argument forms the basis for excluding homosexual couples from adopting children or having equal access to reproductive technologies and in some cases, for preventing biological parents from retaining custody of their own children after having come out as homosexual. How then are the characters of Carol and Susan remembered for the milestone wedding episode but not for being the first recurring lesbian *parents* on scripted prime-time television? Is this an example of the sitcom genre "smuggling" otherwise controversial ideological content under the guise of humor? In the detailed analyses which follow, we will examine several key scenes featuring Carol and Susan which highlight the aesthetic, narratological and ideological strategies employed by the sitcom and which may explain how this significant milestone seems to have "passed" relatively

[390] The ceremony is referred to throughout the episode as a wedding although civil marriage between two people of the same gender was not legalized in the state of New York until 2011. The wedding officiant presiding over the ceremony is clearly characterized as a religious official although her religion and denomination are not identified. Carol and Susan are never identified as belonging to a particular religion. Although Crane and Kauffman purported to be apolitical in their approach to storytelling, it cannot escape attention that the actress playing the wedding officiant is none other than Candace Gingrich, the younger half-sister – and prominent LGTB activist – of then-Speaker of the House and conservative Republican Representative from Georgia, Newt Gingrich.

[391] Tropiano, for example, includes in his timeline, an entry concerning the wedding episode when referring to the characters of Carol and Susan's character on *Friends* but makes no reference to the fact that in the previous season they had given birth to a child together.

[392] According to Chambers, this term has "the advantage of pulling together the two key ingredients that make up the very medium of the family: blood and marriage." He continues, "The sanguinuptial understanding of family proves to be not only *dominant*, as the most common understanding, but also *hegemonic*, in that it crowds out, excludes, or positively rejects other meanings." Samuel Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2009), 137.

unnoticed. This analysis will form the basis for examining if and how these scenes represent an emancipatory discourse in terms of lesbian motherhood and motherhood in general.

III.1.1. Evolving out of Patriarchy? The Museum Scene

In the pilot episode, Ross's character is figured as being passive and unwilling in the face of Carol's decision to divorce him, and, in the following episode (Season One, Episode Two, "The One with the Sonogram at the End") he likewise must passively accept the life-changing announcement that she is pregnant with their child and intends to raise it with or without his participation. The setting and performances which structure this announcement scene are telling and merit close analysis. The scene begins with some visual exposition to situate the spectators, including a middle-distance shot of an imposing urban structure made of stone and complete with classical columns and impressive statuary. The following shot is a close-up of a plaque on which is written, "Museum of Prehistoric History." Finally, the camera switches to Ross in his professional role as paleontologist enclosed, behind glass, within a museum exhibit and engaged in conversation with a female colleague.

The particular exhibit in which Ross and his colleague are positioned is under construction and figures a prehistoric nomadic family (two mannequins clothed in animal hides, one holds a bundle presumably meant to resemble a newborn baby). Ross, apparently the woman's professional superior, questions her choice of decoration, specifically the prehistoric female figure's facial expression:

> **Ross**: It is good, it's just that, um, doesn't she seem a little angry?
> **Female colleague**: Well, she has issues. [Studio audience laughter]
> **Ross**: Does she? [laughter]
> **Colleague**: He's out banging other women over the head with a club while she sits at home trying to get the mastodon smell out of the carpet. [laugher]
> **Ross**: Marcia, see, these are *cavepeople*. [laughter] Okay, they have issues like 'Gee, that glacier is getting kind of close.' [laughter]

As the exchange comes to a close, the colleague notices that Carol has just wandered into the museum and, addressing Ross says, "Speaking of issues, isn't that your ex-wife?" Ross tries to appear busy in the exhibit but manages only to clumsily dislodge the arm of the prehistoric man next to him. He reluctantly and awkwardly greets his ex-wife with a hug, wrapping the prehistoric

arm around her and thus giving the impression that the appendage is a prolongation of his own body: this gesture thereby implicitly connects Ross to the prehistoric caveman in the exhibit. The two begin to chat and Ross uncomfortably asks Carol if she is still a lesbian before he interrogates her pointedly as to why she has come to his place of work seemingly out of the blue.[393]

Carol reveals she is pregnant and Ross, stunned, adopts the very same posture of the caveman whose arm he has inadvertently removed. As such, Ross's character is literally placed in the same position of the prehistoric nomadic mannequin next to him. The resulting audience laughter signifies that they understand the connection being made. The two masculine, paternal figures appear fixed and motionless for a few seconds as Carol's character and the studio audience react to this image. Ross, like his caveman counterpart is stuck, immobile, unable to follow the movement in which he has been caught up: the arrival of a child, his child, in circumstances which he cannot control.

Carol, for her part, remains mobile, pausing just enough to notice Ross's reaction. It is possible to see in her character the agent of the change and evolution which lesbian mothering may suggest: a site of bearing and raising children free from the constraints of patriarchy which has been constructed in this scene as being inherent to an outdated, even "prehistoric" heteronormative family. The violence and womanizing on the part of the patriarch ("he's out banging other women over the head with a club"), the submission and demeaning physical labor endured by the maternal figure ("while she stays at home trying to get the mastodon smell out of the carpet") are elements of the patrionormative family which, the series seems to suggest in this scene, are destined to be relegated to the past, to become part of some future historical exhibit in a dusty museum upon which people will gaze, just as the fictional visitors gaze at this fictional caveman exhibit, thankful that they no longer live in such barbaric conditions.

[393] Within the context of the narration, this question ("Still a lesbian?") seems unnecessary and (besides being an easy vehicle for a quick laugh) was perhaps added to the dialogue to reposition the character of Carol as a lesbian for viewers who had either forgotten this piece of information or were watching their first episode of *Friends*. In any case, Carol reaffirms her non-normative sexual identity just before announcing she is pregnant. There is no ambiguity: she is a lesbian *who is also* a future maternal figure.

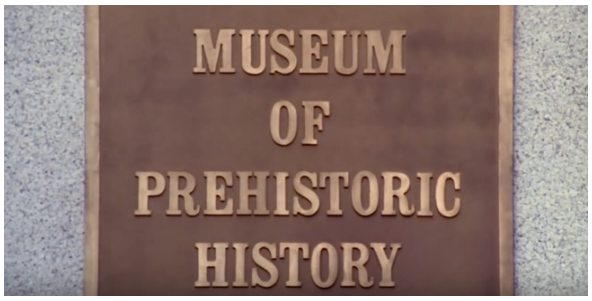

Figure 46 The setting for Carol's announcement. Figure 47 Ross explains that cavepeople have more important things to worry about than patriarchal oppression.

Figure 48 Carol salutes Ross from outside the museum exhibit, she is in the present day, he is still stuck in the patriarchal past.

Through this scene, *Friends* offers an opportunity for the viewer to interpret Carol's announcement and her situation as a lesbian mother-to-be as a positive, or at least inevitable, *evolution* in terms of the nuclear family, away from rigid gender and parental roles and norms and towards a more emancipatory and inclusive vision of family. This scene then fundamentally exposes the radical ideological potential of Carol's presence in the sitcom as a lesbian character who is expecting a child. That it is the character of Carol who is the animating, dynamic impetus behind this narrative arc in contrast to, and to the detriment of, the stagnating (fossilized?) paternal figure exemplified by Ross suggests that any liberation from the strictures of the traditional nuclear family will come about thanks to evolutions within the *maternal* role.

Ross will become a father, a paternal figure, whether he wants to or not, but it would seem that the patriarchal foundations on which traditional paternity is founded will have to be radically reconsidered in order to accommodate a more modern, fresher version of paternity liberated from the violent and archaic strictures of a system in which fathers alone are capable of agency. Further scenes throughout this narrative arc encourage this interpretation including a later scene from the same episode in which Ross is invited (again, the paternal figure plays the passive role) to be present at Carol's first sonogram, this time alongside her new partner, Susan.

III.1.2. What's in a Name?

A scene which takes place in the examination room of an obstetrician-gynecologist uses humor to further underscore Ross's vulnerability as paternal figure within this unconventional familial structure in which he is outnumbered two to one by mothers-to-be. While the scene opens with a close-up of the life-size plastic replica of an at-term fetus curled within a plastic uterus, the camera quickly shifts to focus on Carol, alone in a paper gown, sitting on the examination table. Ross enters the room apologizing for being late ("I got stuck at work. There was a big dinosaur thing") and gives Carol a quick kiss. Briefly, the idyll of the traditional nuclear family is restored through the presence of these two affectionate and nervous parents-to-be: safely enclosed within the walls of the obstetrician's office, a symbolic location conferring the approval of the medical profession along with its formidable power to normalize and/or pathologize various familial configurations, the expectant father rushes to the side of the expectant mother (particularly vulnerable here in her thin paper gown) after having been delayed by his unfortunate yet imperative professional responsibilities. As the kiss lands on Carol's cheek, however, the charming equilibrium is ruptured by the entrance of Susan, a third parent-to-be and second maternal figure who enters the scene by way of the same door as Ross. The arrival of Susan proves to destabilize Ross to such an extent that the future paternal figure will question his own purpose and legitimacy within this nontraditional family-to-be. In essence, Ross's own epistemology of what it means to be a family expecting a child is shaken by Susan's entry into this room and into this familial configuration.

The tension between the three future parents is immediately palpable. Ross's character is shown to be awkward and increasingly clumsy (he reluctantly shakes Susan's outstretched hand, commenting aside to Carol on her "good shake;" he assumes that the obstetrician will be a man; he begins to play with the speculum placed on a table next to Carol pretending it is a duck and making it quack before dropping it suddenly when she tells him it is there to open her cervix; he toys with a plastic model fetus which ends up flying into the air). His entire presence in the obstetrician's examination room positions him as being particularly bumbling and severely out of place. The character literally does not know how to behave or where to put himself. Already, in the process of discovering the (mystical) female universe of maternity, he is forced to do so in a context that requires even more learning: not only must Ross, like any future father, learn how to be a paternal figure but he must in addition learn how to perform this role in a situation for which

he has no prior knowledge, for which there is no cultural script. Ross does not know how to carry himself in this scene and in this particular narrative because Carol's decision to have and raise their child with Susan is unknown to him, just as it is unknown to the sitcom viewer. The character is reduced to an immature masculine presence, an annoying childlike disruption in this circumstance where all the female characters appear, for their part, to *know* what they should be doing.[394]

Figure 49 The nuclear family idyll is disrupted by Susan at the door of the examination room.

Figure 50 Ross reluctantly appreciates her handshake before making a fool of himself with a speculum.

Ross, however, gamely attempts to learn his role in this unconventional family-to-be, asking, "so how's this going to work, you know with us? You know when, like, important decisions have to be made?" The example he gives, choosing the child's name, confirms that in this fictional situation, the paternal role is indeed in the process of being renegotiated and the ensuing dispute concerning the naming of the unborn child will eventually lead Ross himself to question the utility of his role. The argument between the three future parents begins with a discussion over the child's first name and culminates in an argument concerning the child's family name. Both of these disagreements leave the three adults ill at ease and the confrontation over the symbolic patronymic appellation of the fetus pushes Ross's character to the brink of his tolerance:

[394] In this, we get a first glimpse of the pedagogical role that this situation comedy may be interpreted to play thanks to its interrogation of normative motherhood. As the first fictional character to negotiate this unique situation on American television, Ross becomes an avatar for the American viewing public which is also experiencing its first encounter with lesbian motherhood. Ross surely acts the fool for laughs, but his obvious discomfort both translates and smooths over potential viewer discomfort as well, any possible unease is evaporated through the laughter generated by watching this bumbling yet ultimately well-intentioned future paternal figure.

Susan: Oh, please! What's wrong with Helen?
Ross, **sarcastically**: "Helen Geller?" [Studio audience laughter][395] I don't think so.
Carol: Hello? It's not going to be Helen Geller.
Ross: Thank you!
Carol: No… I mean, it's not Geller.
Ross: What? It's going to be Helen Willick?[396]
Carol: No, actually, um, we talked about Helen Willick-Bunch.
Ross: Well, wait a minute, why is *she* [*indicating Susan*] in the title?
Susan: Because it's my baby, too.
Ross: Really? Uh, I don't remember *you* making any sperm. [Laughter]
Susan, **sarcastically**: Yeah, and we all know what a *challenge* that is.
Carol: All right, you two, stop it.
Ross: No, no, she gets a credit, hey, I'm in there, too.
Carol: Ross, you're not actually suggesting Helen Willick-Bunch-Geller? Because I think that borders on child abuse!
Ross: Uh, of course not. I'm suggesting, Geller-Willick-Bunch.
Susan: Oh no! No, no, no, no! You see what he's doing, he knows that no one's going to say all those names. He knows they'll wind up calling her Geller, then he gets his way.
Ross: *My* way? You think this is *my* way? Believe me, of all the ways I ever imagined this moment in my life being, this is not my way. You know what? I, this is too hard, I'm not, I can't do…

At this point the obstetrician knocks on the door and enters the examination room bringing an end to the immediate confrontation. As she positions Carol to examine her, Ross seizes the opportunity to take leave: "Uh, you know what? I'm, I'm going to go. I don't think I can be *involved* in this particular family…[397]" The dispute over naming and the realization that the legal, moral and cultural conventions governing patronymic naming which have been culturally and historically constructed and understood to be the right of the male parent within a patriarchal system are of little import to the lesbian couple is apparently too much for Ross to cope with. In choosing to, literally, walk out on this family-to-be, Ross's character demonstrates that his desire to be "involved" with the child's upbringing is apparently contingent on his ability to lay claim to his

[395] The humor, easily recognizable to the American television viewer, is derived from the sonoric similarity between "Helen Geller" and the notable historic figure Helen Keller (1880-1968), an American author, activist and educator who was the first deaf-blind person to earn a university degree and whose life story was published in the 1903 autobiography, *The Story of My Life*.
[396] Willick is Carol's family name.
[397] Ross's sarcastic emphasis on the word 'involved' is an echo of an earlier moment in the episode and an allusion to the vocabulary used by Carol and Susan in discussing Ross's role in rearing the child: "Carol says she and Susan want me to be involved. But if I'm not comfortable with it, I don't have to be involved. Basically, it's totally up to me." In redeploying Carol's own word with sarcasm, Ross's character mocks her, and in doing so expresses perhaps his own feelings of being mocked at her invitation to be 'involved' in a situation over which he has no control.

creation, to "get a credit." Participating in raising a child who may not be immediately and unambiguously understood to be "his" goes beyond what this future paternal figure can conceptualize, and he readies himself to walk out the door.

This scene brings to light and indeed questions the patrionormative imperative of the newborn being given the surname of its male parent and, as such, reaffirms the subversive potential of lesbian parenting. Neither of the two women suggest that the future child bear the biological father's surname, symbolically and legally distancing the male parental figure from his progeny and rebuffing centuries (if not millennia) of custom and legal tradition in identifying filiation through the process of naming. Echoing the earlier scene in the museum, this scene in the obstetrician's examination room also suggests that the maternal figure is actively seeking to upend, or at least question, conventional ideas of family, maternity and paternity, leaving the paternal figure symbolically lost and in the dark.[398] Two women lovingly and competently raising a child together in the absence of a patriarchal figure seems indeed to be a progressive take on motherhood particularly in light of the overwhelmingly negative discourse that this sitcom has brought to bear on more traditional forms of motherhood.

Ultimately however, Ross does not leave the examination room in this scene, nor does he walk away from "this particular family." What pulls him back towards his paternal responsibilities is not any protestation on the part of the two maternal figures, however, but the "call" of his future child's heartbeat which echoes throughout the examination room and makes Ross pause in the doorway, then turn back, and finally join Carol and Susan positioned in front of a sonogram screen gazing at the image of a fetus. Ross's gaze joins theirs and he clasps Carol's open hand at the same moment that Susan does the same. The three adults are symbolically joined in awe and anticipation. All three of them see the same thing on the screen, all three share, for a moment, the same knowledge of what is to come and from this point on will become a "parenting team" for the child-to-be. Ross, in spite of his misgivings concerning the uncertainty and doubt that this situation engenders for his role as paternal figure to his biological child, is eventually persuaded, not by the mothers, but by the existence of the fetus itself, that this adventure may be worthwhile even if the rights and responsibilities conventionally and historically guaranteed to fathers through the

[398] It is not for nothing that this episode, entitled in English, "The One with the Sonogram at the End" is called "Celui qui est perdu" in French, underscoring the extent to which Ross's character 'wanders' through this episode, seemingly lost and out of place.

patrionormative familial model will either not apply to him or will be under constant negotiation. The ensuing episodes and scenes featuring Ross, Susan and Carol as parenting partners question both implicitly and explicitly these conventions and whether they must either be discarded or reinterpreted in light of the presence of the two maternal figures. Lesbian motherhood forces a new way of knowing about motherhood, fatherhood and families onto the character of Ross.

The sitcom's decision to maintain Ross's presence ultimately ensures that a paternal figure is present in the life of this unborn fetus (and, after Ben's birth, in the child's life as well) and perhaps serves to reassure an audience unaccustomed to lesbian parenting on American television. Because Ross remains, we cannot claim that this representation of nonnormative motherhood takes place *entirely* outside of a patriarchal system. The actual evidence points to something far more nuanced and complex: subtle shifts and corrections rather than revolutionary or radical transformations. If however Ross had chosen to walk out of the door of the obstetrician's room, the narrative arc of lesbian motherhood, however imperfect it may be, would have shut down then and there, depriving viewers of the opportunity to see this unique (in 1994) fictional family's story. The continuing paternal presence in the form of Ross allows, paradoxically, the sitcom to continue to explore this narrative arc, albeit from a predominantly paternal point of view, and in doing so, propose an exploration of the possible adjustments and realignments that may occur when maternity is *distanced* (if not necessarily completely divorced) from the paternal figure and his link to patriarchy. Indeed, the issue of the child's family name is never explicitly returned to or resolved within the sitcom's fictional space. The question remains hanging, a loose end which is *not* explicitly recuperated by the enduring presence of Ross. The sitcom leaves open the possibility that the child is in fact given the family names of the two maternal figures, a complete rejection of the biological father's legal and symbolic filiation.

By the end of its second episode, then, *Friends* has not only powerfully introduced its indictment of the hegemonic patrionormative family as well as the ineffective maternal role within this model (see previous chapter), it has also opened up a considerable yet understated (because cloaked in humor) space within its diegesis to propose new models of maternity, paternity and familial structures. This tendency continues throughout the first season as the sitcom regularly returns to the Carol-Susan-Ross narrative arc to check in on the progression of the pregnancy as well as the preparation of the future parents.

Figure 51 Carol, Susan and Ross (as well as the medical profession and the United States viewing public watching Friends*) are united by the sonogram image which ends the series' second episode: new types of families are possible, in televised fiction.*

III.1.3. "Imagine Your Vagina Opening Like a Flower": Stretching the Bounds of Patriarchy

That the lesbian motherhood narrative arc in *Friends* pushes for a reconsideration of the paternal role is evidenced perhaps most clearly in several scenes from Season One, Episode Sixteen, "The One with Two Parts: Part One" which originally aired on February 23, 1995. Ross, Carol and Susan have agreed to take childbirth preparation classes, or Lamaze classes, together. The future father's unease is manifest even before the scenes in question begin. When Rachel asks whether it will be "weird" to attend Lamaze classes with his ex-wife and her lesbian partner, the future father claims to be comfortable with the idea although as he answers, "By now, I think I'm pretty comfortable with the whole situation," his words are simultaneously undermined by the fact that, as he has been speaking to his friends, he has inadvertently been putting on his sister's jacket instead of his own.

The unease continues in the following scene featuring a group of future parents sitting in a circle on the floor in a room decorated with large cushions and pictures of newborn babies and posters of the childbirth process on the wall. A woman introduces herself and the man sitting next to her as "the Rostins" and explains that they are expecting twins. The group leader and the other group members turn to the next person in the circle, who happens to be Ross, in expectation. Ross, still uneasy, stumbles over the introduction of this nonnormative situation: "Hi. I'm uh, I'm uh Ross Geller and that's…that's (indicating Carol's pregnant stomach) my boy in there. And uh this is Carol Willick. And this…is Susan Bunch. Susan is, um, Carol's, she's, um… Who's next?" The laughter erupting from the studio audience signals that the audience members recognize the character's discomfort in clearly identifying Susan as Carol's lesbian partner in a public forum particularly because Susan's presence tends to muddle the image that Ross has taken pains to

neatly create for this group of strangers: he, Ross Geller, is expecting a boy who is gestating in the body of Carol Willick. Without the confounding addition of Susan, this raw information offered by Ross's succinct introduction can easily be interpreted as the story of a heteronormative (although perhaps unmarried) couple happily expecting a child.[399] Susan's presence, once again, creates unease for the paternal character but also lends to incomprehension for the other characters assembled.

The class teacher's request for clarification leads to yet more confusion until Susan clearly identifies Carol and herself as "lovers" to which Ross uncomfortably adds, "You know how close women can get." A further exchange continues to betray the characters' awkwardness:

> **Carol**: Susan and I live together.
> **Ross**: Although I was married to her.
> **Susan**: Carol, not me.
> **Ross**: Uh, right.
> **Carol**: It's a little complicated.
> **Ross**: A little.
> **Susan**: But we're fine.
> **Ross**: Absolutely. [Studio audience laughter]

If this rapid back and forth between the three characters belies their discomfort as well as their desire to come across as "normal" and in control of their unconventional situation, it also suggests Ross's dominance (he intervenes twice as much in this short give and take as each of the women) not only as a father figure within the diegesis but also as a stabilizing figure for the sitcom's narrative arc of unconventional maternity. However, his awkwardness in this uncertain role continues to be mined for humor as evidenced by the end of the scene in which Ross turns back to the couple expecting twins, remarking simply, "So twins! That's like two births…ouch!" The camera pans out to show Carol and Susan looking at Ross with derision as he looks down ashamed before the shot fades out and transitions into a scene from a different narrative arc.

This unease continues as a later scene from the same episode portrays another visit to Lamaze class. The door opens to the same classroom and Ross steps through it confidently only to

[399] It also allows for an occasion for Ross to officially lay claim to his child in a public space. With the question of the child's family name still unresolved, Ross's "that's my boy" underscores the biological father's sense of ownership over the child gestating in the mother's body, a process over which the paternal figure has no control. This very real lack of control will, if the boy is given the family names of his two maternal figures, continue, symbolically at least, by disrupting the filial link which the giving of the paternal surname to the child conventionally establishes. Ross's initial reduction of Susan to gestational space ("in there") objectifies the maternal figure, reducing her to a gestating receptacle and reaffirming patriarchal claim over her body in its role as gestator of his progeny.

step directly on the head of a life-size plastic newborn which emits an awkward squawk as Ross's heavy boot comes down on it. The harried Ross picks up the doll, squeezes its head back into place and apologetically hands it back to the couple sitting on the floor. His embarrassment only grows as Ross learns from Susan that Carol has been held up at work and will not be attending the class. Susan assures Ross that he does not have to stay but the character, eager not to see his already diminished role further reduced insists on staying, saying, "No, I think I should stay, I think we should both know what's going on." Ross's decision to stay at the class creates the opportunity for a cleverly humorous sitcom scene but also for a confrontation between the male, paternal figure and the simulated experience of childbirth as well as an interrogation of sex and gender roles.

Beginning the class, the Lamaze teacher explains that they will be doing "basic third-stage breathing exercises[400]" and invites the "Mommies" to "get on their back" while the coaches "should be supporting Mommy's head." A moment of hesitation ensues as both Ross and Susan wait for the other to lie on their back on the floor. The studio audience begins to laugh as they recognize the potential for comedy. Susan asks Ross, "I am supposed to be the Mommy?" to which Ross responds, "I'm going to play my sperm card one more time." Susan explains that she does not want to miss out on the opportunity to learn how to effectively coach her partner just because she is a woman and she proposes that they toss a coin to decide which of the two will take on the role of the pregnant mother-to-be pretending to be in labor. Even at this relatively innocuous moment, Ross has no control over his destiny as a random coin toss (as random as the process of fertilization and biological sex-selection itself?) designates that he play the role of the expectant mother on his/her back.

The gender-role reversal at work in this scene posits the representative of patriarchy (Ross) as a submissive, feminine entity, lying on her back waiting, more or less patiently, for events beyond her control (the expulsion of the baby from her body) to occur. This scene, in fact, positions Ross, otherwise clearly characterized throughout the sitcom as a man, as triply feminine and submissive, first in his role-play as the expectant mother, secondly as the passive loser of Susan's coin-toss and thirdly as the lost and wandering displaced father figure for whom most of the important decisions have already been made and who must now accept this lack of control as an

[400] This reference to breathing exercises for this specific stage (the third stage seems to refer to the stage of labor and delivery which occurs after the baby is born) is unusual. Patterned breathing is often taught for the first stage of labor as contractions intensify and for the second stage, the birth of the baby, but we are unable to find any program which counsels a specific type of breathing during the third stage which includes the expulsion of the placenta.

inherent dimension of his family-to-be. Conversely, at the moment when Ross loses the coin toss, Susan becomes momentarily aggressive and dismissive to Ross to whom she orders derisively, "On your back, *Mom*." The character of Susan, who, aside from being a lesbian, corresponds to conventional notions of femininity, is also subject to a triple gender role-reversal, first as the coach in her aggressive stance towards Ross the 'Mom,' secondly as proactive initiator of the coin-toss which sends Ross to the floor as a pregnant woman, and thirdly, as a lesbian woman opting to raise a child distanced, to a certain extent, from patriarchy.

In the final moments of the scene, the 'Mommies' including Ross, are instructed by the Lamaze teacher: "Imagine your vagina is opening like a flower." The scene ends with a camera shot of Ross, looking blankly directly into the camera as the studio audience reacts with laughter. Ross's character has not, of course actually been in a position to give birth to a child, but this sequence, which manages to convey Ross's sense of humiliation, is compelling in that it imposes some of the same elements inherent to the bodily experiences of pregnancy and childbirth on a male character, including lack of control over one's body and its processes, physical and psychological vulnerability and submission to outside (and, in the case of actual pregnancy and childbirth, inside) forces. These are all elements which certainly result in unease and even humiliation for many women and mothers-to-be as they navigate pregnancy and childbirth; however, in imposing these conditions on Ross, a male character, *Friends* highlights the extent to which pregnancy and childbirth can result in a sense of loss of agency and of selfhood. The character's decision to accompany his ex-wife and her lesbian partner on their journey towards motherhood has inadvertently led this representative of patriarchy to be confronted with the disarming vulnerability of incipient motherhood. Ross's blank and stoic humiliation at the end of this scene suggests that he is not particularly pleased by what he has experienced. The studio audience laughter generated by the incongruity of a father figure simulating childbirth suggests that the scene would not have been as comical if the pretend mother-to-be had been Susan instead of Ross. Susan's rejection of the maternal role in this role-play is both ironic (she is, in fact, a mother-to-be herself) and symbolic (if mothers are naturally – because biologically – women, not all women are, or desire to be, mothers).

Figure 52 The paternal figure's body is the site of this birth rehearsal and Ross does not appreciate it.

The final scene from this episode's Carol-Susan-Ross story arc depicts the last Lamaze class in which the future parents watch a childbirth video. Interestingly, the three parents are physically positioned in such a way that Ross and Susan reprise their reversed gender-roles from the previous scene: Susan is behind them, supporting Ross, only this time he is positioned himself as a support to Carol, who is now present, and reclining between Ross's knees. Ross as future father has been released from the humiliation of occupying the most vulnerable position; an actual pregnant woman is now in her place, meanwhile Susan is behind the two of them, suggesting a supplemental support system. Both Susan and Ross are immediately called upon to reassure Carol, who, after watching the video, suddenly loses all confidence in herself and in her body to get through childbirth. Susan chooses to calm Carol by reminding her that childbirth is only one, short, part of the process they are embarking on as parents, to which Ross responds by panicking himself at the idea of being a father for the rest of his life. The three-parent story arc comes to a close as the following, related, episode focuses solely on Ross's struggle to come to terms with being a father. It is an episode in which Ross will ultimately discover that he is indeed ready to assume his role as a paternal figure; however, thanks to its lesbian motherhood narrative arc, this first-of-two-parts episode has forced *Friends*' most compelling representative of patriarchy to, however briefly, assume a most submissive position and in the process, has hinted at the seismic changes underway in the ideologically dominant conception of the nuclear family.

Figure 53 The parenting team

III.1.4. "And who am I?" Susan's Distress

The critical reception of Susan and Carol as lesbian mothers on *Friends* has been mixed. Scholars have pointed out that the treatment of Carol and Susan's experience as lesbian mothers was belittled by the fact that they are only secondary characters. Furthermore, it has been argued that the fact that these representations appear within the sitcom genre, focused as it is on humor, itself leaves precious little space to examine the seriousness of the realities and inequalities confronting same-sex parents. Kelly Kessler for example questions the "political or progressive efficacy" of the representations of lesbian characters in *Friends* as well as in the contemporaneous sitcom *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-1999) and suggests that "many of these emerging representations lacked the breadth and political awareness needed to challenge the dominant system."[401] These are most certainly well-founded criticisms. That Carol and Susan are secondary characters means that most of the audience's access to this story of lesbian mothers and motherhood is available only through the focalization of Ross. However, a close reading of other scenes does create narrative space (albeit limited) for the characters of the maternal figures themselves and may thus be considered an implicit challenge to "the dominant system."

One of these scenes occurs in Season One, Episode Twenty-Three, "The One with the Birth." This is the penultimate episode of the first season of *Friends,* and it features the birth of Carol, Susan and Ross's son, Ben. Echoing and accentuating the competition between Ross and

[401] See for example Kelly Kessler, "Politics of the Sitcom Formula: *Friends*, *Mad About You* and the Sapphic Second Banana," in *The New Queer Aesthetic on Television: Essays on Recent Programming* ed. James R. Keller and Leslie Stratyner, (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers, 2006), 130-146.

Susan over who could be a better coach for Carol – competition which was on display in the Lamaze class scenes – the two non-gestating parents again articulate this rivalry in the hospital room in which Carol is laboring. They argue over who can be the first to bring Carol ice chips, who can keep better time of her contractions and, significantly, who will decide the first name of the as-yet unnamed baby. The bickering and competitiveness between the two drives Carol, painfully suffering through contractions in bed, to expel both Ross and Susan from the hospital room. The two characters continue arguing, now over whose fault it was that they have been sent away, in a hallway of the hospital whereupon Phoebe admonishes them for fighting and pushes them into a utility closet. Inevitably, the door locks behind them, trapping them inside.

After Ross makes several unsuccessful attempts at opening the door, highlighting his inefficient masculinity perhaps, but also masculinity's inability to escape this confrontation with an angry female opponent, the utility closet becomes the locus of Ross and Susan's ultimate argument and the reality of what is at stake for the two future parents is revealed here in the presence of Phoebe:

> **Ross, to Susan**: This is all your fault. This was supposed to be, like, the greatest day of my life. You know, my *son* is being born and I'm… I should be in there, you know. Instead, I'm stuck in a closet with you.
> **Susan**: The woman I love is having a baby today. I've been waiting for this just as much as you have.
> **Ross**: No, no, no, believe me, no one has been waiting for this as much as I have, okay? And you know what the funny thing is? When this day is over, *you* get to go home with the baby, okay? Where does that leave me?
> **Susan, angrily**: You get to be the baby's father! Everyone knows who you are. And who am I? There's Father's Day, there's Mother's Day, there's no Lesbian Lover Day!
> **Ross**: Every day is Lesbian Lover Day! [Studio audience laughter]

If this exchange ends with a joke in an explicit appeal to the audience's sense of humor and the sitcom's generic imperative, we may suggest that this was a deliberate attempt to lighten an otherwise profound discussion between the two parents who do not have an explicitly clear link to the child about to be born: Susan because of her ambiguous status as the birth mother's lesbian partner which marks her as a non-biological maternal figure and Ross because, in spite of his confirmed biological link to the child, his social role as father will be diminished in light of the fact that two women will be the primary caretakers of his child, blurring the unambiguous clarity of the traditional father-son filial relationship.

However, the fact that the back and forth between the two characters is rather vehemently "shut down" in a way that is intended to be humorous on the part of Ross, does not negate, nor even necessarily undermine, the importance of the argument which has just preceded the character's joke. On the contrary, the intensity of Ross's one-liner and the reaction of the audience to it suggest that what has come just before is equally intense in terms of pathos precisely due to the incredibly profound sociological and ideological questions it raises. In this enclosed, closeted area, itself a space replete with significance, Susan and Ross's characters are forced to hash out the thorny implications of the unconventional family model they are in the process of constructing together. They hide in (or, more accurately, have been forced into) the closet in order to confront the very real questions of filiation, recognition and identity which are inherent in a family founded in the margins of the dominant ideological model and Ross must, as the paternal figure in the process of being distanced from his biological child, confront the reality that a new model of the family is overtaking his idealized image and that he has very little control over the process. Indeed, as Ross protests mournfully, it "is all [Susan's] fault."

While, again because of his status as primary character, the focalization of the exchange may belong to Ross (and he undeniably has the final, funny, word), this closeted give-and-take opens up diegetic space for Susan as well. She is a future lesbian mother without a specific role and the scene gives her space to evoke the difficulties that confront her character. This is by no means to suggest that in this instance, as in others, *Friends* is overtly politically progressive. But what is clear is that this scene relates the worries of a lesbian character on the verge of motherhood who is struggling with the very real (and the inherently very political) question of recognition and parental identity. To Ross she says, "You get to be the baby's father.[402] *Everyone knows who you are*."

Even if, as her words imply, Ross is a negligent or otherwise deficient father figure, thanks to his biological filiation, he will always, automatically, be recognized by the wider social world as the child's male progenitor and will likely benefit from all that is conferred by that specific

[402] Note that Susan does not say, "You *are* the baby's father." This suggests that in spite of the character's biological link to the child, Susan (and perhaps, the sitcom's writers as well) take the position that the primary importance of the parental role is a constructed, social one instead of a biological one. That is to say, that a parent (mother or father) is the adult who is regularly present to raise, educate and support the child financially and psychologically, whether or not they are linked by biology. For Susan, then, Ross has the *opportunity* to be the child's father, still a highly coveted and recognizable social role, although it is one that he must *earn*; it will not be conferred on him automatically thanks simply to his biological role.

social role and that specific parental status in a patriarchal society. Susan on the other hand, although present on a day-to-day basis to care for, raise, support and educate the child as well as to support the child's biological mother, has no comparable position or status whether it be customary, legal, official or religious. To underscore her comparative *lack* of recognition, Susan makes reference to the custom of celebrating biological filiation in the form of Mother's Day and Father's Day. "And who am I?" she asks. Susan is a parent in search of an identity that does not yet exist. There is no word for her specific role, the vocabulary is insufficient. That she seems to diminish her own role by referring to herself as "Lesbian Lover" (thereby setting up Ross's quippy one-liner) should not distract us from the magnitude of what the character is, in reality, identifying and expressing. She is embarking on a perilous familial journey because she is neither the mother nor the father of the child she is about to raise, although she clearly intends to raise the child as her own.

While the sitcom does not make the slightest pretension of reconciling this conundrum, it has dedicated a minute (almost literally the length of this scene) of its diegesis to make *visible* Susan's predicament. While it is debatable whether or not this can be described as progressive television, it remains one minute more than any other sitcom had dedicated to the issue of same-sex parenting and identity when the episode aired in May 1995.

Similarly, the short monologue delivered by Phoebe following Ross and Susan's argument may seem counterproductive from the standpoint of those wishing for a more overtly political stance on the part of *Friends*. Phoebe's intervention draws explicitly on the character's own unstable childhood to offer a contrast to what she sees at work in the closet argument:

> When I was growing up, you know, my dad left, and my mother died, and my stepfather went to jail, so I barely had enough pieces of parents to make one whole one. And here's this little baby who has, like, three whole parents who care about it so much that they're fighting over who gets to love it the most and it's not even born yet. It's just… It's just the luckiest baby in the whole world.

Phoebe is awed by the fact that, unlike her own upbringing, Ross, Carol and Susan's newborn baby will be surrounded by love from the moment it is born. Her observations may be interpreted as an admonishment to Ross and Susan: "get over your petty disagreements about who's who in the baby's world, what matters is that the baby is loved," she seems to be saying. Her implicit suggestion can be taken to mean that what is of profound import to Susan, and potentially, of

profound political import to homosexual and lesbian viewers – questions of visibility and identity relating to same-sex parents – is ultimately insignificant in relation to the needs of the child-to-be. As long as the child is loved, it makes no difference who a specific parental figure is or how he or she is identified. Conversely, of course, this identical argument may be viewed as being extraordinarily progressive from the standpoint of viewers who would consider Carol, Susan and Ross's familial arrangement as illegitimate or even immoral. The moral of the scene: as long as a child is loved and cared for, it shouldn't matter who the parents are nor how they are identified.

Figure 54 Stuck in the closet…

Whatever the interpretation, and it is not our intention to catalogue all the possibilities, Phoebe's intervention brings an end to the dispute, the two parents are ultimately freed (metaphorically allowed out of the closet, but only after reconciling) and rejoin Carol on the verge of giving birth just in time. Sitting with Carol on the hospital bed, the newborn baby in her arms, Ross and Susan surround her, creating a family of four for the first time, something unmistakably new on the television screen. Susan gently brings up the fact that the child needs a name and Ross suggests, Ben, the name inscribed on the coveralls Phoebe found in the closet while they were trying to escape.[403]

Figure 55 … and out. A new vision of family.

[403] The significance of this will be discussed later in the chapter.

Thus far we have examined some of the ways in which the ongoing narrative arc of lesbian maternity in *Friends* has been treated with an emphasis on those points in the diegesis where opportunities were created which may encourage a progressive, emancipatory interpretation. Yet as we have also suggested, this representation of the lesbian couple is far from unproblematic and we now address some of the issues which further complexify any easy interpretation of Carol and Susan's story of motherhood.

III.1.5. Carol, Susan and Lesbian Representation

One of Kelly Kessler's critiques of the lesbian characters in *Friends* (as well as in *Mad About You*) is based on the physical appearances of Carol and Susan. She notes that "the show portrays both women as long-haired, dress-wearing femmes who subscribe to heterosexual standards of beauty.[404]" By eschewing the "butch" variation of the butch/femme dichotomy and by imposing a strictly feminine aesthetic on the two women, she implies that *Friends* seeks to reconcile the characters' lesbianism with the "dominant mores of society" thus marginalizing other members of the lesbian community who do not adhere to similar "heterosexual standards of beauty" and thereby somehow trivializing or cheapening any possible progressive value in this representation. Similarly, Kessler suggests that the characters' overwhelming association with motherhood, and in particular Carol's fulfillment of her "biological destiny," reduces the emancipatory implications of their presence in the series. To summarize, Kessler accuses these representations of being too closely associated with and conformant to heterosexual sites of privilege (adherence to certain standards of beauty, association with motherhood, "naturalization" through marriage) to be understood as effective avatars of lesbian representativeness on American broadcast television.

Likewise, Kessler points to their relative stability, in relation to the main cast of characters, as evidence that they are, in truth, nothing more than "ideological members of dominant society.[405]" It is certainly the case that Carol and Susan's relationship, represented as loving, mature and monogamous, positions them in opposition to the six main characters who endlessly flail about romantically from bad relationship to disappointing one-night stand to potential partners who are either too old, too young, too idiosyncratic, etc. Additionally, Carol and Susan both work

[404] Kessler, 139.
[405] *Ibid*, 135.

full time (Carol is a primary school teacher, Susan works, apparently, in advertising) and are financially stable, which sets up another point of contrast with the main characters whose professional misadventures (working in poorly paid or monotonous positions, getting fired) form one of the underlying structuring frameworks of the series. Focusing specifically on Carol and Susan's monogamy and subsequent marriage, Kessler maintains, "the single or nonmonogamous subject is marginalized. Remaining invisible, they are denied access to mainstream culture and society. Similarly, racial and class diversity are not represented.[406]" That racial and class diversity among both heterosexual and homosexual characters is missing in *Friends*, as in many (most) other mainstream contemporary popular sitcoms and dramatic series, is undeniable and has been the subject of frequent, and justified, criticism in popular culture, and Kessler is right to point out that, in highlighting a story of two conventionally attractive, monogamous, well-educated, upper-middle class, white lesbian women who also happen to be loving, devoted mothers, *Friends* does not offer a particularly inclusive image in terms of *lesbian* representation.[407]

While the characters themselves may not be especially appreciable for their diversity or inclusiveness, corresponding as they do to so many heteronormative ideals, the sitcom takes pains to construct their lesbianism as authentic by connecting them to the wider gay-liberation movement and culture. A poster for the International March on the United Nations to Affirm the Human

[406] *Ibid*. 138.

[407] This assumption, too, needs to be qualified. Certainly, there are conventionally beautiful femme lesbians who practice monogamy, marry their partners and desire and raise children just as there are butch lesbians who do not adhere to hegemonic standards of beauty, do not engage in monogamous sexual practices and have no desire to give birth to or raise their, or anybody else's children. We would venture to say that many if not most lesbians might recognize themselves at any of the innumerable points in between these two extremes, so that trying to establish which lesbian or form of lesbianism is the "true" or "correct" one and, furthermore which form is the "right" one to be putting on television screens seems artificial. The executive producers of *Friends*, Marta Kaufman and David Crane (who identifies as a homosexual male), have stated that the characters of Carol and Susan were based on a lesbian couple that they knew personally, which is to say that, in spite of their overwhelming femmeness, Carol and Susan are fictional characters based on real-life people. Kaufman and Crane do not specify whether this real-life lesbian couple is butch, femme, or anywhere in between. This is not to say that Carol and Susan are, in fact, inclusively diverse characters, they are as inclusive and diverse as Ross, Rachel, Monica and the rest, by which we mean white, well-educated, upper-middle class and urban. It is, however, to suggest that Carol and Susan may represent one particular strand of lesbianism and that we, as viewers, would be wrong to expect one representation of one particular lesbian couple in one sitcom to speak to the infinite multiplicity of varieties in sexual identities and orientations. We can conclude by agreeing with Kessler that more inclusion in the televisual representations of *all* types of people is a desirable and worthwhile goal, but we disagree in her call to bypass the sitcom genre altogether because it is "inherently nonconfrontational" and thus somehow not progressive enough. The sitcom is not completely devoid of confrontation, it is *consensus-seeking*. In its quest for widespread consensus its confrontational system is subtle, implicit and often coded.

Rights of Lesbian and Gay People, a demonstration which took place on June 26, 1994 to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, is clearly visible during several scenes in Carol and Susan's apartment. So too, are numerous books including the second-wave feminist tome first edited by Robin Morgan in 1970, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*. Other books are visible on the couple's bookshelves, although it is difficult to discern what they are. Ross, however, comments to Susan in one scene that they "sure have a lot of books about being a lesbian." To which Susan replies, "well, you know, you have to take a course, otherwise they don't let you do it." Perhaps these details represent a consciousness on the part of the sitcom's creative team that Carol and Susan's characters, as conventionally heteronormative as they are, were lacking some sort of lesbian authenticity and these props were added to amend that.

Figure 56 Poster celebrating the Stonewall uprising visible in Carol and Susan's apartment.

However, we may suggest that what is really at stake in these representations is *not* non-normative sexuality or sexual orientation, though these are both eminently worthy subjects to address, but instead non-normative *maternity* and, as such, progressive elements should be looked for not within Carol and Susan's characterization as *lesbians* but within their characterization as *mothers*. In what ways, if any, do their representations demonstrate emancipatory movement away from restrictive ideologies governing appropriate maternal behavior? In redirecting our focus here, we may, like Kessler, raise some questions.

III.1.6. Carol and Susan as Mothers

As we have pointed out, Carol and Susan's mothering experience as lesbians suggests a potential rupture with the heteronormative nuclear family model rooted in patriarchy because, in theory at least, these women are in a position to raise their children in the absence of a paternal figure. However, as we have seen through the previous analysis, the extent to which this rupture has truly taken place is debatable thanks to the continued presence of the biological paternal parent, Ross. The maternal figures have however effectuated the beginnings of a compelling *distancing* from the patriarchal figure, resulting in forcing renegotiations (over naming, for example), encouraging confrontation (between patriarchal strength and feminine/maternal vulnerability) and raising significant questions concerning parental identity. The juxtaposition of lesbianism and motherhood in *Friends* can be said to be fruitful in terms of a nascent emancipatory discourse. It would however be naïve to ignore the multiple ways in which dominant discourses in terms of *motherhood* are put into service by the sitcom to recuperate the representations of Carol and Susan as *good mothers* (and not just as lesbians as Kelly Kessler has demonstrated).

In fact, not only are Carol and Susan good mothers, aside from being part of a female-headed family, they are *ideal*, almost perfect, mothers. Once again, we turn to Sharon Hays' concept of intensive motherhood, the ideology which Hays identifies as "a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children.[408]" As a brief reminder, Hays, in her 1996 monograph, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, identified five constituent components of intensive mothering ideology: it is child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive. As mothers of the young Ben, Carol Willick and Susan Bunch respond to each of these five criteria.

From the early stages of Carol's pregnancy, she and Susan are both shown to be loving and attentive expectant parents and their behaviors conform to the ideology of intensive motherhood in both subtle and overt ways. From the start of the lesbian motherhood narrative, the two characters are placed on multiple occasions and in various ways within the hands of "experts." The very first scene in which the two future mothers appear together ("The One with the Sonogram at

[408] Hays, x.

the End") is in an obstetrician's examination room, making it clear that these women are careful to adhere to the recommendations of the medical profession that a pregnant woman be closely followed and monitored throughout her pregnancy in order to ensure that the development of the fetus proceeds normally. Furthermore, in Season One, Episode Twelve, "The One with the Dozen Lasagnas," the viewer is made to understand that Carol has had an amniocentesis.[409] No explanation is given for why this potentially risky procedure has been offered to and performed on an apparently healthy young woman such as Carol, who has not been identified as carrying a particularly high-risk pregnancy.[410] Nonetheless, Carol is manifestly relieved when she tells Ross that the results show the fetus to be "totally and completely healthy." Susan, too, is delighted when she learns about the results, pushing Ross aside to embrace Carol. Similarly, Carol and Susan (and Ross) also attend, and pay for, childbirth preparation classes demonstrating their commitment to and desire to have a natural childbirth. Finally, Carol gives birth in a hospital surrounded by doctors and nurses whose professional existence is based on the well-being of the delivering mother and the newborn child. These examples of "expert" intervention are easy to overlook because of their near-universal acceptance as routine, ordinary, even common-sense, measures to be taken by responsible pregnant mothers. Carol and Susan may be mothering in an unconventional familial unit, but they are willing to be guided by those professionals who are accepted (socially and professionally) as experts in women's and children's health.

Another example of the couple's willingness to turn to so-called expert guidance is also on display in "The One with the Dozen Lasagnas." Ross is pictured in Monica's living room placing no fewer than eight books into a large bag. The books, it turns out, are pregnancy and childbirth guides and include, *The Birth Book: Everything You Need to Know to Have a Safe and Satisfying Birth* by William and Martha Sears[411] as well as the best-selling *What to Expect When You're*

[409] During this procedure a medical professional, guided by ultrasound, inserts a needle through the pregnant woman's abdominal and uterine walls into the amniotic sac in order to extract a sample of amniotic fluid which can be used to identify certain chromosomal abnormalities. Because of the slight risk to the developing fetus as well as to the pregnant mother, the procedure is not normally proposed to otherwise healthy women when there is no suspicion of chromosomal or genetic abnormality. Because the procedure reveals the chromosomal composition of the fetus, the chromosomal sex of the future child is also revealed thanks to amniocentesis.

[410] It would seem that this otherwise unexplained event is a narratological necessity which serves to set up one of the episode's story arcs: Ross refusing to learn the sex of the baby. That it is referred to in such an offhand manner in the episode underscores the fact that this extremely invasive procedure can somehow be interpreted as a routine and ordinary occurrence during pregnancy.

[411] William Sears, more widely known as Dr. Sears, is one of America's most famous and media-savvy pediatricians. According to his website, askdrsears.com, he and members of his family "have written over 45 books on pregnancy, birth, childcare, and family nutrition." His website describes itself as "The Trusted Resource for Parents." He is also

Expecting by Heidi Murkoff, among others. Ross claims that he has read each of the books. What he says to his gathered friends suggests that, thanks to his extensive readings, he too is now imbued with the knowledge offered by these pregnancy and childbirth experts: "You could plunk me down in the middle of any woman's uterus, no compass, and I could find my way out of there like that [snaps his fingers].[412]" It turns out, however, that these books do not, in fact, belong to Ross. He is putting them in the bag to return to Carol and Susan, which he does in a subsequent scene. The books written by experts, have been bought (or borrowed) by the future mothers and only loaned to the future father. The responsibility for remaining informed and guided throughout the pregnancy and child-raising experience by experts still belongs to the female parent(s).

If the characters of Carol and Susan are constructed as willing and eager to turn to so-called experts in search of guidance, they are also depicted as placing their child at the center of their lives. Indeed, given the secondary character status of the two women, this is a narratological *imperative*. Briefly put, if Carol and Susan are concerned with anything other than the pregnancy, and later Ben himself, the sitcom is not interested in them, unless this has repercussions on Ross thanks to his status as a main character. The Carol and Susan characters are indeed present *because* they are having a child; if there is no child (or incipient child), their presence is not needed. (In this we rejoin Kessler in her critique of Carol and Susan's value as representative lesbians.) However, if their roles as secondary characters necessitate that they be child-centered maternal

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a leading proponent of the theory of attachment parenting, indeed under the heading "Parenting and Behavior," *Attachment Parenting* is the first topic to appear ahead of *Discipline and Behavior* and *Child Rearing and Development*. From Sears' website: "*The Intimate Mother and Baby Attachment*: Attachment is, in a nutshell, perhaps the most important term in parenting. The close mother and baby attachment that attachment parenting produces is an amazing experience for both that allows mom to become completely in tune with baby's needs. **Baby Becomes a Part of You**. Mother and baby attachment is a special bond; a feeling that draws you magnet-like to your baby; a relationship that, when felt to its deepest degree, causes the mother to feel that the baby is a part of her. This feeling is so strong that, at least in the early months, the attached mother feels complete when she is with her baby and incomplete if they are apart. **Dads can be Attached Too**. We will often use the term mother and baby attachment, not to exclude the father, but because, at least in the early months, in most families, the mother and baby attachment is more obvious. This does not mean that a father can't become deeply attached to the child, but it often seems to be a different type of attachment – not less or better than the mother's, just different."
https://www.askdrsears.com/topics/parenting/attachment-parenting/what-attachment-means

[412] The scene makes clear that, in spite of what Ross may think, these "expert" books are, in certain ways, epistemologically lacking in that they do not contain the answers to all of the possible questions raised by Carol's pregnancy particularly those in relation to this unconventional family in the process of forming in the margins of heteropatriarchal normativity. Joey, pretending to be Ross's fetus, asks a series of deceptively simple questions to which Ross clearly does not have easy answers: "Hi Daddy! How come you don't live with Mommy? How come Mommy lives with that other lady? What's a lesbian?" While the studio audience laughter frames the interaction as clearly amusing, this short interaction ends with no answer from the part of Ross. His silence, given the context of being surrounded by books purportedly filled with knowledge concerning women's bodies, suggests that the experts, may not in fact be the reliable and thorough sources of knowledge that they sell themselves as.

figures on a *structural* level in the sitcom, Carol and Susan are nonetheless also configured as child-centered through their specific *characterization*. Susan, for example, in Season One, Episode Nine, "The One Where Underdog Gets Away," makes Ross jealous because she reads to the unborn fetus. Their discussion underscores the importance that Susan places on this act:

> **Ross**: Hey! *Yertle the Turtle*, a classic![413]
> **Susan**: Actually, I'm reading it to the baby.
> **Ross**: The baby that hasn't been born yet? Wouldn't that mean you're…crazy? [Studio audience laughter].
> **Susan**: What, you don't think they can hear sounds in there?
> **Ross**: You're not serious. I mean, you really... you really talk to it?
> **Susan**: Yeah, all the time, I want the baby to know my voice.

Ross, in spite of his scientific background, is dubious of the idea that the gestating fetus can hear sounds outside of the womb. Susan, on the other hand, one of the future child's maternal figures is convinced that this is the case. Her conviction coincidentally corresponds to advice given in numerous pregnancy books which advise gestating mothers to speak regularly, read stories and sing to the fetus so as to familiarize it with the voices of its family members. In any case her willingness and desire to read children's books to the fetus during gestation suggests that she is fully invested from an early stage in performing the child-centered tasks associated with intensive mothering.

Carol's character, too, is represented as being a child-centered, nurturing maternal figure. In Season Two, Episode Two, "The One with the Breastmilk," Carol and Susan make their first appearance in the sitcom's diegetic space since the birth of Ben three episodes (and one summer hiatus) earlier. The baby is several months old, and Carol sits with him securely in her lap in

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[413] *Yertle the Turtle and Other Stories* was originally published in 1950 by children's book author Theodor Seuss Geisel, more widely known by his pseudonym, Dr. Seuss. The story, of a turtle king whose ambition to claim ever more territory leads him to exploit his fellow turtles, is widely seen as an allegory. Yertle selfishly insists that more and more turtles stack themselves one on top of the other underneath him so that his gaze (and by extension his kingdom) stretches ever further. Geisel himself purportedly likened Yertle the Turtle King to Adolf Hitler in his insatiable quest to dominate Europe during WWII. The demise of Yertle comes about when the lowliest turtle of the stack burps sending the tower of turtles tumbling down. Yertle, the King, having been at the top of the stack, falls the furthest into the mud. The story ends with the following, "And the turtles of course… all the turtles are free/As turtles and maybe all creatures should be." While the allegorical nature of the tale is associated by its own author to a historically specific context, its moral that exploitative practices will eventually lead to one's downfall may also be more widely interpreted to apply to any system which oppresses and exploits others for the purpose of individual benefit. In the context of this narrative arc of lesbian motherhood in *Friends*, it is perhaps not unreasonable to suggest that Susan's reading, as a lesbian mother-to-be, of Yertle's tale of woe is a warning to a heteropatriarchal system in which men, in particular fathers, benefit disproportionally from the undervalued labor of women who bear and care for children who, in turn, are identified thanks to the paternal figure's family name as "belonging" to the father.

Monica's living room surrounded by the entire group of friends. As Ben begins to cry, Susan asks if he is "hungry already" as Carol gently turns Ben around on her lap and discreetly pulls up a corner of her shirt to position the baby at her breast. In response to Joey's questioning she acknowledges that breast-feeding hurt at first but that this was no longer the case. Carol's persistence in breastfeeding her son in spite of her initial discomfort infers that the character's decision was not necessarily based on her own needs or desires but on those of her infant as she understands them, thus putting her child's needs before her own.

A subsequent scene from this episode further illustrates Carol's adherence to intensive mothering ideology. She and Susan leave Ben with Ross and the other friends for a short period (the duration of their absence is not specified but when they return, they are wearing the same clothes suggesting that this has not been an overnight trip). The scene opens with the camera on Carol still in Monica's apartment apparently in the process of cataloguing each of the baby's toys and comfort items for Ross, describing their specific uses and roles in the tiny child's life. Carol is frantic, apparently caught up in the emotion of leaving her child for what appears to be, but is not specified as, the first time. Bouncing up and down, holding a stuffed clown doll, she specifies, "And this is funny clown, funny clown is only for after his naps, not before his naps or he won't sleep." The detail and precision with which this maternal figure describes her child's toys and the way they fit in precise, specific moments of the child's daily routine at the risk of upsetting the patterns and rhythms which have been carefully studied and established by this caring and observant mother is reminiscent of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century Scientific Mother who carefully calibrated, measured and recorded food intake, nap times, bodily functions, etc. This is the labor-intensive work of caring for a newborn child. The time and care that Carol expends in transmitting all the specific details to the baby's father can be imagined to be a mere percentage of what the character has expended in time, energy and care in order to collect, sort and understand all of the informational input that has been hers to digest and dissect since the arrival of the baby and in the months preceding his birth.

If her exquisite attention to detail is evocative of earlier models and methods of mothering, what differentiates this representation of the maternal figure in the form of Carol from her predecessors may be her emotional connection to the child. Carol's frantic dancing and bouncing in this scene is not only due to the fact that she has an enormous amount of information to impart on someone (the child's own father) who does not have the same first-hand experience that she

does. Her jumpiness is also due to the fact that she is emotionally absorbed by her child and by the care that she gives him. The character is clearly nervous at the idea of leaving her progeny in the hands of a less-experienced caretaker and her pained facial expressions plead with Ross to reciprocate the intensity of emotions. Unfortunately for Carol, Ross demonstrates little empathy for her anguish at being separated from her son although he seeks to reassure Carol that all will go well. Susan, too, seems not to appreciate Carol's worrying as excessive, suggesting that she has more confidence in Ross's ability to care for the child, saying, "Honey, relax, Ross is great with him." But the gestational mother's behavior is perfectly reasonable and understandable in the context of intensive mothering ideology whereby she is expected to lose herself emotionally in the care of her child to the extent that she loses her own identity. This is clearly what is recommended by experts such as Dr. Sears who, as we have seen, champion attachment parenting (mothering) and suggest that a mother who is truly attached to her baby will feel she is a part of her when they are together but will be left "incomplete" when they are separated. Carol's commotion then may be read as a correctly 'attached' mother on the verge of an identity crisis at the thought of losing a part of herself. Her rhythmic bouncing mirroring and synchronized to the baby bouncing in Ross's arms is the visible link which attaches mother and baby, and which is on the verge of being ruptured.

Figure 57 Ross brings expert guided books back to Susan and Carols apartment before the baby is born. After, Carol breastfeeds Ben in spite of her early physical discomfort.

Figure 58 The young mother carefully explains Ben's toys to Ross and is in general distraught at the idea of leaving her baby even for a short while.

Thus far, Carol and Susan have been easily associated with four of the five criteria Sharon Hays sets out for intensive mothering ideology, "the dominant ideology of socially appropriate child rearing in the contemporary United States.[414]" The final element, that mothers spend an exorbitant amount of money raising their children, also appears to apply to Carol and Susan. The child is persistently surrounded by a plethora of consumer goods. Strollers, car seats, dolls, toys, clothes, shoes, bottles, all contribute to give the effect that no expense has been spared on the baby. In fact, the cornucopia of baby things is the basis for two jokes in two separate episodes suggesting that the sitcom itself is aware of the extent to which the consumption is excessive. In Season Two, Episode Six, "The One with the Baby on the Bus," when Chandler and Joey are entrusted with the care of Ben for the day, they decide to take the baby to Central Park. Waiting for a bus, the two men are fully laden with baby objects. Chandler's joke, "Did you forget to pack the baby's anvil?" underscores the excessive number of things the small child has. In the same vein, the cold open to Season Two, Episode Eleven, "The One with the Lesbian Wedding" pictures Ross in the process of packing up Ben and his things when Carol and Susan arrive at his apartment to pick up the baby. Ben is at first unseen as Ross gathers baby paraphernalia to give back to the boy's mothers. Finally, he pulls away a blanket to reveal Ben waiting patiently to be found, lost amid the pile of clothes, toys and blankets.

While it is unclear that all of these products were bought by Carol or Susan and while the fact that the child is in a shared custody arrangement would conceivably necessitate more objects, what is made clear in the sitcom's aesthetic treatment of the child is that he is the beneficiary of a formidable amount of buying power. A final clue to the amount of financial resources spent on Ben is given in Season Eight, Episode Ten, "The One with Monica's Boots" in which Phoebe realizes that Ben goes to the same private Manhattan primary school as the son of British musician Sting and actress Trudie Styler, referred to as Jack in the episode. In this episode the school is identified as Smithfield Day School. No school of this name exists although it would seem reasonable to surmise that a private elementary school in Manhattan attended by the child of world-famous celebrities may have a substantially high tuition fee. In any case, it is established that Ben attends a private school representing a financial effort corresponding to intensive mothering criteria.

[414] Hays, 9.

Figure 59 "I don't think we brought enough stuff," Chandler quips to Joey highlighting the plethora of baby goods which consistently surround Ben.

Thus far we have seen that the characters of Carol and Susan, while not specifically adhering to patrionormative ideology as a lesbian couple, very much conform to the ideals and ideology of intensive mothering. With the exception of Carol being subtly reproached for being *too* emotionally involved, these maternal figures are not negatively objectified in the same way that the mothers of the previous generation are. The sitcom seems to go to great lengths, in fact, to ensure that these two unconventional mothers are irreproachable as maternal characters. In this, elements of intensive mothering are used as a strategy to recuperate these potentially subversive characters. If Carol and Susan have achieved a certain amount of emancipation (albeit limited) from the traditional nuclear heteropatriarchal family, they do not seem to be necessarily liberated from the restrictive tenets of the ideology of intensive mothering. This is to say that, according to *Friends,* it seems that being a lesbian is in no way antithetical to being a mother, gestational or otherwise, (already a fairly progressive position on American television in the 1990s) as long as the lesbian mothers in question adhere to a strict, even stultifying, regime of motherhood which allows for liberation in terms of maternal *identity* but restriction in terms of maternal *behavior*.

While Carol and Susan's representation as lesbian mothers is in many ways limited in *Friends*, it seems important to point out that in the absence of this narrative arc, millions of viewers in the United States and around the world would not have had access to what is, unquestionably, an extraordinarily affirmative image of a lesbian couple parenting a child on network television. The caveats are numerous and must be recognized: the sitcom formula and structure are too restrictive for authentic and progressive political change, the representations themselves are not diverse or inclusive enough, the irreproachability of the characters as mothers only serves to replace one oppressive social regime by another, the association of lesbianism with maternity may lend credibility to an essentializing view of mothering as the quintessential life experience for *all* women. However, thanks to close readings of several scenes, it can be concluded that this narrative

arc begins significant cultural work by distancing motherhood from the patrionormative familial structure, imposing a renegotiation or reinterpretation of the paternal role, recognizing lesbian motherhood as a legitimate social status, and raising important questions of parental identity for those whose status does not correspond to conventionally accepted categories of parenthood.

In the previous chapter we briefly traced the history of the so-called bad mother figure through millennia of cultural representations. This chapter did not begin with such a history most notably because there is *no* lengthy cultural history of lesbian maternity on which to draw from. Carol and Susan's narrative arc of maternity is, for all its faults, noteworthy for its very presence. In the following section we will turn to a second example of a motherhood narrative which is similarly conceived of on the outskirts of patrionormativity. This representation, too, has significant cultural implications though they do not necessarily resonate in the same way.

III.2. Rachel Green: Single Mother by Choice

The character of Rachel Green and her journey as the upper middle-class socialite fiancée of an orthodontist to a high-powered fashion executive and single mother serves as one of the structuring narrative arcs of *Friends*' diegesis throughout its ten-year broadcast period. Rachel's narrative is a microcosmic take on twentieth-century American feminism. From her liberating decision to leave her unloved fiancé at the altar (a decision which serves as the origin of the sitcom's narrative), to the strong female (and male) friendships she forms, to the decision to have and raise her child out of wedlock, this female character, having turned her back on the promise of a lifetime of material comfort and security, is no stranger to making decisions which undermine the traditional values of the nuclear family model rooted in patriarchy. If Rachel's sexuality is never in question (in spite of a one-off kiss with another young woman in college, Rachel is unquestionably heterosexual), the character's decisions manage to disrupt conventional, patriarchal notions of appropriate womanhood – as evidenced by her father's objections to her decision to remain single early on in the series – and, more significantly for our purposes, appropriate maternity – evidenced by the objections of the biological father of her daughter, Ross. Her decision to become a single mother by choice is an explicit refusal to enter into the

patrionormative institution of heterosexual marriage and may potentially be interpreted, as is the case with Carol and Susan's lesbian motherhood narrative, as a fictional narrative portraying yet again a distancing of motherhood from patriarchy and the sanguinuptial model of family.

The confirmation of Rachel's pregnancy, her decision to raise the child as a single mother and the narrative arc following the pregnancy all occur in the eighth season of *Friends*. The episodes aired, during their original broadcast, on American television screens between September 2001 and May 2002. After the child's birth, episodes featuring Rachel as a mother to the child, Emma, continued to be included in the series' diegesis until the series finale in May 2004. While stories of single mothers were, by that time, relatively commonplace – or at least not unheard of – on primetime American network television, the particular circumstances surrounding the narrative arc of Rachel's pregnancy were less so. Rachel's experience, in her explicit decision to bear her child outside of the traditional institution of marriage, is most immediately reminiscent of another representation of single motherhood by choice on American network television which became notorious for its impact in the wider culture a decade earlier in the sitcom *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998). Another example of a single-mother-by-choice narrative which resonates strongly with Rachel's own representation is that of Miranda Hobbes in the contemporaneous *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). Indeed, Miranda's and Rachel's stories, which are extraordinarily similar in detail, were chronologically intertwined throughout the 2001 and 2002 television seasons.

In fact, the two narratives overlapped temporally in significant ways. Rachel's pregnancy is revealed in the season finale of *Friends*' seventh season, "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding," which originally aired on May 17, 2001. The narrative is retrieved in the Season Eight début, "The One After 'I Do,'" which aired on September 27, 2001 after the sitcom's summer hiatus. Rachel informs Ross of his paternity as well as the fact that she does not want to marry him in Season Eight, Episode Three, "The One where Rachel Tells…" which aired on October 11, 2001. She gives birth to her daughter Emma in the season finale, "The One Where Rachel Has a Baby," which aired on May 16, 2002. In comparison, Miranda's character learns that she is pregnant in an episode that originally aired on August 5, 2001, "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda." She informs the father, Steve, of her pregnancy and her lack of desire to be married in the following episode which aired on August 12, 2001, "Just Say Yes." The rest of Miranda's pregnancy narrative occurs after the end of a mid-season hiatus in January 2002. She gives birth, with Steve at her side, in the Season Four finale, "I Heart NY," which aired on February 10, 2002. While the

two narratives are intertwined, Rachel's pregnancy was the far-more *watched* of the two considering that *Friends*, thanks to its primetime network position garnered many millions more viewers than *Sex and the City* due to its position on premium cable channel, HBO. This particular narrative arc is also credited with improving the lackluster ratings that *Friends* had garnered over the previous two seasons. Season Eight averaged 24.5 million viewers per episode with peak viewership occurring during the first three episodes (each of which are focused on Rachel's narrative) as well as the season finale. *Friends* finished the 2001-2002 network television season as the medium's most watched show for the first and last time in its broadcast history.[415]

Writing in 2004 about the episode which introduced Rachel's pregnancy, one reviewer, reflecting on *Friend*'s success as the sitcom neared its final broadcast, wrote of "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding," that "what mattered was that cliffhanger ending, when Rachel discovers that she's pregnant. The story reversed the show's decline in ways – and to a spectacular degree – that no one watching [that episode] could have ever imagined. Indeed, without that fortune-altering twist, *Friends* probably would have ended sooner and its departure would not be getting anywhere near the attention it's drawing.[416]" Thus, the introduction of a pregnancy narrative, and in particular, *Rachel*'s pregnancy narrative is viewed as being a salutary narratological gesture marking not only the potential birth of a child but also the rebirth of the sitcom itself. This was not inevitable. Sitcom pregnancies may often be perceived as "tired" writing and "the last best hope of an aging sitcom."[417] Clearly, however, the Rachel-is-pregnant narrative resonated with critics and viewers alike.

As Donna Andréolle has suggested, Rachel's decision may be interpreted as a symbolic and implicit recognition of the terrorist attacks which devasted New York City on September 11, 2001.[418] The incident went otherwise unrecognized within the sitcom's diegesis, curious for a series whose identity was so intimately linked to the city even as it was filmed on studio in Los Angeles.[419] The pregnancy narrative was originally conceived before the terrorist attacks took

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[415] https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/2002/2002-05-28-year-end-chart.htm.
[416] Bianco, Robert. "Monica and Chandler's Wedding Kept the Honeymoon Going Strong," *USA Today*. April 21, 2004. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/news/2004-04-21-revisiting-friends_x.htm.
[417] See Libby Hill, "The Trouble with Triplets: Leslie Knope's Babies and a Problematic Sitcom Trend" https://tv.avclub.com/the-trouble-with-triplets-leslie-knope-s-babies-and-a-1798267992 or Rosie Narasaki, "14 Sitcom Tropes 'Friends' Did Better Than Any Other Show Out There." https://www.bustle.com/articles/84245-14-sitcom-tropes-friends-did-better-than-any-other-show-out-there.
[418] Andréolle, 26.
[419] Other subtle clues do indicate that the sitcom recognized the terrorism. At the end of the season premier, an episode which was rescheduled because of the attacks, a title card appears after the final scene (but before the closing credits)

place. However, the decision to have Rachel's character not only remain pregnant (the mistaken pregnancy, erroneously positive pregnancy test, or unfortunate miscarriage are also employed relatively frequently in television writing and were all potential narrative options) but also to have Ross identified as the paternal figure resonated perhaps more deeply because of the widespread public trauma of that moment. Additionally, and conveniently for the sitcom, these narrative decisions present a way to bring the two beloved characters together without explicitly rupturing the will-they-or-won't-they romantic tension which serves as another structural element undergirding the sitcom. Most importantly perhaps, the pregnancy and future child carried by "America's Sweetheart" represent a narrative of hope, purity and innocence in the popular culture of a traumatized nation.[420]

In spite of this role as both a powerful boost to an underperforming sitcom and as a unifying force for a nation in distress, the narrative repeatedly places Rachel's character in positions of choice, power and agency, positions which, on certain occasions, carry with them potentially powerful ideological implications. Most clearly, Rachel refuses the patriarchal injunction to marry the father of her future child in spite of his expectations. Furthermore, as a still single woman, and in spite of her pregnant status, she refuses to refrain from dating other men. Later, obviously pregnant, she is positioned as the object of desire of her friend Joey, a man who is not the biological father of the child she is carrying. She is also positioned as being ill at ease and out of her element as an expectant mother who has little or no innate, intuitive knowledge about caring for children.[421] Once the child is born, Rachel refuses to stop working and has some difficulty adjusting to her new role as maternal figure to her daughter, Emma. To examine the ways in which *Friends*,

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with the words, "Dedicated to the People of New York City." In "The One Where Rachel Tells…" the drawing board on the back of Joey's apartment door features a drawing of the Empire State Building and the Brooklyn Bridge with what appears to be Godzilla simultaneously holding a stick figure woman while also facing down an old-fashioned airplane flying directly towards it. Likewise, in the thirteenth episode, "The One Where Chandler Takes a Bath," Joey wears a t-shirt honoring Captain Billy Burke, a fire fighter who died on September 11th in the collapse of the World Trade Center. A scene (filmed before the attacks) featuring Chandler in an airport joking about hijacking an airliner was also cut in response to the attacks.

[420] Jennifer Aniston has been referred to by this moniker on a number of occasions. See for example : "Jennifer Aniston Net Worth: America' Sweetheart and Money," https://networthcity.com/jennifer-aniston/; "America's Sweetheart Jennifer Aniston Has Been Quietly Donating Millions to Help Cancer Patients, Poor Kids and More," https://life.gomcgill.com/jennifer-aniston-donates-millions-of-dollar-every-year-to-charity; "Jennifer Aniston Turns 50: 10 Facts You Never Knew About America's Sweetheart," https://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/jennifer-aniston-turns-50-10-facts-you-never-knew-about-americas-sweetheart; "9 People Who Have Been Called America's Sweetheart," http://mentalfloss.com/article/560943/people-who-have-been-called-americas-sweetheart.

[421] This theme is also developed long before Rachel herself gets pregnant in episodes in which she cares for Ross's son Ben, for example.

through Rachel's pregnancy and maternity narratives, manages to question some of the norms surrounding pregnancy, child rearing and nuclear families, we will begin by analyzing a key scene in which Rachel resoundingly refuses to marry the biological father of her future child.

III.2.1. Rachel, Knower of Truth

Just as Carol and Susan did several seasons earlier in *Friends*, Rachel Green repeatedly upsets Ross's epistemological confidence in his role as paternal figure. This troubling of patriarchal confidence is made evident from the initial scene in which Rachel announces her pregnancy to Ross. In "The One Where Rachel Tells…", Ross has confessed his and Rachel's one-night stand to Joey and Phoebe and leaves their conversation mistakenly convinced that Rachel is in love with him again and desirous to restart their relationship. Rachel, in the meantime has gone to his apartment to announce the news of the pregnancy and the scene begins with a shot of her waiting by his door. Ross's body is clearly visible in this shot suggesting that it is his viewpoint the audience is asked to adopt. From his position, his gaze focuses on the young woman, alone, on the floor, seemingly vulnerable. A juxtaposed shot of Ross shows the misguided concern on his face as he imagines he is about to have a difficult conversation with her in which he will be forced to reject her desires. The shot of Ross is accompanied by studio audience laughter and underscores his lack of knowledge and understanding of the true state of affairs. Knowing the real reason why Rachel is there (to announce her pregnancy), the audience members are aware of the confrontation that is about to take place and laugh in anticipation of Ross's imminent fall from an exaggeratedly patronizing position of authority.

Figure 60: Rachel, from Ross's point of view. Then, Ross, ridiculous, thinks he knows the truth

The rest of the scene treats Ross's reaction as he discovers that what he thought he knew to be the truth is in fact completely false. Rachel has no intention or desire of reigniting their romantic relationship but has, in reality, accidently conceived following their one-night stand and intends to have the baby. Ross's learning of the truth occurs on multiple levels. First, Rachel gives him the

information that she is pregnant and that he is the biological father (information of which everybody else within and without of the series' diegetical world has already been made aware); she also breaks the news that condoms (their chosen method of birth control during their one-night stand) are not completely effective; and finally she explains that, just as was the case with Carol and Susan's pregnancy, she has decided to keep the child and he can be as involved with the future child or not. Ross and Rachel's dialogue demonstrates the level of Ross's deep incomprehension:

> **Rachel**: Um… I think there's something that we really need to talk about.
> **Ross, patronizingly**: I think we do. Why don't we go inside? [Studio audience laughter as Ross and Rachel enter Ross's apartment]. Look, uh, I know why you're here.
> **Rachel**: You do?
> **Ross**: Yeah. And to save you from any embarrassment I think maybe I should talk first.
> **Rachel, hesitant**: Okay [Audience laughter]
> **Ross**: Ross and Rachel…Rachel and Ross. That's been one heck of a seesaw, hasn't it?
> **Rachel, confused**: What?
> **Ross**: I mean look, that one night we had was fun and certainly passionate. But don't you think it's better if we just stay friends?
> **Rachel**: Seriously, what?
> **Ross**: Okay, okay. You know what? If you want to, we can do it one more time [audience laughter]. I mean I'd be okay with that. In fact, I have some time right now. [Audience laughter as Ross looks at his watch.]
> **Rachel**: Okay, Ross. You know what? Can I talk now?
> **Ross**. Oh, sure!
> **Rachel, hesitates:** I'm pregnant… Ross?... Ross? ...Okay…. Whenever you're ready. [Audience laughter as Rachel leans back to leaf through a magazine] And you're the father by the way, but you got…

In this scene *Friends* exploits the misunderstanding to comically undermine Ross's assurance in his own knowledge. Rachel, the pregnant female character who is in possession of the knowledge that Ross lacks, and who has already reflected on and accepted her status as future maternal figure, confronts Ross (and by extension all men) with the fundamental truth that after the sexual act has taken place, the potential biological father has no natural means of control over the ensuing processes of fertilization, gestation, or, eventually termination; the fundamental truth that for humans, it is indeed the members of the species endowed with certain reproductive systems who ultimately control, within their bodies, human reproduction and nothing less than the survival of the species.

Intertwined with control over female sexuality and sexual desire, control over fertility and reproduction is posited as one of the fundamental underlying reasons for the universal dominance of patriarchal systems within their varying forms across time and throughout most, if not all, forms of human civilization. Ross, confident that he knows one set of facts coming into this scene, is confronted with the truth. What he "knew" was false and he must now rapidly accommodate himself to new information: that this specific attempt to control his and Rachel's fertility has been ineffective, and more fundamentally, (and this, for Ross, is in reality a *reminder* in the wake of Carol's pregnancy) that neither he nor any man, can, in the absence of force, ultimately be assured of controlling female fertility.

The images of Ross's extended reaction time underscore the profound effect that this realization has on the character. Indeed, the construction of the scene exaggerates this prolonged reaction as the dialogue quoted above ultimately ends by a commercial break without Ross having ever uttered a word. The scene is returned to after the program's pause giving the impression that Ross has been digesting the news, unable to speak, for several minutes while Rachel waited patiently.

With Ross still silenced by the revelation, Rachel again takes the initiative by asking him a much more basic question, "Can I get you some water?" Attempting to reassure the shaken man, she immediately follows this offer by specifying that, "there is *no* pressure on you, okay? I mean, you can be as involved as you want." The future paternal figure, however, is not yet in phase with the woman who has now had several days to think through the situation, and he remains in a state of incomprehension. His lack of knowledge transforms to anger directed at the failed method of contraception. "I don't understand... um… how this happened. We, we, used a condom." The character's ultimate anger and indignation "as a consumer" directed at the makers of the defective condom serve to express his anger and indignation at not being able to control Rachel's fertility. Ross is enraged by this failure and the scene closes with his call to the "president of the condom company" to complain. Rachel, with her news and the disruptive knowledge she has brought being veritably ignored by the infuriated man, quietly leaves his apartment.

Figure 61 Ross learns the truth as Rachel waits patiently for it to sink in...

The pregnant character has imparted the knowledge of female control over fertility and reproduction and the reaction on the part of the father-to-be is one of rage. During her subsequent interaction with Ross, she will be met head on with Ross's patriarchal expectations: in this scene too, she will confound these expectations.

III.2.2. Rachel Refuses Patrionormativity

The scene in which the two protagonists are next depicted together occurs in an obstetrician's examination room.[422] Rachel's surprised reaction to Ross's arrival in the place suggests that she was not expecting him. The character's intensity and his insistence on apologizing to Rachel is made obvious by his rhythmic pacing back and forth, almost oblivious to her presence in spite of his explicit desire to atone for his previous lack of empathy.

> **Ross**: I mean, I think I went a little crazy. I mean I was thinking about myself when I really, I should have been thinking about you.

[422] The similarities and differences between this scene and the first obstetrician scene figuring Ross, Carol and Susan are noteworthy. While Carol was pictured sitting alone and apprehensive on the edge of the examination table, Rachel is laying back comfortably installed.

Rachel, beseeching Ross to remain near her head as he speaks: Head Ross, head Ross, head Ross! [Studio audience laughter].
Ross: Right. I just-I want you to know that I'm going to be there through this whole thing, okay? The doctor's appointments, the Lamaze classes, baby-proofing the apartment… although we could probably worry about that till after we get married.
Rachel: What, married?
Ross: Well, yeah. I think we should get married.
Rachel: What, because that's your answer to everything? [Audience laughter].[423]
Ross: No, because that's the right thing to do.
Rachel: Yeah, maybe, if you're in love. But Ross, we are not in love, are we?
Ross: No, but. But still, I mean, you can't possibly do this alone.
Rachel: Excuse me?

Ross, intent on doing the "right thing" has forcibly entered into the examination room with the objective of apologizing for his ignoble behavior in the previous scene and, seeking to reassure her just as she previously sought to reassure him, he promises to be involved in "the whole thing." However, as he enumerates the ways in which he plans to be present, the character inadvertently reveals his belief that "the right thing to do" in this situation of unplanned pregnancy is for the biological parents to marry before the birth of the child, thereby recuperating a rogue pregnancy which has accidentally occurred outside of wedlock and reestablishing the patriarchal regime which the traditional nuclear family has represented.

This scene again interrogates Ross's knowledge, this time of what is right and what is true in terms of family and parenthood, and implicitly suggests that the character's perception is lacking or needs correction. For the future paternal figure, the "right" course of action is to impose a rigid institution upon this situation. From Rachel's perspective, this is unwanted and unwarranted. When Rachel refutes Ross's suggestion on the basis of the lack of a loving relationship between the two future parents, Ross offers another argument based on Rachel's maternal competence. According to Ross, she "can't possibly do it alone." That is, Rachel (and by extension all women?) is incapable of parenting a child on her own. She must be accompanied by a masculine, paternal presence. When Rachel takes umbrage at Ross's suggestion, the conversation and the rest of the scene devolve into bickering as Ross opines that because she cannot eat a meal by herself, it would be impossible for her to raise a child alone.

[423] One of the series' long running jokes concerning Ross's character relates to the fact that Ross has been married and divorced three times, including one time to Rachel herself.

Ultimately, Rachel does not give in to Ross's expectation that they marry, and he does not ask again. The two biological parents do not marry within the sitcom's diegetic space and the parenting and familial configuration that they do opt for confirms, again, that for the fictional universe of *Friends*, Ross's purported knowledge, his assurance of knowing the "right" thing is in need of revision and updating for a more liberated, less normatively rigid era of child-raising. Rachel's decision to officially enter motherhood as a single-mother-by-choice is not overturned and the sitcom takes another step in distancing maternity from traditional heteronormative patriarchal ideology.

III.2.3. Rachel Dates Another Man

Thus far, the character of Rachel Green has proven to Ross that not only can he not control her fertility but that she has no intention of entering into the institution of marriage with him in spite of the fact that she is carrying his child. The main narrative arc of a following episode establishes that, in addition, Rachel intends to maintain an active romantic life by dating other men. This episode, Season Eight, Episode Five, "The One with Rachel's Date," occurs two episodes after the one in which Rachel informs Ross of both her pregnancy and her intention not to marry him.

Once again Rachel is placed in a position of authoritatively knowing precisely what she wants and taking the measures necessary to obtain it. Upon learning that one of Joey's fellow soap opera actors (who is unaware that she is pregnant) has expressed interest in going on a date with her, she clearly wants to seize the opportunity and she is incensed when she learns that Joey has rebuffed the actor, Cash Ford. During the interaction in which Rachel expresses her desire to meet with Cash the sitcom makes no effort to hide or minimize Rachel's pregnant status. In fact, as is made evident by the laughter emanating from the studio audience, a part of what is constructed and perceived as humorous in the exchange between Rachel and Joey is based explicitly on the pregnancy.

> **Joey**: He [Cash] even asked me if I thought you'd go out with him.
> **Rachel**: Oh! I think I'm going to throw up a little bit. [Studio audience laughter]. What did you say?
> **Joey**: I said no!
> **Rachel**: What?!
> **Joey**: Well, I just figured since you're pregnant you're not going to be seeing people.

Rachel: Okay, Joey, first of all, Cash Ford? Not people. [Audience laughter]. Second of all, what did he say when you told him I was pregnant?
Joey: I didn't tell him. I didn't know if you were telling people. This is back when I thought Cash was still people. [Audience laughter].
Rachel: Good, good, don't tell him, don't tell him. Just have him call me, okay?
Joey: Rach, I really don't think that's such a great …
Rachel: Okay, you go do it! I'll come back to that set, I will meet more actors, I will meet them all!
Joey, backing away into his room: Yup.

Joey's statement, "I just figured since you're pregnant you're not going to be seeing people," is an explicit admission that, from the perspective of this particular male character, Rachel would automatically be expected to put on hold her romantic desires because she was pregnant. Rachel, yet again, surprises a (different) male character as a result of her conduct and behavior during pregnancy and proves once again, through her character's narrative agency, that she is a formidable counterweight to normative expectations concerning women and reproduction; namely, that the pregnant woman quash her own wants because she is gestating a fetus. Joey's rapid capitulation suggests that Rachel has, in this case and with this particular character, the undisputed upper hand.

Not only is Rachel adamant in her desire to continue dating, she demonstrates that she has no particular desire, and seems to feel no particular obligation, to share the news of her pregnancy with her prospective date. She warns Joey not to inform Cash of her pregnancy and reflects on how best to explain her lack of drinking while on her date with the man. To Joey she asks, "What do you think is a better excuse for why I'm not drinking on this date tonight – 'I'm a recovering alcoholic, I'm a Mormon, or I got so hammered last night I'm still a little drunk?'" Thus, because Rachel's character is actively seeking to keep her pregnancy a secret, she indeed seems to be aware of the fact that it is unusual (abnormal) for a pregnant woman to go on a date with a man who is not the biological father. However, in spite of knowing this, Rachel persists in her desire to go out with the man, dressing provocatively and in general making herself as attractive as possible. Rachel is thus configured as being in the powerful position of deploying the knowledge of her pregnancy selectively.

Ross is unaware that Rachel is about to go on a date with another man when he arrives at Joey and Rachel's apartment just before Cash comes to meet Rachel. Her actions have again put Ross in a position of not knowing: when he amiably suggests that the three friends go to see a movie together, he is visibly surprised and upset to learn that the biological mother of his future

child already has plans to go out for the evening with another man. Ross's reaction to Rachel's date again highlights the extent to which it is the veritable lack of control over the pregnant woman's body and movements which provokes intense anxiety for this future paternal figure. Seemingly aware however that it would be useless (or too demeaning) to confront Rachel directly, Ross's character transparently lies to her and claims he is comfortable with the situation then waits for Rachel to leave the room momentarily before tackling the question with Joey:

> **Ross**: Rach, you want to come?
> **Rachel**: Oh, no, I can't. I got a date.
> **Ross**: Wh- a date?
> **Rachel**: Yeah. Why is that weird for you?
> **Ross**: Why, no, it's the opposite of weird. It's, it's uh, it's regular. It's, it's uh, mundane. It's, it's actually a little dull. [Studio audience laughter]
> **Joey**: It's no Ukrainian film, I tell you. [Audience laughter]
> **Rachel, returning to her room**: Ohh! Earrings!
> **Ross to Joey**: A date? She's got a date? With, with who?
> **Joey**: I set her up with this actor on my show.
> **Ross**: *You* set her up?
> **Joey**: No. [Audience laughter]
> **Ross**: Joey what were you thinking?
> **Joey**: Well, I was thinking that it'd probably be okay because Ross hasn't gone out with Rachel in five years.
> **Ross**: Joey, I'm not worried about *her*. I'm worried about my baby. Whoever she dates, my baby dates. Now, now where is this "actor" taking them?
> **Joey**. […] I'm not sure. I think they're taking the ferry out to some Italian place on Staten Island.
> **Ross**: A ferry? My baby is going on a ferry? Do you have any idea how dangerous those are?!
> **Joey**: Aren't we talking about those big boats that carry cars? They go like five miles an hour? [Audience laughter]

Ross's character demonstrates dismay at this incontrovertible proof that he cannot control Rachel in whose body his future offpsring is gestating, yet his rage at this blatant example of contempt for patriarchal control is directed not at the mother Rachel, but at another male character, the person he deems responsible for the situation. Simultaneously, Ross is also positioned as being exaggeratedly ridiculous by his intense aversion to the idea that his future child will be put in grave danger because, thanks to Rachel's date, it will be on a ferryboat. Interrogating Ross's malaise once Rachel has left on her date, Joey points to the deeper reasons for Ross's irrational behavior: Ross is truly upset because, thanks to the two children he has conceived on the margins of

patrionormativity; his image of an ideal family, which for him refers to the traditional patriarchal nuclear family structure, continues to slip further and further out of his grasp.

For the future maternal figure, the attempt at dating another man turns out to be a fiasco and the sitcom constructs this denouement as being explicitly caused by Rachel's pregnancy. Running into Ross on the street after the failed date and consoling herself by buying "fifteen dollars' worth of candy bars," Rachel explains to Ross that she "made the mistake of telling" Cash about her pregnancy and that his reaction was a disappointment to her: "he got all weird and sputtery." Evidently, finding out that his date was pregnant with the child of another man was not what this character had bargained for in asking Rachel out for the evening, thereby confirming that Rachel was not only correct in the original assumption that she shouldn't reveal the pregnancy but that her desire to date while pregnant was outside the margins of normative behavior for a pregnant women, even a pregnant single woman, to begin with.

It is difficult to measure whether the date's disappointing result may be interpreted as the sitcom's repudiation of the pregnant character's desire to date while pregnant, and, by extension, as a warning to single mothers by choice more widely. What is clear is that the failed encounter gives Ross and Rachel an occasion to discuss some of the implications of Rachel's pregnancy. Ross meets Rachel's disappointment with compassion and even commiserates with her over Cash's behavior before attempting to cheer her up. As they sit together on the steps and Ross attempts to comfort Rachel, their exchange is both telling and ambiguous. The conversation gives the character of the mother-to-be narrative space to explore the uncertainty of her own feelings but, in doing so, it also enables the father-to-be to reestablish a certain amount of power over Rachel's character:

> **Ross**: I'm sorry about your date.
> **Rachel**: Aw, it's alright. I guess I'm just done with the whole dating thing. It's one more thing in my life that is suddenly completely different. This is hard.
> **Ross**: Yeah, I know. On the other hand, in, uh, in about seven months you're going to have something that you're going to love more than any guy you've ever gone out with. Just wait. Wait until, uh, wait until the first time your baby grabs your finger. You have no idea.
> **Rachel**: Thanks, sweetie.
> **Ross**: You want to grab some coffee?
> **Rachel**: Oh, no. I think I'm going to go home and eat ten candy bars. [Studio audience laughter].
> **Ross**: Hey, I thought I cheered you up.
> **Rachel**: Oh, you did, there are twenty in here. [Audience laughter].

The two adults bid each other good night and the scene ends with a camera shot of Rachel looking contemplative. There are several important points to address in this exchange. Firstly, Ross is no longer upset with Rachel; whether this is because he has managed to put her dating into perspective or because he is relieved that the date was not a success and is no longer feeling threatened by the competition provided by Cash is difficult to discern, but the character is positioned as being genuinely concerned for the upset Rachel.

Secondly, as we have suggested, it appears that Rachel's character has finally understood, or is being made to understand, that she cannot date while pregnant in spite of her own desire to do so. The sitcom configures the mother-to-be as having been naïve to have thought that she could carry on with her life in the ways she did before being pregnant. Rachel is being made to see that because she is carrying a child, the range of options and opportunities that had previously been open to her as an unpregnant woman are becoming circumscribed. However, if Rachel's character is made to confront these newfound limitations on her freedom, she is also given the space, albeit briefly, to express her disillusionment. Her "this is hard" reveals the extent to which the character, in spite of choosing to maintain the pregnancy and wanting to become a mother, is simultaneously surprised by the ways in which it will alter her life and is not entirely enthusiastic about the limitations that are being imposed upon her as a pregnant woman and mother-to-be. This small (almost negligible) space in the *Friends*' diegesis offers an alternative perspective to the cultural understanding of pregnancy as an unambiguously and overwhelmingly wonderful event in the life of the mother-to-be. Instead, for this character, pregnancy is both fully wanted *and* a source of ambivalence.

Figure 62 Newly pregnant Rachel is given space to feel ambivalent about her changing status.

However, as we have seen before in this sitcom, what *Friends* seems to offer in terms of a loosening of maternal paradigms (in this case the overwhelming joy felt by a pregnant character

brought on by a wanted pregnancy) is often recuperated or reconfigured elsewhere in the narrative. If Rachel's character has just been given the opportunity to express misgivings about the way this pregnancy will disrupt her life, Ross's character, in comforting her, reasserts a certain element of authority over the mother-to-be, here depicted as being naïve and unaware. Just as Rachel's knowledge of the truth was used in previous scenes to destabilize Ross and ridicule his character, so in this scene, albeit perhaps more subtly, Ross's superior knowledge in the realm of having children, is used to reassure Rachel and convince her that this is what is best for her, thereby shutting down Rachel's opportunity to express more of her ambivalent feelings. Ross's "yeah, I know" is at once a compassionate show of empathy for his friend and an epistemological statement. He knows, Rachel (and the audience) can be sure, because of his already established status as paternal figure to Ben. He knows that once Rachel sees the baby, once the baby wraps a hand around her finger, she will fall in love and this maternal love, she (and the audience) are told, will be stronger than any romantic love. Ross can credibly know this because he is a father himself. As such, this knowledge and this authority are rooted specifically in his character's paternal status and it is his paternal knowledge that is, in this scene, opposed to and positioned as superior to Rachel's incipient (and, here, explicitly ambivalent) maternal knowledge. Indeed, Rachel has "no idea" what awaits her as a mother, but Ross knows and in this scene he is present to reassure her (and the audience) that she will love her child more than any man she has met and will, in spite of her reticence, be a devoted mother corresponding to the tenets of intensive mothering. In spite of, or because of, Rachel's decision to have the baby outside the traditional nuclear family configuration, Ross's paternal authority is present to guide Rachel, because ultimately, the sitcom appears to be suggesting, she *does* need a father figure in order to be a successful maternal one.

Particularly striking in this episode, however, is its ultimate closure. At the end of their exchange, Ross invites Rachel for a cup of coffee which she declines before the two separate. He is then shown entering Central Perk where he runs into Mona, a character whom he met several episodes earlier. As Mona and Ross chat and agree to have coffee together, the doors to the coffee shop open and Rachel, apparently having changed her mind about sharing a coffee with Ross, enters. The camera focuses on Rachel who, seeing Ross fetch coffee for Mona, slowly leaves the coffee shop without making her presence known. As the doors shut, the closing credits appear

signaling the end of the episode. Contrary to most episodes of *Friends*, this one does not conclude with a final joke or gag, but instead fades to black as Semisonic's "Closing Time" begins to play.[424]

Thus, in an episode which has featured Ross's character becoming jealous and incensed at the thought of having the biological mother of his future child dating other men, after having comforted Rachel following the disastrous date attempt, and after having convinced Rachel that she will soon become so deeply devoted to her future child that she will love it more than any other man, the sitcom pairs Ross up with another woman just as Rachel, the biological mother, seems ready to reengage with him, or at least, renounce seeing other men. While this may (and perhaps should) be interpreted as simply another step in the Ross and Rachel, will-they-or-won't-they narrative, the episode takes on new implications in the context of Rachel's pregnancy. While Ross and Mona become romantically involved for much of Season Eight, Rachel does not seriously attempt to date again during the duration of her pregnancy, suggesting that the character has accepted the idea that dating while pregnant is taboo. Nonetheless, and while the examples may have been successfully recuperated within the narrative space of the sitcom, Rachel's character has engaged the nonnormative ideas not only of a mother-to-be continuing to seek romantic (and sexual) fulfillment with a man other than the future child's biological father, but also that impending motherhood is not necessarily overwhelmingly joyful.

III.2.4. Rachel Confronts Patriarchy

In Season Eight, Episode Eight, "The One with the Stripper," the sitcom constructs a symbolic confrontation between the future single-mother-by-choice and her own paternal figure, Leonard Green. Rachel's apprehension is made obvious during the first moments of the episode when she asks Phoebe to accompany her to dinner with her father "for support" because she is finally ready to announce her pregnancy. Rachel explains her procrastination by saying that she knows he's going to be angry and that he is "a scary guy." It is significant that Rachel asks Phoebe who is

[424] The song, released in 1998, contains the lyrics "Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end" and describes the closing of a bar at the end of the evening. However, it's link to paternity, according to song's writer Dan Wilson, is explicit, as it was written, in part, in anticipation of the birth of his first child: "Part way into the writing of the song, I realized it was also about being born. My wife and I were expecting our first kid very soon after I wrote that song. I had birth on the brain, I was struck by what a funny pun it was to be bounced from the womb." Evan Schlansky, "Semisonic Success Story: An Interview with Dan Wilson," Americansongwriter.com, October 14, 2019. https://americansongwriter.com/semisonic-success-story-an-interview-with-dan-wilson-2/

configured as the most iconoclastic member of the group of friends but also as the most tough and courageous one. Rachel's choice makes clear that she needs a friend who can stick up for her and help her maintain her own courage in the face of an angry father figure. The dinner scene confirms Rachel's fears and also confirms Leonard Green as a fearsomely stereotypical patriarchal figure. When Phoebe declines his offer to "order everybody the Moroccan chicken" because she is a vegetarian, Leonard looks dismissively at the young women and mutters "I'll never understand you lesbians." Leonard's collapsing of vegetarianism and lesbianism suggest that, for this character, any type of nonnormative, marginal or untraditional behavior is worthy of disdain and foreshadows his reaction to Rachel's subsequent announcement.

When Leonard insults a waiter's intelligence, Rachel is on the verge of losing her nerve. Indeed, it is actually Phoebe who breaks the news to Leonard as it appears that Rachel cannot bring herself to tell her father the truth. Before emitting any type of reaction, Leonard's first question is "Who's the father?" His immediate follow-up question, "Oh, no, please don't tell me it's her" while pointing at Phoebe, draws laughter from the studio audience but also testifies to this paternal figure's intense and exaggerated resistance to any nonnormative familial situation. Indeed, Leonard appears relieved, although not overjoyed, when he learns the father of Rachel's child is Ross. As Rachel continues to try to assuage her father, demonstrating her desire to please him, the conversation once again confirms that Rachel was correct in fearing his reaction to her situation.

> **Rachel**: Oh, Daddy, I hope you're okay with all of this. I mean, think about it, this is a good thing. This is your first grandchild. You're going to be a poppy.
> **Leonard**: That's true. A poppy! I'm going to be a poppy! Oh! [*Wipes a tear from his eye*]. So, when is the wedding?
> **Rachel**: Oh... hmm, the who? [Studio audience laughter]
> **Leonard**: The wedding. There's going to be a wedding. Young lady, don't you sit there and tell me that my first grandchild is going to be a bastard. [Audience laughter]. Rachel Karen Green tell me there's going to be a wedding!
> **Rachel**: February second. [Audience laughter].

Rachel's worst fears have been confirmed. Leonard's reaction to the pregnancy has not left open any possible space for it to occur outside of the institution of marriage. His first questions ("Who is the father?" and "When is the wedding?") establish his disapproval of Rachel's choice by not allowing for the possibility that she may conceive of a child in any alternative familial configuration. Rachel's father's most immediate worry, instead of demonstrating concern for his daughter's health and well-being, is to verify that his daughter's entry in motherhood will occur in

a traditional patriarchal family model. While the sitcom's humorous imperative requires the scene to be interpreted as comical, the interaction between father and daughter is, in the absence of the humorous tone, a sheer exercise in patriarchal power over the younger less powerful pregnant female character who, under intense paternal pressure quickly capitulates and gives the older man what he wants and expects: a wedding date to legitimize and normalize his future grandchild.

Rachel, drawing on Phoebe's presence, manages to conjure up enough courage to tell her father the truth, but, again his outrage, anger and indignation force her to lie simply to appease the man.

> **Rachel**: There's not going to be a wedding. Ross and I are not getting married. I'm sorry Daddy.
> **Leonard**: What?! I don't believe this!
> **Rachel**: Uh... Daddy, stay calm, please.
> **Leonard**: Stay calm! How do you expect me to stay calm?! This is unacceptable, Rachel. And I wanna know why?! Is it because that punk Ross won't marry you? That's it, is that it?!
> **Rachel**: Yes, he says I'm damaged goods. [Studio audience laughter].

Once again, without the sitcom's generic elements to code this interaction as humorous, the conversation takes on a more menacing tone as the daughter pleads with her father to stay calm in light of his increasing public rage. The object of this man's rage, it bears noting, is the legal and moral status of his future grandchild, and, by extension, the status of his own daughter's sexuality, sexual activity and reproduction. Leonard's anger is one rooted in a patriarchal privilege which seeks to maintain control over female sexuality. In its emphasis over control, the father's anger echoes Ross's own bewilderment at his lack of control over his sexual partner's fertility. Rachel is on the verge of confounding another avatar of patriarchal privilege, yet this paternal figure's anger and rage proves to be too intimidating and again, she capitulates with a lie that lays the blame for their non-marriage on Ross (entirely unfairly as Ross originally wanted to marry Rachel in order to do the "right" thing.) Rachel's reference to herself as "damaged goods" evokes the pejorative image of young women "in trouble," shamed at being pregnant out of wedlock, and it structures Dr. Green's attitude as particularly backwards and retrograde. Yet, in her rapid acquiescence to her father's demands in spite of her best intentions, the daughter proves just how burdensome the weight of patriarchy remains.

Rachel's lie eventually leads to a confrontation between the two paternal figures with disastrously comical consequences. Leonard Green barges into Ross's apartment to confront the

younger man over what he has been led to believe is an unwillingness to marry Rachel in spite of her pregnancy. As it happens, Ross is with Mona, his new girlfriend, and a three-way argument ensues during which Mona learns not only that Rachel is pregnant, but that Ross had asked her to marry him. Again, the crux of the narrative conflict resides in the stakes of not only the pregnancy but also Rachel's sexuality and sexual status. Leonard, a representative of traditional patriarchal values, is incensed over his daughter's supposed loss of honor and respect at the hands of Ross. Ross, representing a patriarchy which has been forced into transition thanks to increasing female assertiveness and agency, is comically lost, unable to appease the old guard, yet in trouble with his new girlfriend to whom he has not been thoroughly transparent.

The episode concludes, like the one we previously analyzed, ambivalently. Ross, incensed himself at Leonard's intrusion on his privacy as well as Rachel's falsehood concerning him, confronts the mother-to-be. Instead of simply explaining to Mona the circumstances of his complex relationship with Rachel and apologizing for keeping it from her, he enlists Rachel (in fact, Rachel volunteers) to clear the air with Mona herself. Not only must Rachel confront her father again, this time with the full truth of the situation, she must also explain the complexities of the situation for the biological father's new girlfriend. Thus, *Friends* positions the onus of the transmission of information concerning this particular pregnancy on the maternal figure. It is the future mother who, according to this episode, remains the sole detainer of truth concerning this conception and gestation. While Ross, the younger representative of patriarchy, may be in a position to *accept* the truth of this pregnancy (particularly when considered in contrast to the older paternal figure as represented by Leonard Green), he is still unable to *explain* the situation even to his own girlfriend, a task which must be left to Rachel. This is to say that he remains epistemologically ill-at-ease even as he tries to accommodate the situation in which he finds himself.

The scene accompanying the final credits offers a revealing coda to this episode. Rachel, seen in the living room of her apartment reading a book about pregnancy, is holding a telephone at a distance from her ear. Echoing from the telephone is Leonard Green's angry voice. Rachel has finally told her father the truth about not marrying Ross, this time over the phone avoiding a face-to-face confrontation. She is, at a distance, better equipped to handle his rage and when Phoebe enters the apartment to invite her to a movie, Rachel puts the phone down (Leonard's shouting voice still audible) and quietly leaves the house. The character is thus depicted as ignoring, finally

and completely, the anger and pressure coming from her father. More concerned about her own pregnancy (as evidenced by her reading material), more attentive to her supportive friends and to her own desires (as suggested by her eagerness to see a movie with Phoebe), this final scene suggests that the pregnant mother by choice, though not engaging directly with her father, has found her own strategy to neutralize his patriarchal fury and to mark his outmoded demands for a wedding and the supposed legitimization it confers as unnecessary and superfluous.[425]

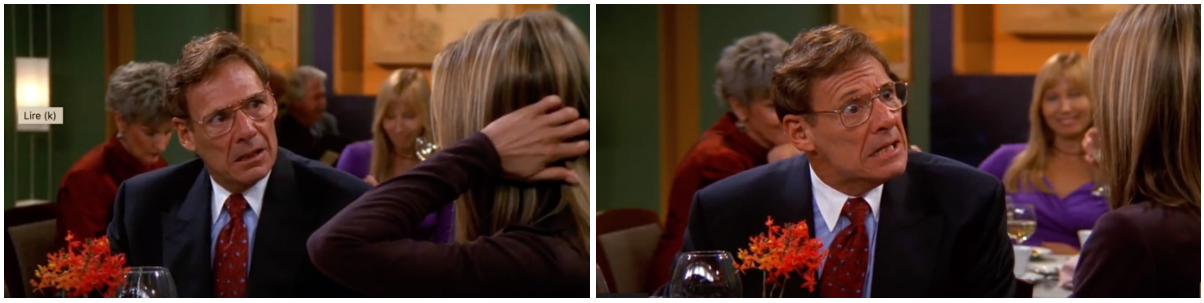

Figure 63 Rachel confronts patriarchal anger.

Figure 64 Rachel explains the situation to Mona and finally decides she has had it with listening to patriarchy.

III.2.5. The Baby Shower: Rachel is Unprepared to Mother

As we have seen, Rachel's pregnancy, contextualized as it is as a sitcom narrative of single motherhood by choice, manages to implicitly and explicitly interrogate the role of the paternal figure, and by extension, traditional patriarchal values. This was, in general, the case with Carol and Susan's pregnancy from the first season as well. However, as we have seen, Carol and Susan's representations *as mothers* seemed to explicitly reposition them as quintessential examples of intensive motherhood ideology and maternal perfection. Seven seasons later, *Friends* seems to

[425] The writers leave it to Joey's character, who inadvertently picks up the phone, to tell Leonard Green to "go to Hell."

take a different tactic with Rachel's narrative of motherhood, and this begins even before the baby arrives. Unlike Carol and Susan, Rachel is not particularly positioned as being intuitively maternal; in fact, her woeful lack of maternal knowledge becomes the basis for the primary narrative arc of Season Eight, Episode Twenty, "The One with the Baby Shower." This episode, whose narrative crux is positioned within the context of the traditional baby shower, subtly undermines the notions that an essential element of womanhood is motherhood and that women are natural, intuitive, and good mothers; indeed that women are *born* to mother.

Drawing on Van Gennep's work on rites of passage, Eileen Fischer and Brenda Gainer theorize baby showers as rites of passage for pregnant women transitioning from one life role to another. Their argument suggests that the baby shower creates space for the pregnant woman to experiment with her new role:

> At a baby shower a mother-to-be is provided both with a community of other mothers and potential mothers, and with objects she will use to fulfil her new role. Thus it seems possible that baby showers contribute to the transitional phase of a classic rite of passage by providing an opportunity for a woman to "try out" both the new equipment she will need to care for her baby, as well as to "try out" her role as a mother.[426]

The baby shower, as it is conceived of in the *Friends* diegesis responds to these criteria: Rachel is indeed surrounded by women, some of whom appear to be experienced mothers themselves, as well as by her own mother, Sandra (the guest role is reprised by actress Marlo Thomas) and she is given numerous gifts which include clothes and equipment that will be helpful to her in raising the baby. Yet Rachel's "performance" at the shower brings into question not only the efficacy of the baby shower as a space to "practice" motherhood, but more fundamentally, it raises questions about the seemingly inextricable link between woman and mother.

In this episode Sandra is portrayed as casting doubt over her daughter's ability to effectively mother and resolves to spend two months with Rachel after the birth of the child. Indeed, Sandra is so concerned about Rachel's maternal capacity that she reminds Rachel of an incident in which she (Rachel) vacuumed her own hamster as a child. It is within this context ("He

[426] Eileen Fischer and Brenda Gainer, "Baby Showers: a Rite of Passage in Transition," *NA-Advances in Consumer Research* 20 (1993): 320-324. https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7460/volumes/v20/NA-20

was a hamster, I'm not going to vacuum up my baby!") that Rachel begins to open the gifts and "try out" the equipment that she is given.

The first gift Rachel is given is a breast pump replete with a long hose. Picking it up excitedly while proclaiming "Oh! I know what this is!" the expectant mother appears suddenly to hesitate while interrogating the positioning of the pump. Holding it near her head she pauses before wondering aloud: "Wait a minute, that can't be right. Is that a beer bong for a baby?" The laughter emanating from the studio audience suggests that they have found the incongruence between babies and beer bongs comic and it is Sandra who informs Rachel that the object which she holds in her hands is indeed a breast pump and not a device to ingest beer as quickly as possible. Rachel's character appears to be aware of and embarrassed by her error as she retorts sarcastically "Did I say I was done guessing?" In any case it is clear that the mother-to-be character could not, in fact, correctly identify an accessory allowing for nothing less than the vital nourishment of her future child. Rachel's confused identification of the object also implicitly evokes a perhaps not-too-distant past of beer-soaked partying, subtly (or not) suggesting a certain unfitness as a future maternal figure. Putting the breast pump down, she sheepishly thanks her guests and moves on to the next gift.

The second object to which Rachel turns her attention is a Diaper Genie, a trash can specifically conceived of for disposing soiled diapers which wraps them individually and prevents unpleasant odors from escaping. Picking up the item, she incorrectly identifies it as a dispenser of clean diapers to which an invited guest corrects her laughingly, "No it's where you put the *dirty* ones." Rachel's reaction underscores her naiveté as a mother-to-be who doesn't comprehend the most basic and basest of details concerning early motherhood.

> **Rachel**: Well that's gross, why don't you just take it outside and throw it in a dumpster?
> **Sandra**: Oh, you're going to do that ten times a day?
> **Rachel**: Wh-it goes ten times a day?! What are we feeding this baby – Indian food?
> **Sandra**: No dear, that's what babies do. […] Plus, what are you planning on doing with the baby while you're trotting out to the garbage ten times a day?
> **Rachel**: I don't know… I'd leave it on the changing table? [*The gathered women emit a collective gasp*] What? What'd I do? What'd I do?
> **Sandra**: You can't leave a baby alone!
> **Rachel, sputtering**: Oh, I, oh, of course! I know that. I mean of course you never leave a baby alone. I mean she wouldn't be safe. You know not as safe as she would be with me, the baby dummy. Oh God, okay, you know what? Opening the presents is a little overwhelming right now so I think, um, I'm just going to maybe open

them all a little bit later but thank you all for coming and for these beautiful gifts and this [*motioning towards a baby bassinet*] basket is beautiful.
Shower Guest: It's actually a bassinet.
Rachel, turning to her mother: Okay, Mommy, don't ever leave me.

This scene contributes greatly to the representation of Sandra Green as a particularly unsupportive mother and further corroborates earlier analysis (Chapter Two) of this maternal figure as psychologically damaging for her adult child, but it also reveals a number of significant elements concerning Rachel's character. Specifically, although Rachel is on the verge of giving birth, she has precious little knowledge about the particulars concerning the next phase of her journey in becoming a mother. Not only is she unable to correctly identify basic objects pertaining to baby care (if the Diaper Genie was tricky, the breast pump is recognizable, and most Americans could identify a bassinet) but she appears to have no prior insight into the physiological functioning of the baby she is carrying nor of its basic needs in terms of safety and security. Unaware that a newborn baby may soil ten or more diapers a day, Rachel also commits the grave error of assuming she can leave the baby alone on an elevated surface while she takes the diaper outside to the trash. The gathered women's horrified gasp at Rachel's mistake emphasizes her lack of awareness and sets her apart as the only woman in the room who is unaware of this cardinal rule. Never leaving the baby alone is also an instruction which is repeatedly found in expert baby-care manuals so the fact that Rachel, who is about to have her baby, is unaware of this imperative suggests that the character, in spite of being pictured reading books about pregnancy, has not read any of the multitudes of books available to prepare for the care of the baby itself.

Is Rachel being comically characterized as an unfit mother-to-be or does this scene implicitly reveal that motherhood is not a natural process or state of being innate to women? This character is both a woman and pregnant, two seemingly indispensable elements which compose a maternal figure, and yet she is, at this late date in her pregnancy, relatively clueless as to how she will take care of, in fact keep alive, the child which she is about to give birth to. If conception, gestation and giving birth are all physiological processes which female bodies may carry out, this scene suggests that the following steps, the keeping alive, the caring for, the cleaning, the feeding, the responding to needs both physical and emotional, the educating, teaching and raising and loving, all of these processes, all of these basic and more complex, repetitive, recurring tasks, all of what may be considered as mothering, are tasks for which Rachel is so terribly unprepared

because, in reality, they are *not* physiological, they are *not* innate, they are *not* inborn to her nor to any woman. Rachel's overwhelmed reaction may be interpreted as her coming to terms with the awesomeness of what is before her and her suggestion that she continue to open the gifts later, gifts which reveal the depth of her lack of knowledge and preparedness, may be read as a refusal to face this lack. In turning to her mother, a woman who (albeit with hired help) has already raised three children, Rachel's character implies that mothering, far from being a natural component of womanhood, is actually a complex ensemble of tasks which must be taught and learned because they are not in fact inherent to every woman.

Figure 65 Rachel's "shocking" lack of maternal knowledge.

A following scene confirms that Rachel has indeed been focusing almost exclusively on her pregnancy and not on the future child she is to mother. To her own mother, Sandra, she confesses, "I read all kinds of books on pregnancy and giving birth, but I just didn't think to read the part about what to do when the baby comes! And guess what? The baby's coming and I don't know what to do!" Even Rachel's closest friends Monica and Phoebe confirm that Rachel's lack of maternal knowledge is "frightening" and that she knows "not a thing." This representation of a helpless mother-to-be is in clear opposition to the calmly reassuring and confident portrayal of Carol and Susan as they serenely transitioned into motherhood. If this representation was, as we have seen, seriously limited by the characters' relegation to secondary status, and, if their status as lesbian mothers made it necessary to confine them to roles of maternal perfection, Rachel's position as a primary character, and as a heteronormative one, opens up more space both narratively and ideologically for the exploration of this disconnect between womanhood and motherhood. Rachel's spectacular "failure" to appropriately and correctly perform her future maternal self during this most symbolic transitional moment reveals the notion of maternal instinct for what it is: a socially constructed ideology which, while achieving hegemonic status, does not represent, by any means, a universal truth.

Simultaneously, as the episode works to disconnect these two notions, it also appears to reposition the role of the future father. When Ross arrives at the end of the shower, he attempts to convince Rachel's mother Sandra that, in spite of her offer to stay with Rachel for two months following the birth, he will be present to accompany Rachel. Ross's argumentation is based on his paternal experience as Ben's father.

> **Ross to Sandra**: Well you know even if she doesn't know anything, I do. I have a son, and his mother and I didn't live together and whenever he was with me, I took care of him all the time by myself.
> **Sandra**: That's true. You do have another child. With another woman. Have you no control, Ross? [Studio audience laughter].
> **Ross**: That's a different issue. The point is, when the baby comes, I will be there to feed her and bathe her and change her, and more than that, I *want* to do all those things.

Ross's character evokes his experience as a paternal figure in another nonnormative familial configuration to illustrate his ability to care for and parent the child that Rachel is carrying, explaining that even if she were an utter failure as a maternal figure he would be capable of fulfilling all the necessary tasks traditionally expected of the female parent. Seven years after the series' first representation of a family challenging patrionormativity, *Friends* references this narrative in spite of the fact that it had not been explicitly illustrated within the series' diegesis for a number of seasons and draws on it to establish Ross's ability to care for a child as a single parent. The move away from a familial configuration rooted in patriarchy, as illustrated by the lesbian motherhood narrative, has paradoxically and tellingly made Ross a more capable parent. Enumerating the tasks which he is not only capable of performing but *looking forward* to carrying out, this paternal figure lists the most basic corporeal functions, those intimate gestures most closely associated with female parents: feeding, bathing and changing the baby. Ross's character has learned, thanks to his experience fathering a child alongside two lesbian mothers, how to care intimately for a human being more vulnerable than himself. Additionally, he has learned to appreciate these tasks as something worthwhile, enjoyable and rewarding. Ross, thanks to his experience in raising Ben, has become what philosopher Sara Ruddick identified as an *agent of maternal practice* and is confident in his capacity to capably parent his next child.[427] Indeed, that this paternal character demonstrates more confidence in his own capacity for maternal thinking

[427] Sara Ruddick, "Maternal Thinking," in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2007), 97.

than the maternal character carrying the child-to-be demonstrates one of the true emancipatory potentials of this sitcom in terms of motherhood: in this case the serialized narratives intertwine in such a way as to decouple mothering and women, which is to say that the activities traditionally associated with mothers may in fact be performed by anyone, because they are not innate to the women whose female bodies carry babies but are learned tasks available to anybody who has the opportunity and willingness to practice them, in this case, Ross.

III.2.5. Rachel's Continuing Journey

Further examples of this decoupling occur in subsequent scenes and episodes, for although Rachel's character is not the only one to experience pregnancy and childbirth during the ten seasons of *Friends*, hers is the only principal character to be configured *as a mother*, that is, seen regularly (though not constantly) mothering her child, and this for the final two seasons of the sitcom's broadcast. The character's maternal behavior, while at times conforming to intensive mothering ideology, also maintains a relative distance from it and continues to be a site for a certain renegotiation of norms surrounding maternal conduct. In Season Eight, Episode Twenty-Two, "The One Where Rachel is Late," Rachel becomes increasingly disagreeable as her due date passes and ultimately screams at the child in her own womb to "Get out! Get out! Get out!" Far from the image of the placid maternal figure patiently awaiting the arrival of her child, Rachel is clearly unhappy. "I have never been so uncomfortable in my entire life!" she complains to her friends. She also joins a bet with Monica and Phoebe over who can correctly guess her delivery date thus raising the specter of this mother-to-be profiting from her own pregnancy, "I'm miserable here, I may as well make some money off of it!"

The episode which features the birth of Ross and Rachel's child, "The One Where Rachel Has a Baby," is also exploited by the sitcom as an opportunity to further dissociate Rachel from conventional maternal behavior. Her pregnancy comes to an end during a double episode season finale which originally aired on May 16, 2002. Much of the humor of this episode is derived from the fact that the labor and delivery last over twenty-four hours. Due to this prolonged period, Rachel's behavior is depicted as particularly unconventional, resulting at times in the discomfort of those around her. When Monica asks the laboring Rachel how she is, she responds, "You know that feeling when you're trying to blow a Saint Bernard out your ass?" When Ross tries to comfort

Rachel by suggesting that the mother-to-be has made such a comfortable home for the baby that it doesn't want to come out, Rachel's response is, "Aw, look at you making up crap for me." When the obstetrician comes to check on her, she asks the doctor to "light a fire up there and just smoke it out." When another woman enters the hospital room in which Rachel has been laboring while watching five other women come and go, she yells triumphantly to the anonymous woman in a wheelchair, "Ha, ha, ha! Beat you, sucker!" Finally, as Rachel ultimately delivers her child, she is instructed to wait for another contraction which the doctor announces will arrive in twenty seconds. However, as the contraction comes much more quickly than anticipated, she screams out, "twenty seconds, my ass!" Each of these lines is met with laughter from the studio audience, suggesting that they have recognized the incongruity of a maternal figure, who is conventionally conceived as being patient and demure, acting in such an unrefined manner and using such coarse language. Thus, the image constructed of this woman as she is on the verge of becoming a mother, is one that is increasingly vulgar (to the extent that this is tolerated on network television). As such, the sitcom solidifies the representation of Rachel as something of an iconoclastic maternal figure, one who uses crude language when under duress.

Scenes following the birth of the child Emma also create space for Rachel's character to explore (albeit briefly and implicitly) issues which have not necessarily been addressed in popular culture's conventional representations of motherhood, therefore offering new variations and, perhaps, points of identification. As Rachel is surrounded in her hospital bed by her friends after Emma's birth, she dabs a tissue to her eyes and says, "I'm sorry, I just can't stop crying." Ross immediately responds, "The doctor says it's completely normal with all the hormones, plus you're sleep deprived." Yet, Rachel is still left to wonder why she wept when she put her slippers on the wrong feet. Rachel's crying, which goes unnamed in the sitcom's diegesis, is an implicit reference to a period of intense postpartum emotions or "Baby Blues" during which the newly delivered mother may be subject to periods of sadness and crying as she transitions into her new role. If this period lasts for longer than a few weeks and begins to seriously disrupt the new mother's life, then she may be afflicted with a more serious condition, postpartum depression or even, in very rare cases, postpartum psychosis. These conditions, although described in most pregnancy and early child guides marketed to expectant and new mothers in the 1990s, were not widely discussed or represented in popular culture at that time. While Rachel's crying may be interpreted as a comically construed sidelong glance at a potentially gravely serious problem, *Friends*, through Rachel's

postpartum tears, manages to address, within the context of a situation comedy, a topic which affects new mothers, and which again signals a rupture in conventional representations of pre- and post-partum women as overwhelmingly and unambiguously overjoyed by the arrival of a new child.

Similarly, Rachel's character's initial attempts at breastfeeding may be construed as a relative attempt at verisimilitude. If, seven years earlier, Carol admitted to the group of friends that breastfeeding was initially painful, Rachel as a new mother is *explicitly* shown to struggle in feeding her child. This illustration opens up a new space for exploring some of the less obvious aspects of new motherhood. The issue is addressed in the debut episode of the ninth season, "The One Where No One Proposes." While her struggle is fashioned in a humorous manner (with Joey made to be extremely uncomfortable as his friend tries to feed her daughter), the scene in which a nurse attempts to help Rachel and the baby points explicitly to this physiologically natural act as one which does not necessarily come as naturally as may be presumed to many mothers and their babies. The character of the nurse is shown to be particularly reassuring to Rachel, implicitly laying responsibility for the difficulty on the new baby and not, as may be imagined, on the new mother. When Rachel asks the nurse why she may be struggling, the nurse cheerfully responds, "It's alright, honey. Takes some babies a while to get it. But don't worry, it'll happen." As the scene unfolds and the difficulty continues, Rachel ends up crying out, "This is so frustrating! Why doesn't she want my breast?" This mini narrative arc ends in success as Emma finally manages to latch on and Rachel proclaims that it feels "weird" but "wonderful weird." While Rachel's breastfeeding difficulty is both brought up and resolved within the space of the episode's twenty-three-minutes, suggesting that this is a minor hiccup with a quick fix instead of one which can lead to intense pain and weeks of doubt and discomfort for both new baby and mother, the sitcom, once again devotes diegetic space to an inglorious aspect of the postpartum period. Once again, *Friends* shines the flashlight of popular culture into the darker cervices of the realities of the motherhood experience.

III.2.6. "The Worst Mother Ever"

A further example of Rachel's pregnancy and motherhood narratives acting as interpretative space for emancipatory discourses, and the last one which we will analyze at length in this chapter occurs in the episode following the birth of Emma, Season Nine, Episode Two, "The One Where Emma

Cries." Rachel and her baby arrive home from the hospital.[428] During a scene in which the three main female protagonists admire the sleeping baby, Rachel's intense maternal love for her newly arrived child drives her to disturb the peacefully sleeping Emma. In spite of Phoebe's warning that "you're *never* supposed to wake a sleeping baby," Rachel insists and bases her argument in terms of maternal ownership: "What? I can do whatever I want, I made her." The laughter emanating from the studio audience signals the oddness of Rachel's statement and the extent to which an ideology of maternal abnegation – one which demands that the maternal figure renounce her own desires if they are not consistent with what has been established to be in the best interests of the child – consistent and concomitant with intensive mothering ideology is an unspoken yet driving force in these narratives, an ideology which the humor in this scene makes evident. In spite of her friend's warning, Rachel, feeling an intense urge driven by her newfound love for the child she has gestated within her body, reaches into the bassinette and pulls her sleeping baby into her arms. As if to prove Phoebe correct, the baby immediately begins to cry (Phoebe's "I would say I told you so, but she's kind of doing that for me" renders this explicitly within the diegesis), sending the new mother into a panic and seemingly suggesting that Rachel has indeed carelessly and selfishly flouted some sort of regulation in the proper code of maternal behavior. The new mother's immediate apologies to her baby ("I'm so sorry, Oh, Mommy's so sorry") do nothing to appease the situation but do reinforce the notion that Rachel has committed some kind of maternal error.

As the episode proceeds, the scenes concerning this narrative arc remain fixed in Rachel and Ross's apartment which becomes an enclosed space in which the three female protagonists struggle to placate the crying baby. Because these scenes are interspersed throughout the episode with others concerning two different narrative arcs, the structure of the episode creates the

[428] Following the childbirth episode, the actress's prosthetic pregnant belly has been removed. However, she is now wearing a prosthetic after-pregnancy belly. This is notable: in many televisual pregnancies, particularly ones in which the actress is not herself pregnant and thus must wear a prosthesis, in the episodes immediately following the childbirth, the character of the mother is shown to have reverted back to her formerly slim self. *Friends'* use of a prosthetic *post*-pregnant belly for Rachel's character suggests a conscious effort to more closely align this fictional event with reality creating a more credible or believable representation. Rachel's prosthesis invites viewers (at least those who have already established knowledge of the physiological processes of pregnancy, childbirth and their consequences for female bodies) to identify more closely with the character. While the prosthetic may be interpreted as an attention to detail in an attempt to resonate more closely with viewers, it is used solely in this episode broadcast. So, the character's body may have been transformed by her pregnancy in a manner attempting to incorporate reality but only for the space of an episode. The following episode, originally broadcast the following week, shows the character's body as "back to normal" undermining both the "real" experience of pregnancy and childbirth on the body and the sitcom's own attempt to represent these processes differently. Nonetheless, the presence of this "post-belly" deconstructs (albeit in a limited manner) the more ubiquitously constricting and thereby normalizing representations of post-pregnant female bodies on network television.

impression that the baby cries, and that the three women are unable to calm her for many, many hours. The extent to which the baby's crying and their inability to help Rachel are constructed as leading to a feeling of outright despair is revealed in the women's comments. For the maternal figure herself, the situation becomes one of desperation in which she is no longer able even to see the humanity of her own baby: "Oh my God, what am I going to do? It's been hours and it won't stop crying." When Monica corrects Rachel's use of the inanimate subject pronoun to refer to her daughter ("*She*, Rach," rectifies Monica), Rachel remains unconvinced, answering "Yeah, I'm not so sure." Again, the laughter generated by Rachel's statement suggests that, within this comic context, the maternal figure's use of "it" is surprising and unexpected. Monica for her part claims that she is losing her mind and Phoebe goes so far as to attribute to the infant an intentional desire to divide the women's solidarity: when Rachel and Monica begin to bicker, Phoebe warns, "You guys, we can't turn on each other, okay? That's just what she wants."

As the baby's crying continues and the women become increasingly weary, the narrative space created for the maternal figure to complain, to worry about her own maternal abilities and to ask for help culminates in a scene in which Rachel asserts, "I'm doing the best I can. Anyone else is welcome to try" and, "Oh, God, what am I going to do, you guys? I can't even comfort my own baby. I'm the worst mother ever." Finally, she hands the baby to Monica asking her friend to "please, take her." As Rachel exits to use the bathroom and Phoebe exits to "scream into a pillow," Monica is left alone holding the baby and finally manages to mollify the crying child. The sudden silence amazes the two other women, particularly Rachel, the baby's biological mother who proclaims Monica "the official baby-crier-stopper" and tells her that she must never leave the apartment. Ultimately, Rachel leaves Monica, against the latter's will, with the sleeping Emma in her arms to go to her own bed to take a nap. Justifying her action, the mother refers to the expert childcare manuals which are featured prominently in this scene: "you know, the book says that whenever she's sleeping, I should be sleeping."

That this episode should dedicate an entire strand of its narration to just one of the difficulties faced by this newly maternal figure suggests a concerted attempt not only to exploit the comic potential of this new situation (although this is certainly the case) but also to highlight the complications, the less easy and less appealing aspects of motherhood. Rachel, in this episode, categorically refuses to adhere to an ideological stance which presumes that she should defer to her new baby's needs ahead of her own desires and, while the episode may be interpreted as

"punishing" the new mother (or, more correctly, educating her as to how to behave in an appropriate maternal fashion), we may also point out that the episode ends with the baby in the arms of another woman. Rachel, though she is indeed the biological mother of the child, needs the material and emotional support – here in the form of Monica's presence – of others to effectively care for her child. This episode explicitly posits maternal work and maternal care not only as uncomfortable, disconcerting and monotonous, but also underscores the extent to which Rachel, and by extension many mothers, are ill-equipped in these early stages to care for their children, exposing as false any notion of an inherent or naturalized maternal instinct which "kicks in" the moment a child arrives. The fact that the episode ends with Monica running to Emma when her cries are heard, even though both Ross and Rachel are present implicitly suggests that caring for young children is in fact a responsibility that must be assumed by an entire community, not just two biological parents, and certainly not just a lone maternal figure. Finally, the episode offers an alternative popular cultural discourse to those which systematically configure the arrival of a newborn baby as a blissful, blessed event. Rachel's character literally invokes God in this harrowing episode and only manages to muddle through thanks to the presence of supportive friends who almost desert her.

Figure 66 Emma wreaks havoc, Monica finally calms her.

The narratives of pregnancy and motherhood which *Friends* accords to the character of Rachel Green are complex and may be interpreted in any number of manners. They are perhaps not revolutionary, but within the sitcom genre, they undoubtedly offer alternative ways of representing motherhood both in how Rachel's character is constructed as a pregnant woman and expectant mother and in her maternal comportment once the child is born. Without the comic impetus of the sitcom genre, what we are confronted with is in fact a generous element of pathos which is effectively dissimulated thanks to the generic necessity for consistent comedy. It is instructive then to reimagine the narratives of Rachel's motherhood in the absence of humor: a young upwardly

mobile professional woman becomes pregnant after the chosen contraceptive method fails. Because she is not in love with the biological father, she refuses to marry him but invites him to become involved in the pregnancy and in the raising of the child. She learns little by little that her life as she had come to know and appreciate it is, and will forever be, changed by the fact that she has decided to maintain the unintended pregnancy. Once the child is born, she becomes increasingly aware of how difficult it is, in spite of being surrounded by loving and supportive friends, to care for a newborn. And, although we have stopped our analysis here, other episodes illustrate the difficulties Rachel encounters when she attempts to find childcare for Emma and when she goes back to work after her maternity leave.[429]

Although *Friends* does not necessarily dwell on Rachel's newfound status as a mother – Emma is not present in every episode, for example – Seasons Eight and Nine of the sitcom do spend a considerable amount of diegetic space exploring this narrative thread which not only rescues it from falling ratings but continues to nourish it until its conclusion in 2004. As was the case with the lesbian motherhood narrative, each episode pertaining to Rachel's narrative of motherhood, while not specifically promoting or championing a particular type or politics of motherhood and while repeating some of the more restrictive aspects of normative motherhood, does, through its very presence within this popular sitcom, offer possibilities of interpretation which expand the horizons and suggest new ways of conceiving this most resonant of social roles.

Finally, as in the case of Carol and Susan, the extent to which Rachel's pregnancy and motherhood narratives distance themselves from patriarchal motherhood is debatable. What does seem probable, however, is that in removing this story of pregnancy and childrearing from the hegemonic sanguinuptial arrangement, *Friends* is able to offer (to a lesser or greater extent) thoughtful diegetic space to the inglorious parts of motherhood which do not fit neatly with idealized and clear-cut cultural ideas and ideals of the experience as unambiguously gratifying and instinctive.

[429] Season Nine, Episode Six, "The One with the Male Nanny" and Season Nine, Episode Eleven "The One Where Rachel Goes Back to Work."

III.3. Ross: Enduring Patriarch?

We began this chapter by positioning both Carol and Susan and Rachel's narratives of pregnancy, maternity and motherhood as potentially *outside* of patriarchy which is to say that by consciously choosing to have and to raise their children without adhering to a traditional nuclear family model in which the biological mother is legally and morally united with the biological father through the institution of marriage, these representations potentially proposed an emancipatory discourse in terms of mothering in the absence of an officially recognized (or recognizable) paternal figure.

Yet, as has been made evident from the beginning of this chapter, Ross plays a fundamental role in both of these narratives from conception through pregnancy and childbirth and on into childrearing. Neither Ben nor Emma, the two children concerned by these narratives, can be said to be without a paternal figure. Indeed, the two biological mothers explicitly invite Ross to participate in the children's upbringing. In this sense then, none of the maternal figures in this sitcom can be said to be mothering entirely outside of patriarchy. Nonetheless, the significance of these representations may lie most clearly and identifiably within this very fact: Ross is *given* the opportunity to be a part of his biological children's lives, a fact which, had either of these families been traditionally composed, would have gone without question. In opting out of the traditional patrionormative family model, both Carol and Rachel maintain control over Ross's access to their, and his, children. If Ross plays such an essential role in his children's lives it is (narrative necessity notwithstanding) because he has been *invited* to do so by the women with whom he has conceived the children and not automatically because he is the biological father.

In fact, Ross's character is thrice made to lose control over, not only the sexuality and reproduction of the woman with whom he has had intercourse, but indeed, over his own sexuality and reproduction. If the defective condom accounts for the unplanned conception of one future child, the decisions of the two female characters (Carol, Rachel) in question account for the unplanned gestation, birth and child raising of both of Ross's children. He is a paternal figure who has lost the benefits of patriarchal privilege not just in granting control over female sexuality and reproduction but in maintaining control over his own. Indeed, through these narratives, *Friends* injects a supplementary step to becoming a father: conception via the sexual act followed by an *invitation or a suggestion* on the part of the gestating maternal figure to become a paternal figure in the future child's life. In this, the sitcom once again ruptures patrionormative familial

conventions in which the paternal figure is positioned as the head of the household and family. In these situations, Ross becomes part of two families only after he is invited to be present. While it is undeniable then that Ross maintains a significant role, that role has been reconfigured as his parental participation is no longer a given. His status as paternal figure, while maintained, is thus adjusted and must be redefined. This perhaps is what Ross slowly realizes in each of the scenes in which the maternal figures announce their pregnancy, explaining his initial loss for words in both instances.

Figure 67 From Seasons One and Eight: Ross is left tongue-tied by loss of patriarchal privilege and control.

III.3.1. Ross's Paternal Significance

We have already examined some of the ways in which Ross's paternal role is depicted as being made to adjust in the face of pressures to realign itself to this new (fictional) reality in which the maternal character, by way of her narrative agency, renders the paternal one more passive, subject to her decisions. However, Ross not only maintains an active presence in these narratives, the sitcom structures his presence as being particularly symbolically salient. For example, in Season One, Episode Nine, "The One Where Underdog Gets Away," Ross is shown talking and singing to the unborn child in Carol's body when he learns that Susan reads it stories. This seemingly minor act of paternal involvement is in fact constructed as having a most profound effect on the developing fetus.

The scene depicts Ross as initially uncomfortable with the idea of reading to the unborn child (he referred to Susan as "crazy" when he learned she read the stories). He is positioned resting next to Carol's belly explaining his choice of paleontology as a career before commenting laconically that, "you have no idea what I'm talking about because, let's face it, you're a fetus." When Carol suggests he sing, he is equally dismissive of the idea telling her, "please, I am not

singing to your stomach, okay?" What spurs Ross to begin singing is Susan's arrival in the apartment signaling a sort of competition between the two non-gestational parents. Ross's choice of song, the theme song from the sitcom *The Monkees* (NBC, 1966-1968) is not without significance. The lyrics begin: "Here we come, walking down the street, get the funniest looks from everyone we meet." Ross's character may indeed be referencing the future nonnormative family as the object of the "funniest looks" but, in any case, as he arrives at the song's refrain ("Hey, hey, we're the Monkees!"), the fictional gestating baby gives its first palpable signs of life and kicks for the first time.

It is Ross's singing, his paternal voice, which brings the dormant fetus to life. While he may be unable to physically gestate the child, and while his role is reduced by the nontraditional familial model which is being constructed in spite of him, Ross is still figured here as being an essential, life-giving presence. He is the member of this three-parent family who has brought about the first concrete and verifiable signs of viability within the fetus. This moment, the fetus's first movement, which is often imperceptible even to the gestating woman, is, in *Friends*, constructed as being attributable to the unborn child's "recognition" of its biological father. That Susan should be present for this moment is ideologically important. Although she will accompany Carol and Ben, she is not, in this scene, constructed as a life-giving force. It is only the biological parents, Ross and Carol, who can be the sole parental figures capable of creating and bringing to life this future child. Ross's slap of Susan's hand as she too tries to touch Carol's belly is a sign of his dismissal of her future role. The lyrics that Ross makes up to accompany the rest of the song are steeped in a richly paternal imagery and, as constructed by the scene, continue to resonate with the unborn child: "Hey, hey, you're my baby! And I can't wait to meet you. When you come out I'll buy you a bagel and then we'll go to the zoo. [At this point the future parents feel the fetus moving again] Hey, hey, I'm your Daddy! I'm the one without any breasts…" This scene, the singing of the song with

Figure 68 Ross brings his unborn baby to life

its specific lyrics and the resulting fetal movements all serve to reinforce the vital importance of Ross's paternal presence within this atypical family.

Similarly, while the issue of naming the future child had been, as we have seen, positioned as a point of contention between the three parents, and although the child's family name remains, until the end of the series, ambiguous, the question of the first name is finally resolved on the day of his birth. This resolution also symbolically serves to reinforce Ross's paternity and to restore a modicum of patriarchal authority. Having been stuck in a broom closet for most of Carol's labor, Ross and Susan manage to get out just in time for the birth of the baby boy. When Susan broaches the subject of names again, Ross suggests, "how about Ben." The two women both like the name and agree to Ross's suggestion. In terms of the richly symbolic act of naming the child, then, it is indeed Ross who gives the name and while the sitcom supplies a seemingly random explanation for this choice of name (while stuck in the closet Phoebe puts on a utility worker's uniform with the name "Ben" inscribed on it), this particular name is replete with significance. Ben is of Hebrew origin and means, literally, "son" or "son of." It is often, though not apparently in this case, a diminutive of Benjamin, also of Hebrew, and specifically Biblical, origin meaning "son of my right hand" or "son of the south.[430]" In any case, the filiation between father and son which is otherwise constructed as being somehow compromised by the presence of the two maternal figures, is fully realized through the symbolism of the name chosen by the paternal figure for his male child.

The paternal figure plays an equally essential and symbolic role in the single-mother-by-choice narrative of Rachel. In "The One Where Rachel Tells…." Rachel, as we have seen, rejects Ross's idea of marriage in a scene which takes place during Rachel's first prenatal exam. As the future parents' disagreement descends into acrimonious bickering, a doctor arrives to begin Rachel's exam. As Ross and Rachel both look at the computer screen of the sonogram the doctor points out, "there's your uterus, and right there is your baby." Both characters look stunned and

[430] While the Biblical connection may be tenuous given that Ross proposes Ben and not Benjamin, it bears noting that the Biblical Benjamin, or Ben Yamin, was the son of Rachel, second wife to the quintessential patriarchal Old Testament figure, Jacob. Jacob, like Ross, had a significant role in the naming of Benjamin, his youngest of twelve sons who represent the twelve tribes of Israel. Rachel is said to have died in childbirth but not before the midwife was able to give her the news that she had given birth to a son. Rachel named the child Ben Oni, or "son of my mourning," yet after her death, Jacob renamed the child, Ben Yamin, "son of my right (hand)" or "son of the south." Jacob's renaming of his and Rachel's child finds its parallel here in Ross's choice of Ben for his, Carol and Susan's child as Carol and Susan had originally chosen another name for the child. Thus, both Jacob and Ross exercise their patriarchal privilege in naming their sons, although Ross's choice is shown to be accepted by both of his son's maternal figures.

Rachel says quietly, “there it is, I see it.” Congratulating the two, the doctor leaves them alone facing the screen and Rachel breaks into tears. However, the mother-to-be is not overcome by emotion as Ross (and the audience) seems to believe. Instead she cries because she cannot identify the fetus on the screen. Not wanting to show her maternal ineptitude, Rachel has lied to the doctor because she did not want the doctor to think she “was a terrible mother” who could not recognize her “own baby.” Ross pulls the dejected Rachel up to face the screen and brings the computer closer. He points to the screen saying, “it’s right there.” Rachel’s reply “Oh it’s beautiful. I see it now,” is another lie and Ross again pulls her close to the screen, this time holding her hand to point out “this tiny thing that looks like a peanut.” Rachel is in disbelief. She had seen the “tiny peanut” all along but could not identify it as the fetus without Ross’s intervention. Thus, although the two future parents both see the same image on the screen, only Ross, the paternal figure, is able to correctly *interpret* the image. In this case maternal recognition of the developing fetus can occur only after paternal mediation on Ross’s part. Rachel’s “oh, thank you” illustrates her gratitude. Without Ross’s help, Rachel would have been incapable of identifying the fetus gestating within her own body.

The father-to-be’s presence is thus necessary in order to bring the future child to life for the mother-to-be. In spite of Rachel’s decision to have the baby on her own, and in spite of her refusal to marry him, Ross’s participation is in fact indispensable to Rachel. The character’s narrative agency may attempt to push the biological father to the periphery of this story, but *Friends* ultimately maintains Ross’s central and authoritative position as father figure to the future child. This scene underscores the importance of Ross’s paternal presence: not only will Ross be a continual presence in Rachel’s narrative but, in spite of his marginalized role, his symbolic ability to “see” the baby growing in Rachel’s body, a baby she herself cannot even identify, reinstates some of his *patriarchal* authority by restoring power over the maternal character; in this case the power to guide (albeit benevolently) Rachel’s vision of her own maternity.

Figure 69 Ross identifies the baby.

III.3.2. Ross Takes his Place

While the previous examples suggest that the sitcom has attempted to reinforce Ross's role as father figure *implicitly*, the scene which serves to close the episode concerning Ben's birth ("The One With the Birth") marks an explicitly televisual effort to confirm Ross's presence as paternal figure. In this remarkable scene, the choice is made to rupture with this sitcom's traditional multi-camera set-up and position the camera so as to give the televisual audience the impression that they are viewing the scene from the new baby's perspective. Soft lullaby music is heard in the background as the camera focuses on Ross's head:

> **Ross**: Ben, I want you to know that there may be some times when I may not be around, umm like this…
> [Ross slowly backs away until he can no longer be seen]
> **Ross, moving back onto the screen**: But I'll still always come back… like this. And sometimes I may be away longer...like this…
> [Ross moves out of the camera's field of vision again]
> **Ross**: But I'll still always come back… like this.

Figure 70 Ross is present even when absent.

The scene and the episode end with the camera still focused on Ross but this time surrounded by his group of friends. In fact, all of the main protagonists from the childbirth episode are included in this shot with the exception of the two maternal figures. In shattering the visual conventions of the traditional sitcom for this scene, *Friends* illustrates the lengths to which it will go to literally insert (and reinsert) Ross into the baby's (and audience's) field of vision thereby reassuring the newborn son that Ross will be consistently if not constantly present as a paternal figure. This highly unconventional method of shooting which positions the television audience as the newborn baby being spoken to suggests that the writers of this scene took as their mission to reassure the American public (as innocent and naïve as a baby in terms of lesbians mothering?) that a stable and loving paternal figure in this unconventional fictional family would never ultimately be too far out of sight. In light of this, Carol and Susan's absence from the shot may be interpreted as a deliberate choice to reconfigure the newborn child's authentic family as the group of six protagonists with whom the televisual audience is more comfortable and familiar.

Ross's contested paternal role seems also to be in need of reaffirming in the unconventional family that he forms later in the series with Rachel. During her pregnancy which spans the eighth season, the sitcom relies this time on a visual gag to communicate the unease created by Ross's

situation as biological father but not patriarchal head of family. In Season Eight, Episode Fourteen, "The One with the Secret Closet," Rachel is several months pregnant and still lives with Joey who nurtures a hidden crush on her. In opposition to the pregnancy narrative of Carol and Susan, Rachel's future child is not imagined as having been brought to life by the vital presence of a paternal figure (as represented by Ross's singing and the fetal "response" through movement). On the contrary Rachel feels the fetus kick while she is by herself in the middle of the night and rushes into Joey's room to share the news. In Rachel's narrative, *she* is the first person to feel the fetal movement and Joey is the second, underscoring the increasing distance between the biological mother and father in this version of maternity.

However, when Rachel rushes into Joey's room, he has just awoken from a dream in which he and Rachel are having a baby together. This dream not only reveals the extent to which Joey is in love with Rachel, but it also explicitly posits Ross as a displaced and disgruntled father figure to Rachel's baby. Indeed, it positions Ross as the baby that Rachel and Joey have together. The fully-grown Ross presented visually as a newborn baby in Joey's arms derides Joey for having usurped Ross's own position as paternal figure. To a horrified Joey, Ross sputters disgustedly, "I hope you're a better father than you are a friend!" Joey awakens at this point to Rachel bursting into his room. The stage is thus set for an episode in which Ross's paternal identity in relation to the unborn fetus becomes the central narrative arc.

Once again, the sitcom proposes a unique perspective offered by a specific visual montage to focus the narrative on the question of Ross's paternity. In highlighting this in such a consciously stylized way, the sitcom signals that this issue is to be set apart from the rest of the narrative, underscoring it as something of especially particular importance. Due to Rachel's decision to have the baby out of wedlock, Ross has literally been displaced, in this case by his friend Joey.

Figure 71 Ross: displaced (and disgruntled) father figure.

In effect, the episode deals specifically with Ross's regret at not being in more proximity to Rachel and at his seemingly being displaced by another man (Joey) who is not the biological father. When Rachel and Joey tell Ross the next day that the fetus has begun to kick, he expresses joy but follows this immediately by: "Although I kind of wish I would have been there to feel the kicking for the first time, you know?" He next offers Rachel his new pager number explaining that he doesn't want to "miss any more baby stuff" and instructing her to use it "anytime anything pregnancy-related happens." This solution meant to bring Ross closer to Rachel and her developing fetus is rapidly proven to be ineffective and cannot rectify Ross's core dilemma: the ambiguity of his role as paternal figure.

In a subsequent scene, Rachel, manifestly nervous and upset, explains to Joey that she is experiencing discomforting sensations which she is unable to identify. He immediately reassures her by referencing his own second-hand knowledge of pregnancy thanks to his multiple sisters who "got every weird feeling in the book." Taking Rachel to the hospital, he pages Ross on the way. The following hospital scene opens with a shot of Joey nervously pacing the Emergency Room floor as he awaits news of Rachel. The character's behavior harkens back to and evokes the culturally resonant trope of the expectant father anxiously pacing the floor while waiting for news of his child's birth in an era when fathers were not allowed into delivery rooms with their wives.

The scene continues to position Joey as the expectant father as a doctor walks out of an examination room with Rachel and explains to Joey that Rachel has been experiencing Braxton Hicks contractions, preliminary contractions which prepare the uterus for labor and delivery. Joey's character, for his part, appears to reaffirm this positioning as the paternal figure, asking the doctor, "So, but everything is normal? And there's no danger to her or the baby?" When it has been established that neither Rachel nor the baby are in danger, Joey admits that he has "never been more scared" and displays intense and genuine concern for Rachel.

Ross finally joins the two in the hospital emergency waiting room at this point, as frantic as Joey had just been but rapidly reassured. The two male protagonists find themselves alone for a moment and Ross thanks Joey for bringing Rachel so quickly to the hospital but also demonstrates his frustration at being again removed from the immediacy of Rachel's pregnancy. Lamenting the fact that he was not there to help Rachel he says, "It should have been me. I'm the *dad*." Ross's chagrin at being excluded from the events surrounding Rachel is not based, according to this scene, on his friendship or feelings of concern for Rachel but explicitly on his paternal status which their nonnormative family structure has again foiled him from assuming completely. To add insult to injury, the doctor who treated Rachel comes back to give Joey a pamphlet on Braxton Hicks contractions, and in front of Ross, adds "by the way, you did the right thing by bringing her in. You're going to make a wonderful father." The significance of the doctor's mistake is picked up on by the studio audience and an audible gasp can be heard as Ross's face falls in disappointment.

The episode continues to render Ross's paternal role as blurred and unintelligible by positioning him as the "wrong" father for Rachel's baby: he inadvertently makes her sick by giving her a sandwich which Joey knew would make her ill. Ultimately it is Joey himself who recognizes that Ross should assume his "natural" place alongside the woman who is gestating his child and it is Joey again who suggests that Rachel move out of his apartment and into Ross's – this in spite of the fact that Joey is in love with Rachel and that Ross has a new girlfriend, Mona. The imperative to restore Ross to a clearly identifiable role as expectant father is thus the primary objective of this episode. This goal is articulated by Joey, who is here unusually clairvoyant in spite of being consistently characterized as the dullest and least articulate of the six main protagonists. Indeed, Ross specifically congratulates Joey on his "smart idea." Joey's response, "well, I was due," both comically reinforces his characterization as dimwitted but concurrently establishes the fact of Ross

and Rachel living together as simple and natural enough for even the most unintelligent to understand and see clearly. Ross's recuperating his position (physically, if not institutionally through marriage) alongside Rachel thus becomes the smart, intelligent and, finally, most intelligible choice for these future parents. Ross's place is clarified, for the time being, and the character is able to retrieve a semblance of normalcy in this otherwise inarticulate (or perhaps more precisely, underarticulated) familial situation.[431]

III.3.3. Ross Establishes his Paternal Identity

We have seen how Ross has used his previously accumulated knowledge of paternity to educate and to reassure Rachel during her moments of doubt. But Ross himself is a character who struggled with doubts of his own in terms of his parental and specifically paternal capabilities. This particular narrative arc from the first season is situated during Carol's pregnancy narrative and while it concerns only Ross and his impending entry into fatherhood, it may be understood as being particularly salient in relation to our study of motherhood. In fact, the episode dealing with Ross's uncertainties is part of a double episode, "The One with Two Parts, Parts 1 and 2." In our treatment of Carol and Susan's lesbian motherhood narrative, we have already discussed the first half-hour episode comprising this two-parter and we have thus seen the ways in which it confronts Ross's expectant paternal character with the reality (as conceived of by the sitcom) of a familial configuration in which two maternal figures are present.

This second part, which was originally broadcast a half hour after the first one on February 23, 1995, turns its focus more specifically on Ross's struggle to come to terms with the fact that he is about to become a father *in general*, and no longer in terms of this fact's articulation with the

[431] Rachel's move back into Ross's apartment will also bring about the end of Ross's relationship with his new girlfriend, Mona. In effect, Ross is characterized as being particularly pathetic in attempting to juggle his relationship with Mona and his unconventional situation with Rachel; indeed, Mona ends up breaking up with him because he has repeatedly been unclear with her about the specifics of his relationship with Rachel. The move also removes Rachel from Joey's apartment and away from the latter's burgeoning romantic feelings for the pregnant woman. While this narrative continues for several episodes, Rachel's move into Ross's apartment (which she is enthusiastic about) effectively brings about an end both to Ross's relationship and to any alternative relationship that could have been open to Rachel. Thus, possible "obstacles" which could continue to render unintelligible Ross and Rachel's unique relationship are cleared out of the way for the characters themselves as well as for the viewing audience. This situation is of course reversed in an episode from the following season, (Season Nine, Episode Thirteen, "The One Where Monica Sings"). Rachel's involvement with other men ultimately leads Ross to a fit of jealousy and Rachel moves out of his apartment and back into Joey's.

lesbian characters. Ross is characterized as panicking in the face of his future role. This panic, as represented by a dream the character evokes, is conjured in a particularly masculine fashion. Ross recounts his dream to Chandler and Joey in Central Perk:

> **Ross:** I had a dream last night where I was playing football with my kid.
> **Joey and Chandler:** That's nice.
> **Ross**: No, no. *With* him. [Studio audience laughter, Ross gestures as if he is holding a football.] I'm on this field and they hike me the baby. And I know I've got to do something 'cause the Tampa Bay defense is coming right at me.
> **Joey:** Tampa Bay has got a terrible team!
> **Ross:** Right, but it *is* just me and the baby so I'm thinking they can take us. [Audience laughter] And so, I, uh, I just heave it downfield!
> **Chandler:** What are you crazy? That's a baby!
> **Joey to Chandler:** He should take the sack? [Audience laughter]
> **Ross:** Anyway, Suddenly *I'm* downfield, and I realize that *I'm* the one who's supposed to catch, him, right? Only I know there is no way I'm going to get there in time. So, I am running and I'm running and *that* is when I woke up. See, I am *so* not ready to be a father.
> **Chandler:** Hey, you're going to be fine. You're one of the most caring, most responsible men in North America. You're going to make a *great* dad.

Ross's dream, set on a football field, juxtaposes the realms of professional competitive sports with its ideological opposite, the care and nurturing of a newborn. As such it displaces an activity socially accepted as feminine (selfless, nurturant child-rearing) into a world understood as masculine (the brutality of this particular contact sport and its lack of an equivalent professional female league underscore football as an especially vibrant example of a specific variant of masculinity.) The football-field context of Ross's dream inevitably places his future baby in danger, leading to the character's malaise, but the contrast also implicitly suggests that *masculinity* and *care of children* are antithetical notions which will need to be reconciled if Ross is to be a successful father. Thus, the stage is set for this episode's narrative which positions Ross on a quest for paternal identity.

Over dinner with his own father, Ross asks Jack Geller at what point he began to feel like a father, to which Jack replies: "I guess it must have been the day after you were born. We were in the hospital room; your mother was asleep, and they brought you in and gave you to me. You were this ugly little red thing [Studio audience laughter] and all of a sudden you grabbed my finger

with your whole fist, and you squeezed it so tight. And that's when I knew."[432] Jack's story of finger grabbing and Chandler's comment from the previous scene that Ross is one of the most caring and responsible men on the entire continent both serve as foreshadowing for the climax and resolution of this episode which will ultimately establish Ross's paternal identity and capabilities in the eyes of the character himself as well as for the viewing audience. The way in which the sitcom establishes this can itself be interpreted as a discourse which loosens the complex ideological ties linking care work and motherhood specifically to womanhood and femininity, by reconfiguring these maternal, feminine tasks as universal, if not specifically masculine.

During the first season of *Friends* Ross adopts a Capuchin monkey named Marcel. In this episode focused on Ross's search for paternal identity, Marcel becomes a proxy for the unborn child. As Ross and Chandler play Scrabble in Monica's apartment while continuing to discuss Ross's imminent fatherhood,[433] Marcel suddenly begins to act strangely. It is determined that Marcel has swallowed a Scrabble tile and Ross frantically rushes to the hospital Emergency Room with the monkey in his arms, bundled like a newborn baby. When the nurse in the hospital objects to the monkey, Ross explains that the animal hospital is too far away and that he had no other choice due to the urgent nature of Marcel's accident. The nurse raises her voice saying, "This hospital is for people!" Ross, panicking, retorts, "Lady he is people! He has a name. He watches *Jeopardy!* He, he, touches himself when nobody's watching. Please, please, have a heart!" A sympathetic doctor agrees to see Marcel and saves the monkey from choking.

The episode's final scene resolves this narrative arc in which Ross has been in search of a paternal identity. It is Chandler who asks Ross, seated next to the recovering Marcel's hospital bed if he feels "like a dad yet." Ross doesn't seem to understand the sense of Chandler's question as he looks at his pet monkey lying motionless in front of him. Chandler gets specific: "Hey come

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[432] This story of discovering a newfound parental identity is echoed in Ross's discussion with Rachel after she has been rejected by her date. Ross, comforting Rachel, tells her, "wait until the first time your baby grabs your finger." The story of finding parental identity through physical connection with the newborn child is transmitted from father to son and from son to female co-parent. It is another implicit reminder that nonnormative familial structures disrupt what is conventionally accepted as the status quo. In this case, a seemingly established circuit of knowledge (from generation to generation) is interrupted by Rachel who, unable to seek guidance and reassurance from her own maternal figure, receives the wisdom of parental connection from Ross.

[433] This scene in which Chandler offers Ross a "worst case scenario" also serves to express Chandler's own difficulties related to his own paternal figure: "Say you never feel like a father. Say your son never feels connected to you as one. Say all of his relationships are affected by this." When Ross asks Chandler if he has a point, the latter responds, "You know, you'd think I would." This nihilistic response takes its meaning when considering Chandler's fractious relationship with his mother and father.

on, you came through. You did what you had to do. That is very *dad*." At this instant, Marcel begins to rouse from his sleep and, as Don Henley's "New York Minute" begins to play extradiegetically, Marcel suddenly grasps Ross's finger with his small monkey hand. As the music swells and with his five best friends surrounding him and looking on proudly, Ross comes to the realization that he is already a father figure and that he indeed has what it takes to be a competent paternal figure to his future son in spite of the future family's nontraditional composition. The emotional nature of this scene and of this realization in particular is underscored by the fact that as the episode comes to an end, no final joke or gag punctuates the scene and it simply fades to black. The final credits appear while Don Henley continues to sing "In a New York minute, everything can change."

Figure 72 Ross saves Marcel and discovers his paternal 'instinct.'

If Ross's character has been made to discover his paternal identity, that he is in fact "very *dad*," the sitcom's construction of this moment allows for an interpretation suggesting an emancipatory, if not radical, renegotiation of parental roles. Ross in this episode has indeed "come through" for Marcel by performing one of the most fundamental acts of nurturance and care towards a more vulnerable being. By rushing Marcel to the hospital, in insisting on bringing Marcel to the closest center of care in spite of the fact that animals are strictly forbidden as patients, Ross has saved Marcel from certain death by choking. In this, Ross's character establishes his paternal *bona fides*. Yet Ross's actions have been performed in service not to another human being but to a Capuchin monkey. Chandler's question in the Scrabble scene as the monkey begins to choke, "What's up with the simian?" serves as a reminder that the creature's evolutionary status is akin

to humans' though not identical.[434] Ross's action of paternal care is thus removed from the specific realm of *human* and inscribed into a world which is considered evolutionarily inferior, more animalistic, more natural. Indeed, Ross's actions, in his lack of hesitation, in his determined, unyielding insistence to have his pet seen by a doctor, can be interpreted as the natural and instinctual actions taken by one who is ethically and morally obligated to take responsibility for a more vulnerable other. Ross's behavior is *instinctual* here; without thinking, he does what must be done to save the monkey. In saving Marcel, indeed in finding in this instinctual life-saving act the essence of his paternal identity, Ross's character serves to decompose rigidly maintained conventions and dualisms which posit men as more rational and evolved while women and mothers are more nurturing, instinctual and emotional.

While Ross's character may be interpreted in these particular narratives of maternity and motherhood as a reminder of a patriarchal presence (Ross names his son and brings him to life, Ross "sees" his child, he "competes" with Joey over Rachel until she moves in with him recreating, in essence, a typical nuclear family), even these instances are riddled with holes through which ideological repositioning may be glimpsed by the televisual viewer. *Friends* does not so much impose one ideological vision as reigning supreme over another as it does construct narratives and circumstances which offer a wide range of interpretive possibilities. Its anchoring in the comic mode, an inherently unstable ideological and semantic terrain, allows it to push certain boundaries while simultaneously keeping others firmly in place.

Nonetheless, and perhaps specifically *because* of Ross's continued presence within the diegesis, the two narratives of motherhood which we have examined in this chapter remain firmly outside of the dominant ideology of the nuclear family even if not so firmly outside of patriarchy itself. Ben has a paternal figure, but he still lives with two mothers, and if Carol and Susan essentially disappear (or are disappeared) as the diegesis continues, Ben never comes to live with Ross permanently although he does continue to make appearances until the final season. What is clear is that Ross's presence, as much as a reminder of dominant ideology as it is, also *allows for* the introduction of these two fictional characters, representatives, at the time, of a version of motherhood which had rarely been seen in popular culture.

[434] Simians or *Simiiformes*, a sub-order of the larger order Primates, regroups a number of other families of primates including the *Cebidae* family to which the various species of Capuchin monkeys belong as well as the *Hominidae* family which is composed of the great apes and, of course, human beings.

Likewise, the representation of Rachel's single-mother-by-choice narrative may be retrieved by patrionormativity through Ross's ever-present proximity and paternal authority, but Rachel remains officially a single mother through the end of the fictional universe's narrative, repeatedly frustrating Ross's attempts to impose patriarchal privilege and, although the final episode reunites the couple, there is no indication that they are to be married, offering the possibility that Ross and Rachel join the realms of the millions of unmarried parents who live and raise children together, or alternatively, that they break up once the cameras stop filming, that Rachel accepts the job in Paris and takes Emma with her. The interpretation resides ultimately in the hands of the individual viewer but *Friends*, thanks to the narratives of Carol, Susan and Rachel, widens the horizon in terms of available interpretive opportunities concerning motherhood.

In conclusion, the constant back and forth which these narratives propose makes it difficult to identify any specific reading of these narratives as the *definitive* one; rather, *Friends* is a diegetic space in which competing ideologies meet and interact all under the seemingly benevolent gaze of humor. Nonetheless, even though no definitive conclusion may be reached, these two novel representations constructed on the outskirts of patrionormativity do contain tantalizingly emancipatory ideological implications swerving towards a new epistemology, new ways of knowing and understanding motherhood. Firstly, while taking into consideration the complex politics of visibility and representation, *Friends* offered a modicum of legitimacy to lesbian motherhood to a late twentieth-century American television audience in a televisual landscape in which this marginal group was otherwise absent. Secondly, through the absence of controversy, it may be surmised that the choice of having a child out of wedlock by the turn of the twenty-first-century had finally become a seemingly benign "lifestyle choice" (to echo Dan Quayle), albeit a lifestyle choice reserved for wealthy, white, heteronormative mothers, as represented by the character of Rachel Green. Thirdly, Rachel's (relative) distance from patrionormativity seems to give her character the space to feel ambiguously about the changes and challenges that her newfound status and responsibilities bring her. Freed from the pressure of an official male partner and patriarchal head of the family, Rachel's character is paradoxically able to flail and fail when it comes to motherhood, a representation which puts the lie to any essentializing notion that mothering is instinctual and natural to all women. Finally, Ross's character offers liberating possibilities in terms of paternal representation; while he remains ever the involved father (as we

have seen, his presence is indeed *vital*), this paternal figure, in response to the maternal and narrative agency of the female characters, sketches a new draft of paternity outside of the traditional patriarchal family, one in which the parental figures move towards a more equal balance of power. In this deliniation, created by one of television's most popular and enduring sitcoms, Adrienne Rich's institution of motherhood, imposed by the Kingdom of the Fathers, exhibits foundational fissures, creating opportunities for popular culture to examine motherhood from more diverse experiential perspectives.

Chapter Four – Multiple Mothers: Narratives of Surrogacy, Infertility and Adoption

This chapter will continue the examination of unconventional motherhoods, those falling outside of the traditional nuclear family model, in *Friends*. In this final section the focus moves to representations of motherhoods which are in rupture with the culturally dominant model of biological embodiment, which question maternal procreative status, that is, representations of women who become mothers without gestating babies within their own bodies. At the same time, these stories are concerned with the women whose bodies are put to use to nurture babies they will not raise. These are stories of women for whom the accession to the status of motherhood does not follow the traditional biological/physiological succession of conception-gestation-childbirth, women for whom these processes must occur within the bodies of other women, and stories of women whose motherhood is cut short at the very moment of childbirth. In short, they are narratives of transaction, both of producing and giving away babies *and* longing for and receiving babies to raise as well as the eventual transfer of motherhood status from one woman to another. *Friends* addresses this phenomenon twice within its ten seasons. In constructing these narratives, the sitcom shines its particular generic light on both the revolutionary technological transformations altering human procreation at the end of the twentieth century as well as more traditional, even age-old processes of child transfer in the form of adoption.

In the sitcom's fourth season, the character of Phoebe Buffay is asked to become a gestational surrogate for her brother Frank and his wife Alice[435] who are unable to conceive on their own. The story arc stretches over the second half of the fourth season and on into the fifth providing audiences with an extended view of the unconventional creation of this type of family heretofore unseen in a situation comedy. In the ninth season of *Friends,* Monica Geller and her husband Chandler Bing learn that they, too, are unable to have children and in the tenth season they become the adoptive parents of twins. What is at stake in these two cases of unconventional family formation goes to the heart of the epistemology of the maternal figure. While the two different story arcs may ultimately be very different in tone and ideological implications, they both depict women gestating children in their bodies and handing them over to other women to raise. As such they interrogate our collective understanding of who mothers are and what, exactly, they do.

We may view these representations as undermining one particularly trenchant aspect of maternal ideology: that mothers conceive, gestate and give birth to their children. As philosopher and feminist theorist Drucilla Cornell suggests "one of our culture's deepest fantasies" is "that there can only be one mother[436]" for a particular child, yet these story arcs seem to suggest otherwise and these innovative depictions raise – without necessarily providing definitive answers to – some of the following questions: what of the woman who conceives, gestates and gives birth to a child or children but does not raise them? Is this woman a mother? What role, if any, does she seek or is she accorded in the family which is created by the birth of these children? What are the ethical implications of such choices? Alternatively, what status is accorded the woman who raises a child conceived, gestated and birthed by another woman? Is this woman's motherhood as legitimate as the woman whose body has gone through the physiological processes of pregnancy? Put briefly, among other issues, these depictions raise compelling questions about procreative status and its link to maternal identity. By consequence, to a greater extent than has been seen to this point, these stories deal with representations which highlight women's bodies: female bodies perceived either as unreliable when refusing to respond to the desire to have children or, conversely, female bodies as the potential solution to those same problems.

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[435] Played by Giovanni Ribisi (*Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg, 1998; *The Mod Squad*, Scott Silver, 1999) and Debra Jo Rupp (*That '70s Show*; Fox, 1998-2006) respectively.

[436] Drucilla Cornell, "Reimagining Adoption and Family Law" in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings* ed. Andrea O'Reilly (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2007), 556.

These narratives are particularly striking in that they operate a surprisingly thorough dissection of the processes of conception and gestation for a popular television audience. The episodes at issue in this section explicitly identify and discuss human reproduction and deconstruct it into discreet components. In doing so, they expose (albeit unwittingly perhaps) some of the extraordinarily sensitive ethical dilemmas surrounding mothering and motherhood in cases where infertility prohibits traditional conception and childbirth. If maternal procreative status has been implicitly interrogated through the process of adoption for millennia, similar questions concerning the use of reproductive or procreative technologies, were (and still are) of immense contemporary importance at the time of their appearance within the *Friends* diegesis. Under cover of humor, these episodes propose an often sophisticated and sensitive examination of questions of profound ideological and philosophical import, reinforcing the role of the situation comedy as a significant arbiter of some of the wider socio-political and cultural issues under negotiation at any given moment within culture.

To examine these stories more closely, we will approach the sitcom on its own terms and address these representations in the chronological order in which they were presented to the audience. This chapter will first look at the fictional representation of gestational surrogacy put forth by *Friends* before turning to look at the series' narratives pertaining to fertility and conception, infertility and finally, adoption.

IV.1. "I'm just the oven, it's totally their bun." Phoebe Buffay and the Question of Gestational Surrogacy in *Friends*.

In response to actress Lisa Kudrow's real-life pregnancy, the *Friends* writers constructed an innovative and humorous narrative arc which included the gestational surrogacy of triplets for Kudrow's character, Phoebe Buffay. This was the first representation of its kind in a television sitcom. The infertile couple (Frank Jr. and Alice) asks Phoebe to gestate and give birth to their biological offspring which the latter agrees to do. As will be seen, Phoebe's surrogate pregnancy becomes a site in which questions concerning ethics and technological innovation are posed. The surrogate pregnancy, in turn, allows for an examination of the always ambiguous role of the

pregnant woman in a subject-object dichotomy in which the gestating woman's body becomes the space of accommodation for another potential human life.

From the character's hesitation to embark on the surrogacy process to her difficulties in coming to terms with giving up the triplets she carried in her body, *Friends* alternates between humor and pathos in its negotiation of the ethical and emotional dilemmas confronting the character. Additionally, the discourses of science and technology are featured prominently in several episodes and contribute to *Friends'* wider project of analyzing and deconstructing the maternal role. What can be said of Phoebe as an expectant mother? Given her idiosyncratic characterization how does she conform or not to dominant ideologies pertaining to motherhood?

To a greater extent than any of the other characters in *Friends*, Phoebe Buffay is coded as different. Her otherness is anchored in an extravagant weirdness which is itself, in part, rooted in a nonconforming, traumatic childhood, the dubious heritage, as has been seen, of not one but two maternal characters configured by this series as irresponsible and inappropriate. Phoebe's origin story of maternal and familial dysfunction is additionally tinged by subtle clues attaching her character to a lower middle- or working-class background, unlike those associated with the other main characters.[437] Her parents' deviant sexual practices, her own mother's mental illness as well as Phoebe's homelessness as a child – these elements facilitate an understanding of this character as singularly distinct. Like Joey, she is not part of the pre-narrative sphere to which the other four characters belonged. Unlike Joey, she did not spend that pre-narrative time enveloped in an extended family structure. Instead, Phoebe lived on the streets, where, as the series makes clear from its earliest episodes, she was exposed to repeated danger and trauma and where she was at times forced to resort to crime to survive.[438]

As *Friends* moves forward through time, Phoebe's ruptured past is brought slowly into the series' narrative present and new elements are revealed to the audience as well as to the character

[437] With the obvious exception of Joey, son of a thoroughly working-class pipe fitter. However, Joey's working-class association is more heavily influenced by ethnicity (Italianness) than Phoebe's which remains rooted in familial trauma and poverty.

[438] The pilot episode establishes this very clearly. In her monologue towards the end of this first episode Phoebe explains, "I remember when I first came to the city. I was fourteen. My mom had just killed herself and my step-dad was back in prison and I got here and I didn't know anybody and I ended up living with this albino guy who was, like, cleaning windshields outside Port Authority and then he killed himself, and then I found aromatherapy." The reaction shots of the other characters as well as the audience's surprised laughter punctuating her intervention reinforce Phoebe's position as the odd one out and help construct the character as resilient, yet strange, thanks to the idiosyncratic traumas she has endured. In "The One with the Mugging," (Season Nine, Episode Fifteen) it is revealed that a young Phoebe mugged a young Ross on the streets of New York and stole his comic book collection.

herself. In Season Two, on a quest to reclaim her past and rediscover the biological father who abandoned her shortly after birth, Phoebe learns of the existence of a half-brother, Frank Jr. Given the program's overwhelming upper middle-class ethos, the existence of this splintered family reads as lower-class, white trash even, and serves to further separate Phoebe from her peers. The scene in which Phoebe discovers her brother contributes visually to this portrayal. The father's new wife (whom he has also apparently abandoned) signals through her appearance – poufy hair, large hoop earrings, leopard print collar – a certain white trash aesthetic as does Frank Jr. himself whose unbuttoned shirt sits atop a white "wife beater" tank top. References to Frank's underage smoking and drinking also construct this family as struggling to uphold conventional middle-class standards of appropriate behavior.

Figure 73 Phoebe discovers her father's new wife and her half-brother, Frank Jr.

This detour is to point out that when actress Lisa Kudrow become pregnant in the early part of the sitcom's fourth season and the writers of *Friends* were searching for a solution to either mask or incorporate the pregnancy, the otherness of the character which had been so carefully cultivated for three seasons provided a ripe (gestational) space to include a narrative of unconventional pregnancy. Austerlitz writes, "Kudrow's pregnancy was an opportunity, and a dare. Phoebe was by far the most outrageous of the *Friends* characters and invited the possibility of more unusual circumstances than other characters could have […] Phoebe was the receptacle for many of *Friends'* quirkiest impulses, extending the range of the show's comic abilities." Austerlitz goes on to note, "The writers often enjoyed writing for Phoebe most, as she required the least tethering to demonstrable reality." Furthermore "[s]he appeared to exist on a notably different frequency than her friends […][439]"

[439] Austerlitz, 2019, 172.

Phoebe's loose relationship to "demonstrable reality" enabled the sitcom's writing team to envision a number of different scenarios and they eventually settled on a narrative in which Frank and his much older wife Alice would come to Phoebe and ask her to carry their biological children thanks to the assisted reproductive technology of in-vitro fertilization. Suggesting the extent to which this character was malleable in the minds of the writers, the exact number of babies Phoebe was to carry was the subject of much debate. Austerlitz recounts,

> Some writers were arguing that Phoebe could have eight babies and that an instant brood in her belly might make for a hilariously over-the-top plotline. Others insisted that eight was far too many and that the story needed to be tempered so as to avoid being too physically dangerous or too unbelievable. They eventually settled on three as the right number – ludicrous enough to be funny but not stretching the bounds of credulity.[440]

The tricky balance between comedy and verisimilitude so necessary for this sitcom's equilibrium was in this case settled by the decision to have the character gestate triplets. To a greater extent than the others in *Friends*, this particular pregnancy narrative can be understood as an exaggeration, a carnivalesque interpretation of human reproduction in the United States at the end of the twentieth century. Nonetheless in choosing to maintain even a distant tether to reality – and in choosing triplets over octuplets this is precisely and consciously what the series seeks to do – the gestational pregnancy of Phoebe Buffay remains recognizable and intelligible to the sitcom's audience.[441] Importantly, it allows for an eventual emotional connection with the fictional surrogate mother as she becomes a point of identification in popular culture for an audience cognizant of, yet not intimately familiar with the socio-cultural, technological and biomedical transformations underway. Through humor and outlandishness, this storyline nonetheless translates sophisticated and controversial content to the wider televisual audience.

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[440] *Ibid*.

[441] It would not be until 2009, well after *Friends* had finished its original broadcast run, that Americans and American popular culture would be confronted with the phenomenon of octuplets thanks to Nadya Suleman, the California 'Octomom' whose high order multiple birth became instant fodder for media fascination as well as significant cultural backlash. The single mother who already had six older children and was receiving public assistance, conceived the octuplets through in-vitro fertilization, a revelation which once again incited debate about the ethical use of assisted reproductive technologies. The amount of media attention dedicated to the Octomom as well as the fact that Suleman herself received death threats reveals the extent to which cultural anxieties linked to appropriate motherhood are alive and well and are indeed exacerbated by the use of technologies such as IVF. Nonetheless, it is interesting to wonder whether writers would have allowed for Phoebe's pregnancy to accommodate more fetuses had this particular event and the accompanying media attention occurred a decade earlier.

IV.1.1. Frank and Alice: Problematic Parents and *Friends'* Initial Interrogation of Infertility

Like Phoebe, both Frank Jr. and Alice are presented to the *Friends* audience, as well as to the other main characters, as absurdly odd. While Frank is briefly introduced to Phoebe in the episode "The One With the Bullies," it is not until the following season in "The One with Frank Jr." that the young character becomes more fully integrated into the sitcom's diegetic sphere and consequently more fully recognizable as hilariously bizarre.[442] However, whereas Phoebe's quirkiness is emphasized as charming and endearing, Frank's eccentricity initially takes on a distinct loser aesthetic. Recalling his earlier association with a working class, even white trash appeal, in this later episode the character wears tee-shirts honoring thrash metal bands Motörhead and Anthrax. His only hobby is obsessively "melting things" – the association to a threatening and destructive pyromania is made palpable when Phoebe places a fire extinguisher next to him as he melts a plastic spoon. Even more damning, Frank is such an unsophisticated dolt that upon learning that his older sister is a masseuse, he assumes she works in a brothel and eagerly accompanies her to her place of employment, embarrassing her by fondling one of her colleagues. The misunderstanding reflects the failure of the formerly estranged siblings to communicate and underscores the dysfunction inherent in the wider Buffay family. Phoebe's disappointment in her brother, this "last desperate chance to have a family," is reconciled by the end of this episode only to be reignited when the character of Frank Jr. makes another appearance several episodes later in "The One with the Hypnosis Tape" this time to introduce his fiancée, Alice.[443]

Frank's surprise incursion into the Central Perk coffee house where the friends have gathered foreshadows the disruption that he will bring to this episode (and to the series) as the young man makes a series of declarations which increasingly shock Phoebe. Frank's announcement that he is engaged is first met with overwhelming enthusiasm by his older sister while the others suggest that, at only eighteen, he may be a bit too young. Phoebe's excitement fades immediately, however, as Frank ushers in his bride to be, a much older woman, and introduces her as "Mrs. Knight." The raucous audience laughter accompanied by the shocked

[442] Season Two, Episode Twenty-One, "The One with the Bullies," and Season Three, Episode Five, "The One with Frank Jr."
[443] Season Three, Episode Eighteen, "The One with the Hypnosis Tape."

reactions of the others as well as Frank's unusually formal appellation for his future wife all underscore the unexpectedness of the older woman's presence, the incongruity created between the audience's (and the other characters') expectations and the surprise delivered by Frank. Further dialogue reveals that Frank and Alice "met" in her Home Economics class. The teacher-student relationship, the barely-adult status of Frank, the older-woman/younger-man dynamic (reinforced by Frank's repeated difficulty in referring to his own fiancée by her first name), and most especially, the lovebirds' propensity to engage in intense physical intimacy at unexpected moments and in the most public of places all code this couple as outrageously ridiculous, a characterization underscored by the audience's loud reactions as well as the reaction shots of the main characters' discomfort and puzzlement.

It is, however, Alice's statement that they "want to have kids right away" that elicits the most concern from the other characters. Frank's inarticulately casual response to Phoebe's interrogation about his own readiness to be a father is hardly reassuring: "How hard can it be, you know? I mean, you know, babies, you know, who doesn't want babies?" His next reflection however anchors his desire to become a father in his own story of paternal abandonment: "Besides, you know, I never had a dad around and, uh, now I always will, 'cause you know, it'll be me, right?" Alice's introductory scene ends by rhetorically asking the others, "when it comes to love, what does age matter?" before turning again to her very young fiancé and passionately kissing him once more.

Figure 74 Frank Jr. introduces his much older fiancée, Alice. Phoebe and her friends react strongly to the seemingly mismatched couple's public displays of affection and desire to have children "right away."

Friends thus introduces one of the series' most improbable couples into its narrative space. While this episode may have originally been conceived as an additional if particularly preposterous piece of the Buffay family puzzle, the addition of the much older, yet still-yearning-to-have-children character of Alice would prove to be prescient when Lisa Kudrow herself became pregnant a few months after this episode aired. The oddball couple was perfectly situated within the *Friends* universe, on hand to be put to good use when a solution was needed to accommodate the growing belly of the series' own oddball character.

IV.1.2. The Embarrassing Question[444]

The characters of Frank and Alice didn't make another appearance in *Friends* until the following fourth season in "The One with Phoebe's Uterus.[445]" The very title of this episode not only immediately signals the extraordinary content of this narrative's first installment but also problematizes one of the more salient aspects of this story arc. As the title suggests, the episode highlights one of the underlying questions running throughout these episodes: to what extent will Phoebe's character be reduced to the reproductive organ which is of most interest to Frank and Alice? Will she become a simple receptacle for the genetic material of her brother and sister-in-law as the series and as the character herself seem to suggest at times, or will she manage to maintain her subjectivity as the gestational mother to the developing humans she will be carrying within her body?

[444] The title of this episode, "The One with Phoebe's Uterus," is reimagined in French as, "Celui qui posait une question embarrassante."
[445] Season Four, Episode Eleven.

Just as Central Perk was the setting chosen to introduce Alice to the group of friends, so it is also used in the cold open of this episode, although this time the group is more intimate, including just Phoebe, Frank Jr. and Alice. Gone are Phoebe's doubts about the couple's appropriateness as she rejoices in the news that the two have just been wed. When Phoebe wonders what kind of gift she can offer the two, she gets a most unexpected request. After a moment of awkward silence, it is Alice who begins:

> **Alice**: We've been trying to get pregnant, uh, pretty much ever since we got engaged. Thought we'd get a jump on things. You know, no one's getting any younger! [Alice laughs uncomfortably, audience laughter]
> **Frank**: 'Cause the thing is, um, we're not able to, you know, uh, conceive, you know?
> **Alice**: And we've tried everything. We've seen a bunch of doctors.
> **Frank**: Yeah, and they say that our only chance to have a baby is if they take my sperm, her egg, and put it together in a dish and then put it into another girl. So, we were wondering if you could be the girl that we could put it into.

With this, *Friends* makes its first foray into evoking a couple's inability to procreate. While narratives concerning fertility and infertility have become more common in the years since *Friends'* original broadcast, these issues were less commonly represented on American television in the 1990s.[446] Indeed, openly and explicitly discussing difficulties in conceiving was unusual and these topics were often more likely to be coded as issues pertaining to an impatient woman's ticking biological clock. Thus, Alice's comments alluding to the fact that the couple has wasted no time in attempting to conceive because no one is getting any younger is to be understood as representative of the anxieties of a forty-something woman eager to have children and concerned that she has passed her reproductive prime.

In *Television and Postfeminist Housekeeping: No Time for Mother*, Elizabeth Nathanson discusses at length the representation of women's biological temporalities on television and argues,

> Television captures these "too late" mothers in stories about infertility that do not represent infertility as a genetic and thus unavoidable problem, but rather one that is attributed to poor lifestyle management. Television participates in circulating discourses about the experiences faced by "older" mothers by rendering their bodies

[446] On web pages which discuss infertility narratives on television, *Friends* is often the earliest television series cited (whether in praise or criticism), suggesting the significance of its impact on popular culture. See for example, "The Best Shows, Books, and Movies About Infertility," https://www.mothermag.com/movies-about-infertility/; "Infertility on TV: Who Gets it Right and Who Gets it Wrong," https://pregnantish.com/infertility-on-tv-who-gets-it-right-and-who-gets-it-wrong/; "Infertility in TV Shows, Movies + Pop Culture," https://www.fruitfulfertility.org/blog/939/infertility-in-tv-shows-movies-pop-culture/.

> as always already out of a woman's control because the lifestyle decisions they have made conflict with the innate temporality of their bodies. Such representations may speak to "real" infertility crises, but they also perpetuate anxieties that the ticking of women's biological clock should be cause for concern.[447]

Alice's "no one's getting any younger" delivered with self-conscious awareness and strained and exaggerated laughter reads as a self-administered reproach, an embarrassment of her own "past-primeness," her body's failure to accomplish its biological and maternal imperative.

Friends offers nothing more to its viewers of Alice's life and history aside from supplying her the relatively low-status profession of high school home economics teacher. Instead, this character's purpose and identity become defined by her "too lateness," her inability to gestate her own children, her status as an older mother whose body's innate temporality has gotten away from her. The character's presence then becomes part of a wider "discourse of 'urgency'[448]" in popular culture concerning female reproduction, a discourse that in the early 1990s Susan Faludi attributed to the conservative backlash against feminism. In attempting to rectify the situation, the couple has "tried everything," consulted with doctors, experts in the domain. But in spite of these efforts, they are unable to find a solution to their procreative difficulties, and while Frank Jr. makes a laudable effort to share the burden of his wife's infertility ("*we're* not able […] to conceive"), the circumstances in need of being rectified lie squarely within the damaged and disappointing older body of the wife. To manage this crisis of the too-old, no-longer-productive female body, Alice and her younger husband are left with no other choice but to call into action the body of a fresher, younger woman, one whose reproductive system is still able to perform its biological functions. Kudrow's body is doubly "in time," to produce a child for the actress and her husband and to create a compelling early televisual narrative of technologically facilitated alternatives to natural processes of procreation.

While the circumstances leading to this narrative of gestational surrogacy seem to conform to a rigid conception of appropriate fertility – a warning signal to women who may be tempted to tempt their own fertility's fate by waiting too long – Alice and Frank's joint declaration of being unable to conceive opens the door to one of the era's most extraordinary depictions of conception and pregnancy on television.

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[447] Elizabeth Nathanson, *Television and Postfeminist Housekeeping: No Time for Mother* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 139.
[448] *Ibid*. 135.

Figure 75 "No one's getting any younger!" Alice's infertility mea culpa.

IV.1.3. Interlude: Definition of Terms

Frank Jr.'s doltish and awkward description of the surrogacy process ("they take my sperm, her egg, and put it together in a dish and then put it into another girl") is crudely accurate and, in this, he may be considered a representative for much of the American television viewing public at the close of the twentieth century for whom the specifics of such practices remained hazy. In fact, the process Frank and Alice describe is gestational surrogacy, a situation in which the woman carrying the fetus bears no direct genetic relation to the fetus itself (in contrast to traditional surrogacy as seen in Chapter Two with the case of Baby M who was genetically linked to the woman carrying her, Mary Beth Whitehead.) Gestational surrogacy is carried out through the use of specific assisted reproductive technologies (ART), namely in-vitro fertilization (IVF) in which male and female gametes are brought together in a laboratory to create a fertilized embryo which is then implanted directly into the uterus of the woman who has agreed to gestate them. These gametes may be collected from the intended parents, in which case the resulting child is biologically and genetically linked to those parents, or they may be taken from donor sources, in which case the child does not share the same genetic information as the parents.

In either case, the people seeking to become parents through this process are known as the intended parents while the woman whose body is to perform the gestating function is variously known as the surrogate gestator, the surrogate, or the gestational carrier. The accepted terminology makes no mention of a "surrogate mother" and this language suggests that a wholly new status has been created, one whose *legal standing*, notes feminist thinker Barbara Katz Rothman, is clear

("'surrogate gestators are not legal mothers[449]") even if its *social status* remains murky. Indeed, Katz Rothman writes that surrogacy forces us "to confront the question of what makes a woman a mother. Is it the egg, or is it the pregnancy?[450]" The vocabulary used throughout the process is revealing. The "parents" of "intended parents" leans into the easy familiarity and known entity of the status of *parent*. Conversely, the various terms used to describe the other party, the very person providing the vital space and bodily resources necessary to bring into being the new human, systematically deny that person any such status. Instead, they become *gestators* and *carriers*, words whose particulier resonance connotes mechanization and dehumanization. The emphasis is thereby put on a specific function, reducing the possibility of a deeper, more profound social role. The following description of a gestational carrier from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Reproductive Health is illuminating:

> Women with ovaries but no uterus may be able to use a gestational carrier. This may also be an option for women who shouldn't become pregnant because of a serious health problem. In this case, a woman uses her own egg. It is fertilized by her partner's sperm and the embryo is placed inside the carrier's uterus.[451]

In this definition, not only is the carrier clearly not considered a mother, it is uncertain whether or not she is a woman, or even a human being. Indeed, the carrier is to be "used" by the "woman" who, along with "her partner" (here, a man), is in need of help. The carrier is merely a useful vessel by which one may get the baby one would like to have. The only hint that the carrier has any humanity is its uterus. Hence the title of this opening episode, "The One with Phoebe's Uterus" may be understood as revealing the creative conception behind the role Phoebe's character plays in this process in which she puts her own uterus to use for the benefit of the intended parents. In a role which is both all-encompassing and radically limited, Phoebe will be everything to the infertile couple. She will carry and bear the children they so strongly desire, their genetic heritage which will outlast them and be their legacy. At the same time, she will be reduced to almost nothing, a nonentity, a temporarily useful organ with no meaningful or lasting social status. The outrageously humorous situation of the teenage brother and his middle-aged wife requesting the sister to carry their offspring is the vehicle by which *Friends* proceeds to explore these most complex and

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[449] Barbara Katz Rothman, *Recreating Motherhood: Ideology and Technology in a Patriarchal Soci*ety, (New York: Norton, 2000), 162-163.
[450] *Ibid*., 162.
[451] "What are the different types of assisted reproductive technology (ART)?" https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/infertility/index.htm

nuanced issues and the character of Phoebe, her place in this narrative as well as her reactions throughout the process, will enable the sitcom to walk a fine and tenuous line as it mediates this complex and potentially contentious ideological content.

IV.I.4. "The Greatest Gift": Phoebe's Decision

If "The One with Phoebe's Uterus" begins with an embarrassing question, the rest of the episode details Phoebe's decision-making process and, critically, serves to anchor this surrogacy narrative within a specific moral and ethical framework of altruism and selflessness. When Frank Jr. wonders if Phoebe could be the girl he and his wife put their unified egg and sperm into, Phoebe is caught off guard. She had been thinking of offering them a very different sort of container, a gravy boat.[452]

However, by the time the episode picks up after the opening sequence and the first commercial break, Phoebe seems enthused by the idea. Entering Monica's apartment and finding the other five characters present, she announces the news to her gathered friends: "Hey! Guess what? Frank Jr. and Alice got married! *And* they're going to have a baby! *And*, and they want me to grow it for them in my uterus." The assembled group's successive reactions of excitement crescendo until they understand what is being asked of Phoebe.

[452] The echo here with Rachel's description from the pilot episode of being more attracted to "a beautiful Limoges gravy boat" than to her own fiancé is intriguing.

Figure 76 The friends react to the news that Frank and Alice are married, are going to have a baby and have asked Phoebe to be the surrogate, respectively.

As if to clarify any doubts for those viewers who may still be foggy on the details, for whom the nuance between gestational and traditional surrogacy may not yet be clear, it falls to Joey to ask the titillating question: "You're really thinking of having sex with your brother?" Phoebe's character, imbued with the same pedagogical role Frank Jr. played in the cold open, once again clarifies the process: "They want me to be the surrogate. It's her egg and his sperm, and I'm – I'm just the oven. It's totally their bun." Phoebe's appropriation of the colloquial expression denoting pregnancy, "a bun in the oven," underscores from the start the very different conditions in which this particular gestation will take place and suggests that language itself as well as its usage will need to be changed and modified in order to accommodate the newness of the situation. It also foreshadows the character's upcoming struggle for subjectivity in a process which will tend to objectify her ("I'm just the oven.")

The rest of this scene offers a rapid yet nuanced and sensitive examination of the issues at hand. The discursive space set up by the sitcom enables the characters to hash out some of the advantages and disadvantages of the surrogacy question. As illustrated by the images, Phoebe's friends appear shocked by the proposal. Ross's "Oh my, God!" and Monica's "Are you serious?" demonstrate this disbelief and interrogation. Thanks to Phoebe's characterization as the oddball

eccentric, the reactions of these two level-headed and serious members of the social unit embody a more conventional response to this request. Phoebe, however, is immediately enthralled by the idea, deeply moved by the profound demonstration of generosity that such a gesture would embody. "[Frank and Alice] said that I had to think about it first, but what is there to think of?" she asks. "I'm going to be giving somebody the greatest gift you can possibly give.[453]"

The friends remain circumspect, however. Rachel and Monica attempt to be conciliatory but seem unconvinced that Phoebe has the wherewithal to consider the implications of such a decision: "Honey, this really is an incredible thing to for them, but there are things to think about," suggests Rachel. Adds Monica, "Yeah, I mean, you'd be pregnant. I mean, *pregnant*." Monica's emphasis on the word "pregnant" reveals the extent to which the process is seen by the other characters as a fundamental life-changing, body-altering state, one from which the young woman will not come away unchanged. Monica holds up her hands on the repetition of the word as if to illustrate the girth of the pregnant belly and the heavy significance of the physical and psychological changes involved. The soft tones and kind words employed in this scene by Rachel and Monica suggest that the young women see their friend as innocently childlike, in need of patient guidance and kindly instruction rather than an adult agent capable of forming opinions and making decisions on her own.

Ross, who here represents the voice of scientific reason and speaks from experience as the only member of the group who has followed a pregnancy in close proximity, chimes in: "Pheebs, you're talking about putting your body through an awful lot. I mean, morning sickness, uh… labor, and it's all for somebody else." Phoebe remains unfazed by the interventions of her friends and repeatedly insists ("I *know*," "Yeah, what's your point?") that she is not only fully aware of what is being asked of her but that she has made her decision and cannot understand why the others would raise objections.

Rachel breaks in again to offer a personal perspective: "Wow. I don't know if I could ever do that. You know, I always figured the first time I had a baby, it would be with someone I love, and that baby was, you know…a keeper.[454]" Rachel's reflection, her mention of her eventual first

[453] The opposition between Phoebe's deep-seated ethical and moral spirituality and her friends' shallow materialism and immaturity is further underscored by Chandler's rejoinder: "You're going to give them a baby *and* a Sony PlayStation?"

[454] In hindsight, Rachel's musing that her first experience in childbearing would be with someone she loves is ironic. In season eight, Rachel's decision to not marry Ross, the father of her future child, was precisely because she did *not*

child as "a keeper" sits squarely in opposition to Phoebe's discourse of generosity and giving and it sets up a polarization between keeping/selfish and giving/generous which in turn highlights the ethical stance on which Phoebe's choice is based. It is possible to see Rachel's affiliation to the Jewish American Princess stereotype (which loosens as the series advances in seasons) at work in this scene. Indeed, the character, who rarely claims any religious affiliation whatsoever, is uncharacteristically wearing a star of David necklace in this episode. Additionally, language is once again renegotiated here as Rachel's use of "keeper" shifts the linguistic coverage of the word from referencing a suitable adult partner (or object) to be retained, to a baby, in the process transposing issues of choice and desirability onto the human child.

Rachel's "keeper" interjection seems to shake Phoebe who begins to realize that her friends may not be supportive of her choice.[455] As they attempt to reassure her, Rachel suggests that Phoebe speak to someone who has had a baby, "like your mom." Rachel is referencing the woman who gestated and who is biologically linked to Phoebe, her birth mother, Phoebe Abbot. However, Phoebe understands Rachel to mean the woman who raised her, Lily Buffay. The maternal confusion surrounding Phoebe's own birth story enables the character to misinterpret her friend's suggestion and offers the character the opportunity to make this intriguing statement: "My Mom never gave birth." At the heart of an episode with deals with the complexities of surrogacy and motherhood, this is quite a statement and seems to converge with the larger discourses surrounding surrogacy in *Friends*. The Mom is not, in fact, the woman in whose body the developing Phoebe gestated, but the woman who raised the young child. The Mom is the social actor who functions very differently from the "carrier" of fetuses. Gestating a fetus does not make of one a mother but raising a child does. The audience laughter suggests that the statement still comes across as incongruous and absurd and Phoebe immediately realizes her misinterpretation, adding, "Oh, but my *birth* Mom did." The opposition between "birth Mom"/Mom who "never gave birth" is made possible only by Phoebe's unique situation, and the *mise en abyme* operated by the series in the choice to have Phoebe act now as birth Mom but *not* Mom underlines the sitcom's commitment to

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love him, suggesting the extent to which the character was the subject of significant evolution over the course of the series.

[455] The selfishness of Rachel's character is once more underscored during the closing segment of this episode as Rachel and Monica sit together in their kitchen. The camera taking in both women, Monica asks Rachel if she would be a surrogate if Monica were to ask her to do so. "Oh, Mon, sure!" is Rachel's answer. After a pause, the camera shifts solely to Rachel who adds suspiciously, "You're not asking me, are you?" Rachel's generosity, compared to Phoebe's which has been highlighted throughout the episode, is conditioned then on *not* being asked a favor, negating her own words and pushing the two women further apart in the hierarchy of altruism that this episode brings to light.

confronting complex social questions as well as its continued interrogation of the role of the maternal figure.

Phoebe's biological mother (played by Terri Garr) has a similar if more explicit opinion than the other friends. After greeting the daughter she gave up to another woman, Phoebe Abbott tells the younger woman, "I really don't think it's a very good idea, Phoebe […] Because you'd be giving up a baby. And I really don't… I don't know if there's anything that I could say that could make you understand the pain of giving up a baby…" With this the older woman hands the younger Phoebe a puppy as a sort of test. Telling Phoebe she can only keep the dog for three days, she explains,

> I realize that I don't have any right to start getting all parenty on you and everything now but, um […] I mean, I know what I'm talking about. I gave up two babies and I only wish that I had someone there who had given up babies that could have told me how terrible it is to give up babies. I just think that it would be something that you would regret every single day for the rest of your life. So, however hard it is for you to give up this puppy, it would be, like, a million times harder to give up a child.

Phoebe Abbott's puppy experiment is meant to teach the younger woman a lesson. By approximating the pain of giving away a baby, Abbott hopes her potential maternal avatar will avoid the same decision she herself made thirty years earlier, one which, the sitcom makes clear, she has lived to regret for the rest of her life. While this scene fits into the previously discussed themes relating to the bad mom/negative maternal figure discourse endemic to this sitcom, that same theme is here put to use in this recycling of maternal narratives.

The younger Phoebe does indeed grow attached to the puppy as the episode continues and she begins to doubt her ability to give it back in three days' time as this test of will stipulates. Sitting with Rachel and Monica at the coffee shop, Phoebe is so distraught at the idea of returning the dog that her two close friends sharing empathically in her pain are near tears (Rachel claims it's like watching *Sophie's Choice*[456]). On the verge of concession ("I can't do this. My mom was

[456] This 1982 Alan J. Pakula film adaptation of William Styron's 1979 novel of the same name depicts the story of a Brooklyn love triangle in the 1940s. The film's ultimate reveal, the choice of the title, becomes apparent at the end of the narrative through a flashback to Auschwitz in Nazi-occupied Poland. Sophie, a Polish Catholic interned in the camp, is the mother of two young children who is made to choose which of her children will die by gassing and which will be sent to a children's camp. The film's "choice" flashback shows the distraught young mother ultimately making the decision to have her daughter sent away when the German officer threatens to condemn both her son and her daughter. The incongruous allusion to this dramatic film within the sitcom's diegetic sphere thus serves as a metonym for the specifically maternal nature of the ethical dilemmas concerning motherhood, childbearing, children and choice.

right. If I can't give him up then there's no way I can give up a little baby"), Phoebe worries over Frank and Alice's reaction to her imminent refusal when the hopeful couple walks into the coffee shop. The two notice the puppy in Phoebe's lap and excitedly take it into their arms cooing and coddling the symbolic baby. Noticing their delight, Phoebe offers the puppy to the couple and seemingly simultaneously reconsiders her decision not to be their surrogate. To Monica and Rachel, she remarks: "I'm really ok with this, you know why? Because look at them, look at how happy they are. And I made that. So, I know it's going to be, like, a million times harder to give up a baby, but it's going to feel a million times better, right?" Turning to Frank and Alice, Phoebe announces, "I want to do this, I want to carry your baby." Alice is overwhelmed, Frank is speechless and the three adults hug as Rachel and Monica also stand up next to their friend symbolically showing their support for her decision.

Figure 77 Seeing Frank and Alice's reaction to the puppy convinces Phoebe she wants to be their surrogate. The couple is overwhelmed with joy by the news.

When Phoebe Abbot subsequently enters the café and seems disappointed to learn of Phoebe's decision, Phoebe explains: "You and I are totally different people, though, and this is a totally different situation. And I know that I am not going to regret this." Ironically, Phoebe demonstrates her independence from the birth mother who has just come back into her life by deciding to embark on a decidedly similar journey of gestation and childbirth. As Phoebe points

out, the older woman's dramatic warning is unnecessary for two reasons. Firstly, the situation is "totally different." Phoebe Abbott's earlier description of her desperate circumstances as a scared teenager surprised by an unplanned pregnancy and regretfully deciding to give up her twin daughters bears little recognition indeed to the very conscious and premediated decision of an adult woman to become artificially inseminated for the purpose of gestating a fetus for an infertile couple. Secondly and perhaps more significantly Phoebe Buffay and Phoebe Abbott are two "totally different people." Indeed, Abbot's decision to give up her own babies is presented by the sitcom as one of immature self-interest in the first episode of this season: facing the wrath of the angry daughter, Abbott herself says, "I was stupid and selfish." In stark contrast, Buffay's decision to "give up babies" by becoming Frank and Alice's surrogate is framed as one of profound altruism. After seeing how happy the prospective parents are after being given the puppy, Phoebe looks forward to feeling a "million times better" after giving them the gift of a child.

Again, the language used is telling. In an emotional scene from the first episode of this season, Phoebe refers to her birth mother as a "big, fat abandoner." But this younger Phoebe will not be abandoning the babies, she will be *giving* babies to a needy and deserving loving couple. This gestational use of her body will not be the result of an embarrassing teenage mistake but a carefully considered (because debated over for an entire episode) choice, freely agreed to. Throughout this episode, the other characters have tested Phoebe, have helped her and the viewing public deliberate the pros and cons of Frank and Alice's unusual request, and, in spite of wavering in the face of her mother's puppy experiment, she has remained consistent in her desire to bring joy to her brother and his wife, the couple who so desperately desire to have a child together. This choice then is constructed by the sitcom as one of generosity and service to those in need of what she has to offer: a body capable of carrying a fetus to term.[457] Indeed even before her decision is officially reached, Phoebe already minimizes her own role in the process, reducing and objectifying herself as "the oven" for the couple's "bun."

The framing of this act of surrogacy as a gift of pure kindness and generosity is of great import. While it corresponds to the deeply humanistic, moral, and karmically-infused character of the idiosyncratic Phoebe, it also minimizes the sitcom's exposure to an unsavory association with the commercialization of human reproduction and the commodification of fertile female bodies,

[457] That gestational carriers in general must have already successfully given birth to a previous child is one of the inaccuracies that the sitcom makes with this narrative.

major critiques of this process particularly on the part of feminists and ethicists. No mention of any exchange of money for the use of the young woman's fertile body is ever made, aside from the costs of in-vitro fertilization. Phoebe is not paid for her surrogacy work. She never asks for money and the couple never offer her any. This is an agreement of pure benevolence between a brother in need and his generous sister and also helps explain why Kudrow's pregnancy was integrated in this specific manner; having the character perform this act for strangers would have been more difficult to explain as altruistic.

In her 1989 text reissued in 2000, *Recreating Motherhood,* Barbara Katz Rothman theorizes contemporary American motherhood as resting "on three deeply rooted ideologies that shape what we see and what we experience: the ideology of patriarchy, the ideology of technology and the ideology of capitalism." These ideologies, she acknowledges, cannot really be understood separately because they are the "strands of a tightly wound braid.[458]" Taken together, they inform the scholar's thinking on the question of surrogacy and their implications illuminate *Friends*' representation of surrogacy on the small screen in important ways. To understand how a patriarchal system informs the issue of surrogacy, Katz Rothman offers this thought experiment:

> We have a technology that takes Susan's egg and puts it in Mary's body. And so we ask, who is the mother? Who is the surrogate? Is Mary substituting for Susan's body, growing Susan's baby for Susan? Or is Susan's egg substituting for Mary's growing into Mary's baby in Mary's body? Our answer depends on where we stand when we ask the question. Right now we use that technology two different ways. John is the father, and if he is married to Susan, then Susan is the mother and Mary is the "surrogate gestator." If John is married to Mary though, then Mary is the mother and Susan is the "egg-donor." Who is socially recognized as the mother of the child? The woman married to the father.[459]

In *Friends*, as both Frank and Phoebe explain to the audience, Alice's egg and Frank's sperm, united, are put into Phoebe's body. But Phoebe is clearly not married to Frank. The incest taboo is alive and well, and while it is alluded to on several occasions throughout this narrative arc (Frank's "my sister's gonna have my baby" is one of the most provocative jokes in the series' entire ten-year run), it is always laughed off within the safe space of the comic mode as hilarious, mildly disturbing, outlandish and above all plainly incongruent with conventional norms of familial propriety. Bringing up the incest taboo cheekily titillates while upholding heteronormative

[458] Katz Rothman, 13.
[459] *Ibid*., 24-25.

standards of motherhood under patriarchy. Phoebe is not the mother of Frank's child, as his half-sister she *cannot* be. Thus, any potential ethical confusion over the true mother of the progeny is effectively cleared away: Phoebe is emphatically *not* the mother of the babies growing inside her, which safely belong to Frank (and Alice). This story then serves, in fundamental ways, the cultural obsession with allocating just one mother, one set of parents, to each child.

Figure 78 A positive pregnancy test means "My sister's gonna have my baby!"

Within the ideology of capitalism, while individual babies may not be directly sold to infertile couples (this remains beyond the ethical pale), the parts and services needed to produce those babies can be. Yet the controversy surrounding the Whitehead/Stern case[460] revealed to the United States the potentially traumatizing effects of selling female reproductive services to infertile couples and, by maintaining a strict discourse of generosity and gift-giving, *Friends* avoids the appearance of a cold and inhuman contractualization of labor, a simple exchange of goods, of the commodification of human beings. In relying on a discourse of generosity however, the sitcom ends up objectifying Phoebe's body as a simple site of services rendered. When Phoebe becomes "just the oven," she minimizes not only the work her body does but, as the gestation of a child necessarily implicates, the work she does as a thinking, rational human being as well. Katz Rothman argues, "The ideology of technology dehumanizes people by encouraging a mechanical self-image – people viewing themselves as machines." When Phoebe refers to herself as an oven, she is literally reducing herself to this level of machine, in this case, an electric device in which to keep the growing fetus warm.

Friends could have maintained this narrative in the diegetic background and concluded it quietly with an off-screen birth, however, in choosing to repeatedly highlight this narrative arc of surrogate pregnancy over a series of several episodes culminating in a grandiose hundredth episode celebration with the birth of Frank and Alice's triplets, the sitcom creates an *ongoing* narrative

[460] See Chapter Two and later in this chapter.

space offering a continual exploration of some of the deeper complexities of the surrogate's situation even while offering what appears to be a relatively superficial interpretation of this uncommon situation. As such, the character is repeatedly accorded space to contest the object status which this narrative seems to attribute to her.

IV.1.5. The Complexities of Surrogacy: Negotiating Phoebe's Status as 'Gestational Carrier'

The twelfth episode of *Friends'* fourth season is generally considered to be one of the sitcom's finest, most notably thanks to the extraordinary level of intimacy it achieves.[461] This intimacy occurs on two levels. Eschewing the typical three-stranded narrative structure in each episode, "The One with the Embryos" presents only two, allowing the sitcom to more effectively focus on and delve more deeply into both. In the first, Monica and Rachel lose a bet to Joey and Chandler during a game which delves into the intimate details of each character as well as their pasts. The second illustrates with astonishing, if not always accurate, detail the surrogacy process upon which Phoebe has agreed to embark in the previous episode. Beginning with a focus on Phoebe at the fertility doctor's office and finishing with the dramatic and joyous announcement that she is pregnant, the scenes which compose this episode's narrative arc are rich with significance. By accompanying the character through this key passage in her surrogacy story, the sitcom manages to offer the viewer a (highly fictionalized and comic) perspective of the figure who in many other circumstances is simply noted as the "carrier." Through Phoebe, *Friends* rehumanizes this otherwise incidental figure whose importance lies mainly in her ability to procreate.

It is essential to keep in mind that this episode (like the wider narrative arc to which it belongs) is in no way an *accurate* portrayal of the processes involved in surrogate pregnancy as it clearly glosses over some of the more time-consuming, invasive, costly and complex difficulties of the in-vitro fertilization and embryonic implantation procedures (although in even attempting to depict them on screen, this episode adopts something of a pedagogical position for the *Friends*

[461] See for example *The Hollywood Reporter*, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/friends-25-best-episodes-ranked-1241149; *Rolling Stone*, https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-lists/25-best-friends-episodes-883737/1-one-where-ross-finds-out-season-2-episode-7-883788/ and *Ranker*, https://www.ranker.com/list/best-friends-episodes/ranker-tv; *Mashable*, https://mashable.com/article/best-friends-episodes/?europe=true; *Le Point*, https://www.lepoint.fr/pop-culture/friends-celui-qui-classe-les-236-episodes-du-pire-au-meilleur-22-09-2019-2337069_2920.php#. These sources rank this episode in first, second, fifth and seventh place, respectively.

audience). Rather, the episode demonstrates a commitment to giving the character a distinctive voice throughout the process. The "intended parents," Frank and Alice, are present throughout, but the focus remains on the "carrier," Phoebe, in some extraordinary ways.

Several moments in this episode tend to remind the viewer that Phoebe's ability to maintain her own subjectivity and identity as a human and as a woman through this inherently objectifying process may be in peril. The first scene in the doctor's examination room opens with a closeup of a sonogram screen on which Phoebe's empty uterus appears. The attention of the viewer is thus immediately tuned to Phoebe's status as (empty) vessel waiting to be filled with the precious cargo she is to carry. Addressing Phoebe sitting in a medical gown on an examination table in the middle of the set, the doctor remarks that her uterus is "ready for implantation" and Phoebe herself seems to be subsumed by her role as carrier, reducing her own subjectivity to the state of her all-important reproductive organ: "I knew it, I felt really thick this morning." Frank and Alice are ecstatic, and Frank urges the doctor to "go get the eggs and put 'em in there" as he casually gestures to the character's abdominal area. However, the atmosphere changes slightly and a struggle over the young woman's very humanity ensues when Phoebe learns that she will be implanted with not one but five embryos. The character is taken aback and explicitly draws attention to this treatment of her body and herself as something other than human by asking ironically, "Five? Okay, where am I giving birth, in a hospital or under the stairs?" In comparing her eventual childbirth experience to a female cat or dog giving birth to a litter of baby animals, Phoebe not only highlights the inherent inhumanity of her position as gestator but, using sarcasm, also reclaims her dignity and simultaneously questions the practice of implanting a significant number of potential human beings inside her own body. The doctor's explanation concerning the fate of the embryos both reassures and causes alarm. Learning that all five embryos have very little chance of developing is a comfort, but the dramatically poor odds of success are a source of stress. Any ethical question related to the creation of excessive embryos to increase the odds of pregnancy is ignored, and the focus shifts quickly to the pressure put on Phoebe and her body to perform this high-stakes reproductive function. This shift also creates the opportunity to reposition Phoebe once more as an objectified carrier.

Figure 79 The inside of Phoebe's uterus is the first focus of this scene.

This discussion of the chances of success resonates with Frank who, in his role as simpleton (or perhaps more accurately in his role as stand-in for the average American television viewer who knows little of the complexities of this procedure), intervenes to ask: "What are the odds if we like, stuff two hundred of them [embryos] in there." The studio audience laughter frames the question as obviously ridiculous and Alice, positioning herself as Frank's teacher (or mother) gently reproaches him: "Sweetie, now, she's a woman, not a gumball machine." The lighthearted and amusing retort masks but simultaneously brings to light a deeper and more troubling reality. Alice's remark starkly reveals one of the potential ethical threats brought about by the convergence of assisted reproductive technologies, infertility and the desire to have children, as well as the availability of viable female bodies to replace those that cannot perform reproductive work. The "working" female body is reduced in this case, not "just" to an animal state (as in the example of giving birth under the stairs pointed to), but even more gravely, to that of a simple mechanical object whose sole purpose is to be filled and emptied at the whim of the intended paternal figure. Alice's humorous reminder is a warning against this view of women as containers and restores to Phoebe her bodily autonomy in a sign of female solidarity.

Thanks perhaps to this show of support from Alice, Phoebe relaxes into the idea and offers to "do this as many times as it takes." It is here that Alice and Frank both explain the overwhelming financial cost of the procedure and add to the stakes of the gamble by stating that they can only attempt the implantation process one time because they will be using all of their savings to do so.

"Whoa!" Phoebe responds, "That's a lot of pressure on me and my uterus." Phoebe has finally learned the true stakes of the situation she has agreed to participate in, and she reports to her friends later in the episode that she is "freaked." This surprising and unpleasant news appears to once again force the young woman into assuming an objectifying perspective of herself and her

body: “It turns out the odds are like, really sucky. And this is Frank and Alice’s, like, only shot. They are like literally putting all their eggs in my basket.” This back and forth movement between assertions of bodily autonomy and humanity on the one hand and objectifying vocabulary and imagery on the other continue throughout the episode and the continuous vacillation from the one to the other suggests the underlying uncertainties and anxieties raised by the sitcom’s choice to assign the character this as-yet poorly understood role of surrogate.

Figure 80 Phoebe feels the pressure from Frank and Alice when she learns in the fertility clinic that her body has only one chance to “win” this bet, and later in Monica’s apartment when they stop by and ask if she is ready to take a pregnancy test.

IV.1.6. Phoebe and the Embryos: The Beginnings of a Maternal Relationship

This uncertain fluctuation in representation is at work in one of the episode’s (in one of the series’) most extraordinary scenes in which Phoebe introduces herself to the embryos. As in the previous scene with its close up of Phoebe’s uterus, the iconography of this passage at first diminishes the role of Phoebe, seemingly relegating her once again to a role of simple vessel only to widen its scope, thereby ultimately forcing a consideration of the woman herself. The scene opens on a close up of a single petri dish sitting on a table in the same examination room in which the previous scene took place. Behind the table is the medical gown-cloaked torso of Phoebe. As the camera pans out slowly, Phoebe’s shoulders, neck and head come into view. The woman leans into the table and begins to speak:

> Hello, teeny embryos. Well I’m Phoebe Buffay, hi. I’m hoping to be your uterus for the next nine months. You should know that we’re doing this for Frank and Alice, who you know, you’ve been there. You know, they want you so much. So, when you guys get in there, really grab on. Ok, and I promise that I’ll keep you safe and warm until, you know, you’re ready to have them take you home. So… Okay. Oh, and also, next time you see me. If I’m screaming, don’t worry. That’s what’s supposed to happen […] Good luck!

The initial focus on the small petri dish as well as the precious genetic material waiting patiently inside would seem once again to undermine the woman's role in this modern process of pregnancy creation. Alternatively, Phoebe's one-sided discussion with the petri dish may be understood as the character's precocious and obsessive compliancy to the ideology of intensive mothering as theorized by Sharon Hays which posits that mothers must expend enormous amounts of time and psychological energy supporting their children and ensuring their own psychological well-being. In this reading, the reassurance and encouragement that Phoebe offers the as-yet unimplanted embryos pushes this expenditure of time and energy to its most ridiculous and hilarious limits and depending on one's reading, Phoebe is either an incredibly supportive and appropriate maternal figure, or this scene points out the utter inanity of the rigid tenets of good mothering ideology.

In any case, it is intriguing that the sitcom should choose to dwell on this moment which once again underscores the underlying carnivalesque atmosphere of the entire narrative arc.[462] Phoebe's self-introduction to the embryos that will imminently be implanted in her body takes place in the privacy of the examination room and in the absence of either of the intended parents, as well as any medical staff. The camera's close look at Phoebe speaking to the petri dish underscores the proximity of the woman to the embryos she will carry. In this sense, the scene illustrates the initial creation of an intimate maternal space within the wider, often dehumanizing framework of gestational surrogacy in which maternal status seems to be so ambiguous. Indeed, Phoebe speaks to the embryos which, unable to answer her, remain silent, "listening" to what the young woman has to say to them. This exercise in communication (speaking/listening) in which the gestational carrier introduces herself, explains the embryos' origin story to them and outlines their near future while they listen attentively is, in fact, a fundamental insertion of humanity and care into an otherwise cold and exclusively scientific process in which humans (women) are treated as reproductive objects and babies are treated as prized possessions. This "conversation" also presumes, of course, the innate humanity of the embryos as sentient beings, conferring on these clusters of cells the status of living human beings and evoking the hotly contested ongoing cultural, religious, political and philosophical debates over the exact beginning of human life.

[462] Austerlitz recounts its origin. "Writer Jill Condon was in the shower one morning, pondering the story, when she had a brainstorm: Phoebe should talk to the embryos. She should hold the petri dish with the embryos and implore them to hold on for her brother and sister-in-law's sake. There was never any guarantee, on a show as team-written as *Friends*, that any idea would make it into the script, but as soon as Condon thought of it, she was confident that, unless she was wildly wrong, this moment was likely to make it onto television. It was just what the episode needed. Sure enough, when Condon pitched the idea to the room, David Crane responded enthusiastically." Austerlitz, 2019, 173.

Phoebe's chat, while seemingly ridiculous and unrealistic is in fact a highly symbolic moment, the beginnings of communication between nurturer and nurturee, a nascent interpersonal interaction which underscores one of Katz Rothman's fundamental critiques of the surrogacy process. Arguing for a conception of pregnancy as a relationship, the author reminds us,

> When we think of the newborn child as having just gotten here, we ignore where it has come from. But children do not enter the world from outside the world; they do not come from Mars or out of a black box. By the time they are born they have been here, in this world, for nine months: not as children, not as people, but as part of their mothers' bodies. A baby enters the world already in a relationship, a physical, social and emotional relationship with the woman in whose body it was nurtured.[463]

In conceiving of, staging and filming this conversation within the context of the surrogacy narrative, *Friends* opens up this process and makes it visible to the naked eye, exteriorizing a development which under conventional circumstances remains hidden within the most intimate spaces of the female body. The bringing into the light – albeit the glaring fluorescent light of a fictional fertility clinic – of this meeting between surrogate and embryo only illustrates, in a definitive place and at a definitive moment, what takes place in the invisible spaces and instants of every pregnancy, no matter the emotional resonance; that is, the encounter of two distinct beings, one (or in this case, several) dependent on the other. In this, *Friends* serves as a microscope, offering an intensely close-up view of the social relationship underway between female body and embryonic human being. In doing so, it ultimately negates and escapes the technical and dehumanizing lexicon of surrogacy. The scene depicts Phoebe's establishment of the social relationship that she will maintain with the children she will carry, even before the establishment of the physical relationship. "A surrogate is a substitute," writes Katz Rothman. She continues,

> In some human relations, we can accept no substitutes. Any pregnant woman is the mother of the child she bears. *Her gestational relationship establishes her motherhood*. We will not accept the idea that we can look at a woman, heavy with child, and say the child is not hers. The fetus is part of the woman's body, regardless of the source of the egg and sperm. Biological motherhood is not a service, not a commodity, but a relationship. Motherhood can remain obvious. If a woman is carrying a baby, then it is her baby and she is its mother. Of course it is true that a mother, any mother, can abdicate her motherhood, can give away a baby. But it is hers to give.[464] (Emphasis added)

[463] Katz Rothman, 57.
[464] *Ibid*., 167.

The *relationality* between the future maternal figure and the embryos that this scene depicts can, in spite of its humor, be interpreted as unequivocally establishing the maternal status of Phoebe in the minds of both the character as well as the audience, both of whom may have heretofore struggled with any clear identification of her role. As the narrative progresses through time and over several episodes, the relationship that the character nurtures with the embryos is deepened and intensified just as the maternal status of the character is maintained and solidified.

Figure 81 The embryos, firstly depicted as magical genetic material free floating and disconnected from any other human.

Figure 82 As the camera pans out, Phoebe appears and introduces herself to the embryos. The social relationship is underway even before the embryos become part of Phoebe's physical body.

Figure 83 Phoebe promises to keep the embryos safe and warm. The touchingly humorous scene establishes the ultimate maternal status of the character even as she veers between an objective and subjective view of her role.

Four episodes after the "The One With the Embryos," Phoebe, now visibly pregnant, is distraught to learn that the pregnancy is giving this ardent vegetarian irresistible cravings for

meat.[465] The desire is so strong that the pregnant woman attempts to eat a sandwich which is already literally in the mouth of her friend Chandler. The scene then depicts the pregnant woman competing for meat with another person (Chandler's position as the weakest, most laughable, member of the group is significant here) and positions Phoebe as a desperate animal on the attack. If the image resonates symbolically as a carnivorous pregnant animal fighting for the necessary resources in a struggle to sustain the babies growing inside her and thereby manages to reposition Phoebe as the animal mother she resisted in the previous episode described, it also sends a subtle message that even though she is not the biological mother, she is somehow acting through some sort of animalistic "maternal instinct" thus lending credence to the notion that she is indeed a mother to the children she is carrying.

In her proclamation, "I can't help it! I need the meat. The baby needs the meat!" she both attests to the impact that the carrying of fetuses is having on her body and conflates for the first time her own needs with those of the baby. Phoebe and fetus(es) become one. Indeed, this scene is a vivid reminder of what Sarah Lachance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist, drawing on Kristeva, suggest in their introduction to *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Mothering*. Namely that in pregnancy there is

> a literal alienation of the woman from her own flesh. As her bodily integrity is undermined by the fetus, this challenges the mother's personal sense of unity. She is no longer alone in her body; her life is no longer individual. She cannot be simply identified with her own body, since there is another person within it. In the pregnant body – self and other (mother and fetus) coexist, sharing a split self.[466]

This is one example of Kristeva's *sujet en procès* and it is universal to every woman who has, in whatever circumstances, carried a gestating fetus within her body. In this, whether or not the gestational carrier (in this case Phoebe) continues the already months-long relationship with the baby after childbirth, that relationship will always have existed, the "carrier" will always have fulfilled, to a most vital extent, an authentic maternal role.

In carrying another being in her body, Phoebe's autonomous self begins to slip away and this betrayal of one of her most beloved principles (not eating meat) in order to meet the needs of the next generation growing in her own body once again evokes Hays's theorization of intensive

[465] Season Four, Episode Sixteen, "The One with the Fake Party."
[466] Sarah Lachance Adams and Caroline R. Lundquist, *Coming to Life: Philosophies of Pregnancy, Childbirth and Mothering* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 16.

mothering ideology. As such, not only is Phoebe literally becoming a mother, the character is becoming a *good*, socially appropriate mother, putting the desires of the future children ahead of her own. As if to confirm this, it is also in this episode that Phoebe feels the baby kick for the first time suggesting that, as the corporeal and physiological reality of her role sets in for the character, the psychological reality of the maternal relationship does as well.

IV.1.7. Phoebe's Motherhood is Born: Baby Showers and the Toll of Surrogacy

Further instances throughout this narrative arc confirm Phoebe's role as a veritable mother heavily invested in the future of the children she is gestating. When she learns she is carrying triplets, for example, she brainstorms new ways to make money in order to offset the financial burden the multiple births will represent for Frank and Alice, thus suggesting that the character feels she is under the same financial obligations as the biological parents.[467] When Alice suggests that Phoebe choose a name for one of the babies, the biological mother legitimizes the gestational mother's fundamental parental role in the process of creating new life.[468]

As the episodes progress and the pregnancy nears its end, the sitcom increasingly creates space for the character to voice the frustrations she feels with her progressively burdensome physiological state. This is most clearly made evident in "The One with the Worst Best Man Ever.[469]" In the episode's cold open, an exasperated and testy Phoebe is filmed leaving the bathroom in the Central Perk coffee shop to rejoin her friends on the couch. The advancing pregnancy not only forces her to urinate more frequently ("That's like the tenth time I've peed since I've been here.") it also sets her apart physically and situationally from the rest of the group, who are all present in this scene, forcing the character to regularly remove herself from the others so that she can attend to her body's pressing physiological needs.

Here, the pregnancy's toll on the character is made explicit: "I'm so sick of being pregnant," she proclaims wearily adding ruefully, "the only happiness I get is from a cup of coffee, which, of course, is decaf, because, 'Oh! I'm pregnant!'" Lost in this scene is any mention of Phoebe's generosity of spirit and the giving of the children as gifts, the aura and language which

[467] Season Four, Episode Seventeen, "The One with the Free Porn."
[468] Season Four, Episode Eighteen, "The One with Rachel's New Dress."
[469] Season Four, Episode Twenty-Two.

structured the early episodes of this narrative arc. Indeed, lost in this scene is any suggestion at all that the pregnancy is *not* Phoebe's. No reference to Frank and Alice is made in this moment, which belongs solely to the pregnant character, underscoring the impression that the babies she is carrying are hers and hers alone. While the final gag of this cold open is a version of the pregnant-woman-as-hormonal-cliché (Phoebe, in spite of the emotional tenor of her dialogue, asserts that she has not in fact been subject to mood swings), the narrative arc has progressively shifted the pregnancy from a mere physiological *function* which Phoebe simply *performs* for another couple to an all-encompassing phenomenon which overwhelms the body, mind, and spirit of the character, thoroughly coursing through her and encroaching on every aspect of her existence including her integration within her kinship group. The sitcom's emphasis on the character's subjective experience of the pregnancy she is living through her body again complicates any seemingly easy divisions that the conventional language framing surrogacy (gestational carrier v. intended mother) may imply and it clearly demonstrates to viewers that any woman living through the phenomenon of gestating a child can never be *only* an object, a gumball machine, an oven, a depository or vessel for somebody else's genetic material. The rest of this episode carries on with this logic of recomplexifying Phoebe's role as her well-intentioned friends make a misguided attempt to cheer the character up.

Upon learning that Joey is to organize a bachelor party for Ross on the verge of getting married, Rachel and Monica spontaneously suggest that they too will organize a party, a baby shower for Phoebe. That the idea for the shower originates only out of a spontaneous sense of competition with the male characters as opposed to a thoughtfully planned celebration for their pregnant friend foreshadows the dreadful turn the women's party will take; yet it is also indicative of the fact that the sitcom's other main characters have indeed begun to see Phoebe as *the* mother of the triplets gestating in her body. This point is made clear in a scene in which Monica arrives at her apartment and excitedly shows Rachel three infant outfits that she has bought. "Phoebe's gonna love dressing them in these!" fawns Monica as she smooths the small pink dress in her hands. It is Rachel who takes pause as the absurdity of Monica's purchases sinks in. Quietly and thoughtfully she reminds Monica, as well as the televisual audience who may also have lost sight of Phoebe's only temporary maternal status, "Huh... Except, uh, Phoebe's not going to be the one who gets to dress them." Monica, making the realization as well, gives a slight nod and adds, "because she's not going to get to keep the babies." The vocabulary is telling. It's not just that Phoebe will not *be*

dressing them or keeping them, it's that she won't *get* to do those things. Those actions of keeping and dressing babies, of nurturing, grooming and caring for the babies who are still, in this diegetic moment, part of her, connected to her and dependent on her, will, in the very near future be removed from the character's realm of agency. The women's double emphasis on Phoebe's not *getting* to do those things, those eminently maternal deeds, implies that this is not a mere neutral and objective arrangement of gestation followed by handing over babies. Instead, Phoebe will be actively *missing out* on those tasks, *deprived* of them thanks to her status of "carrier." It is this realization of the imminent and permanent removal of the babies from their friend's everyday life which leads Rachel to proclaim, "Oh my God! We are throwing the most depressing baby shower ever!"

Fischer and Gainer suggest that baby showers are "consumption venues distinguished both by their 'feminine nature' and their seeming role as a modern-day rite of passage.[470]" This ritual, which marks the passage of an expectant woman into motherhood, is traditionally organized by a female relative who is already a mother and attended by close female friends and family members. As we have seen in the previous chapter, during a traditional baby shower, the mother-to-be is given gifts (baby clothes, cribs, strollers, diapers) which are meant to help her in her new role as mother and offset the financial burden of becoming one for the first time. If, as Rachel proclaims, the party they are planning is the most "depressing baby shower ever," it is because the symbolic value of this ritual cannot be achieved. The traditional baby shower, in its celebration of the pregnant woman's move from non-mother to mother, configures pregnancy as a liminal space, an intermediate moment during which a fundamental and non-reversable transition in status and identity occurs. However, as Monica and Rachel both realize, no such transition will take place. As a "carrier," Phoebe's status from non-mother to mother will remain incomplete. *This* pregnancy is not a liminal space but one of stagnation. The other end of this pregnancy will indeed see a new mother, but it will not be Phoebe. In a very real way then, her incipient motherhood will be terminated, aborted as soon as she gives birth and must remit the children to their intended parents. Phoebe, to the eyes of the outer world, will remain a non-mother. A depressing baby shower indeed!

[470] Fischer and Gainer, (no page number). https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7460/volumes/v20/NA-20

Figure 84 Rachel and Monica recognize the incongruity of their gesture.

Friends, however, is not quite ready to dwell on the moral and emotional implications of this unnerving realization. Undeterred, Monica quickly suggests that they "give her all gifts that she can use after she's done being pregnant. Like, um, regular coffee, tequila!" Rachel concurs and adds that "somebody could get her those leather pants that she's always wanted." "She's gonna love that!" replies an enthusiastic Monica.[471]

The editing immediately cuts to a scene of the prophetic baby shower. Phoebe holds up the leather pants, outraged and uncomprehending. "What the hell is this? What, you actually thought it would make me feel better? To give me something I can't even use for another two months? This sucks! Ugh!" With this she violently stuffs the expensive gift back into its bag and asks angrily and sarcastically "Alright, what's my next present?" To audience laughter, the assembled women shake their heads and hide the other presents they have brought. Monica and Rachel have badly miscalculated. Phoebe is not enthused by the idea of gifts which are incoherent with her pregnant body's temporality, which require her to imagine herself and specifically her body in a near future, one in which she is no longer pregnant. Her outrage in this scene is again constructed as another humorous example of her pregnancy hormones and Phoebe's overall snippiness will continue to be mined for laughs in subsequent scenes. However, before the episode is over, the series will again make space available for a more nuanced and emotional examination of Phoebe's circumstances, contextualizing the young woman's behavior throughout the episode and ultimately creating an opportunity to envision a legitimate and humane role for this person who has lent her body to the service of a couple in need.

[471] That a long-standing desire for leather pants is entirely out of character for the vegetarian character did not seem to prevent the writers from using it as an example to speak to Phoebe's transition *back to* non-mother.

Figure 85 Phoebe hates her baby shower gift which obliges her to envision a future in which she is no longer pregnant.

The final scene of this episode's pregnancy storyline has Phoebe reclining on Monica and Rachel's couch after experiencing false labor. The pregnant woman is once again initially curt and sarcastic with her two female friends. Yet in this scene instead of conjuring up an elaborate baby shower under false pretenses for their friend, the two young women are attentive to Phoebe's needs: Rachel brings her ice water, Monica sits across from her and rubs her feet, both place themselves on Phoebe's level allowing for an intimate conversation between the three characters. The soothing space in Monica's comforting living room provides the setting in which Phoebe addresses for the first time and in the most explicit of ways her conflicting feelings about her experience. The first part of the exchange merits attention:

> **Monica**: How do you feel?
> **Phoebe**: Okay, I guess, I mean…I don't know, it's just… I guess, I know it's going to be over soon, so…
> **Rachel**: But, isn't that a good thing? I mean, you said you were sick of this.
> **Phoebe**: I know. It's just, you know, usually when you're done with the pregnant thing, then you know, you get to do the mom thing. I'm gonna be, you know, sitting around in my leather pants, drinking tequila. [Studio audience laughter]
> **Monica**: Some moms do that. [Studio audience laughter]
> **Phoebe**: Okay, that's even sadder. Look, I know, I know what I got myself into, you know? It's just that now that they're in me it's like… it's like I *know* them, you know, and, and... It's just not going to be easy when, you know, these little babies have to go away.[472]

This is the first time in this episode that the pregnant character is *not* depicted as irrational, hormonal and a source of humor. This scene, devoid of music and limited in its overt appeal to audience laughter, offers the sitcom's version of a quiet space of reflection in which the character

[472] "When these little babies have to go away." The phrasing is significant. Phoebe is no longer giving the babies to Frank and Alice, rather, some outside force has made it necessary for them to be separated and suggests that the character, in spite knowing what she got herself into, is in some way disowning her own role as active agent in the process. Interesting enough to be placed in the main text.

can explore for herself, for her co-characters, as well as for the studio and wider television audience, the emotional impact of the gestational experience she is in the process of completing.

Indeed, the scene provides the viewer with a reinterpretation of what has just come before. No longer is Phoebe's behavior the irrational result of hormones gone wild. It is, in fact, the very *rational* reaction to the imminent shutting-down of a process in which her entire physical, emotional, and psychological self has been brought into action to bring forth three new human beings all for the benefit of a third party. Her regret at not being able to "do the mom thing," the logical next step to her own "pregnant thing" in spite of "knowing what [she] got [herself] into" speaks to the unavoidable social relationship at work between the gestational mother and the fetuses and points to the reality that the surrogacy process cannot simply divide motherhood into component parts. Phoebe "knows" the children in her body in a way Alice never will. This is a specific epistemology accrued from the days and nights spent sharing a single corporal entity as well as food, oxygen, light, sound, movement, hormones, and emotions.

This is not to depreciate the future motherhood of Alice whose own relationship with her children will (presumably, since the viewer never actually sees Alice in action) flourish when she begins to care for them, investing in a new set of relationships. Nor is it to suggest that Phoebe is in some way the *real* or authentic mother of the triplets because she gestated them. It is to suggest that her role cannot be reduced to that of "carrier." The character has, throughout a number of episodes, fought back against this minimization of her maternal role.

Phoebe makes it plain to her friends and to the audience the difficulty with which she anticipates the next phase of the process, the separation of "these little babies" from her body and from her whole self. In so doing she confirms Katz Rothman's assertion that, through pregnancy, motherhood becomes "the physical embodiment of connectedness."

> We have in every pregnant woman the living proof that individuals do not enter the world as autonomous, atomistic, isolated beings, but begin socially, begin connected. And we have in every pregnant woman a walking contradiction to the segmentation of our lives: pregnancy does not permit it. In pregnancy the private self, the sexual, familial self, announces itself wherever we go. Motherhood is the embodied challenge to liberal philosophy.[473]

Phoebe's overt and explicated sadness at the upcoming separation becomes itself a criticism of the surrogacy process which, in its commercial form, degrades and devalues human connection by

[473] Katz Rothman, 35.

putting a price, ascribing a monetary measure of value, on the processes and components of what it means to be human. As we have suggested, in framing the Phoebe/Alice/Frank surrogacy as a gift, *Friends* adroitly avoids the ethical questions related to the monetary exchange involved in surrogacy. The sitcom's treatment of this arrangement, however, does nonetheless shed light on the emotional impact from the perspective of the otherwise objectified, and rarely heard from "carrier."

Figure 86 Phoebe opens up about being sad at the imminent separation.

As the scene continues, Monica and Rachel help console their friend and negotiate a new social role for her, one which may no longer be recognized by the wider society as being legitimately maternal, but that may, as Monica suggests, be "even better." Because of Phoebe's relationship to Frank, she will maintain a biological link to the children she is carrying. Phoebe is at first unconvinced that this more distant role may in fact be better, but Rachel insists. "Really, you're not going to be the one worrying about saving for college or yelling at them when they're bad, you know, or deciding to put them on Ritalin when they just won't calm down." What Rachel

is proposing is a less proximally affective relationship with the offspring, but one devoid of the more cumbersome parental responsibilities. “You just get to be cool Aunt Phoebe,” she adds. The prospective of being the cool aunt cheers Phoebe up who seems to be comforted by this, more limited, role. While the solution offered may seem simplistic (in keeping with much of the rest of the narrative), it does offer, if only briefly, a potential alternative to the dictate that children must have only one official maternal figure, a loosening of the one mother for one child norm. While this episode ends with a seemingly pat resolution to the problem of Phoebe’s ambiguous maternal status, the character will make one final and spectacular effort at contesting her carrier status in the episode which marks the culmination of this narrative arc.

IV.1.8. “I Want to Keep One”: Phoebe Gives Birth

On Thursday October 8, 1998, “The One Hundredth” aired on NBC. This third episode of the fifth season celebrates a symbolic television milestone: the production and broadcast of the series’ one hundredth episode. The producers of *Friends* felt it was the perfect occasion to mark the climax of the surrogacy storyline with the birth of the triplets, and the importance accorded to this episode is demonstrated by the fact that the original production team was reenlisted to take part in its creation. Marta Kauffman and David Crane are given writing credit, while Kevin Bright produced it. In one of the clearest demonstrations of the serializing effect that pregnancy can have in a usually episodic sitcom, the storyline of “The One Hundredth” actually begins at the end the previous week’s episode, “The One With All the Kissing.” Just as the friends are about to head off to celebrate a weekend away together and with one minute left in the episode, Phoebe’s water breaks. The final, cliffhanging shot (before the closing credits scene) shows the six adults walking out through the open door of Monica and Rachel’s apartment. The cold opening of the subsequent episode picks up where this story leaves off: Joey, Ross, Rachel and Phoebe walk into the hospital together and Phoebe announces, “I’m Phoebe Buffay, and I have babies coming out of me.”

The episode initially progresses rather conventionally with Phoebe’s labor intensifying gradually. However, a scene near the ten-minute mark interrupts what may have otherwise been a routine sitcom childbirth episode, albeit one depicting a carnivalesque pregnancy scenario. As Rachel congratulates Phoebe for the “terrific thing” she is doing in “having these babies for Frank and Alice,” the laboring character asks to confide “a little secret.” “I want to keep one,” Phoebe

teasingly reveals. Her tone is light, almost flirtatious. Audience laughter is heard immediately suggesting the impropriety of the pregnant woman's aspiration as well, perhaps, as a recognition of Phoebe's idiosyncratic nature back at work in a narrative arc which had placed the character in a far more serious role than that with which she was usually identified. The camera pauses on Rachel's changing facial expression as the character's expectation of hearing a juicy piece of gossip transforms into a foreboding realization that Phoebe's desire is out of bounds and potentially dangerous. Putting a hand to her forehead and turning away from Phoebe's bed Rachel comments, "Oh, I'm going to be on the news," and the remark serves to solicit audience laughter once again. While it may not be immediately recognizable as such, Rachel's comment can be read as an implicit inference to the dramatic Baby M surrogacy case from over a decade earlier. The extraordinary level of media attention resulted in sensationalistic images which saturated the media landscape for the next several years and framed the national discourse surrounding surrogacy as a struggle between two families, often, as on the *People* magazine cover, between two competing mothers. Thus, Rachel's fear of being "on the news" harks back to this harrowing imagery of "tragedy," of tearful families, painful controversy and above all, to the intense mediatization that accompanied the case.

Figure 88 The sensationalistic cover pits two 'competing' mothers against each other.

Figure 87 A scene from Baby M*, the 1988 Emmy-nominated ABC movie based on the case.*

Figure 89 Media coverage of the Baby M case often framed the situation as a rivalry between two grieving families.

Elements framing Phoebe's request – as a salacious secret between girlfriends, Rachel's tabloid-fearing reaction, as well as the audience laughter confirming its ridiculousness – all help to firmly (re)position this situation within the traditional comic mode of the sitcom genre and distance the potentially controversial fare from the complex ideological implications it infers. The character's interventions become more hyperbolic the more Rachel resists:

> **Rachel**: Phoebe, honey, you've got to be kidding. I mean you know you can't keep one of the babies.
> **Phoebe**: Why not? Maybe I can; you don't know!
> **Rachel**: Yes, yes, I do know! Frank and Alice are going to want to keep all of their children!
> **Phoebe**: Maybe not! You know? Seriously, three babies are a handful. Maybe they're, you know, looking for a chance to unload one of them. Listen I'd hate to miss an opportunity just because I didn't ask.
> **Rachel**: Phoebe, no, this is insane.
> **Phoebe**: Oh, just ask him!

The audience laughs as Phoebe instructs Rachel to ask Frank if he would be willing to give up one of the babies ("Say it's for you!" she suggests when Rachel hesitates) and laughs again when Rachel quickly accepts Frank's answer that he does not view three babies as "a lot." The very fact that Rachel never actually brings herself to formulate the question that Phoebe has charged her with asking demonstrates that the request is not a legitimate one, that it is too dangerous and rife with complexity to be posed within the sitcom's comedic sphere by anybody other than the series' most eccentric main character whose very categorization as zany defangs the request of any possible link to reality. Rachel's regulation of the gestational mother's desire to the sphere of the

unspoken prevents it from causing any real harm and ensures that no one will end up "on the news."

However, instead of immediately and unceremoniously restoring Phoebe to her role as idiosyncratic kook, this episode ends with one of the most touching and emotional moments of the sitcom's entire ten-year period in a scene which ultimately pays tribute to the character of the gestational mother through the absence of laughter and humor. Gathered together in the delivery room, the friends surround Phoebe with the triplets. Holding one of the babies, she turns to Rachel and asks hopefully if Frank and Alice have agreed to let her have one of the children. Once again, the words cannot be spoken aloud. This time, even Phoebe herself is unable to utter the question: "Did you talk to them about… you know?" The newly delivered woman's desire to maintain intimate daily contact with at least one of the newborns that she has given birth to slips into the realm of the unspeakable because, ultimately, they are *not* her children and the struggle between maternal figures over children, a struggle over maternal status, who has the right to raise which child, remains too sensitive to be formulated through language.

Laughter no longer shapes this very quiet moment. If Phoebe's previous demand was ridiculed, met with laughter, hilarity and Rachel's own hyperbolic reaction, this is Phoebe's last quiet struggle in her fight against the ambiguous gestational status which she knowingly agreed to take on. Rachel is tender with her friend ("No, honey," she states simply) and strokes her hair as Phoebe digests the information. The disappointment and sadness are plain on her face and the earlier framing of Phoebe's request to keep one of the children as "insane" is recast in a far more empathetic light. No longer is this desire the last-minute, quirky wish of an emotionally unstable, or worse, delusional, female character. It becomes instead the recognition of a profound and nonreversible rupture between a woman whose mind, being and bodily labor nourished three new lives into existence over a period of days, weeks and months and the babies that that nourishment produced.

Figure 90 A hopeful Phoebe asks Rachel one last time if she will be able to keep one of the babies. In disappointment she turns back to one of the babies she will have to give away.

Fifteen episodes after the humorous scene in which Phoebe introduces herself to the newly created embryos in a petri dish, the final moments of this one hundredth episode offer another moment of intimacy between gestational mother and the progeny she is, for a time, responsible for. Yet this echo of that earlier moment mostly eschews humor in favor of a wrenching scene of separation. The image of the young woman openly crying, in the process of mourning the time she will no longer spend with the babies she is obliged to let go is a stunning incursion of grief within the generic sphere of the situation comedy, and the production decision to make this space possible suggests a desire to honor the character and to give depth to a narrative arc which had hitherto been conceived of and performed as something of a long-running joke. Gathering the three babies on her lap, she says the following:

> So here you are. It seems like yesterday I was talking to you in that little petri dish. Everyone said labor was the hardest thing I'd ever have to do, but they were wrong. This is. Well, I had the most fun with you guys and I wish I could take you home and see you every day. Ok, I'll settle for being your favorite aunt. I know Alice's

sister has a pool, but you lived in me. Okay so we're cool. Yeah, we're going to be great.

The sequence, which is only punctuated with sparse audience laughter, is filmed in a shot-counter shot manner alternating between Phoebe and the babies in her lap. This configuration of images suggests, once again, a conversation between the gestational mother and the children who have just emerged from her body and as such the composition underscores this interaction as a deeply meaningful and human one taking place within the framework of the particular social relationship which was established in the previous season and which remains specific to the phenomenon of pregnancy.

Figure 91 Phoebe's final conversation with the triplets.

As the camera inches slowly closer to frame Phoebe and the babies, the character moves her head nearer to the three small heads of the babies and at one point the camera catches one of the babies stretching out an arm towards Phoebe. These details, the up-close intimacy created by the camera, the quietness of the moment and the movements of the characters towards one another all work together, along with the scene's position at the very end of the episode followed by a quiet fade to black, to communicate the importance of what is occurring on screen and its significance not only to the character but also to the sitcom. The character's deep sadness, the fact that the sitcom ends this episode with the fading image of a lone woman weeping while holding for the

last time the three newborn babies she is on the verge of handing away is indeed unusual terrain for a situation comedy.

It is intriguing to consider for a moment why such a celebratory episode would not have ended in a more triumphant and ceremonial act of gift-giving considering the ideological framework of festive generosity and selflessness in which this narrative arc was anchored at its outset. The Alice and Frank characters are present in this episode and it would have been easy to write and produce a grandiose final scene in the delivery room featuring all the characters with a triumphant exchange of children and a life-affirming message on the limitlessness of Phoebe's kindness and ability to rescue an infertile couple from childlessness. It, too, would have been a scene full of emotion and tears, though tears of joy, happiness and congratulations. It would have been a thoroughly appropriate way to celebrate the one hundredth episode milestone of this sitcom at the height of its popularity. But this is not what was delivered to viewers. Instead they were left with this image of a woman who is no longer pregnant yet will not be returning to her home with a baby.

Figure 92 "The One Hundredth's" final scene is a fade to black shot of Phoebe weeping over the triplets.

This final, middle distance shot of Phoebe, her face breaking into tears, alone with the triplets she has grown literally attached to but with whom the maternal role is on the verge of being discontinued, and surrounded by the sterile props of the hospital setting representing the ideology of technologies which made this narrative arc possible may be understood not as an unambiguous call to arms against alienating technologies which distance women and mothers from their own bodies and pregnancies but as a gentle nudge to consider the complexities of this specific type of

familial formation which may indeed deliver desperate couples from the burden of infertility but which always relies on a woman who gives of her body, mind and health whether in the confines of a financial transaction or out of generosity of spirit.

Without making any overtly political statements and perhaps entirely unintentionally, Phoebe's surrogacy arc in *Friends* provides popular culture with a fictional space to interrogate in a nuanced manner the ethical implications of this unconventional story of family creation which raises particularly difficult questions concerning the place, role and function of the maternal figure. The restoration of humor and light heartedness in the final seconds of this episode's credit sequence cannot undo the drama and significance which have immediately preceded. Rather, the sitcom is put back on its appropriate generic track in order to continue, episode after episode, its fundamental function of consensus-seeking within the disparate ideological landscape of the late-twentieth-century United States.

IV.2. The Politics of Trying: Monica and the Need to Conceive

Complex questions related to fertility and infertility which interrogate the very essence of who mothers are and what, exactly, their role is are again raised within the *Friends* diegetic sphere in the sitcom's final two seasons, this time in relation to the characters of newly-married couple, Chandler Bing and Monica Geller. The extent to which Monica has consistently dreamt of being a mother is repeatedly made evident throughout the series[474] and her marriage to Chandler at the end of the seventh season sets the fictional couple up to potentially establish the series' only Generation X family conceived within a conventional heteronormative, sanguinuptial framework. Yet, although the tendency towards a more traditional familial structure clearly begins to present itself as the characters move further into adulthood (as may be recognized in the child Rachel and Ross raise together, a familial configuration which is traditional in everything aside from its non-

[474] See for example, Monica's yearning during Carol's childbirth episode (Season One, Episode Twenty-Three, "The One with the Birth"), her ultimate decision to break up with Richard when she understood that he didn't really want to have children with her (Season Two, Episode Twenty-Four, "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding"), or her thwarted attempt to use a sperm donor to have a baby in the aftermath of her breakup (Season Three, Episode Three, "The One with the Jam.")

nuptial consecration), *Friends* has not yet finished its close-up examination of the processes and dynamics of family formation and, in its ultimate denial of a conventional family to the one character who so avidly wished for it,[475] the sitcom demonstrates once again a desire to push the series beyond its traditional generic boundaries just as it pushes conceptions of the American family beyond their own.

If questions of fertility and infertility are the barely acknowledged backdrop to Phoebe's gestational surrogacy narrative arc, these issues are placed front and center five years later within the context of Chandler and Monica's own relationship. Indeed, Monica's journey to motherhood can roughly be divided into two narrative strands. The first of these begins during the final episode of the eighth season ("The One Where Rachel has a Baby") when the couple decides they are finally ready to try to conceive a child. This narrative thread runs throughout the ninth season as multiple episodes chronicle the couple's repeated attempts to conceive. This arc concludes with a diagnosis of shared infertility ("The One with the Fertility Test") and the ultimate decision to adopt a baby ("The One with the Donor.") A second narrative strand picks up the story at the beginning of the tenth and final season and follows the adoption process as, over a series of episodes, the couple are chosen by and become acquainted with a young woman seeking to give her child up for adoption. The surprise birth of twins in the series' finale, "The Last One," concludes not only the narrative arc but acts as a final coda to the series' long-running examination of and experimentation with alternative familial and mothering configurations.

While these two narrative strands together compose a more organic overall story of family formation containing particular reverberations for the maternal figure, under careful analysis, distinct implications and significations arise from each of these two component parts. On the one

[475] The decision to opt for a story arc relating to infertility seems to be in some way related to Courteney Cox's own difficulties in getting pregnant. As the actress relates, she had several miscarriages which coincided with the series' later seasons (including during the pregnancy narrative arc of Rachel Green) before being diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder which affects female fertility and eventually opting for two rounds of IVF treatment finally resulting in a healthy baby girl born, as most fans know, in 2004 after the series stopped production. The actress was, indeed, noticeably pregnant as her fictional character readied herself to become an adoptive mother in the final episode of the last season. Cox has spoken out repeatedly about her struggles with fertility as well as her careful consideration of the various options which were available to her. See "Courteney Cox's IVF Story," https://www.infertilityaide.com/celebrities/courteney-coxs-ivf-story, "Courteney Cox Opens up About Fertility Struggles: 'I Had a Lot of Miscarriages,'" https://www.today.com/parents/courteney-cox-opens-about-fertility-struggles-i-had-lot-miscarriages-t150827, "*Friends* Star Courteney Cox Discusses Fertility Problems -Friend, Cougar & Mum," https://fertilityroad.com/courteney-cox-discusses-fertility-problems/. In 2019 the actress's Facebook Watch docuseries, *9 Months with Courteney Cox,* was released. The series, "a unique experiment," features twenty 12-15-minute episodes which illustrate the complexity and diversity of real-life women and couples in various stages of conception, pregnancy and family formation in the contemporary United States.

hand, the Season Nine conception and fertility narrative reveals itself to be a vector for communicating cultural anxieties related to gender roles, sexuality and reproduction, while the Season Ten adoption narrative resonates in some ways as similar to that of the Season Four surrogacy narrative with its emphasis on multiple maternal figures, yet includes a more explicit and problematic emphasis on the notion of maternal worthiness. Taken together, the two narratives appear to further *Friends'* unstated commitment to telling politically progressive stories of unconventional maternities (writing a narrative of female infertility into the generic space of the situation comedy, with its historic emphasis on the traditional nuclear family is, in many ways, as groundbreaking as Murphy Brown's decision to have a baby out of wedlock) while simultaneously and paradoxically offering points of identification to more conservative viewers (the adoption of the young Erica's baby necessarily implies that this secondary character chose *not* to have an abortion, for example), reasserting once more the sitcom's role as ideological negotiator and curator of cultural consensus.

To more fully understand the trajectory of Chandler and Monica's narrative arc which leads the fictional couple from simple newlyweds to new parents of adopted twins over a period of two years, it is critical to keep in mind the contract negotiations which were playing out behind the scenes of *Friends* and which serve as a reminder that the larger institutional context of this, like any, television series always influences, in ways more or less obvious, the content of the program. Between the seventh and final seasons of the sitcom, the uncertain resolution of the actors' regular salary negotiations managed to unsettle the story writing process sufficiently to create the impression of a number of false-start narratives of closure. In terms of the penultimate ninth season, Adam Chitwood explains the dynamic succinctly:

> As *Friends* began production on its ninth season in 2002, all involved were under the impression that it'd be the last one. The actors' contracts were up and they were getting expensive ($1 million an episode expensive), so the first few episodes of this season set up the show's finale (eg. Chandler moving to Tulsa.) However, after much begging from NBC, the cast agreed mid-production to return for an abbreviated tenth season, and so showrunners Marta Kauffman and David Crane had to abandon their finale set-up and start moving things back to a place that could set up the next season.[476]

[476] Adam Chitwood, "'*Friends*' Seasons Ranked from Worst to Best." Collider.com, December 16, 2019. https://collider.com/friends-seasons-ranked-from-worst-to-best/#9

Having established in the final episode of the eighth season that the couple would begin trying to have children, the opening episode of the ninth, as will be seen, picks up this story arc immediately where it left off. Yet, as it became increasingly clear that the sitcom would indeed be produced for a tenth and final season, this story arc is eventually stretched through several episodes over the entire ninth season generating a months-long opportunity to observe this fictional couple's attempts at conception as well as its ultimate resolution in a diagnosis of mutually shared infertility.

This narrative arc of fertility and conception eventually culminates in and transforms into a narrative offshoot of *inf*ertility and adoption. The sequence of episodes stretching from the end of season eight when the couple agrees that they are ready to begin a family to the series finale at the end of season ten when they adopt the newborn twins of a young unmarried woman provides an extended reflection on family planning and family formation. While the narrative threads and scenes constructed by the sitcom and examined here may not ultimately challenge hegemonic notions of family formation and can certainly not be considered realistic given their loose connection to the very complex realities they represent, they provide innovative (if problematic) occasions in which the American television viewer is exposed to narratives (including menstrual surveillance, male and female infertility, open adoption) rarely seen in this genre up until this point.

IV.2.1. "Maybe it's Right": Thinking about Starting a Family

Often relegated to the narrative background in the shadow of the more emotionally suspenseful Ross and Rachel relationship, the fictional couple formed by Chandler Bing and Monica Geller is, on the surface, the sitcom's most conventional. From friends to lovers to married couple, the progression of this love story advances linearly, uninterrupted by infidelity or, significantly for our purposes, surprise pregnancies. While Monica's desire to have children is made clear in the comedy's earliest seasons, the couple is held back by the emotionally immature Chandler and the two adults slowly negotiate their way towards parenthood together. This is noteworthy because, unlike the previous narratives of pregnancy and motherhood made available to the audience in *Friends*, in this case the viewer is made privy to a conscious and deliberate thinking-through of the process of family formation. This is fictional family planning at its functioning ideal, a talk-therapy approach used by husband and wife to negotiate their individual needs all the while moving closer to a common goal. A sample dialogue:

> **Chandler**: We've always talked about having babies some day and I'm not saying it has to be right now, but I'm starting to think that we can handle it. We're good. We're really good.
> **Monica**: We are pretty good.
> **Chandler**: But nothing has to happen till you're ready.
> **Monica**: Well maybe I'm ready now. I mean, it's a little scary, but…maybe it's right.[477]

Chandler and Monica's idealized decision-making process is of a piece with their seemingly overwhelming heteronormativity. The young, heterosexual, upwardly mobile, married couple superficially check all the boxes delimiting the traditional, hegemonic post-WWII vision of the American family (with the possible exception of Monica's ambiguous Jewishness.) However, just below this simulacrum of perceived normality, the roiling dynamics of gender, power and agency work to complexify the couple, complicating an easy categorization of them as typical or conventional. The deeply entrenched-through-serialization characterizations of Monica as competitive and obsessive (read masculine) and Chandler as emotionally and psychologically fragile (and therefore traditionally coded as feminine) confound what R.W. Connell terms a "unitary model of sexual character," a model which is itself "a familiar part of sexual ideology.[478]" The characters of Monica and Chandler both complicate simplistic understandings of gendered roles and it is within this context of uneasy gender dynamics that their story of family formation is implanted.

Yet while the married characters may regularly be understood to be flouting conventional gender roles and stereotypes, *Friends'* narrative arc of trying to conceive does not necessarily lend to a more progressive representation of gender dynamics. Indeed, in anchoring this story within the framework of Monica's already obsessive and competitive character, much of the diegetic space seems to be taken over by problematic, unflattering and clichéd characterizations of women eager to engage in ethically compromising behavior in order achieve their desire to become mothers. Centered within the character of Monica, desire for motherhood meets masculine aggression in this series of episodes devoted to conception. The result is a particularly unflattering

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[477] Season Eight, Episode 23, "The One Where Rachel has a Baby."
[478] Connell, *Gender and Power*, 167. The author explains, "Often it is assumed that there is just one set of traits that characterizes men in general and thus defines masculinity. Likewise, there is one set of traits for women, which defines femininity." Connell argues for a conception of sexual character as non-unitary and explains, "The need to take this path is now clear in the research literature; all interesting conceptions of sexual character from here on are non-unitary. Both femininity and masculinity vary and understanding their variety is central to the psychology of gender." Chandler and Monica may then both be understood as genderly complex characters.

characterization of Monica as manipulative and duplicitous which seemingly harks back to historical and cultural fears related to female fertility and fertile females.

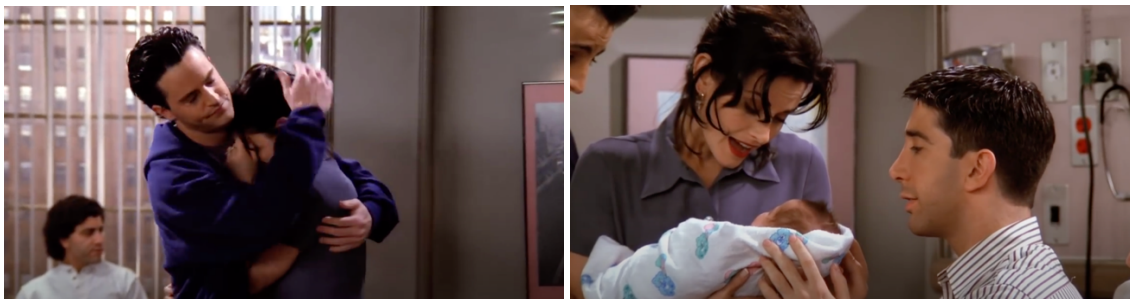

Figure 93 From Season One, Episode Twenty-Three, "The One with the Birth." Monica is depicted as pining to become a mother. Chandler is there early on to comfort his still-platonic friend as those around her begin to have children.

Figure 94 As their relationship progresses, Chandler remains reluctant to start a family, resisting Monica's overwhelming desire for motherhood. Here, Monica (with a bundled-up sweatshirt under her dress) is overcome by the sensation of carrying a fetus, a sensation the series will ultimately deprive her of. Season Five, Episode Twenty-Four, "The One in Vegas – Part 2."

Figure 95 Even on their wedding night, Chandler is destabilized when he (mistakenly) learns that Monica is pregnant. Season Seven, Episode Twenty-Three, "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding – Part 1"

IV.2.2. "Period Math"

Monica and Chandler's decision "to try" is confirmed in the context of Rachel's own physical entry into motherhood during the final episode of Season Eight just as the latter is in the process of giving birth to her daughter Emma. Within this diegetic space of imminent maternity and through Monica and Chandler's decision to "start trying," the sitcom initiates a discourse of fertility and ovulation which draws significant attention, uncharacteristic in the situation comedy genre and on primetime American television more generally, to the menstrual cycle. Far from being a liberatory discourse which frees women of the burden of silently carrying their menses as shameful, or a triumphant one which celebrates female fertility as a force of creation and life-sustenance, this particular iteration more accurately and unfortunately serves to reinscribe women of childbearing age within an anxiety-provoking succession of cycles to be studied, and tracked, lest the window of procreation close for another month, or alas, permanently. Here, ovulation becomes a site of efficient organization in which women can either excel, or, if lacking in appropriate executive and managerial skills, fail. Disguised as a form of female-empowerment, the ovulatory discourse in *Friends*, while undoubtedly opening up cultural space to recognize and talk about human reproduction (and in a country where reproductive education may be obscured completely in some locations, this is not negligible), *Friends* ultimately envisions the menstrual cycle as a force to be simultaneously controlled and obeyed on the path to maternal fulfilment as well as one which remains fundamentally unknowable and mysterious to men.

In the same hospital scene (mentioned above) in which the couple agree that they are ready to start a family, it is Chandler who asks his wife, "So, when do you want to start trying?" Already, the assumption is clear: now that the decision has been mutually agreed upon to attempt conception, there are elements of the process which will elude Chandler's control. To answer her husband's question, Monica hesitates and adopts a reflective position. "Alright, hold on a sec," she says as she begins to count on her fingertips. The act may be unclear to the viewer and audience, but Chandler seems to immediately understand the significance of what his wife is calculating with her hands. "Period math?" he asks. "Yeah," Monica responds quietly, still figuring. "Yeah," Chandler himself rejoins with a slight nod of understanding. Chandler's faint acknowledgement of his wife's menstrual math both allows for masculine recognition of the existence of biologically

female physiological process while at the same time subtly shutting them out thereby relegating them to the exclusive domain of femininity. He doesn't turn away cringing or embarrassingly attempt to thwart his wife's counting (a plausible reaction given the overall portrayal of the character as immature and emotionally stunted), nor does he actively join in, asking about specific dates, for example (another plausibility given a previous example of the character's investment in his female friends' menstrual cycles).[479] Rather, Chandler waits patiently as his wife counts on her own two hands, figuring out whether or not she is fertile. The sitcom thus provides a moment's recognition of this bodily process rarely admitted into existence on United States network television, yet Monica's ovulation remains hers for her to master within the couple's larger quest to conceive. Female physiology is thus acknowledged in this scene while at the same time remaining safely contained to one gender, sufficiently mysterious to continue portraying male partners as unwitting and vulnerable to wily women eager to take advantage of their unsuspecting partners.

Figure 96 Monica counts the days of her cycle on her fingertips as Chandler waits passively for her to reveal her fertility status.

IV.2.3. "This is Going to Be Fun": Maternal Desire and Deception

In fact, this dynamic of feminine scheming is set in motion even before this hospital hallway recognition of ovulation takes place. In the first scene of this episode's Monica-and-Chandler-conception narrative thread, Monica, suffering from boredom by the marathon labor and delivery of her best friend, attempts to entertain herself and Phoebe. "Hey, you want to see something?" Monica asks Phoebe conspiratorially as the two women sit across from Chandler and Joey in the hospital's waiting room. "This is going to be fun," she continues, adding, "watch me freak out

[479] An earlier mention of the menstrual cycle occurs in Season Four, Episode Twelve, "The One with The Embryos." In an attempt to guess what Rachel has bought on her shopping trip, Chandler whispers something unheard (taboo and unmentionable only four seasons earlier) to Joey. The latter looks at Rachel and shakes his head. "No," he replies to Chandler, "not for like another two weeks."

Chandler." She moves across the room to sit close to him and, changing her demeanor to adopt a more serious, thoughtful tone, begins to speak with him. "I don't know whether it's because we're here or… Rachel's giving birth…but, um…I think we should try and have a baby." Assuming that her husband is still unready to become a father, Monica's "game" here consists essentially in trying to terrify her husband, to scare him with her desire to become a mother, to get a reaction out of him. While Monica's maternal desire is easily recognizable for viewers who have followed her character over the previous seven seasons and has been used to both poke fun at but also elicit sympathy for the fictional singleton, this initial interaction between the two married characters, a dialogue which will set in motion much of what occurs between the two until the series comes to an end two years hence, is rooted in what is fundamentally deceitful behavior on the part of Monica. In an attempt to cure her own boredom, and for the benefit of another female friend, she decides to taunt her husband with information she imagines will send him into a fit of panic and fear.

While this particular iteration of maternal-yearning cunning is minor and brief, it troublingly sets the tone for a number of subsequent actions on the part of the hopeful mother-to-be character, establishing Monica, and by extension women of child-bearing age as untrustworthy yet powerful creatures willing to manipulate their male partners in an effort to satiate their hunger to access motherhood. Along with her ability to quickly calculate "period math," that is, understand and master her own cycle of potential procreativity, the character is imbued with an ominous power to deceive, a power which, at times, will cast a long shadow of duplicity over this entire multi-episode narrative arc.

However, this initial use of her maternal desire to play with her husband's emotions is revealed for the dirty trick that it is when Chandler refuses to take his wife's "bait" and, in comparison, appears to react with eminent maturity, reserve and thoughtfulness. "Okay," he replies concisely. A pause allows for Monica's own anxiety to grow in the absence of the husband's expected freak out. He continues helpfully, "I've been thinking about it too and I think we're ready." Like an expert judoka Chandler has met his wife's stealth attack head-on and wielded her own desire to become a mother against her. The reverse power play catches her off guard and the character is ridiculed, taunted by her own wish to bear children. The scene appears benign, but it in fact foreshadows a number of moments in which the quest to have children as well as accompanying discourses concerning fertility and maternity cause *both* future parents to behave

in ethically questionable ways although this underlying moral instability ultimately seems to adhere with more sticking power to the desiring *maternal* figure than to Chandler.

Figure 97 A long and boring wait in the maternity ward brings out Monica's willingness to use her maternal desire to trick her unsuspecting husband.

Figure 98 Monica moves in to lay her trap but becomes the victim of her own attempt to upset her husband when he calmly agrees that they are ready to start a family.

IV.2.4. Fertility Duplicity

In Season Nine, Episode Five, "The One with Phoebe's Birthday Dinner" the obsession with getting pregnant and the pressure of attending to a physiological timetable which is unrelenting and unforgiving even as the couple is separated for long stretches at a time leads to conflict and deception between husband and wife. Monica, ovulating and hoping to take advantage of the short time the couple has before meeting the others to celebrate Phoebe's birthday, welcomes Chandler home wearing revealing black lingerie in an apartment romantically lit by candles. The character has metaphorically set the stage for an ideal sexual encounter, as though the perfection in details will lead to the perfect act of copulation culminating in insemination and conception. Chandler, however, away on the job in a different state has succumbed to his previously kicked habit of smoking, a habit for which he has been roundly criticized from his group of friends and which Monica in particular despises. Monica is hurt and furious but catches her husband off guard when

she calmly but firmly orders him to extinguish the cigarette he has provocatively lit and insists that they "put this fight on hold and go have sex." Nothing is to derail her plan in her desire to make the best possible use of her menstrual cycle, to be as productive as possible in her use of her corporeal temporality. The character's urgency is not without reason. She explains angrily with increasing agitation, "This is the last day that I'm ovulating, and if we don't do it now then we're going to have to wait till next month!" The woman's seemingly bizarre behavior (insisting on going to bed with a husband with whom she is furious) makes sense: she is running out of time.

In exploiting this moment of tension for humor, the scene offers a rapid descent into a depiction of the sex act stripped of all tenderness and affection, reduced to its barest elements of productivity and efficiency. In the spiteful back and forth between the couple, Chandler agrees to go to bed with his wife but "with no talking." Monica, competitive as always, ups the ante, "and no cuddling." Chandler comes back, "and no kissing your neck." Monica's vindictive retort, "Oh, good, I HATE it when you do that" elicits another nasty comeback from Chandler, "and LOTS of kissing your neck." The audience laughs and the scene closes; yet stripped of its humorous framing this scene simply shows two angry and increasingly aggressive people (in another light Chandler's insistence on lots of neck kissing in spite of his partner's dislike of the act could raise troubling questions of consent) entering the bedroom to have sex for no other reason than to get pregnant. The incredible urgency of Monica's desire has, for the moment, outstripped the couple's sexual desire, intimacy and affection for one another and reduced them to an animal state, limiting them to nothing more than biological actors on a quest to reproduce. There is no hint of pleasure on the horizon, only the cold satisfaction of having performed one's reproductive function on time. Indeed, the scene brings to mind imagery of the aggressive mating rituals of wild animals devoid of sentiment and humanity.

Figure 99 An ovulating Monica sets the stage for the perfect sexual encounter which leads to disappointment and resentment when she learns that Chandler has taken up smoking again.

Figure 100 The couple's interaction grows increasingly hostile as they move towards the bedroom in anger.

The following scene takes a step back from the brink of this aggressive and uncomfortable sexual standoff. While Monica lies grumpily in bed waiting arms-crossed and impatient for her husband to undress, it is Chandler who blinks, explaining that he is unable to "make love" to his wife under the tense circumstances. "I'm not going to do this," he asserts and then asks his wife pointedly, "is this really the way you want our baby to be conceived?' There is a short pause during which it may be understood that Monica sees the full wretchedness in their actions. "No, you're right," she concedes as she gets out of bed, puts on her bathrobe and apologizes for her behavior towards Chandler. They kiss passionately and she asks, "do you want to?" The two rush into bed as the scene comes to a close.

However, the episode is not over, and this story arc takes another turn following an obligatory lovemaking ellipsis. The clichéd image of the mutually satisfied post-coital couple is troubled in this scene which configures Monica as a sexual trickster all too ready to manipulate the innocent and overly sentimental, indeed overly feminine, Chandler. While the latter appears thoroughly satisfied, Monica shocks him when she reveals that she is still, in fact, furious with him. "But you said you forgave me!" cries Chandler as Monica leaves the bed. Replacing her dressing gown over the slinky lingerie, she hurls to a confused Chandler still in bed, naked and vulnerable, "I just said that because I was ovulating, and you said you wouldn't have sex with me if we were fighting." The slow, shocked laughter of the audience which accompanies the scene echoes Chandler's discomfiting realization, "you tricked me to get me into bed?" Monica's response is briskly unapologetic as she walks out the door, "that's right, I got mine." The scene's final shot shows Chandler clutching the bedsheets and pulling them closer to his chest. "I feel so used," he says. His wife's surprising sexual ruthlessness leaves him isolated, his body alienated from the intimacy of the sexual act it just performed. Contrary to the ideal of cooperation and communion Chandler had envisioned, the two bodies were in fact operating on very different terms, Chandler's at an affective/emotional level, Monica's at a functional/biological one. The

reversion of gender roles is complete as Monica stalks off, self-satisfied, after the sex act leaving a vulnerable and feminized Chandler in bed alone.

Figure 101 A familiar and idealized post-coital shot is turned on its head as Chandler understands his wife's deception.

Figure 102 Rude awakening: Chandler is fragilized and feels "used" by his wife's duplicity while she revels in "getting hers."

The audience laughter that brings the scene to a close undercuts any implication that the male character is in fact seriously emotionally destabilized by the revelation, instead it serves to poke fun at and highlight Chandler's already challenged masculinity as fragile and laughable. Indeed, in a subsequent scene Chandler's masculinity will be reestablished, guided back towards normativity thanks to the ultra-masculine presence of Joey who chides his unmanly friend. Chandler's anguished, "she lied, she tricked me into having sex with her," is met with an unsympathetic and unsentimental, "So?" from Joey who continues, "you got to have sex, right?" Chandler's response: "What's the matter with me, why am I such a girl?"[480] Studio audience laughter signals the restoration of normative gendered behavior. The sitcom seems to suggest that Chandler, destabilized after the encounter with his aggressive and unscrupulous wife, just needed to be reminded that men are meant to enjoy sex under even the most emotionally hostile conditions and that seeking any sort of emotional satisfaction from the sex act particularly while in the process of attempting to conceive a child is demonstrably girly behavior to be proscribed.

[480] Chandler's return to heteronormative manhood seems to be attractive to his wife who suggests that she may still be ovulating and therefore the couple should have sex again in order to increase their chances of conception.

The thrust of the episode's narrative thread configures Monica as a "manipulative shrew,[481]" selfish ("I got mine") and willing to do whatever it takes to get what she is after, the obsession to conceive outweighing any ethical obligation to be honest and truthful to her life partner. Monica is an aggressive sexual partner and a man trap. She wields her fertility with unsentimental calculation and control, reducing the sex act to one of performance, production and efficiency. Above all, her willingness to lie makes her untrustworthy and conjures age-old suspicions of woman's fertile bodies as unknowable and uncontrollable by men. Adrienne Rich identifies this dynamic in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. "Woman as elemental force, and as sexual temptress and consumer of his sexual energies" she writes, "becomes, for man, a figure generating anxiety.[482]" Rich herself draws on theorist and psychoanalyst Karen Horney who notes, "Woman is a mysterious being who communicates with spirits and thus has magic powers that she can use to hurt the male. He must therefore protect himself against her powers by keeping her subjugated.[483]" Indeed, Chandler's girlyness and submission in bed after the sex act, his "feeling used" at the hands of his manipulating and ovulating wife is thus a reflection of his emasculation, his hurt, at the hands of his wife's powers of procreation. Fortunately for Chandler's masculinity, the woman-using Joey is on hand to help him regain perspective.

This episode then wades into multiple levels of cultural anxiety related to female fertility and reproduction to nourish this particular plotline, from postfeminist discourses of the menstrual cycle as something to be mastered, tracked and optimized lest it escape the woman-over-thirty's control before it is too late, to deeply entrenched patriarchal fears of female bodies as beyond the reach of male control.[484] Within the space of this episode, the narrative thread seems to be

[481] In a later restaurant scene, Chandler mumbles this under his breath as a suggestion for Monica. The subtle reference to this Shakespeare play (*The Taming of the Shrew*) is reinforced by Joey, who instructs his friend at one point to "control your woman!"

[482] Rich, 114.

[483] Horney cited in Rich, 114.

[484] Within the context of the continuous narrative arc concerning Monica's fertility, it is unsurprising that a subsequent episode in this season demonstrates Chandler's obsessive attempts to control his wife's sexuality and this even retroactively. In Season Nine, Episode Seven, "The One with Ross's Inappropriate Song," Chandler comes across what he believes to be a videotape of Monica having intercourse with her former boyfriend. The entire narrative thread revolves around Chandler's over-the-top jealous reaction to the existence of the tape of his wife having sex with someone else. Chandler insultingly refers to his wife as a "porn star." When they both learn that the tape actually features another woman, the depths of Chandler's insecurity and fear of diminished masculinity is revealed. "Life is good again," he proclaims.

particularly harsh on the female character. In fact, Monica's character, through her assertive desire to place her need to conceive a child above her interpersonal connection with her husband, is represented as aggressively sexual, manipulative and cold, through those very processes which have traditionally been used to allocate and measure femininity, those being conception, gestation and bearing children. Confusion reigns. Is Monica a real woman thanks to her manifest desire for motherhood or a real man in the wake of her abuse of Chandler for sex?

IV.2.5. Duplicity Redux: Chandler's Revenge?

While Chandler's masculinity is constantly negotiated throughout the ten seasons of *Friends*, this narrative of fertility and conception seems to open up particularly meaningful spaces for its interrogation. Following several episodes where Chandler's character is relocated to direct an office in Oklahoma, he finally quits this job in order to "follow his dreams." Chandler is, for a time, unemployed and the sitcom immediately mines this newfound homemaker husband situation for comedy. "The One with Christmas in Tulsa" ends with a closing credit sequence in which Chandler realizes that Monica, like an increasing number of US women, is now "the sole wage earner," "the head of the household." The character happily describes himself as "a kept man" but seems initially unsure of what to make of Monica's offering him a twenty-dollar bill and her accompanying suggestion that he buy himself "something pretty" while she is off working. This upending of decades of televisual representations (particularly in the situation comedy genre) of white men as primary wage-earners and heads of households is framed with laughter by the studio audience. Chandler finishes by accepting the money with nonchalance in this casual yet powerful diegetic afterthought, a miniscule *mise en scene* envisioning the complete reversal of a patriarchal ideology in which the institution of marriage may be interpreted as a financial transaction which subjugates women in exchange for their reproductive services.

If this scene suggests that Chandler may view this new arrangement enthusiastically, the following episode nuances this reaction. In "The One Where Rachel Goes Back to Work," Monica's fertility and the aim of "getting pregnant" once again drive the narrative, becoming a fictional space in which cultural tensions and anxieties, this time concerning masculinity and male status as financial provider, are brought to the fore, and hashed out, if not necessarily resolved.

The episode begins with a cold open that places Monica, apron at her waist, in the literal domestic sphere of her apartment, preparing her husband "a nice big breakfast" so that he can keep up "his strength for tonight." "You're going to get me good and pregnant" she tells (threatens?) her husband as he emerges from the bedroom in sweatpants. Expressing discomfort with his newly unemployed status, Chandler laments, "I don't know what I'm going to do with my life." Monica's reaction, "Well, I just lost my erection" (followed by audience laughter) cements the symbolic transfer of masculinity, here explicitly linked to the phallus, from (now passive and unemployed) husband to (dominating, yet feminine, indeed ovulating) wife. The blurring of boundaries of gendered behavior is thorough, particularly as Monica's "erection" returns once she envisages herself as the organizer of her newly-out-of-work husband's job search. Monica becomes the postfeminist ideal woman combining hyper femininity (the beautiful, seductive, ovulating wife who spends time and energy cooking nourishing meals in a loving effort to enhance her husband's masculine performativity) with an aggressive, even sexualized, desire to succeed in the public sphere, a desire which in this case, is channeled not into her own ambition but into helping her husband succeed.

In spite of his wife's dogged determination to help, Chandler's ambitions for a new career are put on hold when he is offered an unpaid internship. The prospect of being unable to make a living leads Chandler to rethink the wisdom of immediately starting a family. At home in his apartment he shares his uncertainty with Ross. The two men share an intimate moment of confidence which ends in a tender hug. However, Chandler doesn't have the chance to communicate his worries to his wife. Just after the two men hug, Monica aggressively enters (penetrates) the intimate moment of male bonding, announcing, "Okay! It's baby time!" and barks at her husband, "Pants off, Bing." Monica's assertiveness intensifies throughout the scene. Ross tries to stay near his friend in an effort to help Chandler fend off the wife's insistence on having intercourse, but the female character remains unmoved. "We're having sex," she insists, then again more clearly when Ross refuses to leave, "Let me put it this way, we're having sex whether you're here or not." Ross is no match for his sister ready to copulate and leaves Chandler to fend for himself.

Figure 103 The two men share a moment of intimacy in the gendered space of the kitchen (the presence of the baby carrier in this scene reinforces the aesthetic of caring and tenderness) which ends in a supportive hug.

Figure 104 Pants off, Bing! Monica interrupts the moment aggressively gesturing to Chandler to remove his clothes.

What to make of this scene which positions Monica as a persistent sexual aggressor ready to have her way with her husband? The viewer is clearly aware that Chandler, rendered vulnerable thanks to his "kept man" status, is uncomfortable and seemingly unable to speak on his own behalf. Indeed, the scene ends without a word from Chandler. The character is effectively silenced in the face of the wife's overwhelming assertiveness as well as her newfound superior status as sole breadwinner. In this, it highlights the power of the financial provider to dictate their will over the subjugated partner. Imagining Chandler and Monica's roles reversed is instructive and uncomfortable: out of an overwhelming desire to reproduce himself, to start a family, the financially superior, power-wielding patriarch pushes past all objections on behalf of his dominated wife, indeed is not even available to hear them, so blinded in his desire to achieve his goal. He bursts through the front door after a day's work and orders "skirt off" to his unwilling wife. This scenario, in its uneven sexual power dynamics of domination and submission as well as murky treatment of consent, bears a discomfiting resemblance to rape, yet through the operation of the gender role reversal in which it is the (ovulating) female character acting aggressively *because of* her desperate quest for motherhood, the result can be effectively coded as humorous.

Unlike the previous episode featuring a contentious sexual encounter between the couple, this one does not offer viewers an immediate post-coital scene. Rather, a "next morning" establishing shot signals an ellipsis and the storyline is picked up the following day. Chandler, in

spite of his inferior position as "kept man," ultimately proves that he is perfectly capable of reclaiming agency. In order to do so, however, he too succumbs to perfidy. As Monica emerges from the bedroom "a little weak in the knees" (a sign that already, her status of dominator is in the process of being renegotiated) after their night together she declares feeling that they may have "made a baby." Chandler is contrite, admitting that he faked an orgasm so as not to ejaculate inside his ovulating wife avoiding any chance of conception. "You're not pregnant," he tells his wife. "That thing that I have to do to make a baby, I faked it." Only by withholding his semen is Chandler, operating from within the confines of his newfound position as subjugated partner, able to reassert his own volition, this time, a desire *not* to conceive.[485] Monica is dumbfounded, more upset to learn that men are capable of faking orgasms than to learn that Chandler is newly unsure about having a baby.

Figure 105 Chandler feels compelled to explain to his wife that she cannot be pregnant because he faked his orgasm during their previous sexual encounter.

This episode then proposes a parallel yet opposing narrative to that described in the one analyzed above. Each member of the couple resorts to dishonesty to maintain control over their respective reproductive needs and desires. It should be noted, however, that whereas the female character's dishonesty was demonized throughout the episode by her husband as a treacherous betrayal, turning her into a scheming, calculating, (inhuman) "shrew" and becoming a source of humor for the episode, Monica's reaction to her husband's own sexual dishonesty is consternation tempered by a desire to understand the underlying reasoning behind his deceitfulness. Chandler's admission of faking the orgasm comes at the end of this episode and opens up a brief but contemplative space of discussion between the two adults about their desires and worries.

[485] Chandler's ability to penetrate his wife while still maintaining agency over his own powers of reproduction highlights the ultimate inequivalence of reproductive sex: in the reverse situation Monica, being penetrated, would certainly be able to fake an orgasm, but would under no circumstances be able to withhold her own capacity to reproduce at will: her body would not withhold an egg ready to be fertilized just because she didn't feel ready to conceive.

Under cover of humor, *Friends*' narrative arc of fertility proposes a consideration of family planning which feeds off of and in turn nourishes anxieties encompassing female fertility, male virility and masculinity as well as the gendered dynamics of power particularly as they resonate in terms of the intimate politics of reproduction. Above all, the discourse of deception constructed by these episodes suggests a dissociation of sexual pleasure and human reproduction. The sex act in these episodes becomes decidedly *unpleasant* (literally, in the withholding of orgasm, figuratively in the withholding of honesty and affection), the site of untrustworthiness and suspicion. As such, it is reduced to a utilitarian function, the female partner's need to conceive trumping all other aspects including closeness, intimacy and pleasure. In this pressure to conceive, in the panic to reproduce as conceptualized within this narrative arc, heteronormative reproductive sex becomes a site of duplicity and discord. Notes theorist Gayle Rubin, within a wider ideological framework of "sex negativity," the sex act "may be redeemed if performed within marriage for procreative purposes and if the pleasurable aspects are not enjoyed too much.[486]" Indeed, Monica and Chandler's sexual relationship responds to every one of Rubin's criteria of The Charmed Circle – "Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality.[487]" Here, it is paradoxically the obsession with fertility itself, the pressure to perform on time, the desire to achieve the ultimate level of heteronormativity through procreative sex which ultimately leads to the lack of pleasure. However, if both members of this couple are touched equally by sexual displeasure, the fault appears to be repeatedly placed on the shoulders of the female character obsessed by her body's biological needs and rhythms and her overwhelming desire to become a mother.

This dynamic is striking in the fourteenth episode of season nine, "The One with the Blind Dates." As Chandler is struggling to babysit for Rachel's baby, Emma, Monica strides out of her bedroom businesslike and confident with a calendar in her hand. "Just so you know," she begins briskly, "I'm going to be ovulating from tomorrow until the sixth." Then, wagging a menacing finger at her husband she adds firmly, "so don't touch yourself in the next forty-eight hours." This is Monica at her organizational and authoritative best, putting all of her managerial skills to work in order to further her objective of getting pregnant. Master over her menstrual cycle, she is also,

[486] Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Deviations, A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 148.
[487] *Ibid*., 152.

in this scene, master over her husband's sexual pleasure, ordering him not to masturbate lest he waste any precious genetic material.

Yet Monica, is not, in fact as in control of her biological destiny as she appears to be. Chandler points out that she is holding an outdated calendar and the character is horrified to learn that, due to her own mismanagement and lack of organization, her dates have been miscalculated. Thus follows a panicked moment of realization that she may be out of time for another month which is relieved in a subsequent scene. The woman emerges from the bathroom having taken an ovulation test. "We're okay, I'm still ovulating," she announces. The pressure is on once again for the couple to conceive as Monica immediately suggests they "do this." Yet the couple finds themselves thwarted in their ability to be intimate. Infant Emma is in a playpen in their living room under their responsibility and Chandler feels uncomfortable.

Monica suggests they have sex in the baby's presence. It is Chandler who interrupts her, arguing that "having sex in front of a baby" is "horrifying," "scarring," and "something people go to jail for." The presence of audience laughter at Chandler's scolding insinuates that Monica's willingness to have sex in the presence of a young child is indeed despicable and inappropriate. That even conceptive sex must remain as unpleasurable as possible is underscored when, having determined that Emma is asleep, the couple agree to run to the bedroom to have sex. However, they "have to be fast," warns Monica. Adds Chandler to his wife, "and you can't make any noise." Together, the couple set the terms for their imminent intercourse which promises to be rushed, silent and devoid of sensuality, again stripping as much pleasure out of the act as possible and reducing it to its most basic biological function.

As the scene continues, the sitcom appears to suggest that even this puritanical version of intercourse is too risqué. Just as Chandler and Monica leave the living room set for their bedroom, Joey arrives and picks up the baby before moving over to the closed door of the bedroom. Joey appears to understand what the couple is doing behind closed doors and is shocked. "you can't have S-E-X in front of a B-A-B-I-E," he proclaims holding the child protectively close and running out of the apartment with her as the audience reacts to his overreaction with enthusiastic laughter.

Coming out of the bedroom after intercourse, the couple is optimistic. "I think we may have really done it this time," suggests Chandler. Yet their self-congratulation is quickly brought to heel when, aghast, they discover the baby missing. The couple panics and begins a frantic quest to find her. The message is clear: not only does the pressure to respect Monica's ovulation remove

the pleasure of the sex act for this couple trying to conceive, even when disconnected of its most erotic elements it becomes shameful and in need of correction. In this case, the couple so desperately trying to conceive a child is subject to the removal of a child under their care, a faint echo of the role played by various child welfare departments removing children from circumstances deemed unfit but whose actions have a checkered history of being deployed against less-privileged women and families. The discourse of irresponsibility and inappropriate behavior is made clear, although as always filtered through humor, when it is discovered that it was Joey who took the innocent child.

> **Monica**, **outraged, to Joey**: Why the hell did you take her?
> **Joey**: Because you two were having sex [whispering and gesturing to the bedroom.]
> [Chandler and Monica lean back in mock horror.]
> **Monica**: No, we weren't!
> **Joey**, **wagging a finger at Monica:** Don't you lie to me! I can tell by Chandler's hair. [To Chandler] You are so lazy. Can't you get on top for once?
> **Chandler**: All right, all right. We were… we were trying to make a baby. Monica's ovulating.
> **Joey**: Hey! It is unacceptable that you two would have sex with Emma in the next room. Now, I'm going to have to tell Rachel about this.
> **Chandler**: No, no, no!
> **Monica**: No, please don't! Joey, she will kill us.

The hypersexual Joey becomes, in this scene, the maintainer of sexual propriety, the enforcer of norms and the savoir of the baby girl in supposed danger at the hands of sexually promiscuous adults. This being the final scene of the episode's narrative thread, the end is relatively unambiguous: the couple is terrified that the mother of the child will find out about what is humorously characterized here as, essentially, sexual misconduct. Couched in humor, the scene and the larger episode evoke the uneasy relationship between adult sexuality, conception and the innocence of children. Monica and Chandler's explanation for their behavior (removed as it was in a different room and behind a closed door) is deemed "unacceptable." Sex, even for procreative purposes, is potentially corrupting and in need of the strictest surveillance.[488] If Joey's part in the narrative arguably reduces the impact of the role of enforcer and renders the scene slightly

[488] The scene is complexified further, however, by the couple's sexual position. Joey's admonishment to Chandler reveals that Monica was on top. Is this example of Monica as "woman on top" to be interpreted as a further instance of the character's aggressive (manly) desire to become pregnant? Or are Monica and Chandler, in eschewing the missionary position, not actually attempting to engage in procreative sex, after all? Are they in fact having sex for pleasure? Or, are Chandler's submissiveness and Monica's aggression (their gender role reversal) the real reason they have not yet conceived?

ridiculous, the story nonetheless highlights the discomfort, even paranoia, surrounding the politics of sex and sexuality and further contributes to the problematic representation of "trying" in *Friends*.

Figure 106 Chandler and Monica run off to the bedroom to have intercourse in an attempt to conceive. Joey arrives and finds Emma unattended.

Figure 107 Joey is shocked by the couple's behavior and wags an incriminating and disciplinary finger at Monica.

Within the diegetic space of *Friends*, the sitcom's narrative arc of conception suggests a real preoccupation with what may be termed a politics of trying. Monica and Chandler's trying narrative opens up a discursive site in popular culture in which a number of elements are brought forth to the attention of the viewer including a particular, and peculiar conception of sex, anxieties related to female fertility and an interrogation of normative gender roles.

The episodes which comprise *Friends*' narrative arc of trying each appear to denature heterosexual procreative sex in some way or another, lowering it from its hierarchical pedestal as the gold standard of normal, appropriate, good sex, either by aligning it with acts of deception or by scolding it as traumatizing and corrupting. Such images and narratives communicate a surprising displeasure with sex, suggesting that within a sexual framework based entirely on the pressure to conceive, intercourse between heterosexual adults inherently becomes a space of deceit and manipulation, a power struggle in which honesty and mutual trust is at risk.

Concomitantly, although the narrative operates as a potential cultural site of recognition for addressing the taboo of the menstrual cycle, the series places its chosen emphasis on Monica's

ovulation as the decisive moment in that cycle. In fact, the character's ovulation is of such import that one of the earliest allusions to Monica's ripeness is made by her own father to the shock and embarrassment of the character herself.[489] The paternal figure's intimate knowledge of his own daughter's reproductive cycle, with an emphasis on this momentous physiological event in particular, suggests an unrelenting and regressive patriarchal investment in female fertility. Indeed, Jack is so excited to learn that the couple are trying, that he exhorts them to rush back into the hospital broom closet from which they had just emerged and later attempts to give them pamphlets dispensing tips on conception. The father's recognition of and excitement about his daughter's ovulation constitutes Monica as the preciously fertile female child within a traditional patriarchal configuration. This perspective may illuminate to some extent the narrative's discourse of female fertility anxiety which configures ovulation and the menstrual cycle as a process to be observed, tracked and above all, respected, lest it go uncontrolled. This narrative of the politics of trying can thereby be understood as anchored within wider fears, taboos and misconceptions related to the potential excesses of female fertility (the "tooness" of female fertility), the potency of which is demonstrated by the images and stereotypes which litter popular culture and media: women being feared as either too fertile (in the case of stereotypes of lower-class women or those of ethnic and racial minorities) or too unfertile (in the case of "careerist" women who put childbearing off until it is too late).

Finally, through an inversion of gender roles in which Chandler struggles to maintain his already-weakened position in the hierarchy of masculinity, while Monica becomes aggressive to the point of sexual coercion, the politics of trying in *Friends* ironically shines an unflattering light on the effects of parental desire on its characters. Instead of celebrating these gender-troubling tendencies as progressive and liberatory, the sitcom repeatedly diminishes them, coding Chandler's unhegemonic masculinity as laugh-inducing while Monica in the role of the potential maternal figure becomes pushy, intimidating even menacing, and at the origin of situations which end in dishonesty and turmoil for the couple on their quest to become parents.

[489] In Season Nine, Episode One, "The One Where No One Proposes," Chandler and Monica's first "try" after agreeing to begin attempting to conceive a child is unceremoniously interrupted by Jack Geller who inadvertently opens the door to the utility closet in which they are hiding. Great shame ensues until Chandler replaces their sex act within a framework of "trying." It is at this point that Jack encourages them to "get back in there" and, addressing Monica, asks, "aren't you ovulating?"

IV.2.6. "They Gave you the Kiddie Size": Male Infertility and the Shame Game

By the middle of the ninth season it was clear that *Friends* would be back for a final, if truncated, tenth and the need to find satisfying narrative closure came more sharply into focus. The twenty-first and twenty-second episodes of this ninth season thus seem to function as something of a turning point in Monica and Chandler's quest to start a family. After pursing the narrative of "trying" for much of the previous season, in Episode Twenty-One, "The One with the Fertility Test," the couple is seemingly abruptly thrust into a diagnosis of infertility. Over the span of a single episode the viewer is first reminded (by Monica) that the couple have yet to conceive, then presented with a sequence of scenes showing the two protagonists at a fertility clinic undergoing tests and, finally, given access to a most intimate moment in which the two characters, back at home, receive the diagnosis of infertility.

The following episode, "The One with the Donor," sees the couple mull over the possibilities laid out for them by a fertility specialist. The narrative thread follows the characters as they reject one option after another, finally settling on adoption. While the episode reads as an examination of the decision-making process of its fictional characters, it may also be interpreted as an examination of the narrative options open to the sitcom's writers in the process of reflecting on the precise direction in which to move this final story of family formation and entrance into motherhood. Before turning our attention to the specific episodes concerning the adoption narrative located in Season Ten, we will briefly look at these two episodes.

In "The One with the Fertility Test" the now-explicit narrative thread of fertility opens with a continuation of the disassociation of sex, pleasure and conception as Chandler's suggestion that he and Monica have intercourse fails to tempt his wife who reminds her husband they will be undergoing fertility testing the following day. In rejecting her husband's amorous advance, Monica admonishes, "You need to keep your tadpoles in the tank." Chandler, disappointed and uncomfortable appears childishly reluctant to have his fertility evaluated. It is up to the wife to explain to her husband (as well as to remind the audience) that they have been trying for more than a year and that the tests "are a good idea to find out if everything's okay." The short scene reinforces Monica's role as the couple's fertility tracker. Having spent much of the season dedicatedly tracking her own cycles of ovulation to no avail, it is now up to her to take responsibility for the medical inquiry which will confirm whether they are fertile or not. Not only is she responsible for the organization of the tests, she must also ensure that Chandler is ready,

refusing his sexual advances and admonishing him not to masturbate in advance of the tests. Later at the fertility clinic Monica is primarily put in the position of comforting her husband. The episode spends no time on the effects of the tests on the female partner in spite of referring to them as "an invasive vaginal exam." Instead, the hopeful mother-to-be is already positioned as maternal figure to her own husband, first nagging him not to compromise the tests through wanton sexual behavior (masturbation), then reassuring him and attempting to help him through his embarrassment related to "doing it in a cup."

Chandler's discomfort and hesitation is a reluctance to confront an eventual diagnosis of infertility, equated for the sake of humor throughout the episode, to a diagnosis of diminished virility and weakened masculinity. This is ably demonstrated by the presence of a nurse who takes charge of Chandler in the fertility clinic. A severe looking woman bearing a nameplate with the ambiguously gendered "Terry" on it, the nurse intimidates Chandler, speaking to him in the imperative and employing the austere discourse of medical science. "You'll go into that room and deposit your specimen into the container," she explains extending a plastic cup in his direction. Chandler's joke highlighting once again the dissociation of sexual pleasure from the conception of a child inherent in this story of fertility ("Deposit my specimen? You know, I usually have to call a 900 number for that kind of talk") is met with a stony stare on the part of the nurse, a look which quickly obliges the man to submit to her orders. Chandler takes the cup and bows his head in acquiescence, a recognition of her dominant position over him. His surrender is a sign of his vulnerability, a vulnerability which is further used to weaken the character when his ex-girlfriend, the abhorred and ultimately emasculating, Janice, shows up out of the blue.

The character of Janice is efficiently put to use in this episode to deepen Chandler's humiliation. Her grating laugh, her comment that Chandler was given "the kiddie size" specimen cup as well as Chandler's own rueful comment that his penis "just fell off" when Janice teasingly suggests she give him "a hand" all serve to underline the connection between Chandler's uncertain fertility and his uncertain masculinity.

As we noted, this episode pays little attention to Monica's part in the fertility testing process. The character moves discreetly offscreen to undergo her invasive vaginal exam, no props or equipment equivalent to Chandler's specimen cup are employed in order to humiliate her and her own doubtful fertility. And while this is indeed curious considering the investment that the series has made in Monica's quest to become a mother throughout the series' previous seasons,

Monica's relative absence offers something of a respite from the blame and shame of female infertility not only for the character but also, perhaps, for the actress, Courteney Cox, simultaneously struggling herself with issues of fertility off-screen. More significantly perhaps, thanks to this episode's focus on Chandler's story, awkward though it is in its problematization of male infertility as shameful and a result of inferior masculinity, *Friends* proposes an alternative discourse to infertility as a uniquely female problem and transfer the locus of responsibility from the exclusive realm of the mother-to-be to the shared one of the parents-to-be.

In this particular narrative thread, the sitcom, in effect, elects to shift the blame of infertility. Questioning Chandler's masculinity through uncertainty about his fertility parallels and upsets a more entrenched medical and cultural tradition of questioning and doubting the femininity of women, hopeful mothers-to-be, afflicted by infertility. That this reversal be represented through an equivalent yet opposing discourse of male blaming may be regretted, however, it does open up space in popular culture to address male infertility at a moment when men were (and still are) increasingly afflicted by it.[490]

Figure 108 Nurse Terry intimidates the vulnerable Chandler.

Figure 109 Ex-girlfriend Janice shows up to point, laugh and further emasculate Chandler in this shameful moment.

[490] Vardit Ravitsky and Sarah Kimmins, "Over the past 40 years, sperm counts worldwide have halved and sperm quality has declined alarmingly with 1 in 20 men currently facing reduced fertility," *Biology of Reproduction* 101, no. 5 (2019): 872-874. https://academic.oup.com/biolreprod/article/101/5/872/5551192

In any case, in an implicit recognition of the emotional toll of the process on both partners, this episode's final scene in which Monica and Chandler both learn they are infertile mostly eschews laughter, and yet another *Friends* episode treating issues of childbearing ends with a simple fade to black.

It is Chandler, home alone, who receives the call from the fertility clinic and must announce the news to Monica. Placing the responsibility of sharing the poor diagnosis in Chandler's hand further implicates the male character in this story of fertility failure. As Chandler announces the diagnosis and the couple grapples with its significance, the camera slowly moves in to capture the intimacy of the moment. Soft guitar music only begins to accompany the scene before the final fade to black. A few instances of soft studio audience laughter may be heard but this is completely absent for the full final minute.

> **Monica**: So, what is it? Is there a problem? Is there a problem with me? Or with you?
> **Chandler**: Actually, it's both of us.
> **Monica, stunned**: What?
> **Chandler**: Apparently, my sperm have low motility and you have an inhospitable environment. [Studio audience laughter.]
> **Monica**: Oh… well, what does that mean?
> **Chandler**: It means that my guys won't get off their Barcaloungers and you have a uterus that is prepared to kill the ones that do. [Laughter] It means…
> **Monica**, **impatiently**: Ok, Chandler…
> **Chandler**, **slowly**: It means that we can keep trying, but there's a good chance this may never happen for us.
> **Monica, beginning to cry**: Oh my God!
> **Chandler**: I'm sorry.
> **Monica**: I'm sorry too.
> **Chandler**: Well, we're going to figure this out.
> **Monica**: Yeah, I know.

The scene is remarkable not only for its emotional heft but also for its commitment to striving for absolute equality between the two potential parents. The double diagnosis is shared twice by Chandler; once, employing the language of medical science to anchor the problem as a medically valid verdict as well as to signify that the sitcom's writers carefully researched the implications of their narrative decisions, the second, in lay terms, to help the audience better understand the results and offer the requisite space for laughter within this otherwise exclusively dramatic scene. Both iterations emphasize the dual nature of this adversity. Ultimately, there is no room for blame or fault-finding here as the problem lies within the bodies of both characters (this

specific combination of diagnoses also acts as a limiting factor on the possible narrative choices available to the writers in the following episodes). The “I’m sorry” proffered on the part of both husband and wife are polysemic. They are at once the mutually empathic responses of a caring couple aware of one another’s misfortune as well as apologies for their respective reproductive deficiencies, expressions of regret for the physiological shortcomings which would prevent them from becoming parents through traditional intercourse.

Chandler and Monica, in following a traditional heteronormative script from courtship to marriage have done everything according to conventional norms of family formation. Ultimately their reproductive systems betray them. Yet, within this story of physiological betrayal, a new set of conventions is at work. Chandler and Monica’s shared infertility is fundamentally an example of a politics of gender equality. This example of equal opportunity infertility, striking both the male and female partner to equal degrees, demonstrates a commitment on behalf of the sitcom, albeit an imperfect and ever fluctuating one, to a movement towards full equality within the sphere of familial formation. Finally, Chandler’s portrayal earlier in the episode as immature and imperfectly masculine is recuperated to an extent through the authoritative yet sensitive role he plays in this final scene.

Figure 110 Chandler receives and then announces the news of the couple's shared infertility. The episode ends with a fade to black that has by now become synonymous in Friends *with the serious business of having children and starting families.*

IV.2.7. How Will Monica Enter Motherhood? The Ultimate Narrative Decision

The following week's episode follows the couple as they parse their options and ultimately decide on adoption. The episode simultaneously moves the narrative forward (in the wake of the preceding episode's bad news, Chandler and Monica arrive at an important decision), while also resetting the diegesis to its former equilibrium: Chandler is once again silly and immature, ogling a poster of the female reproductive system during a consultation with the fertility specialist, while Monica reprises her role as the yearning mother-to-be, now aware of her own infertility. This delicate equilibrium, alternating between stasis and narrative progression, demonstrates this sitcom's deft ability to conform to the characteristic episodic nature of the genre while also integrating the serialized storytelling inherent to narratives of maternity.

During this medical visit, the specialist spells out the possible choices available to the couple given their specific configuration of infertility. "Well, given your situation," he begins, "the options with the greatest chances for success would be surrogacy or insemination using a sperm donor." He continues, "and of course if you feel that neither of those is right for you, you could always adopt." This scene is not only an occasion to spell out the choices for the characters themselves it is also the opportunity for the audience to understand the potential narrative options available to the writers, characters and audience, a nod to the heterodiegetic processes at work in preparing the final season.

The sitcom postulates three options, each of which involve dramatically different implications for this fictional future maternal figure. *Friends* has deemed Monica infertile because her uterus is unable to maintain a pregnancy, but her ovaries and eggs are left intact. Likewise, Chandler's sperm lack motility but could conceivably be rendered viable through artificial insemination or in-vitro fertilization; thus, the first option, surrogate pregnancy, could in fact result in a biological child for the couple to raise. The second possibility, relying on a sperm donor, appears incoherent here: whether the future child was half Monica's and half somebody else's, Monica's uterus would still be unable to carry a pregnancy and reliance on a surrogate mother would still be necessary. Rather, the option appears to have been included for the sole purpose of this episode which revolves around a discomfiting story line in which one of Chandler's colleagues is asked to dinner to be 'interviewed' for the role of donor. The third option, adoption, is the only one which denies Monica the possibility of raising a child linked to her biologically.

The surrogate pregnancy possibility is rejected quickly in a subsequent scene. It is Chandler, confiding in his two male friends, who explains why: "Monica's dreamt her whole life of carrying a child, and she just felt that watching a surrogate would be too hard for her." Several aspects are of note in Monica's justification, transmitted here by Chandler. Firstly, it raises the specter of feelings of maternal competition and jealousy aroused on the part of the infertile maternal figure towards the fertile one, an aspect of surrogacy which was not addressed in Phoebe's narrative as Alice was regularly presented as being exceedingly grateful to the younger woman. Furthermore, unlike the Season Four episode in which much handwringing is spent on detailing the physical and psychological implications of the process for the surrogate mother (Phoebe), Monica's reasoning omits concerns about the health and safety of this hypothetical woman altogether. Moreover, that the open adoption process embarked upon by the couple in the following season exposes Monica to this exact set of circumstances (essentially, "watching a surrogate"), with the added repercussion of resulting in an *un*biologically related child, appears not to be a concern for the writers or the characters. Likewise, Joey's anxiety about not knowing what surrogacy means ("So you're ruling out surrogacy? So I don't have to learn what that means?"), in spite of having accompanied Phoebe through the process five seasons earlier, appears not to have struck the writing room as a storytelling discrepancy and reveals the extent to which the content of a long-running series such as *Friends* is always dependent on the vagaries of the writers' room, the specific configuration of which is subject to change from season to season.

The second option, as noted above, in spite of its unconvincing narrative justification becomes the thrust of this episode's fertility narrative thread. Chandler's spontaneous move to bring home Zach (played by John Stamos), a colleague from work, strikes Monica as "crazy," although, upon learning that he is as compulsively neat as she is, she does begin to consider the possibility. Zach's presence functions to once again position Chandler as insufficiently or imperfectly masculine, as well as an unsuitable or deficient paternal figure. He qualifies his work friend as "sperm-tastic" and goes on to suggest that, "even if my sperm were fine, I think he'd be the way to go." Later, his eagerness is even more pronounced. "So what do you think?" He asks Monica. "I want this guy's genes for my kid! Those eyes, those cheekbones!" Monica's exasperated response to her husband, "Okay, there's enthusiastic and there's just plain gay!" once again filters Chandler's behavior through a prism of heteronormativity: Chandler's desire for Zach to be his children's biological father becomes muddled with an erotic desire for Zach himself. The

joke registers as just another example of the humor that can be derived whenever Chandler's sexuality or masculinity is questioned. At a deeper level, however, Chandler's desire for Zach is more complicated and much darker. It is the desire for genetic erasure, the antithesis of reproduction. In effect, the character seems to be willing to remove himself from the gene pool in order to ameliorate the future generation and as such may be interpreted as a commentary on the profound disillusionment and insecurity of the Generation X cohort in relation to the project of family formation.

Chandler and Monica's infertility thus opens up the possibility to move beyond the constraints of one's own limiting or disappointing genetic material, to father and mother children more evolved and improved than those which could have been created through traditional conception and gestation. It is a possibility steeped in both hope for a better (perfect?) future as well as self-loathing and despair for oneself and one's past. Chandler and Monica's awkward "interview" of Zach over dinner, during which they question their unsuspecting guest about the personal details of his physical and mental health, becomes ultimately an opportunity to "preview" the protentional future offspring itself. As such, the sitcom hints at the ethically murky possibilities made available by scientific and technological intervention in human reproduction.

Ultimately, the sitcom pulls back from this philosophically and ideologically charged narrative possibility. Monica rejects Zach's sperm and renews her devotion to her husband, "If I can't get pregnant with you, then I don't want to get pregnant by him or anyone else," she tells Chandler. He expresses relief. Bringing Zach home to meet Monica was an act of desperation revealing the character's shame and guilt at not being able to "bring the sperm" to his wife, to fulfill his husbandly duty. In opting for the choice of adoption the couple renew their devotion to one another, and the sitcom opts to bring Monica to motherhood in a fashion which is both exceedingly conservative ("I want to find a baby that needs a home and I want to raise it with you," Chandler says to his wife) and relatively unique for the genre.

Figure 111 The final scene of season nine's fertility-infertility narrative. Chandler and Monica gaze into their future after having settled on the decision to adopt a baby following their diagnosis of infertility.

On screen the couple ticks through one choice after another, settling finally on adoption. Off screen, the sitcom itself seemingly searches for the perfect narrative option, one that allows for a closure capable of satisfying a viewing public invested in this most traditional and conservative potential family unit while at the same time staying true to the *Friends* ethos of challenging that very same notion of traditional family formation. The adoption option manages this equilibrium: the couple desiring a family above all else ends up with two newborn babies, a fully-fledged family, to care for. A traditional nuclear family is formed, and, as if to erase any doubts about the traditional nature of this fictional family, *Friends* ends its storytelling on the cusp of the new family's move out of urban New York City and into the suburbs. At the same time, the choice of the adoption narrative necessarily troubles this idyll by bringing on the scene a third party, a second maternal figure on whose body Monica is dependent in order to fulfill her series-long desire to mother a child. While this problematic is eminently reminiscent of one of the underlying tensions in the narrative arc of Phoebe's surrogate pregnancy, five years after the series' first foray into a story concerning multiple maternal figures, this series-ending plotline resonates, as will be seen, very differently. In any case, the infertility and adoption narratives allow *Friends* to squeeze in one final depiction of alternative motherhood.

After these two consecutive episodes, the narrative arc of adoption was put to one side for the following three episodes to make room for other narrative threads. When the story resumed after the 2003 summer hiatus, it was stretched over the shortened, seventeen-episode, season allowing for something of a methodical (if highly fictionalized) approach to the adoption process. These two consecutive episodes which terminate season nine's narrative of trying to conceive while paving the way for the series' final approach to family foundation and motherhood were not received without criticism. One mother diagnosed with infertility writing at the time in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, acknowledged that "NBC and the creative team behind '*Friends*' are in the business of entertaining a widely diverse audience," but suggested that "it would be refreshing if, when the series resumes this fall, they accurately portrayed some of the physical, emotional and financial heartache that the disease of infertility, and the process of adoption, can cause.[491]" It is unclear whether or not the writers were aware of this type of criticism, but the amount of diegetic

[491] Suzy Evans, "Infertility Feels Like a Punch, Not a Punchline," *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2003. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-may-19-et-evans19-story.html

space accorded to this narrative in the final season suggests an intent to approach the topic with a certain degree of seriousness while remaining resolutely loyal to the genre's comic imperative.

IV.3. The Politics of Adoption in *Friends*

Of the final seventeen instalments of the series, eight of them deal in some way with the prospect of Monica and Chandler's decision to adopt. The second episode of the final season, "The One where Ross is Fine," lays the groundwork. Not only does it (re)establish Monica as the true motivator behind the process of becoming parents but it also succinctly presents the audience with some of the different variations within the adoptive process (intercountry adoption, dependency adoption), thereby reprising this sitcom's role of educator when it comes to stories of alternative motherhoods. Additionally, Monica's exasperated reflection that the process is "so overwhelming" and that there are "so many ways to go and this is, like, the biggest decision of our lives," is the sitcom's acknowledgment of the complexities of this tremendous undertaking.[492]

While this episode offers a (very) brief introduction to the topic of adoption, the plot quickly turns to the more familiar terrain of situation comedy humor. The couple are invited to the home of another couple, adoptive parents themselves, to discuss the complicated process. In this setting, Chandler reincarnates the incompetent future father figure, first revealing to the couple's child that he is adopted, a fact the parents have hitherto not revealed to the boy.[493] Chandler then tries to bribe the child to prevent him from reporting to his parents what he has just learned. Finally, Chandler suggests that he and Monica run away to avoid an uncomfortable confrontation with the unhappy parents. That Monica appears only too happy to oblige and that the entire treatment of Chandler's unfortunate reveal, as well as the child's and the parents' obvious distress, is framed

[492] However, unlike the treatment of surrogacy, no mention is made of the heavy financial burden necessary to undertake the process.

[493] This choice to make the adoption of the boy known to all but the young child himself within a larger narrative arc which aims to celebrate adoption as an *open* process seems incoherent and suggests that for the writers, the topic of adoption may have been considered both an innovative and interesting narrative arc to pursue as well as a handy prop with which to characterize Chandler as a stereotypical bumbling father. Alternatively, it may be read as a sly and sophisticated critique of closed adoption as an archaic and fundamentally harmful process.

by laughter suggests an uncharacteristic insensitivity on the part of the writers and foreshadows some of this narrative arc's more ethically troublesome fare on the horizon.[494]

Further examples of this type of morally questionable behavior exploited for laughter include Joey's manipulation of the social worker who arrives at Chandler and Monica's apartment for a pre-adoption visit (Home Study) in the seventh episode of this season, "The One with the Home Study." When the social worker (an attractive young woman) arrives, she reveals that she had previously dated a man in the building who left her disappointed when he didn't return her calls after they spent the night together. The man, of course, turns out to be Joey. When the two wind up meeting during the visit, Joey turns the tables on the social worker, improvising a lie and claiming that he had been waiting for her to call since their fateful date. The contrived guilt trip and embarrassment over the encounter pushes the social worker to quickly approve Chandler and Monica's application as adoptive parents. What is supposed to be a serious and thorough visit examining the intended parents' as well as the home environment's fitness to welcome a child is reduced in the sitcom to a farce, a further exploitation of Joey's rampant womanizing for laughs.[495] In the end, Chandler and Monica are approved for adoptive parenthood *not* because of their merits as people but thanks to their friend's vulgar manipulation of the social worker's emotions. It is a deceit in which the intended parents remain entirely complicit and it foreshadows a more troubling example of dishonesty (this time on the part of the intended mother, Monica) to come.

IV.3.1. The Birth Mother: First Impressions

Chandler and Monica learn, at the end of *Friends*' final Thanksgiving episode, "The One with the Late Thanksgiving," that they have been chosen as potential adoptive parents by a pregnant woman in Ohio. The group hug and the enthusiastic reaction on the part of the other characters (as well as the studio audience) mirror the reaction that Phoebe's announcement of her positive pregnancy

[494] Indeed, the sitcom pushes this to the extreme when Chandler further reveals to Owen that Santa Claus is not real. In this episode he also tells Frank's triplets that it was Phoebe who gave birth to them, and, in a humorous reference to his own irresponsibility, the episode ends on a suggestion that he will reveal to Ross and Rachel's daughter Emma that she was "a mistake."

[495] The Home Study is intended to ensure "that children are placed in safe homes. The [adoption agency] staff will interview the parents, review their medical histories, conduct criminal background checks, and talk with references." For an overview of the open adoption process in The United States, see the U.S Department of Health and Human Services guide, "Open Adoption: Could Open Adoption be the Best Choice for you and Your Baby?" https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/openadoption.pdf

test elicited five seasons earlier. Yet this announcement presages a story line in which the birth mother, who in this case is also the biological mother, will be treated very differently by the sitcom.

As an example, in her toast to the couples' fortunate news, Rachel says this: "To Monica and Chandler, and that knocked-up girl in Ohio." This first classification of the character who will become known to the audience as Erica in the following episodes and who will give up what turns out to be twins to the married protagonists already proposes a number of signifiers. In opposition to the known entities of Chandler and Monica, the biological mother remains anonymous, an unknown. Rachel's toast, however, structures the audience's first impression of this as yet off-screen character in some key ways. Referring to her as a girl allows for a certain amount of ambiguity concerning her age but undoubtedly signals youthfulness and immaturity and suggests that the pregnant mother may be a minor. Placing her in Ohio, a state with large urban centers, significant swaths of rural farmland and a substantial footing in the plateaus of the Appalachian Mountains delimits the characterization of the pregnant woman geographically while maintaining ambiguity in terms of the woman's cultural and geographical identity. Finally, addressing her pregnant status through the derogatory slang term "knocked up" implies that the pregnancy is out-of-wedlock and illegitimate and may certainly garner laughs but also clearly reveals an overall lack of consideration and respect for the person whose pregnancy is not only unfortunate enough to cause her to seek adoption but is one in which the married couple has a clear and vested interest, a pregnancy from which they will benefit directly and indefinitely. This toast, cheering for the personal misfortune of a vulnerable woman, resonates with Chandler's statement just after the couple made the decision to adopt at the end of Season Nine. Gazing out of the window (see image on page 393) he says quietly to Monica, "If we're lucky, and we're really, really, really quiet, we may be able to hear the sound of a condom breaking."

A fateful dichotomy is set up: for Monica and Chandler to happily fulfill their desire to become parents, to get lucky, another party, a young woman, must necessarily be struck by misfortune, an unwanted pregnancy. While this may very well be one of the realities of the adoption process, the overt celebration of this in *Friends* is curious. Part of this difference in treatment is certainly be explained by the fact that, unlike Phoebe, the young birth mother Erica is a secondary character written into the story for the sole purpose of providing narrative closure in the form of a nuclear family for two of the main protagonists in which the *Friends* audience has had such ample opportunity to invest in and identify with over an extended period of time. Yet,

there is a distinct, though subtle, aesthetic of meanness which accompanies this particular story line, paradoxically coded as emotionally resonant and fulfilling for the characters of Monica and Chandler. It accompanies much of the content of this particular narrative arc and shapes the ideological implications of this representation of adoption, conjuring long-standing traditions of mistreatment and discrimination against young, pregnant unmarried girls and women throughout the twentieth century in the United States.

IV.3.2. Interlude: The Adoption Mandate[496] in the United States

In order to better conceptualize the implications of this particular example of fictional adoptive motherhood on the small screen, it is useful to briefly think about some of the political and ideological considerations of adoption in the United States. At its most fundamental, it is a solution to the conundrum of an unexpected, unwanted or financially untenable pregnancy. Without terminating the pregnancy, the resulting responsibilities (the child) are shifted to another person. In the United States (and, undoubtedly, throughout the world and across the ages), until the early years of the twentieth century, this process occurred relatively informally, a more fluid and unregulated practice in which women seeking to give up their babies did so without much recourse to or intervention from so-called experts and third-party officials.

But as with most aspects pertaining in some way or another to the issues of reproduction and motherhood, the politics of adoption have been shaped and influenced by converging and ever-fluctuating social, religious, cultural and economic forces so that by the early 2000s the adoption process looked very different than a century earlier. Elements such as the Progressive Era rise in social work as an area of expertise, the influence of Freudian-inspired psychoanalysis and psychology, concerns about (female) sexual mores and normative family structure, as well as anxieties linked to female fertility and infertility – anxieties due, in part, to the increasing participation of women in the work force – have all worked to structure ideas about who can and

[496] This is Solinger's term for the forces prevailing on unmarried white women in the post-World War II Era pressuring them to give up their illegitimate babies for adoption. Rickie Solinger, "Race and 'Value': Black and White Illegitimate Babies, 1945-1965" in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency* eds. Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang, and Linda Rennie Forcey (New York and London: Routledge, 1994): 287-310.

should give up their babies and why, who can and should adopt those babies and why, as well as the specific processes governing those transactions.

In her article "Race and 'Value:' Black and White Illegitimate Babies, 1945-1965," itself based on her book length study, *"Wake Up Little Susie:" Single Pregnancy and Race in the Pre-*Roe v. Wade *Era*, Rickie Solinger concisely summarizes some of these forces particularly pertaining to unmarried women during the post-WWII era at a time when discourses surrounding white unmarried pregnant girls and women changed dramatically. From the early twentieth-century view that single mothers were biologically and genetically degenerate and that it was best to keep mother and child together in a circumscribed dyad of illegitimacy so as to avoid contamination to more morally upright members of society, discourses surrounding adoption evolved thanks to "[p]sychological explanations" which "transformed the white unwed mother from a genetically tainted unfortunate into a maladjusted woman who could be cured […] The white out-of-wedlock child, therefore, was no longer a flawed by-product of innate immorality and low intelligence. The child's innocence was restored and its adoptability established.[497]"

This optimistic discourse of restorability suggested that young women who had conceived outside of wedlock could be rehabilitated from their former sexual deviance and avoid life-ending shame and ruin as long as they relinquished their babies at birth. Parallelly, through complete and final separation from their birth mothers, babies born out of wedlock would likewise be accorded a clean slate, stripped of their association to immorality and placed in more normative familial configurations. Scientific discourses pathologizing and stigmatizing infertility also contributed to increased demand for babies to adopt. The post-War adoption mandate offered the hope of restored purity to all involved. *Friends* taps into this discourse of purity refurbishment in subtle ways. In the hospital giving birth, for example, Erica is asked by an awkward Chandler how she intends to spend the summer just after having given birth. Her reply, "I don't know, maybe church camp," evokes the possibility of religious restoration, the possibility of a born-again virginity which would put Erica, a wayward but nonetheless savable young character, back on track, capable of reentering nonpathological motherhood at a later date within the appropriate confines of heteronormative marriage. Chandler's rejoinder, "You may not want to mention *this* [the out-of-wedlock pregnancy]," underscores the shame Erica is meant to endure for her transgressions and the possibility that she may transcend the stain on her character by keeping her mistake secret.

[497] Solinger, 289.

For much of the later part of the twentieth century, and because it was intended as a clean break for all involved, adoption was indeed a closed and secretive process. Records were sealed, erasing the biological, genetic and social histories of the mothers and children concerned. The move toward open adoption has arisen out of evolving concerns for the psychological and physical well-being of children and families cut off from knowledge that could enable them to live healthier lives. Open adoption, in which links between the parties remain accessible, more or less maintained, and ideally, friendly, is now considered the norm.[498]

Although the representation of adoption in *Friends* draws its inspiration from the more progressively conceived open adoption process (Monica and Chandler meet Erica on multiple occasions and invite her to New York City for the final weeks of her pregnancy), the sitcom's characterization of the birth mother, the adoptive parents, as well as the relationship which is developed between them ultimately depicts as regressive a narrative on motherhood as may be seen in *Friends*.

IV.3.3. Meeting the Birth Mother: An Ethical Test for Monica

After having struggled with conception for over a year culminating in a diagnosis of infertility and after having decided to start their family by adopting a child, Chandler and Monica appear to be finally on the verge of achieving their desire. Informed that this young pregnant woman has chosen Monica and Chandler's profile at the end of season ten's eighth episode, the couple flies to Ohio to meet with the mother of their potential child in the following episode, "The One with the Birth Mother." The episode's cold open which takes place in the Central Perk coffee shop again serves as a pedagogical reminder to the other characters as well as to the audience of what is at stake in this narrative of adoption. In another echo of Phoebe's surrogate pregnancy, in this scene it once again falls to Joey, the character whose intellectual (in)capacities make him the perfect stand-in for a wider audience lacking general knowledge on reproductive matters, to play the fool.

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[498] See for example Adam Pertman's *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families – and America*, for a discussion of the open adoption "revolution." "After decades of incremental improvement and tinkering at the margins, adoption is reshaping itself to the core. It is shedding its corrosive stigmas and rejecting its secretive past; states are revising their laws and agencies are rewriting their rules even as the Internet is rendering them obsolete, especially by making it simpler for adoptees and birth parents to find each other." Adam Pertman, *Adoption Nation: How the Adoption Revolution is Transforming Our Families – and America* (Boston: The Harvard Common Press, 2011), 5.

Monica: We're going to meet the lady who could be carrying our baby.
Joey: I can't believe it! When you guys come back, you're gonna have a baby. That is so weird!
Chandler: And so incorrect.
Monica: She's only a couple months pregnant. I mean, she liked our application, but who knows if she's going to like us […] And a lot could still get in our way.
Chandler: Yeah, I mean, this girl could decide against adoption, or she could like another couple better…

The adoptive couple spells out the process and the potential hurdles to their ill-informed friends and in doing so the process of open adoption is configured as one in which the birth mother wields the ultimate power of conferring on them not only a baby but also all of the attendant implications in terms of roles and status that go along. In light of the potential pitfalls, Chandler explains that they are trying not to get their hopes up. Yet Joey encourages the couple to think positively and Monica undergoes an abrupt change in attitude. "Oh my God. She's gonna pick us," she proclaims confidently. "I know that things could still go wrong, but if they don't, if this works out, we're gonna have a *baby* Chandler. A *baby*!" Then more excitedly still, "Oh my God, it's gonna work! We're gonna make it work. I'm gonna be a mommy and you're gonna be a daddy! I'll see you suckers. I'm gonna go get me a baby!" The audience claps as Monica leaves the coffee shop in a hurry. The character's newfound determination, in spite of Chandler's reservations, proves fateful for this episode as well as for the protagonist's characterization as an adoptive mother to be.

The following scene in this narrative is situated by the sitcom in an adoption agency located, thanks to establishing shots, in an urban setting. The couple is shown into a warmly appointed meeting room and they sit side by side. *Friends* explicitly points to the awkwardness of the situation through Chandler who, anticipating his introduction to the birth mother, says, "It's just weird you know? It's like, 'Hi, I'm Chandler, may I have the human growing inside you?'" Monica, on the other hand, is cockily confident. To Chandler's "you're gonna be great," she replies, "Well, obviously." It is Chandler's character then who, through the filter of humor, communicates a more intuitive and sensitive approach to the innate delicacy of the situation, to the very fact of the birth mother's bodily and psychic existence. In contrast, the future maternal character appears unmoved by any consideration for the fact that the couple is hoping to take a baby home that will have been nourished and brought to life within the body of another woman. The character who *Friends* has kept waiting for almost ten years demonstrates her readiness

through intense self-assurance, but the writers introduce another hurdle for the character to overcome and, in her haste to access the much-anticipated maternal status, she stumbles.

Erica[499] arrives, accompanied by an official from the adoption agency. The character is an unassuming, soft-spoken and modestly dressed, young blond woman, wearing a maternity tunic which slightly accentuates a just-protruding abdomen. The couple and the woman warmly shake hands and sit down to begin the interview. Erica immediately confesses to being intimated by this "amazing couple" and to their dismay, Chandler and Monica learn that Erica is erroneously under the impression that Chandler is a doctor and Monica a reverend. It is Chandler who begins to interrupt the young woman to correct her mistaken perception. Monica, in turn, interrupts him before he can speak and, immediately and deceptively coopting Erica's incorrect understanding of their identities, claps an authoritative hand to her husband's leg saying, "let her finish, Doctor." Audience laughter cues the end of this scene and when it is reopened it is Chandler who, while going along with Monica's falsehood, once again demonstrates a more profound ability to take the pregnant woman's subjective perspective into consideration:

> **Chandler**: So, the fact that I'm a doctor and my wife is a reverend, that's important to you?
> **Erica**: Yeah, I read some great applications but then I thought, who better than a reverend to raise a child?
> **Monica**: Amen. [Audience laughter].
> **Erica**: Plus, I thought the baby would be in good hands with a doctor.
> **Monica**, **reaching for Chandler's hands**. Good hands. Healing hands.
> **Erica**: Reverend, can I ask? Does the Bible say anything about adoption?
> **Monica**: It says, "Do it!" [Audience laughter]. "And behold, she did adopt unto them a baby. And it was good." [Audience laughter].

Erica continues to ask the couple more about their respective professions. Monica continues to impersonate a religious official while Chandler carefully answers Erica's questions so as not to lie but without revealing the truth of the mistake either. The adoption official enters the room and Erica, confident in her (false) knowledge of the couple, tells him that she no longer needs to reflect on her decision, she has chosen them. Monica, overwhelmed, hugs Erica and thanks her, adding, "you are *so* going to heaven!" Once again, audience laughter closes the scene.

It is difficult to minimize the future maternal figure's perfidy in this scene. No attempt is made on her part to correct the misunderstanding; indeed, she leans into it with gusto, adopting the

[499] Played by Anna Faris (*Mom*, CBS, 2013-present).

false persona of a Christian religious authority and improvising Biblical passages to reassure the unwitting pregnant woman. Chandler is more reticent and in a later scene becomes the moral counterpoint, restoring reason to his ethically challenged wife. “This woman is giving away her child. She deserves to know who it’s going to,” he reminds her. Monica eventually acquiesces although she remains reluctant to tell the truth, especially when Erica shows the couple a sonogram picture of the fetus. It falls to Chandler to reveal their true identities to Erica who is furious: “You think I’d give you my child after this? This is over!” proclaims the young woman as she leaves the room in disgust.

It is Chandler who runs after the birth mother and convinces her to give them the baby. He pleads with Erica telling her that they only lied because they were so desperate to have a baby, that Erica should indeed give them the baby because “it kills [him] that [he] can’t give [Monica]” one, that he really wants a kid. But the sitcom saves Chandler’s decisive argument for last. Monica, he says, “is a mother…without a baby.” This line of reasoning, the sitcom’s camera work suggests, has the intended effect on the character. A reaction shot of Erica shows her hesitating, looking away from Chandler as if deeply affected by what he has just said, before looking back at him and ever so slightly shrugging her shoulders, or shrinking away, suddenly much less sure of her indignation at being lied to.

The camera cuts back to Monica, still waiting pensively in the room Erica has just stormily vacated. Chandler enters. “You still want that baby?” he asks. Monica smiles in relief, Chandler does a dance of victory and the two embrace as the audience cheers and claps loudly. “God bless you, Chandler Bing,” says Monica reprising her faux reverend persona. Audience laughter is heard once again, and the episode ends.

Monica, in spite of deliberately and unashamedly lying repeatedly to the pregnant woman, will indeed get her baby thanks to Chandler’s intervention and, specifically, an appeal to the character’s unfulfilled status as mother. In spite of knowing that their actions were “wrong,” Erica, the moral compass in this episode, decides to give the baby to them. Significantly, the spoken response of the young woman remains unsaid, her consenting voice goes unheard. The sitcom no doubt skips this crucial moment for the sake of enhancing suspense, yet in doing so it succeeds in positioning Erica as subordinate, literally voiceless in the face of the more powerful and privileged couple’s desires. The absence of her explicit consent symbolizes a wider lack of esteem and

recognition accorded to the character on the part of the sitcom and code her as expendable, there to be exploited for her body's reproductive capacities.

This narrative arc then positions Monica once again engaging in ethically questionable behavior in her mission to get a baby, although it appears to excuse that behavior through an appeal to the essentialist nature of Monica's motherhood which just happens to be frustrated due to her unfortunate infertility. While the audience is surely meant to sympathize with Monica who has waited so long to become a mother, the sitcom's characterization of the two maternal figures is highly troubling. In showing Monica going to extreme lengths to get the baby while the vulnerable birth mother is left little room to refuse, the sitcom flirts dangerously with adoption abuse. Monica, in refusing to deal honestly and ethically with the woman bearing her potential child, refuses to recognize the young woman's humanity, and Erica becomes little more than a baby-producing object standing in the way of Monica's desire for motherhood.[500] As in the narrative of trying from the previous season, *Friends* appears to suggest, through Monica's devious behavior, that the desire for a baby is so strong that women are ready and willing to lie and cheat in order to fulfill it.

If Erica's youth, unmarried status, and need to put her baby up for adoption make her appear vulnerable in this episode, further appearances of the Erica character unfortunately seem only to create space for this sitcom to dig deep into regressive stereotypes of unmarried pregnant girls and women.

IV.3.4. Erica and the Question of Class

After a four-episode respite, the narrative arc of adoption is picked up once again in Season Ten's thirteenth episode, "The One Where Joey Speaks French." This episode illustrates another step in the process of open adoption as Erica arrives to spend time in New York so that the adoptive triad

[500] This conception of Erica as objectified baby producer is reinforced when Monica bakes cookies for her (Season ten, Episode thirteen) not as a kind gesture of kindness or gratitude to the birth mother but instead because Monica wants "the baby to come out all cute and fat." The fixation on the baby at the expense of attention to the birth mother becomes a dominant theme for the remaining episodes treating this narrative. When Monica introduces Erica to Phoebe and Joey, she presents the pregnant woman and then instantly points to her abdomen. The unborn fetus held within the young woman's body is accorded as much attention as the birth mother. Chandler is not immune to this dynamic, either. When Erica describes the long list of tourist sights she hopes to see while in New York, an exasperated Chandler whispers to Monica, "this baby better be really good."

can become more acquainted. It is also the occasion for the writers to flesh out this secondary character as well as for the audience to learn more about the woman carrying Chandler and Monica's baby. Erica is presented as a naïve and commonplace tourist, childishly excited by the prospect of seeing New York and eager to visit the city's most popular landmarks. By comparison, the New York couple appear adult, worldly and cultured, and Chandler's disdain for Erica's choice in landmarks codes her as tacky and unsophisticated. This characterization offers a subtle means for the sitcom to introduce an understated yet distinct comment on the character's socio-economic class. Already situated as an Ohio native, in this episode the Erica character is conferred a decidedly hillbilly aesthetic suggesting she is more Appalachian bumpkin than Cleveland urbanite. Her poufy bangs and simple, unfashionable clothing point to her relative lack of taste and style especially in comparison to the always chicly dressed Monica.

More clearly still, Erica's description of the baby's biological father renders the character identifiable as white trash. Here is what the character has to say about the baby's father: "well he was my high school boyfriend, captain of the football team, really cute. And he got a scholarship and went off to college. Yeah, it's almost definitely him […] Well there's a chance it's another guy. I mean I've only ever been with two guys, but they sort of overlapped." Erica proceeds to reveal that the other potential father is now serving time in prison after killing his own father with a shovel. Reaction shots predictably show the adopting couple's shock as cries of surprised laughter are heard from the studio audience. Two elements encapsulating questions related to class are of note in this account. Firstly, Erica's shy disclosure that she was sexually involved with two men at the same time (as well as the audience's laughing reaction to the news) designates the young woman as sexually deviant, a slut, unable or unwilling to uphold conventional and monogamous middle-class sexual propriety, much less pre-marital abstinence. Secondly, the criminal record of the second potential father, the intrafamily violence and the weapon specified in its use (a shovel) are all evocative of a degenerate lower-class, perhaps rural, family struggling to maintain, or altogether ignorant of, middle class normative behavior and respectability.

While the sitcom finally establishes that the first man, the more socially acceptable and aspirational local high school hero, is indeed the father, it does so in a way that deepens Erica's association with deviant, even maternally unworthy behavior, and decidedly unmaternal sexuality. It is Monica who reports to Chandler that she has resolved the mystery of the paternal figure brought about by Erica's disobedient sexuality. "It turns out that Erica didn't pay much attention

in sex ed class," Monica explains to her husband, "because the thing she did with that prison guy? It would be pretty hard to make a baby that way." This new information confirms that Erica engaged in exclusively non-procreative sex with the murderer-boyfriend and the news reassures the couple who now know that their future baby will have no link to the violent man, will remain untainted by a genetic and biological connection to the moral degenerate who interrupted the sanctity of normal familial life with his lethal violence. At the same time Erica's sexual practices move her to the Outer Limits of Rubin's sex hierarchy,[501] further stigmatizing the young woman as sexually and morally perverted and reawakening dormant stereotypes of unmarried pregnant teenage girls as abnormal if not downright pathological.[502]

As if to fully lean into the fact of Erica's sexual deviancy, if only to titillate and amuse viewers, Chandler insists on more detail. "Oh, God, what was it?" he asks his wife, "the thing we hardly ever do or the thing we *never* do?" *Friends* remains coy in its references to non-vaginal sex. The two options may presumably be interpretable as oral and anal sex. Monica specifies that it was the latter, initiating a begrudging admiration for "shovelley Joe" on the part of Chandler. The new baby is thus rescued from the ignoble genetic heritage of the murdering potential father but only at the expense of Erica's already compromised reputation, while the young, unmarried, lower-class woman's engagement in non-procreative sex distances her ever further from appropriate motherhood status and confirms the older, married, sexually normative Monica as the more suitable maternal figure for the unborn baby.

Rickie Solinger articulates the intersection of class, gender and race as a salient framework shaping adoption politics in the United States. Discussing these dynamics and their relation to young, white working-class or poor women in the post-WWII era, who were particularly vulnerable to adoption abuse, she argues,

> Because they were poor, they did not have the information or other resources to resist baby-market operators. Because they were female (specifically, white females), their socially mandated shame precluded self-protection and motherhood. Because they were white, their babies had value. This combination of poverty, race and gender – in a context which defined white unwed mothers as non-mothers, and defined their babies as valuable – put some white, unwed mothers in a position of extreme vulnerability.[503]

[501] Rubin, 152.
[502] It should be noted that if these stereotypes were in fact in the process of being laid to rest, this can only be considered the case for young, unmarried, *white* women. The pejorative stereotype of the unmarried pregnant black girl or woman as Jezebel or Welfare Queen maintained currency much longer.
[503] Solinger, 296.

Watching these episodes of *Friends,* we see these very dynamics at work. While Erica may not be subjected to the machinations of the "baby-market operators" that Solinger goes on to discuss, her inferior social status does make it difficult for her to refuse the couple's request for her baby even in the face of their significant dishonesty. Her white baby is particularly coveted by this white upper middle-class infertile couple, and her gender and class mean that in the absence of a suitable paternal figure, raising the child on her own is not a valid option for her. The contrasts between the sitcom's depiction of Rachel's unmarried pregnancy and this one, constructed as it is within the confines of a secondary character, are striking. Rachel's upper-middle class status, her older (but not too old), more appropriate maternal age as well as her continual proximity to the biological father of the child all construct that fictional pregnancy as acceptable, while the opposing characteristics built into the representation of Erica's pregnancy create the impression that this adoption is good, right and legitimate, reassuring the viewer that the transaction they are in the process of watching is a satisfying and wholesome one for both parties in spite of Monica's contemptable behavior and the problematic power dynamics at work.

The implicit and explicit cues built into the character of Erica, cues articulated primarily around the notion of social class, which put into doubt her capacity to successfully mother her own child render this fictional adoption intelligible and rewarding for the viewer. Through adoption, the upper middle-class couple including the "mother without a baby" will be offering the child a more favorable context than the one the biological mother could provide. Seemingly anticipating this very set of (fictional) circumstances, Solinger writes,

> white babies were so valuable because in postwar America, they were born not only untainted but also *unclassed*. A poor, "white trash" teenager could have a white baby in Appalachia; it could be adopted by an upper-middle-class couple in Westport, Connecticut, and the baby would, in that transaction, become upper-middle-class also.[504]

In proposing this nearly identical representation of adoption to its viewers, *Friends* creates satisfying narrative closure for its most maternal of characters and remains true to its tradition of depicting alternative motherhoods and families for a wider television audience. However, this particular representation, in its facile dependence on and maintenance of existing class hierarchies and their attendant social stereotypes comes at the cost of a truly progressive discourse on

[504] *Ibid*., 294.

motherhood and maintains its status as a privilege reserved for white women of a certain class. These divergent characterizations of the two women consistently portray Monica as the correct mother for the child. Indeed, even the sonorous association of their two first names (Monica/Erica) suggests that these two characters are opposing versions of a single, maternal figure, and only one can emerge from this narrative arc as legitimate.

This is made particularly evident when the young woman goes into labor at the end of the sixteenth episode, "The One with Rachel's Going Away Party." Erica, coming back to Monica and Chandler's apartment after a dinner in town begins to have what appear to be contractions, interrupting the young woman as she speaks. Erica accords little attention to the bodily disruptions, dismissing them as digestive difficulities. The implication of what is happening is, however, immediately evident to Monica as well as to the studio audience whose knowing laughter guides viewers, helping them to understand that something of significance is afoot, while the pregnant character herself seems oblivious, explaining the pains away as "stomachaches that come and go every few minutes." Thus, Erica, the character within whose body the narrative climax of the story arc is beginning to take place, remains the only actor (along with Chandler) in this sequence unaware of the meaning of what is happening.

Monica, shouting and intense, clarifies for everyone, "She doesn't have a stomachache! She's in labor!" *Friends* thus demonstrates that, in spite of her infertility, it is Monica's maternal nature which enables her to recognize the signs of labor in a body which is not her own, more clearly even than the woman directly affected by the contractions. Monica's sensitivity to the labor of the woman carrying the baby she is destined to mother is so acute that the sitcom configures this event as affecting Monica's own body. Shouting excitedly ("we're going to have a baby!") and rushing to get Erica to the hospital, Monica is herself overwhelmed physically. "Oh, God, I've got to sit down! I've got to sit down!" she cries as the company surrounding her help her to sit. The adoptive mother then begins to mimic the signs of labor pains, breathing heavily and laboriously. Left standing to her side is Erica, whose departure from the chair in favor of Monica signifies the imminent transfer of maternal status from one woman to another. Indeed, Erica assumes the role of supportive friend encouraging the other woman, "You can do this! Just breathe." The audience laughs in recognition of the incongruity of the situation and the transfer of motherhood status is completed through this symbolic transferal of the corporeal reality of labor pain. The status of

motherhood is resettled from one woman to another even before the baby leaves the body of the one mother to be taken into the home of and cared for by the other.

Figure 112 When Erica goes into labor, Monica is the first to recognize it as such, even before the pregnant woman herself.

Figure 113 Monica is overcome with" labor" pains and the status of motherhood is transferred through the shared experience of labor.

By the time Erica gives birth in the series' final episode, the narrative has been constructed in such a way as to clearly legitimize one maternal figure over another. Over the course of the adoption story arc *Friends* has consistently suggested that Monica and Chandler are the rightful parents of the newborn twins because they have *wanted* to become parents for such a long time (as opposed to Erica whose pregnancy was unwanted), because their unfortunate infertility has impeded their ability to procreate naturally (as opposed to Erica's uncontrolled fertility), and because they are appropriately situated in the social hierarchy so as to capably care for the two babies (as opposed to Erica whose youth, marital status, sexual deviancy and social class mark her as a less worthy maternal figure.) In Erica's final scene, the character herself is made to concur: "I'm really glad I picked you guys," she says as she is wheeled away from the babies, "You're going to make great parents."

In stark contrast to this sitcom's treatment of the separation of babies from birth mothers as depicted in the narrative arc pertaining to Phoebe's surrogacy, this secondary character is

accorded no diegetic space in which to bid farewell to the babies she has carried in her body. Her goodbye is limited to saluting the new parents who happen to be holding the babies she has nurtured for months and just delivered. However, *Friends* does make two gestures at establishing this birth mother's continuing presence in the diegetic future. Confirming the openness of this fictional adoption, Monica informs her that they will call her, indicating a continuing relationship between adoptive parents and birth mother. Similarly, Monica reveals to Erica that they have decided to name the female baby Erica. The effectiveness of this homage, however, is undercut by Erica's own simplemindedness. Unable to understand the significance of the choice of names, Erica mistakenly believes it is a coincidence. The sitcom's almost systematically sneering characterization of this plotline's birth mother accompanies the character until the end of the episode and the end of the series.

If Monica has finally been accorded her series-long dream to become a mother, the sitcom has constructed her access to motherhood through manipulation, deceitfulness and at the expense of a marginalized secondary character. While all of the previously analyzed representations of motherhood appear problematic at times, this one seems to be even less careful in its use of stereotypes and characterization than its predecessors, revealing perhaps a certain amount of creative fatigue at the end of this final season of *Friends*.

While the representations of these two alternative types of motherhood, which each diverge in fundamental ways from a traditional motherhood trajectory may, at times rely on inaccuracies or facile stereotypes, *Friends*' narratives of surrogacy and adoption nonetheless offer unique spaces in popular culture to explore nontraditional forms of motherhood, particularly those which implicitly and explicitly question the societal imperative for a single, clearly identifiable maternal figure. Through these two stories, the sitcom demonstrates that in the wake of infertility, scientific innovation as well as more traditional practices of baby sharing such as adoption, motherhood may no longer be considered as simply a biological reality, but must be seen as a social one as well, that motherhood is a status which can be transferrable between women. If the potential for maternal solidarity is more fully developed in the story arc of Phoebe's surrogacy, the pact between fertile and nonfertile mothers is nonetheless present between Monica and Erica in spite of the unfortunate recourse to pejorative stereotypes. Ultimately, these two examples demonstrate the constructedness of the motherhood paradigm and demonstrate the need to consider as mothers all

those whose material realities (be they physiological/biological or social) involve a responsibility to and a nurturance of children.

Conclusion

Beginning in 1994 *Friends* initiated its storytelling universe by immediately unveiling stories of maternity that were in many ways in rupture with conventional maternal narratives in television situation comedy, on television in general, and within the culture at large. Lesbian motherhood, gestational surrogacy, chosen single motherhood, infertility, adoption – episode-long narrative arcs depicting these sensitive, potentially controversial, issues allowed for extended and detailed considerations of maternity stories which had hitherto remained un- or under-represented on the small screen yet which echoed real transformations stirring outside the realm of television fiction.[505] Far from igniting controversy or arousing a backlash within the sitcom's massive fanbase and the wider culture, these stories instead flowed smoothly within its diegetic universe.

As we have seen on a case by case basis, the sitcom's generic comic imperative, the necessity to make things funny, is no doubt responsible for smoothing over and smuggling in this potentially disruptive ideological content, rendering it less offensive and more acceptable to a diverse viewing public. For if the days of the Network Era's least objectionable programming ideal were receding into the past and narrowcasting was ever more on the minds of programmers, *Friends* was situated in this transitionary period where industry executives were clearly courting a

[505] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, between 1996 and 2015 the rates of assisted reproductive technology (ART) procedures as well as the number of children born as a result of them has roughly tripled. "Assisted Reproductive Technology Surveillance – United States, 2015." https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6703a1.htm?s_cid=ss6703a1_w
Likewise, a 2008 CDC document notes that rates of infertility are increasing but does not identify the causes. https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/infertility/infertility-white-paper/page-two.htm
Meanwhile, the Pew Research Center reports that in 1980 61% of children were living in a family composed of two parents in a first marriage. By 2014 that percentage had dropped to forty-six while there was a notable uptick in children living in single parent homes (26% in 2014 compared to 19% in 1980) as well as children living with cohabiting parents (7% in 2014, unreported or nonexistent in 1980).
https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/17/1-the-american-family-today/
According to a 2014 paper for the Council on Contemporary Families, only 22% of American children were living in a "married male-breadwinner family" compared with 65% in the 1950s.
https://familyinequality.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/family-diversity-new-normal.pdf

younger, more affluent "quality audience" while still aiming to attract as many viewers as possible. Humor then, signaled by the regular interjections of audible audience laughter, yet more broadly permeating the sitcom's entire scope of creation and production, plays a critical role in structuring the meaning-making possibilities of what is seen onscreen. The sitcom's all-encompassing comic intent influences interpretive potentials, making some more plausible than others, while never fully restricting the range of heuristic possibilities.

In addition to being buffered through humor, the stories of motherhoods breaking with dominant ideological traditions seem to dissolve into *Friends*' overarching narrative, one of generational coming-of-age within a wider Generation X aesthetic of malaise and disenchantment. In this light, the simple creative decision, based on pressure coming from network executives, to write the parents of these young characters into the diegesis early on, resulted in profound consequences. The "bad" mothers responsible for their grown children's profound disappointments (even neuroses) set the stage for, perhaps even necessitated, *Friends*' multiple reimaginations of mother as concept, its dedication to finding and thinking through new ways of being in this most ancient of roles.

The older generation of mother characters in *Friends*, through their repeated characterizations as being somehow inappropriately maternal, create the conditions for the series to plausibly offer new conceptions of who a mother is and what she can do. While room is (always) left for nuance, the series is repeatedly quite explicit on this point. In "The One with Barry and Mindy's Wedding,[506]" Monica wonders if her desire for children is innate or whether she is just feeling pressure from "society" to respond to normative gender roles. "And by society, I mean my mother," the young woman hastens to add as the audience laughs. Monica, on the verge of breaking up with a true love who doesn't want children, is miserable. But before ultimately identifying her desire to have children as well and truly her own, Monica's caustic reference to her mother casts the older woman as oppressively omnipotent, all powerful in her ability to render her grown child unhappy through her constant and tyrannical expectations. This mother (and society) clearly needs to be reimagined, recreated as a figure capable of authentic nurturing and encouragement.

At another point, no less an authoritative cultural figure than *The Tonight Show* host Jay Leno has difficulty in identifying a woman as comfortable with her own sexuality as Nora Bing as

[506] Season Two, Episode Twenty-Four.

a genuine maternal figure. As we have seen, in "The One with Mrs. Bing,[507]" Nora's appearance on Leno's show is watched by Chandler and his friends from home. Nora explains to Leno that she is excited to soon be seeing her son "who I love!" Patronizingly Leno breaks in, "You know, don't take this wrong, I just don't see you as a *mom* somehow, I don't mean that bad." Nora's attempt to rebut Leno's perception, to reframe his image of what, who and how a mom *can be*, is ultimately met with ridicule. Her statement that she is a "fabulous mom" because she bought her son his first condoms is met with laughter by the studio audience and visually used to isolate Chandler as different from the other (grown) children in the room. Instead of portraying the act as one of a responsible parent attempting to instill safe sexual practices in her son, the sitcom chooses to highlight Chandler's humiliated reaction, his isolation (he is standing in the kitchen while the others gather together on the couch in this scene) framing him as the sad and lonely victim of this oversexed woman. Nora's condom-giving thus confirms Leno's perception that she *cannot* be seen as a mom, that she is more hindrance than help to her son. Once again, this episode seems to suggest, something has gone awry with the maternal figure.

Narratives of Maternity and Sitcom Conventions

While the ideological ramifications of the depictions of mothers and motherhoods in *Friends* are complex, the repeated emphasis on maternal representations also creates opportunities for a complexification of the sitcom at a generic level. This occurs at two specific sites of generic convention: on a narrative level and in terms of the genre's comic impetus. Motherhood in *Friends* is, from its early episodes and throughout the series, a multi-episodic affair, one which does not systemically lend itself to humor and comedy.

The genre itself has critically and historically been understood to be simplistic, formulaic and lacking in complexity both in terms of form and content and it is the perceived lack of narrative complexity which seems to be a particularly negative attribute of sitcom. Lawrence E. Mintz's definition of the sitcom from 1985 is representative of this line of thinking:

> Each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in a given episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour […] The most important

[507] Season One, Episode Eleven.

> feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored.[508]

While Mintz's definition is several decades old, more contemporary sources suggest that this understanding of sitcom still holds currency today as can be deduced from recent guides to writing sitcom. For example, Marc Blake in his 2011 *How to be a Sitcom Writer: Secrets from the Inside* suggests that "[t]here is little character development in sitcom because we keep our characters trapped. They can't move. They are stifled by their lives, their jobs, their relatives." He adds, "[t]here are rarely big plots in sitcom.[509]" Likewise, John Vorhaus in his 2012 *The Little Book of Sitcom* explains, "writing sitcoms isn't really that hard. So much of what you need to know is already defined for you […] Sitcom is easy and sitcom is fun. Sitcom is the gateway drug to longer forms of writing.[510]"

Institutionally and critically then, the sitcom continues to be conceptualized as an elementary genre occupying a lower status in the hierarchy of televised fiction. Sitcom characters as well as the stories in which they appear tend to be understood as static, unchanging and simple. The diegetic world may (indeed, must) undergo turbulence but this is conventionally understood to be resolved by the end of the twenty-two-minute episode, at which point the initial equilibrium is reestablished in order to reset the sitcom's world order for the next episode. In this understanding there is no evolution, no character growth, no forward moving element which would permanently alter the sitcom's storyscape.

Indeed, it *is* rare to see grand and sweeping narratives of epic moments and great drama in sitcom. Historically sitcoms are anchored in the familiar small-scale spaces in which humanity gathers such as homes, cafés and workplaces, with the latter regularly becoming secondary homes housing secondary families. The sitcom revels in the everyday absurd, the intimacy of the quotidian, and the hilarious mundaneness of everyday life. Because of its focus on the intimate ties of family and kinship in daily life, this type of programming has, since its début on American television sets in the 1940s, told stories of families with children and, inevitably, of women having children. Indeed, we have seen some of the implications of these pregnancy stories for the genre itself as early as *Mary Kay and Johnny* and *I Love Lucy*. However, the process of pregnancy (a

[508] Mintz, 115.
[509] Marc Blake, *How to Be a Sitcom Writer: Secrets from the Inside* (Andrews UK Limited, 2011), 4-5.
[510] John Vorhaus, *The Little Book of Sitcom* (Monrovia, California: Bafflegab Books, 2012), 2.

complete narrative unto itself), is not one that can, following Mintz's definition, be finished and closed off at the end of one finite episode of sitcom, and *Friends*' repeated depictions of pregnancy and motherhood rupture the notion of a strictly episodic narrative structure. Even if the maternal content in *Friends* is relegated to more minor story arcs, it continues to ensure an element of seriality and storytelling continuity, complicating critical understandings of this genre as simplistic.

Hence, the narrative of lesbian pregnancy in *Friends* stretches over the entire first season, from the second episode to the twenty-third and, while the expectant mothers do not appear in each episode, the story remains alive across the season thanks to Ross's own presence as the conflicted future father. Furthermore, that the story is explicitly configured with an eye to seriality is attested to by the use of the close-up of an ultrasound image as a cliff-hanger ending to close out "The One with the Sonogram at the End[511]" (the episode in which Ross learns of Carol's pregnancy). The final seconds of this episode are comprised of a middle-distance shot showing the three future parents uniting together after Ross's threat to leave, a close-up of the hospital monitor and its panoptic display of the embryo developing within the mother character's uterus, the appearance of the final credits superimposed on the sonogram image, followed by a final fade to black. Eschewing the genre's traditional closing joke with its accompanying audible laughter, this episode ends instead with the foetal heartbeat playing as these final images unfold for the viewer. With an eye to the future (of the season, of the series, of motherhood and of the family as an institution), this episode's ending is decisively positioned as a new beginning which viewers will want to follow. The image of the newly developing foetus represents the newly developing storyline which represents, in turn, the sitcom's newly developing approach to telling stories about families.

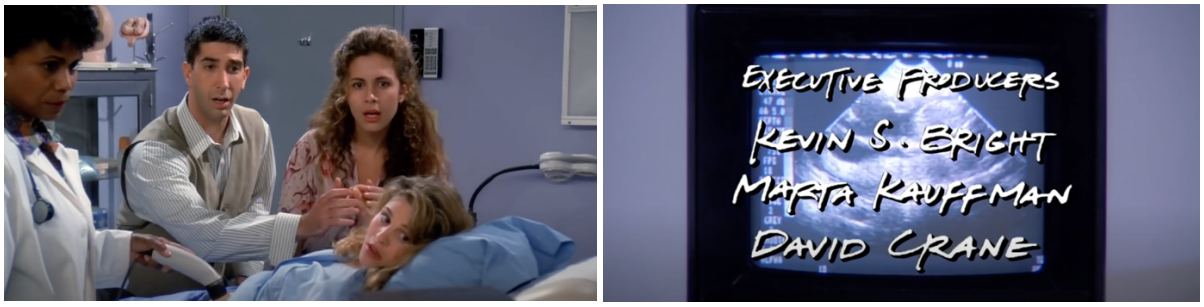

Figure 114 Final close-up of the sonogram ends the episode but begins Friends' *seasons-long exploration of motherhood.*

[511] Season One, Episode Two.

The cliff-hanger potential of maternal narratives is once again put to effective use to tease the idea of Rachel Green's pregnancy in "The One with Monica and Chandler's Wedding.[512]" In the leadup to the couple's wedding, a positive pregnancy test has been found and the audience has been led to believe that it belongs to Monica. In the final instances of the seventh season's final episode, Monica herself denies this and the camerawork intervenes immediately, shifting to the other two lead female characters standing nearby as bridesmaids. Phoebe, under the impression that Monica is pregnant, rejoices erroneously in the couple's happy news. "They're going to have a baby!" she exclaims. Slowly and deliberately, with sentimental music audible in the background, the camera narrows in on Rachel as her expression changes from the same smiling happiness written on her friends' face to a look of nervous apprehension meant to reveal that she is in fact the expectant mother responsible for the positive pregnancy test. As Rachel exhales deeply and anxiously, the camera fades to black, once again without laughter, and *Friends* viewers are left to wait out the four-month summer hiatus before confirmation of Rachel's pregnant status arrives.

When the sitcom recommenced in September of 2001, the confusion and suspense continued as Rachel's pregnancy was revealed incrementally to each of the other characters. The ultimate point of expectation for both the other five characters and the audience revolves around the identity of the future father. The series continues to build audience anticipation through the first two episodes of the new season until the future father is finally and unexpectedly revealed to be Ross in the last moments of the second episode, "The One with the Red Sweater." Euphoric audience reaction combines with the shocked faces of Monica, Phoebe and Joey in a narrative denouement which reignites one of the series' ongoing romantic arcs, Ross and Rachel's on-again, off-again relationship.

Figure 115 Rachel's pregnancy teaser bridges Seasons Seven and Eight.

[512] Season Seven, Episode Twenty-Four.

Figure 116 The suspense comes to an end for the characters as well as the audience as Ross's paternity is revealed.

While articulated differently in each particular narrative arc, *Friends* creatively exploits some of the inherently suspenseful aspects of maternity and particularly pregnancy: Who is pregnant? Who is the father? What will the new family look like? How will it function? And the series takes its time in answering these questions, stretching the moment between asking and answering as long as possible so as to keep audiences tuning in while also increasing their expectational pleasure. Far from corresponding to the narrative structure of a simple, episodic formula, these stories demand diegetic space and a creative commitment to their duration within the fictional universe as a narrative pertaining to pregnancy or (to a lesser extent) motherhood cannot simply be dropped or forgotten as a detail along the diegetic wayside.[513]

Judy Kutulas reminds us that, although *Friends* is not usually celebrated for its creative innovations, it in fact "pioneered new plot points, structures, and themes that continue to impact the situation comedy.[514]" She contends that "a different structure, new plots, and enhanced character development" all played key roles in *Friends*' popularity and helped to differentiate it from other sitcoms, echoing Jane Feuer's identification of "the sitcom's potential for diachronic development in character growth and change.[515]" Feuer locates this potential within a larger shift toward serialized television programming which, she suggests, goes hand in hand with another generalised transformation in late twentieth-century American television: an increasing tendency

[513] The role of ultrasound imaging here is critical. In each of the narratives of pregnancy in *Friends* there is at least one instance of ultrasound imaging: Carol, Phoebe and Rachel all undergo sonograms at one point (with or without accompanying fetal heartbeats). Ultrasound photographs of developing fetuses are shared by Ross (during Carol's pregnancy), by Rachel, and by Erica as a gift to Chandler and Monica. These images are "proof" that a developing fetus exists. After this point, the sitcom can no longer "go back" and alter the narrative by claiming a mistaken or false pregnancy. The multiple examples of fetal imagery in *Friends* also provide a potent point of identification between expectant audiences and fictional fetuses making narrative alterations through miscarriage (or abortion) extremely unlikely. In visually identifying the developing embryo/fetus, the ultrasound "fixes" the narrative in place. Once seen on screen, they can be neither ignored nor easily adjusted and ensure the continuation of the narrative arc. The images of these screens onscreen also perform a significant reflexive function in this sitcom. Just as the characters gaze together upon the ultrasound screen, so too the viewer observes the characters on a screen. These screens within screens, this watching of watching acts as a mise-en-abyme and reveals *Friends* itself as a collection of images whose purpose is to be watched by spectators.

[514] Kutulas, 2018, 1172.

[515] Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film* edited by Colin McCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 111.

towards melodrama. Indeed, in the media commentary surrounding the series' final season, Slate.com television critic Chris Suellentrop argued that understanding *Friends* as a sitcom was fundamentally erroneous. *Friends*, he argued, was essentially being misgenred. "*Friends* isn't a sitcom. It's a soapcom, a soap opera masquerading as a situation comedy." Writes Suellentrop, "You don't tune in to *Friends* to watch wacky hijinks – Will Chandler get stuck in an ATM booth? Will Phoebe land a music video? – but to find out *what happens next* in a plotline you've been following.[516]" The introduction of episode-spanning maternal stories into the sitcom genre can indeed be a vector for a more serialized type of narrative, but also for a more dramatic, less comedic one.

In *Friends*, this trend is illustrated in the aforementioned examples in which maternal content corresponds if not to melodrama, at least to serious, non-comic content. Episodes such as "The One with the Sonogram at the End," "The One Hundredth," "The One Where Rachel Tells…," and "The One with the Fertility Test[517]" all end with fades to black either in complete silence or quietly with music, their lack of laughter a testament to the emotional content contained within the episodes themselves. Carol's pregnancy complicating Ross's paternal status, Phoebe's inability to take home the babies she gestated, Rachel's unexpected pregnancy with Ross, Chandler and Monica's diagnosis of infertility – all offer *Friends* occasions to inject wonder and awe, disappointment and sadness into the otherwise comic space of the situation comedy, further complicating this particular series' generic status by underscoring its commitment to emotion. In *Friends*, stories of pregnancy are unwieldy narratives which cannot be disciplined by the generic norms and structures traditionally associated with sitcom. Yet, *Friends* remains identifiable and recognisable as just that: a situation comedy. This fact serves as a reminder that discussions of genre ultimately remain, as Jason Mittell drawing on Foucault puts forth, discursive practices.[518] That is, sitcom will remain sitcom as long as the discourses of critics, audiences and the television industry itself continue to identify them as such. Indeed, this phenomenon, what Chloé Delaporte has more recently identified within the film industry as "genration," is a semiotic process so common as to "become invisible." Yet its influence reaches far and wide "ordering the entire film

[516] Chris Suellentrop, "*Friends*: A Great Soap Opera Masquerading as a Great Sitcom." Slate.com, May 5, 2004. Emphasis in the original. https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2004/05/friends-why-it-was-never-a-great-sitcom.html
[517] Season One, Episode Two; Season Five, Episode Three; Season Eight, Episode Three; Season Nine, Episode Twenty-One.
[518] Mittell, 12.

industry from the production of movies to their reception.[519]" This same semiotic process of genration, conditioning both creation and reception is undoubtedly also at work in the television industry, and, as Delporte herself points out, on the streaming platforms of the contemporary digital media landscape as well, explaining and facilitating the continued perception of *Friends as a sitcom* in spite of its many genre-rupturing aesthetic qualities,

Ideological Implications

We began this project by identifying *Friends* as a sitcom in which stories of mothers and motherhood proliferate, a comedy which interrogates maternal matters seriously, and a series which appears to reinterpret the maternal role on multiple occasions, each time proposing representations of mothers and motherhoods which appear to rupture in some way with the dominant ideologies relating to the concept of the mother figure. Far from attempting to evaluate these representations as positive or negative, these analyses have attempted to point out these potential moments of rupture, and more widely, to theorize the mother figure and motherhood as a cultural faultline in this specific genre and in this particular series. For in its repeated reworkings and reimaginings of maternal content we may surmise that this is a critical matter for popular culture and a critical one for American culture in general.

In this work's introduction, we identified three overlapping areas in which dominant ideology may structure understandings of the concept of *mother*: ideologies which delimit the maternal figure in terms of *identity*, in terms of *behavior* and in terms of *procreative status*, and our analyses have attempted to identify and account for some of the ways in which *Friends* both challenges and adheres to existing ideology in these domains. We suggested that questions related to maternal identity include race and ethnicity, religion, social class, marital status, and sexual orientation. In the first chapter we identified some of the most significant representations of maternal figures within the situation comedy as a genre and we pointed to some of the changes related to her idealized identity throughout the twentieth century. By the time that *Friends* began its original broadcast in 1994, the American television viewer had seen an increasingly wide

[519] See Chloé Delaporte, « La médiation générique des contenus cinématographiques sur les plateformes de vidéo à la demande », *Réseaux* 217 (2019) : 151-184, 154.

variety of mothers on the small screen. These fictional characters included the strong ethnic (Norwegian, Jewish) working-class immigrant, maternal matriarchs of the immediate post-World War II era as well as the more rigidly defined WASP housewife in suburbia of the Cold War era. Gradual shifts in representation led to ever more diverse examples of maternal identities, including single mothers (widowed, then divorced), working mothers, Black mothers and working-class mothers.

What, if anything, can *Friends* be said to add to the continuing televisual conversation about appropriate maternal identity? In spite of some of its problematic content, *Friends*' representation of lesbian motherhood indeed offers a further example of maternal inclusiveness in the television landscape. By introducing mainstream television audiences to a lesbian couple both pursuing motherhood and actively mothering their baby, *Friends* takes the position (indeed fairly begins its diegetic world *based* on the position) that this is a normal, everyday (common sense!) thing to do. At no point does the sitcom suggest that this particular familial situation may ultimately be a bad thing for the child involved or for society at large. Indeed, Carol and Susan, as we have attempted to demonstrate are ideal mothers to young Ben. The only pushback within the fictional universe comes from the displaced father figure himself, Ross. Yet the character is regularly chided for his conservative reactions to his son's mothers, and in turn becomes the sitcom's object of ridicule. In "The One with the Metaphorical Tunnel,[520]" for example, Ross is disturbed to find Ben playing with a Barbie Doll and goes to absurd lengths to get him to choose a monster truck, a dinosaur and that ultimate symbol of hegemonic (toxic) masculinity, a GI Joe action figure. Instead of worrying over the blurring of gender roles alongside the father character, the episode sets up Ross as the butt of the joke. Carol and Susan slyly mock him as do the other characters, and the episode ends with Monica's revelation that, as a young boy, Ross dressed up as a woman (in his own mother's clothes, no less) and hosted tea parties. The episode closes with a shot of three women (Monica, Carol and Susan) quite literally falling over laughing at Ross's expense. The closing credit sequence shows images of a young Ross dressed up in women's clothing, jewelry, accessories and make-up serving tea and singing to himself. These final shots of young Ross, intriguingly, are not framed by laughter, suggesting that it is clearly the adult Ross's anxieties about gender roles that are the subject of ridicule in this episode, *not* the young boy's experimentation in gender fluidity. In situating the humor of these circumstances on the shoulders

[520] Season Three, Episode Four.

of the grown-up male character who is slow to adapt, *Friends* opens up cultural space in which lesbian identity may not only plausibly coexist with maternal identity but may even be a preferred version of it thanks to its distancing from the rigid and ridiculous gender expectations of the patriarchal norm.

Likewise, the series' construction of single motherhood, nuanced and complex as it is, presents chosen single motherhood as a plausible, even appropriate, maternal identity. Far from bringing shame to the mother or harming the young child, Rachel's unmarried status disturbs the paternal figure and disrupts what the series presents as outdated gendered dynamics. Concomitant with Rachel's desire to remain officially single comes a demonstration of the character's liberation from the traditional and gendered maternal role. In this glorified fictional version of single motherhood, Rachel is not only free to continue dating and pursue an active sex life, more crucially, she accepts responsibility for only *part* of the care and duties necessary for the nurturing and upbringing of the baby. Ross, unable to rely on the mother of his child to take on the full-time care work involved in raising her, must, as was the case with Ben, share the load. Thus, Ross is shown carrying the infant in a carrier or pushing her in the stroller, and this, even when Rachel is present. Indeed, the amount of care Ross invests in his child (and the lack of care on Rachel's part) becomes, in one instance, an object of humor as made evident by a joke from "The One Where Rachel Goes Back to Work.[521]" Embedded in the context of a larger narrative of Rachel's difficulty in returning to her job after childbirth, the joke consists in Rachel asking Ross to change Emma's soiled diaper. Ross acquiesces but adds sheepishly, "All right, but you have to do one some time." The fact that Rachel, the baby's mother, has yet to change a dirty diaper several months after having given birth but still manages to be portrayed as an overall loving and devoted mother is perhaps one of the series' most stunning (and overlooked) suggestions in terms of motherhood. The allusion to Ross's repeated performance of traditionally maternal tasks (and in changing soiled diapers *Friends* explicitly opts for one of mothering's basest, most dirty responsibilities) underlining and highlighting the *absence* of such acts on Rachel's part subtly pushes for a reconsideration of appropriate gender roles.

In keeping, then, with the sitcom's tradition of speaking to changes underway within the larger society, narratives of lesbian motherhood and single motherhood in *Friends* quietly expand the realm of plausible maternal identity by imagining stories of mothers situated on the margins of

[521] Season Nine, Episode Eleven.

traditional heteronormative nuptial patriarchal motherhood and thus refusing to correspond to dominant ideals of the maternal figure. Nonetheless, while *Friends* imagines motherhood as an increasingly plausible option for these women, their racial and social class statuses also appear to be fundamental constitutive elements contributing to the overall appropriateness of these maternal characters. Carol, Susan and Rachel all maintain, as has been seen, an important and (perhaps for some viewers) reassuring link to patriarchy in the form of Ross. However, were these women to be figured as mothering on their own, it is entirely possible that the characters could yet be envisioned as good mothers due to other key markers of "appropriate" maternal identity, namely whiteness and upper-middle-class status. As young, white, upwardly mobile women, these characters are clear beneficiaries of the cultural, social and economic capital necessary to either ensure the maintenance, or the continued upward mobility, of their progeny within the social hierarchy. The characters' access to regular medical care, their consultation of the correct pregnancy and child-rearing books, their ability to procure childcare, pay for elite schooling and even expensive European baby products all testify to these mothers' immense resources and encode them as suitable and adequate maternal figures, even in the absence of a clear paternal or patriarchal figure.[522] In spite of their homosexuality or their lack of wedding ring, these women, *Friends* demonstrates time and again, are at little risk of needing or asking for costly social programs such as universal childcare or government-mandated paid maternity leave to help raise their children. Indeed, the one (secondary) character who is explicitly linked to a lower-class status, Erica, is, as we have seen through the narrative of adoption, problematically denied the opportunity to become a mother, in favor of the higher status "mother without a baby," Monica. In the case of Phoebe, whose own relation to working-classness has been discussed and whose body was used to provide babies for another couple, she eventually comments that she would like to have "a whole bunch" of babies but only after her marriage to the ultra-wealthy Mike ensures her own and her future children's economic and social sufficiency. American viewers may thus be reassured that, in spite of their seemingly marginal status, these mothers will raise well-adjusted, well-educated, independent future citizens. Thus, while *Friends* demonstrates a specific commitment to

[522] In "The One with Monica's Boots" (Season Eight, Episode Ten), Ben is identified as attending Smithfield Day School, a fictionalized version of the private Manhattan Day School (2020 yearly tuition, $20,000: https://www.privateschoolreview.com/manhattan-day-school-profile.) In "The One with the Cake" (Season Ten, Episode Four), scenes from Rachel's apartment show a collection of baby cosmetic products from the French brand Mustela.

expanding maternal plausibility to certain types of women, this expansion must be qualified and contextualized within the sitcom's overriding spirit of upper-middle-class mobility and racial homogeneity.

Further on in the introduction, we identified the role of ideology in structuring understandings of mothers and motherhood in terms of maternal behavior. In Chapter Two we identified the secondary maternal characters, the mothers of *Friends*' main characters, as corresponding to stereotypes of the bad mother. In most instances this was due to some sort of behavior characterized by the sitcom as psychologically destructive to the adult child and as such unloving, uncaring, or insufficiently maternal. These were mothers who were branded as selfish or made bad decisions, were overly sexual, overly critical, or generally immature. Little attempt was made to offer alternative readings for these characters and their conduct, celebrating them or sympathizing with them instead of jeering at them for their maternal shortcomings. Instead, their lack of ability or desire to put the psychological needs of their grown children ahead of their own, their obvious lack of adherence to this tenet of intensive mothering ideology, condemned them in most cases to merely fulfilling the secondary character's role of narrative complication, of obstacle to be overcome within an episode.

These older women may be understood to have been exclusively responsible for the upbringing of the children who would grow into the maladapted and neurotic *Friends* sextet because of the harmful gendered expectation that, within a sexist and patriarchal social organization, it is women who almost exclusively care for and raise children. The sitcom's incessant and very funny incursions into its characters' past childhood disasters maintains, at some level, their status as constant children throughout the ten seasons thus subtly, yet relentlessly, reminding viewers of their ineffective parents. While the fathers certainly play a role in disappointing their adult children, they are to a great extent exculpated from direct responsibility because these adult children of Generation X were raised predominantly by their mothers. Viewers know that this is the case for Monica and Ross, whose father was "busy with the business." They know it was the case for Chandler whose father left with "the Filipino houseboy." They know it was the case for Rachel whose father, an eminent cardiologist, left it up to Sandra Green to raise three girls with the help of a Spanish-speaking nanny. They know it was the case for Joey whose Italian Mama raised him and his six (or seven) sisters while his father fitted pipes, and they know it was true for Phoebe as well whose own origin story specifies repeatedly that she was raised by

a single (and suicidal) mother. However, in its own reworkings of motherhood, *Friends* makes cultural space available to imagine male caregiving and, specifically, male child rearing as a viable and desirable alternative to exclusive female childcare.

Initial hints of this may be identified early on in the sitcom although in these examples male caregiving is displaced from children onto animals. As we have seen, Season One's narrative arc concerning Marcel the monkey situates Ross as the sole caregiver of this most human-like of animals. While Ross's care of Marcel is ultimately used to reinforce his *paternal* role – when Ross rushes Marcel to a hospital to save him from choking, Chandler pointedly asks him if he feels "like a Dad[523]" – the young man is nonetheless configured as the monkey's caring nurturer, the attentive parent responsible for "raising" him and the one who worries frantically when the animal runs away.[524] Likewise, through their adoption of a baby chick, Joey and Chandler are both put in the position of being responsible for the care and upbringing of a vulnerable living thing.[525] That the sitcom itself recognizes the transgressive possibilities of this configuration is highlighted when Chandler and Joey get into a heated argument over who spends more time taking care of the chick, a parody of a heteronormative couple's domestic tensions. The addition of a duck completes this male-headed "family" of four and the men continue to live with the two animals for several seasons.

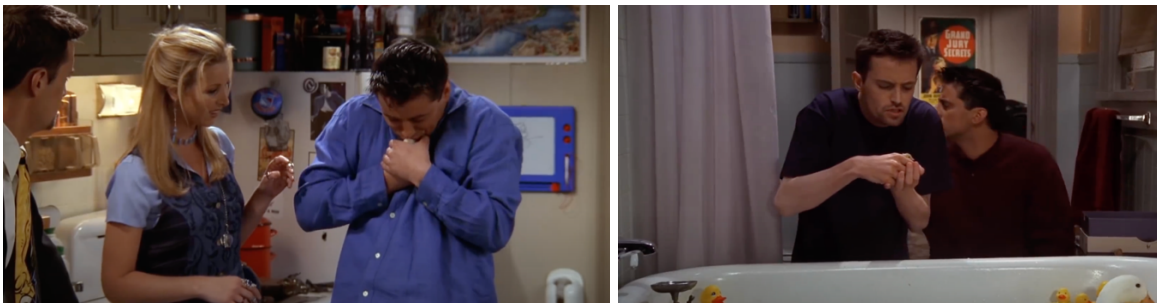

Figure 117 Joey and Chandler love and tenderly care for their young charges.

However, the case for male child rearing is made perhaps most effectively in an episode from the ninth season. Rachel's decision to disavow marriage and the traditional patriarchal family structure also obliges her to maintain her (prestigious) career in the fashion industry, and while Ross indeed does take on much of the burden of childcare including changing diapers, the mother's occupation requires that the parenting unit hire a person outside the family to care for Emma in

[523] Season One, Episode Seventeen, "The One with Two Parts - Part 2."
[524] Season One, Episode Nineteen, "The One Where the Monkey Gets Away."
[525] Season Three, Episode Twenty-One, "The One with a Chick and a Duck."

their absence. "The One with the Male Nanny[526]" is an episode in which the series most effectively uses the praxis of mothering to confound normative gender roles and to question childcare as the exclusive prerogative and responsibility of not only mothers but women in general. The episode is initially noteworthy in that it explicitly depicts the demanding process of procuring childcare in a country which provides little help to working mothers. While *Friends* never takes the opportunity to configure this as an overtly political issue, the sitcom's treatment of the question already presents the process as arduous, time-consuming and, given the obviously elevated socio-economic status of Emma's two parents, one reserved for only the most financially secure. A first candidate is rejected when she balks at the possibility of being asked to do a drug test and the frustration of the parents, particularly Rachel, grows.[527]

The male nanny arrives for an interview and the gender confusion begins even before the couple meets him. Ross reads the nanny's profile to Rachel: "This one's name is Sandy. She's got a degree in Early Childhood Education. She worked for her last family for three years." The gender-neutral name and the candidate's education as well as the overall context of care work leads Ross to assume that the person they are about to meet is a woman. The door opens and a young man introduces himself, "Hi! I'm Sandy." The camera settles on the parents' faces. Ross in particular appears aghast and he turns to Rachel, snarking, "She's a little *mannish*." Sandy's arrival troubles the expectations of the two main characters and Ross in particular has difficulty interpreting the meaning of this clearly male entity (the fact that Sandy is played by heartthrob Freddie Prinz, Jr. signals him as desirably masculine) applying for a position so intimately associated with the opposite gender. Attempting to fit Sandy into his own clearly defined worldview, the openly hostile Ross blurts out, "Are you gay?" Sandy assures Ross that he is straight and engaged to be married, but the main character remains skeptical, indeed increasingly hostile as he cannot fathom why a heterosexual man would apply for such a job. For his part, Sandy immediately displays behavior worthy of the most intensive of mothers. He breaks down in tears when recounting the time spent with his former charge, jumps up to soothe a crying Emma, and applies his own homemade (calendula and honey) diaper cream to heal her rash. Later he is shown

[526] Season Nine, Episode Six.
[527] This first candidate's presence is troubling. She is given no name, yet her appearance subtly codes her as Latina or of Hispanic descent. As such, her presence would reflect the reality that a significant proportion of care work in the United States is performed by women of color, yet her reference to drug use simultaneously associates her with pejorative stereotypes of minority women as irresponsible and morally degenerate.

rocking the child in his lap next to Rachel, reciting poetry, baking madeleines and playing Greensleeves on the recorder to rock the baby to sleep. Sandy makes his own colorful puppets, espouses the latest research in early childhood development and even knits. The man's sensitive, maternal behavior is so incomprehensible to Ross that the latter eventually insists on firing him. While Sandy's "sensitivity" is certainly pushed to comic hyperbole, the episode seems once again to punish *Ross* for his rigid perception of appropriate gender roles: the female characters find him ridiculous and audience laughter appears to concur. Yet, the real culprit is revealed in the episode's final scene. Sandy questions Ross about his discomfort with such a delicate male presence and Ross acknowledges, breaking down in cathartic (though exaggerated) tears, that his own father criticized him for his insufficiently masculine behavior. It is thus these entrenched and restrictive ideas of appropriately gendered behavior that lead Ross to fire such an exceptionally gifted caregiver.

Indeed, Sandy's maternal traits (while exaggerated to the point of ridicule) point to him as being not just an ideal nanny for the baby, but as performing motherhood in ways far superior to the baby's biological mother, Rachel. In this young man's skilled and loving hands, the baby appears to be given more attention and a higher quality of care than Rachel is willing or able to give to her daughter. The comic excesses of Sandy's homemade diaper cream or his educational homemade puppets are no doubt humorous thanks to their poking fun of the excesses of the childrearing enterprise as a whole, yet they displace the twin ideals of domesticity and authenticity onto the masculine character. Within this character may be found every maternal trait that could possibly be hoped for by an increasingly technological, individualistic, consumerist society: the basic humanity, empathy and warmth necessary to identify the needs of a more vulnerable being and the time, attention and skill necessary to care for it (this in contrast to Rachel a few episodes earlier who was at a loss as to how to calm her crying child); the time and expertise needed to create high quality, homemade products for the sole purpose of coming to the aid of a child and helping it reach its potential (in contrast to Rachel whose skillset does not include cooking or puppet-making); and perhaps, most importantly, the *desire* to spend one's time exclusively raising a child. "I really believe," Sandy says to a dubious Ross and an adoring Rachel, "the most satisfying thing you can do with your life is take care of a child." Displaced onto this male character, this series of acts and behaviors, the proclamation that raising children is one's highest calling in life, not only profoundly disturbs Ross's own understanding of gendered behavior by

revealing the poisonous nature of his own childhood experience with rigid concepts of masculinity, but more fundamentally, hints at masculinity as a potential (or even optimal) site of ideal maternal behavior. Ross is ultimately discomfited not by Sandy's "sensitivity." His desire to categorize Sandy as gay, or "at least bi," speaks to his need for clear classifications. Sandy, as an ideal maternal figure, would be a more understandable and recognizable phenomenon if his sexual orientation were also marginalized. Sandy disturbs precisely because he is resolutely straight *and* entirely maternal and his presence in *Friends* is ultimately more significant, a suggestion that a reimagining of normative heterosexual child-rearing arrangements is both desirable and necessary for the liberation of both men and women from the constrictive expectations that limit them. While definitive answers may be elusive (as always, the volatile comic terrain of the situation comedy allows for multiple interpretations), "The One With the Male Nanny," in locating ideal mothering praxis within a male character, offers an opportunity (perhaps for those already open to seeing it) to imagine a world of equal, or even superior, male caregiving as a plausible one.[528]

Figure 118 Sandy, the male nanny.

The final level of maternal ideology which we suggested was brought under the microscope by *Friends*' treatment of motherhood deals with procreative status, namely that the traditional conception-gestation-parturition sequence remains the legitimate way into motherhood. This series features two women taking home multiple (triplets and twins) children to care for which they neither gestated nor gave birth to. While Alice, thanks to assisted reproductive technology, remains

[528] This tension is raised again in "The Manny." This fictional sitcom embedded within the diegetic sphere of *This is Us* (NBC, 2016-present) draws its title from Chandler's confused appellation for Sandy ("You got a man who's a nanny? You got a manny?") and features Kevin Pearson (Justin Hartley) as the male nanny in this multi-camera sitcom parody. Kevin's starring role in this "bad sitcom" is the source of shame to him as he sees himself as a more serious actor while the main thrust of this satiric show is to objectify Kevin by insisting that he take his shirt off at least once per episode. Instead of using the possibility of male caregiving to criticize dominant masculinity as *Friends* does in "The One with the Male Nanny," "The Manny" becomes itself a space in which dominant masculinity and masculine sexuality are glorified at the expense of the ideal of sensitive male caregiving. Kevin's need to flee his stifling role on the sitcom parody speaks to the continued interrogation of masculinity as a possible and appropriate source of caregiving.

the biological mother of her children, Monica, in adopting the biological children of Erica, does not. The sitcom's triumphant tone throughout much of these two narratives celebrates these alternative maternal statuses, suggesting that these women may become mothers who are just as authentic (if not more so in the case of Monica) than the women who gestate and give birth to their own biological children. In addressing this issue, and while some of its content is, as we have seen, highly problematic, *Friends* dedicates precious airtime to these unconventional possibilities and alternative routes to maternal status. Both of the narratives are driven by problems of fertility. Infertility caused by social factors (waiting "too long") and by physiological factors is configured in *Friends* as affecting both men and woman. While the urge to procreate and become a mother may result in questionable ethical behavior (particularly on the part of Monica), these stories ultimately serve to disentwine motherhood and maternal identity from the biological and physiological processes which are traditionally understood as constituting it. They shed light on the extent to which *mother* and *motherhood*, far from natural and incontrovertible notions fixed and unmovable, are in fact more elastic concepts which are ultimately constructed within the social discourses of culture, law, medicine, politics, religion. And they shed light on the historical and cultural reality that many women have become mothers without having birthed babies and that many women who have birthed babies have not gone on to become mothers.

This is made most evident in *Friends* in "The One with Joey's Porsche[529]" in which Phoebe is asked by Frank and Alice to "babysit" the triplets. The vocabulary itself is telling for a mother does not babysit her own children. The deep maternal link that Phoebe was portrayed to have had with the three babies while they gestated within her body is, in this following season, decisively ruptured by the term which implies only a distant, casual relationship. The episode's narrative features Phoebe in a panic, unprepared and unequipped to take care of the babies. Indeed, she enlists the help of Chandler and Monica and when they are called away, she dreads finding herself on her own. Her fears are substantiated as she loses first one, then all three babies within the confines of Monica's small apartment. By the time the episode comes to an end, order has been restored and the triplets are fast asleep, but Monica's apartment has been trashed in the process. In losing the babies she gave birth to, in letting her friend's apartment, the location of the mothering activities, fall to ruin, any lingering doubts as to Phoebe's status as mother are definitively resolved. She may have given birth to the babies, but this does not confer on her lasting maternal

[529] Season Six, Episode Five.

status, indeed the episode ultimately underscores the division between a woman's procreative status and her maternal status. This is a division which, thanks to adoption, has certainly existed since before recorded history. However, the televisual and narrative treatment given to it in *Friends* is brought about thanks to the sitcom's awareness of and decision to include stories about infertility as well as the revolutionary possibilities of extending access to maternity to otherwise infertile women thanks to scientific research and technological innovation.

Left out of this discussion has been any reference to perhaps the most subversive maternal narrative arc of all, and the one that cannot be found in *Friends*: the conscious decision to *not* become a mother, to *not* want to have children, to *not* start a family. There is sitcom precedent for this in the case, as we saw in Chapter One, of Maude Findlay who had an abortion to terminate an unwanted pregnancy in a 1972 episode of *Maude*. But Maude was a forty-seven-year-old mother of an adult daughter, not a young woman just reaching adulthood. Likewise, Ann Marie's (*That Girl*) refusal to marry may be understood in part as a refusal to enter into motherhood, although this is never explicitly stated. In the case of *Friends*, its female characters may all be defined to a certain extent by their relationship to motherhood, and the sitcom has been called out for its narrative closure which places each of its three female protagonists in circumstances which suspiciously resemble those that the sitcom had spent so much time criticizing in its early seasons. It is true that the final episode sees Monica married and the mother of two children on the verge of moving to a comfortable house in the suburbs while Rachel gives up a prestigious job in Paris to stay in New York with her true-love Ross. While no mention of marriage is made, the decision to reunite Rachel with Ross effectively reconstructs the traditional nuclear family ideal as Emma's two parents at least cohabit if not marry. Phoebe for her part, is married and set to begin having lots of babies with new husband Mike. Not having children, for these characters, is clearly not an option.

However, to suggest that the female characters of *Friends* might have eschewed this seemingly conservative turn to domestic tranquility by refusing motherhood is perhaps to misunderstand this sitcom's guiding principles. From the beginning it was a show about young people searching for love. A reminder of the original pitch from 1993:

> This show is about six people in their 20's who hang out at this coffee house. An after hours insomnia café. It's about sex, love, relationship, careers… a time in your life when everything is possible, which is really exciting and really scary. It's about searching for love and commitment and security… and a fear of love and

> commitment and security. And it's about friendship, because when you're young and single in the city, your friends are your family.[530]

It is remarkable the extent to which the tonality of this mission statement was preserved across the series' ten seasons and David Crane in discussing the final episode remarks, "The essence of the show leads you to an organic conclusion. *Friends* started as the time in your life when your friends are your family so what's at the heart of [the finale] is six friends going off in different directions." Emphasizing the importance of closure for the characters themselves, he adds, "Several of the characters had children and were married, so it was all about closure – not just of 10 years, but of the journey they'd been on in their 20s and 30s.[531]" From the start then, these were characters who were conceived of as seeking love, *commitment* and *security*. The early emphasis on these last two qualities fairly predicts that narrative closure would dictate that they be placed within some sort of stable kinship structures. Ultimately, if *Friends* may not have called into question the primacy of motherhood as a (or indeed *the*) legitimate path for women, this is perhaps not surprising given that sixty-two percent of Generation X women were (are) mothers between the ages of 22 and 37 years old.[532] Motherhood remains a reality for the majority of Generation X women and such a closure – positioning the three female protagonists either in maternal roles or hinting that motherhood was on the near horizon – suggests that the creative team was convinced that this was the narrative resolution a majority of viewers either hoped to see or could relate to.

If *Friends*' final narrative thrust may indeed have established a particularly conformist conclusion, the ultimate significance of motherhood narratives and representations in *Friends* lies not so much in whether they may be evaluated as explicitly progressive or regressive, positive or negative. Rather, what is at stake is their overall presence, the sheer weightiness of maternal content in this comedy, the consideration and the multiple reconsiderations that are given to the

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[530] From the first page of the original pitch for *Friends*, then known as *Insomnia Café*. https://www.wgfoundation.org/blog/well-friends-resurgence

[531] Excerpted from an interview with Marta Kauffman and David Crane for *Entertainment Weekly*. Dan Snierson, "*Friends* Finale: Marta Kauffman and David Crane Look Back," ew.com, April 16, 2014. https://ew.com/article/2014/04/16/marta-kauffman-david-crane-friends-finale/

[532] Pew Research Center. "As Millennials Near 40, They're Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations." Note that this is only two percent less than the Baby Boomer Generation at the equivalent age group. In fact, Generation X women who have become mothers appear to have had slightly more children than Baby Boomer women (2.07 compared to 2.05) at a similar age. In fact, a significant drop in fertility rates appears to affect the Millennial Generation although these women (like some Gen X women) are still in their prime childbearing years (15-44). https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/

topic of mothers and mothering, the reinventions and reinterpretations of motherhood which are presented to its massive (and ever growing) audiences. In its subtle negotiations of the tensions and strains acting upon the maternal role at the turn of the millennium, *Friends* was a long-running fictional narrative which set itself apart as a site of keen cultural observation within popular culture.

Legacy: Maternal Narratives Post-*Friends*

If *Friends* set itself apart for the sheer variety of maternal figures represented in its diegetic sphere, what has television done with mothers and motherhood in the fifteen years since the sitcom's final episode aired? What, if any, legacy have the maternal examples in *Friends* left in subsequent television series? This brief summary is in no way meant to adequately cover the entire spectrum of maternal representations on television in the time since *Friends* left the air. However, the continuation and intensification of the diversification of fictional maternal figures suggests that *Friends* was, consciously or not, at the vanguard of the cultural politics surrounding the maternal role, as well as the tensions and pressures acting on it, within the context of transforming gender dynamics and scientific and technological innovation at the turn of the millennium.

Within the more restrictive confines of network television, programs following on the heels of *Friends* were quick to adopt its successful template of a close-knit group of young adults growing into older adults with a focus on their comedic romantic and professional entanglements. Examples of these include *How I Met Your Mothe*r (CBS, 2005-2014) also set in Manhattan and *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-2019) set in California. In spite of the former's title, the mother in question does not integrate the sitcom's diegetic sphere until the second to last season, although another character, Lily, does give birth in the series' seventh season. *The Big Bang Theory* makes explicit use of the regrettable Jewish mother stereotype to regularly harass main character Howard Wolowitz, suggesting that this mythical maternal figure still hovers over television comedy with enduring staying power. Another secondary maternal character, psychiatrist and neuroscientist Dr. Beverly Hofstadter, is depicted as being emotionally frigid to the extent that her young son Leonard was compelled to build a hugging machine in order to attain the necessary parental affection. The bad mother is thus recycled and exploited in this sitcom's own logic of intergenerational conflict as a source of humor.

More intriguingly, *The Big Bang Theory* offers two narrative arcs of (relative) maternal ambiguity. In the sitcom's eleventh season one of the main characters, Bernadette, is the married mother of a young baby when she finds out that, in spite of "being careful" and still breastfeeding the first child, she is pregnant again. While the "surprise" is quickly assimilated as "a blessing," her husband's horror upon learning the news and Bernadette's own momentary hesitation mark a rare instance in the sitcom genre where a positive pregnancy test is not immediately received with exhilaration. In another instance, *The Big Bang Theory* explores the prospect of a main (and married) female character explicitly stating that she does *not* want to have children. Penny's desire not to have children is met with reluctant acceptance by her husband Leonard during this sitcom's twelfth and final season, although the news is met with hostility on the part of the character's two female friends. However, in the series' finale, it is ultimately revealed that Penny has accidently become pregnant, has changed her mind about motherhood and is now happy to start a family with her husband. It would seem that, within the logic of sitcom finales, announcements of pregnancy, like the actual birth of babies (as in the *Friends* finale), are seen as providing particularly satisfying narrative closure after seasons-long diegeses. The promise of narrative continuity beyond the narrative realm of the sitcom offered by the news of a new baby reassures the long-term and invested viewers of these television comedies that their beloved characters will continue to exist, because safely ensconced in parenthood, for at least a generation to come.

In the popular and long-running *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020), a single-camera situation comedy employing a faux documentary aesthetic, the focus of this series rests not on a group of friends but on the extended Pritchett family. This three-pronged, close-knit familial unit is composed of a blended family (sexagenarian patriarch Jay, his thirtysomething trophy wife and Colombian immigrant Gloria, her son from a previous marriage, Manny, and their mutual son, Joe), a traditional nuclear family (breadwinner Phil, Jay's daughter and stay-at-home-mom, Claire, and their three children), and a gay couple (Mitchell and Cameron) who are also adoptive fathers of two young children. While *The Big Bang Theory* took time to reach its peak popularity, *Modern Family* was immediately a hit and its representation of gay parenting has been lauded as mainstreaming homoparental families. Calling *Modern Family* "a step forward," in the politics of gay representation, Frank Bruni argued in *The New York Times* that Cameron and Mitchell make

"a fundamentally conventional home, and no one around them suggests they're not every bit as entitled to it as anyone else. It's an Ozzie-and-Ozzie reverie for the age of marriage equality.[533]"

While gay fatherhood appears to have achieved mainstream acceptance in the United States thanks to its presence on network television,[534] stories of lesbian mothers and motherhoods have also received attention. Lesbian motherhood has appeared as a narrative arc on the NBC medical drama *ER* (1994-2009) and on ABC's long-running *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-present), yet its treatment appears to be more fully developed for the moment on cable network dramas such as Showtime's groundbreaking *The L Word* (2004-2009) and ABC Family's *The Fosters* (2013-2018). *The L Word*'s unabashed treatment of a Los Angelean lesbian couple seeking to become mothers begins in the series' pilot episode as Bette and Tina, a long-term lesbian couple, attempt to find an appropriate sperm donor so that Tina may be artificially inseminated. Tina and Bette's journey to motherhood, however, is marked by seasons-long reproductive and relationship strife as Tina suffers an initial miscarriage and the couple spirals into instability, breakup and reunion. In *The Fosters*, Stef and Lena Adams-Foster are an interracial lesbian couple living in San Diego who raise Stef's biological son from an earlier marriage, adopted Latino twins and two foster children in this family drama airing on ABC's cable affiliate. Noting the dearth of series featuring lesbians raising families, *The Fosters*' executive producer Bradley Bredeweg stated,

> We started looking around at the landscape and thought about maybe telling a story about the American family with gay dads, but we felt that had been done a few times before and rather well. Then we realized that there was a kind of a vacuum when it came to stories about women raising families. So we set off in that direction. Many of our own friends are moms raising biological kids. Some of them have fostered and adopted. Suddenly, we realized we had a story here that hadn't been told on television before.[535]

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[533] Frank Bruni, "ABC's Gay Wednesdays," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2012. https://web.archive.org/web/20120310105033/http://bruni.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/08/abcs-gay-wednesdays/

[534] Other network examples include gay fathers Kevin and Scotty in the ABC drama *Brothers and Sisters* (2006-2011), secondary characters Bob and Lee in *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012, seasons 4-8) and the short-lived *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012-2013) chronicling the journey of wealthy gay couple Bryan and David who decide to have a child with their surrogate Goldie.

[535] Queer Voices. "Bradley Bredeweg, Executive Producer, Discusses ABC Family's 'The Fosters.'" *The Huffington Post*, February 2, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/bradley-bredeweg-the-fosters_n_4569014?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGQAXI2fZTTzaUW6WNgBiUqF90R8SLN9BPuoeTDthhI16aGjEcDXw21kkVzCL4Rt-nLyWOqg4UBiIESXaNFX8ADsYZuortz3Cd6tX5zUOYWixzOoSo3SWX5vX6ghKhx20CSr2xW_M0gL_ZY8e-exkJ7P2i-njE7TgvYeS8eyPbCq

Lest there be any doubt that this type of programming is approved by all Americans, before *The Fosters*' pilot was finalized and aired, it became the target (just like *The New Normal* a year earlier) of protest and a boycott campaign by the website OneMillionMoms.com, a division of the conservative Christian, American Family Foundation. The group's objective is clear as the website's mission statement, in a direct appeal to women's maternal status, attests:

> Our goal is to stop the exploitation of our children, especially by the entertainment media (TV, music, movies, etc.). Mom, OneMillionMoms.com is the most powerful tool you have to stand against the immorality, violence, vulgarity and profanity the entertainment media is throwing at your children. It is time to fight back![536]

In their statement specifically concerning *The Fosters*, OneMillionMoms.com. opines that,

> While foster care and adoption is a wonderful thing and the Bible does teach us to help orphans, this program is attempting to redefine marriage and family by having two moms raise these children together […] None of this material is acceptable content for a family show. Hollywood is continuing to push an agenda that homosexuality is acceptable when scripture states clearly it is a sin.[537]

Gay and lesbian parenting, despite (or perhaps more accurately because of) its increasing visibility on American television screens appears to be a lightning rod for controversy, making Carol and Susan's lesbian motherhood narrative arc in *Friends* even more noteworthy in retrospect, for its lack of polemic. It is notable that the aforementioned lesbian motherhoods have all appeared in the context of dramatic programming. These series, without their commitment to comic intent, may well appear to be more tethered to reality than sitcom and thus more threatening to those who would already object to their content. The situation comedy, by comparison, does indeed appear to be a genre in which nonnormative representation "passes," is more easily accepted, because of its seemingly less serious approach to storytelling.

In the time since Rachel's moments of ambiguity concerning her pregnancy and motherhood surfaced in *Friends*, a number of recent television series have picked up on the theme of maternity and the maternal role as boring, difficult, arduous and *un*glorious. Indeed, the entire diegetic sphere of ABC's popular suburban soap opera satire *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) appears to be a long running parody of this very notion. More recent variations on this theme

[536] From "About Us." https://onemillionmoms.com/about-us/
[537] Hillary Busis, "Anti-gay Group Protests Jennifer Lopez Series." Ew.com, October 8, 2012. https://ew.com/article/2012/10/08/abc-family-the-fosters-protest/

include *Better Things* (FX, 2016-present) in which Sam Fox is the harassed single mother of three growing girls who tries to hustle acting work as a past-her-prime forty-something actress in Los Angeles. *The Letdown*[538] (ABC Australia and Netflix, 2016-present) is an Australian comedy-drama in which Audrey struggles with the fatigue and uncertainty of new motherhood and eventually has an (offscreen) abortion in order to avoid having a second child too soon. *Workin' Moms* (CBC Canada and Netflix, 2017-present) is a Canadian series focusing on four new mothers who regularly meet for a mom's group. As the title suggests, the four are intended to represent a relatively diverse (heterosexual, lesbian, Asian) group of mothers who struggle to balance their professional and personal lives in the wake of their entry into motherhood. These programs, blending various tones (melancholy, anxiety, optimism, humor), demonstrate the possibilities in this post-network televisual landscape to offer programming which attempts to tease out and speak to the complexities of mothering in the twenty-first century with more or less authenticity. The women in these programs, however, like Rachel before them, are largely white and comfortably middle- or upper-middle class – one critic writes that *Workin' Moms* "reeks of entitlement and requests us to have sympathy for elites[539]" – suggesting that not only is access to appropriate motherhood still reserved for an economically privileged class, but that the by-now acknowledgeable *disillusionment* which comes along with it may be reserved for these elite mothers as well. Of note, two of these three programs are not produced in the United States, a sign perhaps that American television producers are still reluctant to imagine maternal figures who are not ultimately fulfilled by their motherhood status.

The increasing portrayal of transgender individuals on televisual programming is in the processes of further interrogating the relationship of motherhood to gender and biological sex for consumers of popular culture. *Transparent* (Amazon, 2014-2019), in which the transitioning septuagenarian Maura questions not only her gender identity but also her parental identity, makes explicit the stakes of disassembling the gender binary. In "To Sardines and Back,[540]" Maura seemingly pushes her new gender identity to the limits when, at a family birthday dinner, she

[538] The title plays on the semantic ambiguity existing between the two significations of "letdown": on the one hand the physiological process in which milk is released into the breasts during breastfeeding ("letdown effect") and on the other, the feelings of disappointment after getting one's hopes up.
[539] John Doyle, "CBC's *Workin' Moms* Reeks of Entitlement and Privilege," *The Globe and Mail*, January 9, 2017. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/television/john-doyle-cbcs-workin-moms-reeks-of-entitlement-and-privilege/article33552675/
[540] Season Three, Episode Three.

announces that she hates the new moniker her grown children have assigned her (Moppa) and suggests being called simply Mom. Present at the table is Maura's ex-wife, Shelly, the biological-birth mother of the three children. The pause following Maura's suggestion and the camera's focus on a stricken Shelly anticipate the latter's considered response: "Mom? Ha! Well. Get a load of this. Mom. Ok. Well, I mean, were you there when Sarey got her period? Did you slap her across the face like a good Jewish mother? Did you show her how to put her tampon in?" Shelly's outrage appears to stem from what she sees as an illegitimate and unearned usurpation of her hard-won maternal status. For this character, that status is one that, drawing on the example she gives of the daughter's period, can only be attained thanks to specific actions associated with, crucially, a specific type of body corresponding to a specific biological and physiological reality (having functioning ovaries, a uterus, vagina and menstruating).

The journey of *Transparent*'s Maura may be subject to being read as a more nuanced, sophisticated and more fully developed iteration of Chandler Bing's own paternal figure, Charles Bing. While the character of Chandler's father is played by Kathleen Turner and stars in a Las Vegas drag show under the stage name Helena Handbasket, Charles Bing is referred to as Chandler's Dad throughout the series, including in the episode title "The One with Chandler's Dad." It is true that Chandler is walked down the aisle on his wedding day by two parents wearing dresses, make-up and feminine accessories, and this certainly introduces an element of queerness and subversion to the couple's wedding ceremony as well as to the Bing family more generally. However, Charles Bing never makes any claim to a specific gender identity himself and he is considered by the series to be a gay man and drag queen. While there is a certain amount of ambiguity in the sitcom's treatment of this character, notably reflected in Monica's confusion over which pronouns to use at the Las Vegas drag show they attend, there appears to be little space to make the argument that this character's (limited) appearance interrogates the parental binary in a way similar to the explicitly stated Maura-Shelly showdown in *Transparent*.[541]

[541] According to the Comedy Central UK website, Marta Kauffman has a different opinion: "Marta Kauffman reminded us that Kathleen Turner's character (Chandler's cross-dressing father and drag queen Helena Handbasket) was transgender – a pretty progressive move for its time." "Friends Creators Step in to Defend 'Homophobic' Chandler," comedycentral.co.uk.
https://www.comedycentral.co.uk/news/chandlers-dad-was-transgender-marta-kauffamn-confirms
However, in a different interview, Kauffman reveals that this interpretation of the character is something of a revision: "I think we didn't have the knowledge about transgender people back then, so I'm not sure if we used the appropriate terms," Kauffman explained to *USA Today*. She stated further, "I don't know if I would have known those terms back then […]" Clémence Michallon, "*Friends* co-creator Marta Kauffman says she would change transgender storylines if show was made today," *The Independent*, May 2, 2019.

If cable and streaming programming allow for (or demand) an ever-more diverse panoply of maternal representation, it is on network television that one of *Friends*' successor sitcoms has quietly maintained a seasons' long commitment to chronicling the nuance and complexity of maternal roles within the intergenerational context which leads so often to facile stereotyping. *Mom* (CBS, 2013-present), executive-produced by Chuck Lorre (*Grace Under Fire, The Big Bang Theory*) and created by Lorre and Gemma Baker, takes as its storytelling foundation the life of a young single mother struggling to overcome addiction. Christy Plunkett (played by Anna Faris) has two children and works as a waitress. A former stripper and the victim of domestic violence, Christy gave birth at sixteen and spent much of her young motherhood drinking, doing drugs and gambling. Now clean, Christy aims to become an appropriate and responsible maternal figure for her two children. In the pilot episode, Christy's daughter Violet reveals that at seventeen, she too is pregnant. In spite of remaining in a stable relationship with the young father, Violet decides to give the baby to another couple in an open adoption. Also, in the pilot, Christy's own mother, Bonnie, arrives to reinitiate her own maternal relationship with daughter Christy after years of absence, substance abuse and emotional neglect. *Mom*, then, situates its diegesis within a multi-generational cycle of bad mothering and Baker explains the challenges of bringing such representation to a network situation comedy: "I really thought audiences would not be able to get behind a bad mom on network TV. We agreed her [Christy's] trouble needed to be in the rearview mirror and the children had to [be] safe, in order for it to be funny.[542]" Baker's comment indicates that there are limits to what mainstream audiences will accept as potentially humorous and that a woman putting her children in harm's way cannot qualify. However, within the safe confines of the comedy, *Mom* seizes upon the bad mother stereotype and spends seven seasons (and counting) digging into it, to better reveal it for what it is: a generalized and clumsy categorizing of women, of maternal figures, whose life circumstances have led them to behave in certain ways. *Mom* is the space where bad mothers can go to redeem themselves as a stereotype. Over the seasons, Bonnie and Christy rebuild a strong and loving, though sometimes prickly, relationship. As the focus of the series moves away from Christy's increasingly distant and ambiguous relationship with her

https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/friends-marta-kauffman-creator-transgender-jokes-chandlers-dad-a8896611.html

[542] Danielle Turchiano and Amber Dowling, "'Mom' Team Reflects on Centering a Sitcom on Women in Recovery," *Variety*, February 1, 2018. https://variety.com/2018/tv/features/mom-road-to-100-episodes-chuck-lorre-allison-janney-anna-faris-interview-1202676844/

own children who eventually leave the series, it turns its attention to the group of women who make up Bonnie and Christy's addiction recovery group, who constitute, in effect, an all-female "found family." *Mom*, in essence, imagines a world released from the patriarchy and individualism that render modern motherhood so taxing, a world in which a multi-generational group of women forge the bonds of kinship, "raising" each other (up) in order to survive. "Women helping women recover from the seemingly hopeless disease of alcohol and drug addiction provided this extraordinary ensemble of great actresses that were funny in different ways. In loving each other and supporting each other, they survive not as individuals – the me is overridden by the we," notes executive producer Lorre.

Lorre himself acknowledges the continuity of content that links this project with his earlier *Grace Under Fire* (ABC, 1993-1998) and he inscribes himself within the wider tradition of the Norman Lear social relevancy sitcoms of the 1970s. However, the casting of Anna Faris – who played *Friends*' unwed teenaged biological mother who gives up her baby to Chandler and Monica – as an unwed teenage mother in *Mom* links these two situation comedies as well. *Mom* reconsiders Faris's character and offers her not only the opportunity to keep her baby but also the contextualization she was not accorded in *Friends*. While *Mom* ultimately seems to support open adoption as the most appropriate choice for unwed mothers, in this instance it does so from the perspective of the maternal figure and not that of the more privileged upper middle-class couple struggling with infertility. In this, as well as in its reimagination of the chosen family as an all-female space, *Mom* may in fact be *Friends*' most direct sitcom successor in spite of the two programs' apparently very different conceptual origins.

If *Mom* imagines motherhood as a complex though ultimately redemptive place from which to initiate a wider project of community building and care as a buffer to the hostile and dangerous world of violence and abuse, television's most dystopian take on motherhood to date, Hulu's drama *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017-present) proposes to viewers a world in which state-imposed motherhood becomes the *source* of violence and abuse for women. Based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* follows June, a young woman living in the authoritarian theocracy, Gilead, formerly the United States. June is a fertile woman in a world in which fertility rates have declined to the point of demographic collapse. She is captured and assigned as a handmaid in the service of an eminent military commander whose own wife cannot bear children. Subjected to ritualized rape by the commander, June is eventually impregnated by another man

who she comes to have a romantic relationship with and escapes the commander's household while sending her child to safety. *The Handmaid's Tale* pushes to the extreme the notion of fertility and motherhood as (lifesaving) status and proposes a dark warning about the dangers of loss of bodily autonomy in an authoritarian state. While *The Handmaid's Tale* may, in many ways, be the antithesis of *Mom* (in terms of genre, platform, and tone), the two programs both explore the tensions and possibilities surrounding motherhood and confirm the presence of the maternal figure as a continuing source of inspiration and negotiation in television.

In a 2014 paper prepared for the non-profit, nonpartisan Council on Contemporary Families, Philip Cohen writes:

> People often think of social change in the lives of American children since the 1950s as a movement in one direction – from children being raised in married, male-breadwinner families to a new norm of children being raised by working mothers, many of them unmarried. Instead, we can better understand this transformation as an explosion of diversity, a fanning out from a compact center along many different pathways.[543]

Over the past seven decades in the United States, the move from three or four national television networks to a seemingly infinite variety of platforms and channels parallels the move from a relatively uniform and dominant nuclear model of the American family centered on a normative maternal figure to a seemingly infinite variety of family types and an increasingly wide diversity of mothers and motherhoods. The "fanning out" of the American family mirrors the "fanning out" of the televisual industry itself, a fanning out which, in turn, lay the groundwork for televised fiction's plethora of increasingly diverse maternal figures as the fictional mother continues to inspire and provide salient content for television across a formidable span of genres. *Friends'* place as a transitional (network era to post-network era) situation comedy at this moment of televisual and generic loosening mirrors its role as a cultural product representing the loosening of the maternal role from a set of rigid identities, behaviors and procreative statuses to a collection of motherhoods stretching towards ever-more diversity and complexity.

[543] Philip Cohen, "Family Diversity is the New Normal for America's Children," The Council on Contemporary Families, 2014, 1. https://familyinequality.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/family-diversity-new-normal.pdf

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Résumé détaillé de la thèse en français

Question(s) de recherche

Ce projet a commencé il y a plusieurs années avec l'intuition que la critique avait négligé un aspect fondamental du phénomène télévisuel *Friends*, série diffusée à l'origine sur la grande chaîne de télévision américaine NBC de 1994 à 2004. Alors que le titre de cette sitcom suggère que son contenu est destiné à traiter exclusivement des relations amicales de ses protagonistes, elle est, en fait, véritablement traversée par des questions liées à la formation de la famille, à la parentalité et plus particulièrement au rôle maternel. La série a été analysée dans son traitement des préoccupations de la génération X, qui doit gérer la réalité décevante de la vie urbaine américaine au tournant du millénaire, et cette déception est partiellement ancrée dans le discours que la série porte sur la famille nucléaire traditionnelle. Cependant, il me semblait qu'il manquait une étude approfondie concernant l(es)'interprétation(s) que *Friends* propose quant à l'institution de la famille, et plus précisément, quant à la question des mères et de la maternité. Ce qui frappe dans *Friends*, encore aujourd'hui, c'est, en effet, la présence de représentations très diverses des mères et des formes de maternité au sein de l'espace fictionnel de ses dix saisons et de ses deux cent trente-six épisodes : des femmes mariées avec enfants, qui semblent se conformer aux idées et aux idéaux dominants liés à la maternité et à la famille nucléaire ; des femmes qui souhaitent devenir mères mais qui souffrent d'infertilité ; des femmes qui, en aidant d'autres femmes en quête de maternité à devenir mères, deviennent elles-mêmes mères, ne serait-ce que pour une durée limitée ; des femmes qui ont recours à la procréation médicalement assistée ; des femmes qui ont des enfants hors mariage ; des femmes qui élèvent des enfants avec d'autres femmes ; ainsi que des hommes qui assument des tâches de maternage traditionnellement accomplies par les femmes.

Friends, tout en restant fidèle à son héritage de sitcom, construit un espace discursif et spéculatif, invitant à maintes reprises ses téléspectateurs tout au long de sa diffusion à revisiter et à reconceptualiser l'institution de la famille, et plus particulièrement la figure maternelle, à un moment historique précis et singulier. Le tournant du XXIe siècle peut, en effet, être compris comme un moment de tension idéologique en ce qui concerne les rôles parentaux et l'institution

de la famille, et ce à cause de discours de plus en plus répétés interrogeant les rôles genrés et sexués normatifs, dans le sillage des mouvements d'*empowerment* des femmes et des homosexuels, et de l'accès accru à de nouvelles technologies de reproduction, engendrant autant d'espoirs que d'angoisses. À travers un retour répété vers le sujet des mères et de la maternité, *Friends* souligne le rôle social et culturel important de la sitcom américaine en général, et de cette sitcom en particulier, en tant que vecteur d'idées et d'images reflétant et alimentant à la fois les préoccupations sociales contemporaines.

L'idée centrale de ce projet est alors la suivante : bien que cette sitcom se concentre sur un groupe d'amis, *Friends* est préoccupée par la famille et elle le démontre à plusieurs reprises à travers ses épisodes, chacun explorant, d'une manière ou d'une autre, les mères de manière complexe et incarnée, et la maternité à la fois en tant qu'institution et expérience.[544] Comment la maternité affecte-t-elle la sitcom d'un point de vue narratologique et générique ? Comment cette série interroge-t-elle les notions de mère et de maternité ? Les représentations de cette sitcom soutiennent-elles les idéologies dominantes associées à la maternité ou s'y opposent-elles ? De quelle manière l'intention comique, la composante générique fondamentale de la sitcom, nourrit-elle ces représentations ? En dépit d'un désir conscient de s'éloigner du modèle de la famille nucléaire, *Friends* semble revenir régulièrement à cette question de la maternité et au rôle des mères au sein de ce modèle familial, mais semble insister aussi sur un potentiel élargissement de la notion de famille au-delà de ce modèle normé tout en tenant compte de la spécificité du rôle maternel au sein de ce projet. Si cette série interroge la structure familiale en général, cette analyse se concentre principalement sur les représentations maternelles car elles semblent être interrogées de manière plus saillante par rapport à ce qui peut être observé concernant la paternité (bien que cette thèse aborde aussi, en marge, cette question). Ce que *Friends* dit sur les mères, leurs identités, leurs activités, et la manière dont cela apparaît dans cette série à ce moment historique – tels sont les enjeux fondamentaux de cette étude.

Cette analyse est d'autant plus pertinente si l'on tient compte de la popularité de la série, aujourd'hui comme au moment de sa diffusion. En effet, au cours de sa diffusion originale, *Friends*

[544] La maternité en tant « qu'institution et expérience » est tirée de la formulation de la poète et théoricienne Adrienne Rich. Cette dernière vise à opérer une distinction entre la maternité conçue de manière rigide normée dans une société patriarcale et la maternité véritablement vécue, la relation potentielle que chaque mère peut entretenir avec ses propres pouvoirs de reproduction. Voir Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born, Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976).

fut l'un des programmes les plus regardés à la télévision ; la série a toujours figuré parmi les dix émissions les plus populaires mesurées par Nielsen. L'épisode le mieux noté, diffusé en 1996, a attiré 52,9 millions de téléspectateurs ; le dernier épisode de la série, près de 52,5 millions.[545] La sitcom fut également un gros succès commercial pour sa société de production et de distribution, Warner Bros. Television, ainsi que pour la chaine NBC, pour l'équipe créative composée de Kevin Bright, Marta Kauffman et David Crane, et pour les acteurs et scénaristes qui ont participé à sa création. En 2018, *Friends* rapportait encore un milliard de dollars par an à Warner Brothers grâce à des accords de syndication lucratifs, et sa constante popularité a poussé la plateforme de *streaming* Netflix à payer 100 millions de dollars à WarnerMedia pour obtenir les droits de la diffuser pendant une année.

Friends fut également un succès critique. Après une première réception un peu tiède, la sitcom a fini par remporter soixante-deux nominations aux Emmy Awards, dix nominations aux Golden Globes, quatorze nominations aux Screen Actors Guild, et onze nominations aux People's Choice Awards. « Indiscutablement », écrivent Simone Knox et Kai Hanno Schwind, « *Friends* est l'un des programmes les plus importants de l'histoire de la télévision et de la culture médiatique.[546] » En effet, ces auteurs soulignent la portée de *Friends*, soulignant que le « profil mondial » de la sitcom comprend « l'Australie, la Chine, l'Égypte, la France, l'Allemagne, la Grèce, l'Inde, le Japon, la Norvège, les Philippines, l'Espagne et le Royaume-Uni.[547] » Depuis sa diffusion initiale et en particulier depuis qu'Internet occupe un rôle dominant dans les médias, *Friends* a même été explicitement identifiée comme outil pédagogique pour l'apprentissage de la langue anglaise. Au cours des vingt-cinq dernières années, *Friends* s'est ainsi imposée au niveau mondial d'une manière inégalée par rapport à d'autres séries de la même période.

Compte tenu de sa popularité, de son succès commercial et de sa portée culturelle, il semble surprenant que les chercheurs aient jusqu'alors accordé relativement peu d'attention à *Friends* en particulier et au genre de la sitcom en général. En 2005, Brett Mills avançait un certain nombre d'arguments pour expliquer pourquoi ce genre a traditionnellement reçu si peu d'attention universitaire. Il y aurait le préjugé selon lequel « la sitcom est simple et déjà comprise ; la

[545] Pour l'audimat de *Friends*, voir Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows, 1946-Present* 9th ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), 1694-1697.
[546] « Indisputably, *Friends* is one of the most significant programmes in the history of television and media culture. » Simone Knox and Kai Hanno Schwind, Friends: *A Reading of the Sitcom* (eBook: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4.
[547] « It would be *Friends* that would receive a global profile, showing in countries that include Australia, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, India, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, Spain and the UK. » Knox and Schwind, 2.

conviction qu'en tant que forme comique, elle n'a pas grand-chose à 'dire' sur les préoccupations sociales et les publics qu'elles divertissent ; la conviction que l'examen de formes plus 'sérieuses' est plus pressant ; la croyance qu'il ne s'agit 'que de sitcom'.[548] » En effet, Mills suggère que la dynamique qui mène au succès d'une sitcom est si « clairement évidente » que l'on suppose qu'une « analyse complexe » est inutile ; que parce que la sitcom fonctionne sur l'humour, une analyse approfondie détruirait en quelque sorte la capacité du genre à créer cet humour. Pourtant, en évitant une analyse approfondie de son contenu humoristique, nous risquons de ne pas saisir ni apprécier toutes les implications de ce genre télévisuel américain. Or il s'agit d'une tâche particulièrement importante compte tenu de l'arrivée du genre sur le petit écran à un moment historique précis où dominait une image exceptionnellement saillante des mères et de la maternité. En effet, la *situation comedy* américaine arrive à maturité à un moment où le modèle patriarcal hétéronormatif de la famille nucléaire est célébré comme idéal culturel et sociétal dominant. L'attention constante que la sitcom en général porte à la famille consacre le rôle maternel (aussi bien que paternel) dans une configuration familiale normative, mais l'ancrage du genre dans le domaine intrinsèquement instable de la comédie permet régulièrement à la sitcom, dans les efforts qu'elle réalise pour divertir des publics disparates, de proposer des discours apparemment contradictoires sur ces rôles.

Que signifie être *mère*? Qui, en fin de compte, est une *mère*? Ces questions ont l'air très simples et semblent relever du « bon sens. » Pourtant, là où il y a « bon sens », il y a de l'idéologie et c'est dans ces moments où le langage apparaît le plus évident qu'il est nécessaire de l'interroger. Par ses représentations multiples et variées de la figure maternelle, *Friends* bouscule toute compréhension simple du concept de *mère* et invite ses spectateurs à comprendre la mère non pas comme un signifiant fixe mais comme un terme régulièrement soumis à des pressions et des négociations idéologiques concurrentes, voire contradictoires.

Les représentations idéologiques dominantes dans une culture donnée nous informent sur ce que cette culture privilégie à un moment donné. A travers cette analyse, j'identifierai trois types de cadres idéologiques interdépendants qui s'appliquent aux mères et à la maternité telles qu'elles sont représentées dans *Friends* : les idéologies qui agissent au niveau de *l'identité maternelle*, les idéologies liées au *comportement maternel* et les idéologies qui concernent *le statut*

[548] « [T]he sitcom is simple and already understood; the belief that, as a comedic form, it has little to 'say' about social concerns and the cultures it entertains; the belief that the examination of more 'serious' forms is more pressing; the belief that it's 'only sitcom.' » Voir Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 3.

procréateur de la mère. Les différentes composantes contribuant à la notion d'identité maternelle comprennent, par exemple, le sexe, l'origine ethnique, la classe sociale, la religion, la situation matrimoniale, le statut professionnel ou encore le lieu de résidence de la figure maternelle, et elles peuvent toutes être soumises à des pressions et des tensions idéologiques, valorisant certaines mères et maternités plus que d'autres. Les idéologies à l'œuvre en termes de comportement maternel prennent en compte la manière avec laquelle une figure maternelle agit envers ses enfants et avec laquelle elle se positionne par rapport à eux. L'enjeu ici se trouve au sein de l'interaction de la mère avec les membres de la jeune génération sous sa responsabilité. En ce qui concerne le statut procréateur de la mère, des pressions idéologiques peuvent être à l'œuvre pour attribuer une légitimité à certaines façons d'accéder à la maternité (conception traditionnelle, gestation et accouchement, par exemple) davantage qu'à d'autres (comme l'utilisation de technologies de procréation médicalement assistée ou l'adoption).

Une grande partie de cette analyse cherchera à établir dans quelle mesure le genre de la sitcom, et *Friends* en particulier, peut être compris comme créant des espaces de dissidence dans ses représentations de la figure maternelle et de la maternité – des fissures dans les édifices idéologiques dominants qui façonnent la maternité.

Méthodologie et progression de l'argumentaire

S'appuyant sur les études télévisuelles et les études culturelles, notamment les théories du matérialisme culturel,[549] et gardant à l'esprit que *Friends* est un texte culturel produit par et pour une industrie dans une logique capitaliste, cette thèse part à la recherche des moments de dissidence potentiels au sein d'un système de représentation génériquement spécifique, moments qui exposent et interrogent les formations idéologiques liées à la maternité. Le simple fait que la *situation comedy* en général et *Friends* en particulier reviennent continuellement aux histoires de famille, de parentalité et de maternité suggère qu'il s'agit bel et bien d'un sujet de taille. Alan Sinfield nous rappelle, en effet, que ce sont les « histoires de ligne de faille » ("*faultline stories*") qui « nécessitent les revisites les plus assidues et continues ; ce sont elles qui abordent les questions

[549] Voir Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992).

délicates et non résolues, celles pour lesquelles les conditions de plausibilité sont contestées.[550] » Au tournant du millénaire, l'insistance récurrente sur les mères opérée par cette sitcom indique que cette question peut être considérée comme une « histoire de ligne de faille », où les idéologies dominantes correspondantes sont soumises à d'intenses pressions et négociations.

Pour étudier ces lignes de faille, cette étude sera composée de la description empirique, de l'analyse et de l'interprétation des principaux arcs narratifs et des représentations concernant les mères, le maternage et la maternité à travers des micro-lectures contextualisées de scènes et d'épisodes spécifiques. En fonction des exemples, les analyses pourront prendre en considération la structure narrative, le jeu des acteurs, les dialogues, le travail de la caméra, les rires du public, le décor, etc. afin de répondre aux questions suivantes : la scène est-elle structurée pour être drôle ? Si oui, comment l'humour est-il créé, et en quoi est-ce drôle ? Sinon, pourquoi n'est-ce pas drôle ? Et, enfin, quelles sont les possibles ramifications idéologiques de ces représentations au sein de la structure sérielle ?

Dans le premier chapitre, nous situons *Friends* de manière générique et chronologique dans une histoire culturelle plus large de la *situation comedy* familiale américaine afin de clarifier comment la série se conforme ou s'éloigne des constructions fictionnelles précédentes de figures maternelles et de la maternité au sein du genre. Le chapitre commence par une exploration de la sitcom en tant que catégorie de la culture télévisuelle populaire qui trouve ses racines dans des formes antérieures de comédie, telles que la comédie de situation radiophonique et les spectacles de vaudeville. Les principales conventions génériques de la sitcom sont esquissées, y compris l'intention comique primordiale du genre.

Ce premier chapitre évoque également des exemples notables de mères et de maternités fictives présentées aux téléspectateurs américains au cours du XXe siècle. Le chapitre retrace l'histoire de la figure maternelle depuis les débuts de la télédiffusion, où figuraient des personnages ethniques matriarcaux forts, comme dans *The Goldbergs* (CBS, NBC, DuMont, 1949-1956) et *Mama* (CBS, 1949-1957). S'ensuit une longue période de variations mineures sur un thème dominant à l'époque de la guerre froide, celui de la figure maternelle comme femme au foyer blanche, de classe moyenne, vivant dans une banlieue résidentielle, subordonnée à un mari salarié qui endosse le rôle d'un vrai patriarche. Ces programmes comprennent *The Adventures of Ozzie*

[550] « [A]ssiduous and continuous reworking; they address the awkward, unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute, » 47.

and Harriet (ABC, 1952-1966), *Father Knows Best* (CBS, NBC, 1954-1960) et *Leave it to Beaver* (CBS, ABC, 1957-1963). Plus tard encore, des sitcoms telles que *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972) et *The Addams Family* (ABC, 1964-1966) semblent faire allusion au mouvement naissant du féminisme de la seconde vague en accordant plus de liberté à leurs figures maternelles bien que ces écarts soient contenus par des diégèses fantastiques et/ou imaginaires. Afin de maintenir leur pertinence sociétale, les *situation comedies* de la fin des années 1960 et du début des années 1970 commencent à aborder ouvertement les questions de race, de classe et de sexe, et ces préoccupations influencent à leur tour les figures maternelles fictives d'émissions telles que *Julia* (NBC, 1968-1971), *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978) ou encore *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979). Les mères célibataires (divorcées ou ayant choisi de rester célibataires) apparaissent sur le petit écran américain dans les espaces fictionnels de *One Day at a Time* (CBS, 1975-1984) et de *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), tandis qu'un retour symbolique à la figure maternelle idéalisée des années 1950 est à l'œuvre dans de nombreuses sitcoms des années 1980, notamment *Family Ties* (NBC, 1982-1989), *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) et *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-1992). Dans la décennie précédant l'arrivée de *Friends* à l'écran, la famille nucléaire, figure maternelle incluse, tombe soudainement en disgrâce, victime de la dynamique de la famille dysfonctionnelle, comme dans *Married…with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997), *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988-1997) ou *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-présent). Ce premier chapitre délimite donc (d'un trait large) certains des grands thèmes récurrents en termes de représentation maternelle et souligne les ruptures et les dissonances quand elles se produisent. L'évolution des représentations maternelles est aussi contextualisée dans un cadre plus large de changements culturels et historiques.

Nous poursuivons avec un deuxième chapitre qui aborde spécifiquement la sitcom *Friends* et débute précisément là où celle-ci commence, c'est-à-dire avec une étude approfondie des premières figures maternelles que met en scène la série : les mères des six personnages principaux, Judy Geller, Nora Bing, Gloria Tribbiani, Sandra Green, Lily Buffay et Phoebe Abbot. Personnages secondaires par définition, ces femmes (bien que distinctes chacune à sa manière) n'en sont pas moins universellement caractérisées comme décevantes aux yeux de leurs enfants adultes. Ce discours de déception fonctionne différemment en fonction de chaque personnage et le chapitre cherche à expliciter comment cette dynamique fonctionne dans chaque cas et se demande si la sitcom crée, à un moment donné, un espace pour racheter ces mères apparemment insatisfaisantes.

En raison de leur association étroite avec le stéréotype culturel de la « mauvaise mère », ce chapitre commence par un tour d'horizon de cette figure féminine fantasmagorique en identifiant ses nombreuses apparitions culturelles, dans une tentative de contextualiser sa présence si significative dans la sphère diégétique de *Friends*. Loin d'être une constante socio-historique, les caractéristiques de la mauvaise mère fluctuent dans le temps et à travers les contextes, ce stéréotype répondant généralement aux besoins culturels du moment. Les mauvaises mères agissent différemment à différents moments, toujours en rapport avec d'autres comportements ou identités maternelles plus socialement acceptables, ce qui souligne ainsi la construction sociale de cette figure.

Ayant établi que *Friends* offre un regard très critique sur une génération spécifique de mères, les chapitres trois et quatre se focalisent sur ce que nous pouvons considérer comme les « nouvelles » mères et les « nouvelles » maternités proposées par la sitcom. Dans l'ordre chronologique, la première saison suit la grossesse des personnages secondaires Carol Willick et sa compagne, Susan Bunch, à travers ce qui constitue la première représentation sérialisée de la maternité lesbienne dans une sitcom américaine. Vingt ans avant que la Cour suprême des États-Unis ne décide que le mariage est un droit constitutionnel pour les couples de même sexe, ces deux femmes fictives élèvent un enfant ensemble au cours de plusieurs épisodes sans provoquer la moindre polémique. La quatrième saison de la sitcom propose un regard approfondi sur les processus inhérents à la grossesse de Phoebe Buffay en tant que mère porteuse gestationnelle, qui entame une telle démarche suite à la demande de son frère et de sa belle-sœur (trop âgée pour avoir un enfant). Depuis la prise de décision jusqu'à la représentation décomplexée des technologies de procréation médicalement assistée alors encore innovantes, en passant par une séparation difficile d'avec les triplés auxquels Phoebe donne naissance, ce récit d'une maternité de substitution offre une perspective étonnamment franche sur un processus encore mal connu à l'époque. En huitième saison, l'arc narratif qui suit le personnage de Rachel Green dans son expérience d'une maternité célibataire choisie est, en apparence, moins pionnier que les autres, car en 2001, les mères ayant choisi de rester célibataires faisaient déjà partie du paysage de la sitcom depuis plus de dix ans. Cependant, Rachel étant le seul personnage principal montré dans la pratique de la maternité, l'histoire de sa grossesse et de ses premiers pas en tant que jeune mère parvient tout de même à renouveler le discours autour des comportements maternels hors normes. Enfin, dans les saisons neuf et dix, au cours des dernières années de diffusion de *Friends*, Monica Geller et son mari

Chandler Bing apprennent qu'ils ne peuvent pas avoir d'enfant et cette histoire devient le sujet d'un arc narratif autour de l'infertilité et de l'adoption, arc qui atteint son point culminant lors du dernier épisode de la série lorsque le couple adopte enfin des jumeaux.

Le troisième chapitre se penche particulièrement sur les deux récits de maternité qui semblent d'abord rompre avec l'idéologie dominante de l'hétérosexualité conjugale. En tant que mères lesbiennes, Carol et Susan refusent cet idéal patriarcal et obligent la figure paternelle, Ross, à reconsidérer son rôle. La paternité (à nouveau représentée par Ross) est également obligée de s'adapter lorsque Rachel tombe enceinte de manière inattendue et refuse de se marier avec le père biologique de l'enfant qui va naître. La figure paternelle reste cependant présente, voire omniprésente, et ce chapitre conclut en se demandant dans quelle mesure ces exemples de maternité se détachent véritablement du patriarcat.

Enfin, le chapitre quatre examine les deux exemples de maternité qui remettent en question le statut procréateur de la figure maternelle. La traditionnelle trajectoire de la maternité, fondée sur une suite d'événements physiologiques a priori simples (fécondation, gestation, parturition) situés dans un corps maternel unique, sous-tend l'idéologie selon laquelle il ne peut y avoir qu'une seule mère pour un enfant. Cependant, dans chacune de ces histoires de création familiale, deux femmes vont être nécessaires pour contrer le diagnostic d'infertilité. Mère porteuse gestationnelle, Phoebe Buffay agit en tant que parturiente de la progéniture génétique de son frère et de sa belle-sœur, tandis que Monica Geller adopte les jumeaux liés, génétiquement, gestationnellement et par accouchement, à un autre personnage secondaire, la jeune célibataire Erica, dans un récit d'adoption ouverte. Ces arcs narratifs révèlent et examinent les complexités liées au statut de la maternité lorsque celle-ci ne suit pas la simple progression procréative allant de la conception à la gestation puis à la parturition. De plus, le récit de l'infertilité que subissent Monica et Chandler, et qui se prolonge sur plusieurs épisodes, repousse également les limites génériques de la sitcom du fait d'une histoire beaucoup plus dramatique et sérieuse.

Tout au long de ces quatre chapitres, il s'agit de démontrer que non seulement *Friends* perturbe (ou tente de perturber) les représentations des mères, du maternage et de la maternité, mais aussi que, dans le déploiement régulier et répété de tels récits, ces questions, à leur tour, troublent *Friends* en termes de classification générique. Les histoires liées aux mères et à la maternité étendent *Friends* au-delà des limites du genre de la *situation comedy* traditionnelle tant au niveau de la structure narrative que de la dynamique comique.

Quelques résultats

Dès ses débuts en 1994, *Friends* développe des récits de maternité à bien des égards en rupture avec les conventions à l'œuvre dans ce type d'intrigue, que ce soit dans les sitcoms ou, plus généralement, à la télévision et dans la culture populaire. Maternité lesbienne, gestation pour autrui, maternité célibataire choisie, infertilité, adoption : ces questions sensibles et potentiellement controversées sont abordées dans des arcs narratifs consacrés à des maternités restées jusqu'alors sous-représentées, voire totalement absentes, sur le petit écran, alors même qu'elles font écho à de vraies transformations en cours dans la société américaine.[551] Cependant, ni tollé ni polémique n'accompagnent la réception de ces récits. L'impératif générique comique de la sitcom, la nécessité de faire rire, est sans aucun doute responsable d'un effet de lissage permettant une « entrée clandestine[552] » de ce contenu idéologique potentiellement perturbateur, le rendant ainsi plus acceptable pour un public varié. La première diffusion de *Friends* se situe dans une période de transition : les dirigeants de l'industrie télévisuelle commencent à courtiser un « public de qualité », plus jeune et plus riche, tout en continuant à viser l'audimat le plus large possible. L'humour, signalé par les rires du public, mais qui imprègne plus largement tout le champ de création et de production de la sitcom, joue un rôle essentiel dans la structuration des choix interprétatifs offerts aux spectateurs. L'intention comique globale de la sitcom rend certaines interprétations plus plausibles que d'autres, sans jamais restreindre complètement l'éventail des possibilités heuristiques.

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[551] Selon les Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), par exemple, le nombre de procédures de procréation médicalement assistée a triplé entre 1996 et 2015 ainsi que le nombre d'enfants qui naissent grâce à ces techniques : https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/67/ss/ss6703a1.htm?s_cid=ss6703a1_w. De même, un livre blanc publié par les CDC note une augmentation du taux d'infertilité, sans pour autant en identifier les causes : https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/infertility/infertility-white-paper/page-two.htm. Parallèlement, une étude du *Pew Resarch Center* révèle qu'en 1980 61% des enfants aux États-Unis vivaient dans des foyers composés de deux parents unis par un premier mariage tandis qu'en 2014 ce pourcentage avait diminué de 15%. Enfin, selon un rapport publié en 2014 par le *Council on Contemporary Families*, seuls 22% des enfants américains vivaient dans une configuration familiale dite traditionnelle (parents mariés, père qui soutient la famille financièrement) tandis que ce chiffre s'élevait à 65% dans les années 1950.

[552] Ici nous empruntons à Paul Wells le terme anglais « *smuggle* », qui signifie « passer en contrebande » ou « faire entrer clandestinement » pour évoquer la manière dont le mode comique de la sitcom permet de déguiser en quelque sorte le contenu potentiellement polémique. Voir Paul Wells, « 'Where Everybody Knows your Name:' Open Convictions and Closed Contexts in the American Situation Comedy, » dans *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference,* ed. Stephen Wagg (Londres et New York : Routledge, 1998), 180-201, 181.

Ces récits de maternité, rompant avec les traditions idéologiques dominantes, se fondent aisément dans l'arc narratif global de *Friends*, arc narratif qui inscrit le passage à l'âge adulte de la génération X dans une esthétique du mal-être et du désenchantement. Dans cette optique, la simple décision créative, prise sous la pression des dirigeants de la chaine NBC, d'inclure très tôt les parents des jeunes personnages dans la diégèse a eu de profondes conséquences. Ces « mauvaises » mères, tenues pour responsables des profondes déceptions (voire des névroses) de leurs enfants adultes, ont préparé le terrain pour les multiples réinventions de la figure maternelle dans *Friends*, et ont peut-être incité la série à chercher de nouvelles façons de concevoir ce rôle. C'est cette première génération de personnages de mères qui, à travers les incarnations récurrentes d'une maternité défaillante, crée les conditions d'un renouvellement de la figure.

Si les ramifications idéologiques des représentations des mères et des maternités dans *Friends* sont complexes, l'accent mis sur ces représentations maternelles vient à son tour complexifier l'appartenance de la série au genre de la sitcom. Cela se produit à deux niveaux des conventions génériques : au niveau narratif et en termes d'impulsion comique. La maternité dans *Friends* est, dès les premiers épisodes et tout au long de la série, un récit multi-épisodique, et qui ne se prête pas systématiquement à l'humour ni à la comédie.

Le genre de la sitcom est considéré historiquement et par de nombreux critiques comme formulaire et simpliste, manquant de complexité à la fois en termes de forme et de contenu. C'est précisément ce manque de complexité narrative qui semble être objet de mépris. Sur le plan institutionnel et critique, la sitcom continue à être conceptualisée comme un genre élémentaire occupant un statut inférieur dans la hiérarchie de la fiction télévisée. Les personnages de sitcom ainsi que les intrigues dans lesquelles ils apparaissent ont tendance à être considérés comme statiques, immuables et simples. Le monde diégétique peut (et même, doit) subir des turbulences, mais il est entendu que ces perturbations trouveront une résolution avant la fin des vingt-deux minutes que dure l'épisode, l'équilibre initial étant ainsi rétabli afin de réinitialiser l'univers de la sitcom pour l'épisode suivant. Il n'y aurait donc pas d'évolution, pas de transformation possible pour les personnages, pas d'événement qui pourrait modifier de façon permanente le paysage de la sitcom. Or cette notion de structure narrative strictement épisodique se trouve bouleversée dans *Friends* par les représentations récurrentes de la grossesse et de la maternité. Même si le contenu maternel de *Friends* est, à certains moments, relégué à des arcs narratifs de moindre portée, il

continue d'assurer la présence d'une part de sérialité et de continuité dans la narration, compliquant l'appréhension de la série comme purement épisodique.

Pour illustrer ce phénomène, nous pouvons citer l'exemple du récit de la grossesse lesbienne, qui s'étend sur toute la première saison, du deuxième au vingt-troisième épisode. Bien que les futures mères n'apparaissent pas dans chacun de ces épisodes, l'histoire se poursuit tout au long de la saison grâce à la présence de Ross, qui se cherche en tant que futur père dans cette configuration familiale singulière. Ce premier récit de maternité non normative est explicitement configuré d'une manière sérielle, comme en témoigne l'utilisation d'un gros plan sur une image échographique qui sert de clôture en *cliffhanger* au premier épisode dans l'arc narratif où Ross apprend que son ex-femme attend son enfant.[553] Les dernières secondes de cet épisode sont constituées d'un plan moyen montrant les trois futurs parents réunis et d'un gros plan sur un écran d'échographie avec son affichage panoptique de l'embryon dans l'utérus de la mère, puis de l'apparition du générique final en superposition sur cette image, suivie enfin d'un écran noir. Évitant la blague de clôture traditionnelle et les rires enregistrés, cet épisode se termine de manière surprenante, le bruit des battements de cœur du fœtus accompagnant ces images finales. Tournée résolument vers l'avenir (de la saison, de la série, de la maternité et de la famille en tant qu'institution), cette fin d'épisode se positionne de façon décisive comme un nouveau départ, le démarrage d'une histoire que les téléspectateurs souhaiteront suivre. L'image du nouveau fœtus en développement symbolise ici ce nouveau scénario de maternité lesbienne, qui symbolise à son tour une nouvelle approche, en cours de développement dans cette sitcom, pour raconter des récits familiaux au sein de ce genre télévisuel.

Bien qu'articulés différemment dans chaque arc narratif, les aspects intrinsèquement suspensifs de la maternité, et en particulier de la grossesse, sont exploités à des fins créatives dans *Friends*: Qui est enceinte ? Qui est le père ? À quoi ressemblera la nouvelle famille ? Comment fonctionnera-t-elle ? La série prend son temps pour répondre à ces questions, prolongeant le plus longtemps possible ces moments d'attente afin d'entretenir la curiosité du public tout en augmentant le plaisir qu'elle lui procure. Loin de correspondre à la structure narrative d'une formule simple et épisodique, ces intrigues requièrent un espace diégétique, un engagement créatif et un engagement des spectateurs dans la durée car un récit de grossesse ou de maternité en général ne se clôt pas en un seul épisode.

[553] Saison un, épisode deux, « Celui qui est perdu. »

Judy Kutulas rappelle que *Friends*, pourtant rarement célébrée pour ses innovations créatives, a en fait « lancé de nouvelles intrigues, structures et thèmes qui continuent à avoir un impact sur la *situation comedy*.[554] » Elle soutient qu'« une structure différente, de nouvelles intrigues et un développement approfondi du personnage [555]» ont tous joué un rôle clé dans la popularité de *Friends* et ont contribué à la différencier des autres sitcoms. En cela, Kutulas fait écho à l'identification par Jane Feuer du « potentiel de la sitcom pour développer diachroniquement des personnages, les faire évoluer et changer.[556] » Feuer situe ce potentiel de la sitcom dans le contexte plus large d'un tournant vers une programmation télévisuelle sérialisée qui, selon elle, va de pair avec une autre transformation généralisée de la télévision américaine à la fin du XXe siècle : une tendance croissante au mélodrame.

Dans *Friends*, cette tendance est illustrée par l'exemple précité, où les histoires de maternité sont traitées, sinon à travers le mélodrame, du moins sur un ton sérieux. Des épisodes tels que « Celui qui est perdu », « Celui qui a des triplés », « Celui qui découvrait sa paternité » et « Celui qui faisait un test de fécondité » se terminent tous par des écrans noirs, soit dans un silence complet, soit avec un accompagnement musical. L'absence de chute humoristique et de rires témoignent alors d'un traitement émotionnel et non comique. La grossesse de Carol qui complique le statut paternel de Ross, l'impossibilité pour Phoebe de garder les bébés qu'elle a portés, la grossesse inattendue de Rachel, le diagnostic d'infertilité de Monica et de Chandler : tous ces arcs narratifs offrent à *Friends* l'occasion d'injecter de l'émerveillement et de l'admiration, de la déception et de la tristesse dans l'espace diégétique autrement comique de la *situation comedy*, troublant davantage le statut générique de cette série en soulignant son attachement à l'émotion. Dans *Friends*, les récits de grossesse sont des intrigues complexes qui ne peuvent être disciplinées par des normes ni par les cadres génériques traditionnellement associés à la sitcom. Pourtant, c'est ainsi que *Friends* reste identifiable et reconnaissable. Comme le rappelle Jason Mittell à partir des travaux de Foucault, les discussions de genre demeurent, en fin de compte, des pratiques

[554] *Friends* « pioneered new plot points, structures, and themes that continue to impact the situation comedy. » Kutulas, Judy, « Anatomy of a Hit: *Friends* and Its Sitcom Legacies. » *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51, n° 5 (2018): 1172.
[555] *Ibid*., « [A] different structure, new plots, and enhanced character development. »
[556] Feuer cite, « the sitcom's potential for diachronic development in character growth and change. » Jane Feuer, « Narrative Form in American Network Television, » dans *High Theory/Low Culture: Analysing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin McCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 111.

discursives[557] : une sitcom reste une sitcom tant que les discours des critiques, du public et de l'industrie télévisuelle elle-même continuent à l'identifier comme telle.

Si les arcs narratifs de ces formes nouvelles de maternité tendent à repousser les limites génériques de *Friends* vers un horizon plus sériel et moins humoristique, quelles en sont les implications idéologiques ? Au cours de cette thèse, nous avons identifié les idéologies qui délimitent la figure maternelle en termes d'identité, en termes de comportement et en termes de statut procréatif. Nos analyses ont tenté de rendre compte des manières dont *Friends* remet en cause l'idéologie existante dans ces domaines ou au contraire y adhère. Au moment où *Friends* commence sa diffusion originale en 1994, les téléspectateurs américains ont déjà pu voir une diversité croissante de personnages de mères et d'identités maternelles sur le petit écran : les changements graduels de représentation ont conduit à des exemples toujours plus diversifiés d'identités maternelles, y compris les mères célibataires (veuves puis divorcées), les mères qui travaillent, les mères noires et les mères de la classe ouvrière.

En poursuivant cette conversation télévisuelle sur l'identité maternelle, en imaginant de nouvelles figures de mères, *Friends* élargit à son tour l'espace du plausible pour ce type de personnage. En dépit de certains éléments quelque peu problématiques, la représentation de la maternité lesbienne offre en effet un nouvel exemple d'inclusion maternelle dans le paysage télévisuel. En montrant à la télévision grand public un couple de lesbiennes qui attendent un bébé, puis l'accouchement et le maternage actif des deux mères, *Friends* présente cette façon de former une famille, d'être mère et de s'occuper de son enfant comme une chose normale et même quotidienne. Cette prise de position fonde d'ailleurs toute la diégèse de la série. À aucun moment la sitcom ne suggère que cette situation familiale particulière pourrait être néfaste pour l'enfant concerné ou pour la société en général. Plus largement, la maternité lesbienne dans *Friends* force le « patriarche » (Ross) à se repositionner, à évoluer et à devenir un *agent de pratique maternelle*[558] lui-même, l'obligeant à prendre soin de son jeune fils. Lorsque Ross résiste ou hésite, la sitcom dépeint le personnage comme dépassé, vieux jeu, ringard. En prenant pour cible de l'humour le personnage masculin qui tarde à s'adapter, *Friends* ouvre un espace culturel dans lequel l'identité

[557] « Discursive practices. » Mittell, Jason. « A Cultural Approach to TV Genre Theory. » *Cinema Journal* 40, N° 3 (2001): 12.
[558] « Agent of maternal practice, » selon la philosophe Sara Ruddick. « Maternal Thinking, » in *Maternal Theory: Essential Readings*, ed. Andrea O'Reilly, (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2007), 97.

lesbienne peut non seulement coexister de manière plausible avec l'identité maternelle, mais peut même en être une version préférable grâce à son éloignement des attentes de genre rigides associées à la norme patriarcale.

De même, la construction faite par la série de la maternité célibataire, aussi nuancée et complexe soit-elle, présente la maternité monoparentale choisie comme une identité maternelle plausible, voire appropriée. Loin de faire honte à la mère ou de nuire au jeune enfant, le statut célibataire de Rachel dérange plutôt la figure paternelle et perturbe ce que la série présente comme une dynamique sexuée dépassée. Parallèlement au désir de Rachel de rester officiellement célibataire, la série montre que sa façon d'être mère se libère peu à peu du rôle traditionnel et genré associé à la maternité. Dans cette version glorifiée de la maternité célibataire, Rachel est non seulement libre de continuer à sortir avec des hommes autres que le père de son enfant et de poursuivre ainsi une vie sexuelle active mais, plus important encore, elle n'accepte de prendre en charge qu'une petite partie des soins et des activités nécessaires au maternage et à l'éducation du bébé. De cette façon, certaines de ces tâches (souvent ingrates et invisibles) deviennent la responsabilité de la figure paternelle, qui, encore une fois, va devoir s'adapter à ce nouveau rôle.

Friends procède avec nuance et subtilité à un élargissement du domaine de l'identité maternelle grâce à ces récits de maternité lesbienne et de maternité célibataire : ces mères situées en marge de la maternité patriarcale nuptiale hétéronormative traditionnelle refusent de correspondre aux idéaux dominants de la figure maternelle. Néanmoins, alors que *Friends* imagine la maternité comme une option de plus en plus plausible pour les femmes lesbiennes ou célibataires, leur statut racial et leur classe sociale semblent être des éléments constitutifs fondamentaux contribuant à la pertinence globale de ces personnages maternels. Dans leurs relations avec Ross, Carol, Susan et Rachel maintiennent toutes, comme nous l'avons vu, un lien important et (peut-être pour certains téléspectateurs) rassurant avec le patriarcat. Or même si ces femmes avaient été configurées comme mères célibataires ou lesbiennes sans être reliées à une figure paternelle, il est tout à fait possible qu'elles aient encore été considérées comme de bonnes mères, et ce en raison d'autres marqueurs clés de l'identité maternelle « appropriée », à savoir leur appartenance à la classe moyenne supérieure blanche. En tant que jeunes femmes blanches en pleine ascension socio-professionnelle, ces personnages sont incontestablement bénéficiaires du capital culturel, social et économique nécessaire pour assurer un statut équivalent à leur progéniture et lui donner la possibilité de poursuivre cette mobilité sociale ascendante. L'accès des

personnages à des soins médicaux réguliers, leur consultation des ouvrages appropriés sur la grossesse et l'éducation des enfants, leur capacité à se procurer des services de garde d'enfants, à financer une scolarité d'élite et à acheter de coûteux articles de puériculture européens témoignent des immenses ressources de ces mères et les codent comme figures maternelles adéquates, même en l'absence d'une figure paternelle ou patriarcale claire. Même si elles sont homosexuelles ou célibataires, ces femmes sont d'un niveau social élevé et les téléspectateurs peuvent accepter leur maternité non normative car elle est récupérée par un discours de classe implicite. En effet, le seul personnage (secondaire) à qui est explicitement attribué un statut social inférieur, Erica, se voit refuser par la série, de manière problématique, l'opportunité de devenir mère elle-même, au profit de Monica, « mère sans bébé » de classe aisée lors du récit d'adoption ouverte des deux dernières saisons. Quant à Phoebe, dont le propre rapport à la classe populaire est implicite et dont le corps a été utilisé pour fournir des enfants à un autre couple, elle affirme à la fin de la série qu'elle voudrait faire « tout un tas de bébés », mais seulement après son mariage avec Mike, dont l'immense fortune pourra assurer son propre confort économique et social ainsi que celui de ses futurs enfants. Les téléspectateurs américains peuvent ainsi être rassurés sur la capacité de ces mères, malgré leur statut apparemment marginal, à élever de futurs citoyens bien adaptés, instruits et indépendants. Ainsi, alors que *Friends* démontre un engagement spécifique à étendre la plausibilité maternelle à certains types de femmes et de maternités, cette expansion doit être nuancée et contextualisée au sein du discours dominant de la sitcom, discours qui idéalise la classe moyenne supérieure et l'homogénéité raciale.

Dans le deuxième chapitre, nous avons identifié les stéréotypes de la mauvaise mère. Dans la plupart des cas, en effet, ce comportement maternel est présenté par la série comme psychologiquement destructeur pour l'enfant adulte. Les mères des six héros semblent insensibles et insuffisamment maternelles. Elles sont considérées comme égoïstes, ou prenant de mauvaises décisions ; elles sont trop critiques, ou encore trop tournées vers le sexe, ou plus généralement immatures. Peu de tentatives sont faites par la série pour offrir des lectures alternatives de ces personnages et de leur comportement, pour les traiter avec admiration ou avec compassion au lieu de se moquer d'elles. Incapables de faire passer les besoins psychologiques de leurs enfants avant les leurs, ou n'en ayant pas envie, elles manifestent un manque évident d'adhésion à ce principe

de l'idéologie du maternage intensif[559], ce qui les condamne dans la plupart des cas à simplement remplir la fonction de complication narrative typique des personnages secondaires, d'obstacle à surmonter au sein de l'épisode.

En revanche, dans ses propres remaniements de la maternité, en particulier grâce aux représentations des figures maternelles en rupture avec le modèle patriarcal, *Friends* crée un espace dans la culture populaire qui interroge le comportement maternel. Quels comportements sont appropriés et normaux pour une mère ? Qui est en droit de se conduire comme une mère ? En guise de réponse à ces questions, nous pouvons reprendre l'exemple de Rachel Green, une jeune mère qui s'écarte à maintes reprises du droit chemin du maternage intensif. En effet, le personnage de Rachel est construit de telle manière que le public comprend qu'elle n'est pas dotée d'une forte intuition maternelle, sans pour autant glisser vers le stéréotype de la mauvaise mère. En fait, Rachel est une mère que les multiples petites tâches liées à ce nouveau statut ennuient et elle n'offre pas toujours une écoute attentive aux besoins de son bébé. Ainsi, ce n'est pas elle qui se charge de changer les couches souillées de sa fille Emma. On la voit aussi réveiller son bébé pendant la sieste au lieu de la laisser dormir. Cependant, au lieu de présenter ce personnage comme une mauvaise mère, la série compense les failles de Rachel par des figures masculines qui s'impliquent maternellement auprès d'Emma aux côtés de sa « vraie » mère. Ross apparaît alors de nouveau comme un donneur de soins : c'est lui qui change les couches de sa fille, qui la porte souvent contre sa poitrine dans un porte-bébé et qui la promène régulièrement dans sa poussette. Un épisode de la neuvième saison, « Celui qui était le plus drôle », est plus parlant encore. Dans cet épisode, il revient à Sandy, un assistant maternel (« *male nanny* », « nounou homme ») de garder la petite Emma. Doté d'une meilleure intuition maternelle que la mère biologique, le rôle de Sandy permet à *Friends* d'imaginer un univers où les soins prodigués aux plus petits le sont par des hommes. Cet

[559] Dans son livre *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, la sociologue Sharon Hays identifie ce qu'elle appelle *intensive mothering* (que je traduis par « maternage intensif ») comme « l'idéologie dominante du maternage socialement approprié aux États-Unis aujourd'hui. » (ma traduction). Le maternage intensif selon Hays est une idéologie genrée qui exige des mères qu'elles consacrent énormément de temps, d'énergie et d'argent à l'éducation de leurs enfants. Dans son étude, Hays dénombre cinq éléments qui caractérisent cette idéologie et délimitent le comportement de la mère idéale. La bonne mère est impliquée dans un système qui est centré autour de son enfant (*child-centered*), elle se laisse guider par des experts (*expert-guided*), son implication auprès de ses enfants est émotionnellement intense (*emotionally absorbing*), elle doit accomplir un nombre de tâches important au service de ses enfants (*labor-intensive)* et enfin, elle doit dépenser beaucoup d'argent pour assurer une enfance correcte et heureuse à sa progéniture (*financially expensive)*. Ces cinq éléments constituent un comportement reconnaissable comme *normal* pour la bonne mère. Voir Sharon Hays*, The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996)

épisode envisage l'éducation des enfants par les personnes de sexe masculin comme une alternative viable et même souhaitable à une prise en charge exclusivement assurée par des femmes. Ainsi cette sitcom participe à une réflexion sur les bons comportements maternels, et sur les personnes (hommes comme femmes) qui peuvent exercer le rôle de figure maternelle.

Le dernier niveau de l'idéologie maternelle que nous avons identifié dans le traitement de la maternité par *Friends* concerne le statut procréateur. Cette série met en scène deux femmes qui ont plusieurs enfants (des triplés pour l'une et des jumeaux pour l'autre) sans les avoir portés ni les avoir mis au monde. Tandis qu'Alice, grâce à la procréation médicalement assistée, est la mère biologique de ses enfants (portés par Phoebe), Monica, qui adopte les enfants biologiques d'Erica, ne l'est pas. Par son traitement de ces récits de maternité alternative, *Friends* suggère, en dépit de quelques ambiguïtés de représentation, que ces femmes peuvent devenir des mères tout aussi authentiques que les femmes qui portent, mettent au monde et élèvent leurs enfants biologiques. Bien qu'une partie du contenu de ces intrigues s'entremêle avec d'épineuses questions de rapports de classe, *Friends* consacre un espace narratif précieux à ces possibilités non conventionnelles et à ces voies alternatives vers le statut de mère. Les deux arcs narratifs sont motivés par des problèmes de fertilité, causés par des facteurs sociaux (désir d'enfant après un temps d'attente « trop long ») comme par des facteurs physiologiques, et touchant à la fois les hommes et les femmes. Si l'envie de procréer et de devenir mère peut entraîner un comportement discutable d'un point de vue éthique de la part des personnages (en particulier de la part de Monica), ces récits servent finalement à séparer la maternité (et l'identité maternelle) des processus biologiques et physiologiques qui sont traditionnellement considérés comme des éléments fondamentaux du statut de mère. La série fait apparaître à quel point la *mère* et la *maternité*, loin d'être des notions naturelles, incontestables, fixes et immuables, sont en fait des concepts plus élastiques qui se construisent dans les discours sociaux de la culture, du droit, de la médecine, de la politique et de la religion. *Friends* met ainsi en lumière la réalité historique et culturelle selon laquelle de nombreuses femmes sont devenues mères sans avoir mis d'enfant au monde tandis que de nombreuses femmes qui ont mis des enfants au monde ne sont pas devenues mères pour autant.

Enfin, un type de récit lié à la maternité, peut-être le plus subversif d'entre tous, se trouve complètement écarté par les scénaristes de *Friends* : la décision consciente de ne pas devenir mère, de ne pas enfanter, de ne pas former de famille. Pourtant, il y a bien un précédent générique : celui de Maude Findlay, qui choisit d'avorter pour mettre fin à une grossesse non désirée dans un

épisode de 1972 de *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978). Mais Maude était une femme de quarante-sept ans, mère d'une fille adulte, et non une jeune femme tout juste arrivée à l'âge adulte. Dans *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-1971), le refus de se marier de la part d'Ann Marie pouvait se comprendre en partie comme un refus de devenir mère, bien que cela n'ait jamais été explicitement déclaré. Dans le cas de *Friends*, les personnages féminins peuvent tous être définis, dans une certaine mesure, par leur relation à la maternité, et la sitcom a été critiquée pour sa clôture narrative qui place chacun de ses trois protagonistes féminins dans des circonstances ressemblant étrangement à celles que la série avait passé tant de temps à critiquer au cours de ses premières saisons. Le dernier épisode voit en effet Monica mariée et mère de deux enfants sur le point de déménager dans une confortable maison suburbaine tandis que Rachel abandonne un emploi prestigieux à Paris pour rester à New York avec son véritable amour, Ross. Bien qu'aucune mention ne soit faite d'un possible mariage, la décision de réunir Rachel avec Ross reconstruit l'idéal traditionnel de la famille nucléaire puisque les deux parents d'Emma vont à nouveau cohabiter, si ce n'est se marier. Phoebe, pour sa part, est mariée et s'apprête à avoir de nombreux enfants avec son nouveau mari Mike. Pour ces personnages, ne pas avoir ou ne pas vouloir d'enfants n'est clairement pas une option narrative.

Si *Friends* semble bien arriver à une conclusion particulièrement conformiste, la signification ultime des récits et des représentations de la maternité dans *Friends* ne réside pas tant dans leur nature explicitement progressiste ou rétrograde, positive ou négative. L'enjeu se situe plutôt dans leur présence globale, dans cette somme d'histoires liées à la maternité au sein d'une comédie télévisuelle, dans l'attention accordée à maintes reprises et sous différents angles aux mères et au maternage, dans les réinventions et les réinterprétations de la maternité qui sont présentées à un public toujours plus large. Les subtiles négociations autour des tensions et des pressions qui agissent sur la figure de la mère au tournant du millénaire ont constitué un trait distinctif de *Friends*, véritable site d'observation et de réflexion au sein de la culture populaire.

Dans un article de 2014 préparé pour le *Council on Contemporary Families* (une association à but non lucratif), Philip Cohen écrit :

> Les gens considèrent souvent le changement social qui affecte la vie des enfants américains depuis les années 1950 comme un mouvement dans une seule direction : d'une situation dans laquelle les enfants sont élevés par des parents mariés dont seul le père travaille à une nouvelle norme selon laquelle les enfants sont élevés par des mères qui travaillent, et dont beaucoup sont célibataires. Toutefois cette

> transformation se comprend mieux comme une profonde diversification, un déploiement dans de multiples directions à partir d'un point central.[560]

Au cours des sept dernières décennies, aux États-Unis, le passage de trois ou quatre chaines de télévision nationales à une variété apparemment infinie de plateformes et de chaînes trouve un parallèle dans le passage d'un modèle nucléaire relativement uniforme et dominant de la famille américaine centrée sur une figure maternelle normative à une variété apparemment infinie de types de familles et une diversité de plus en plus grande de mères et de maternités. Ce « déploiement » de la famille américaine reflète le « déploiement » de l'industrie télévisuelle elle-même, déploiement qui, à son tour, rend possible l'avènement d'une pléthore de personnages maternels de plus en plus diversifiés dans les fictions télévisées à travers un formidable éventail de genres. *Friends*, *situation comedy* de transition (de l'ère du *network* à l'ère *post-network*), est diffusée à un moment d'affranchissement des cadres télévisuels et génériques qui trouve son reflet dans sa représentation d'un rôle maternel s'affranchissant d'une identité, d'un statut procréatif et de comportements rigides pour céder la place à un ensemble de maternités toujours plus diverses et complexes.

[560] « People often think of social change in the lives of American children since the 1950s as a movement in one direction – from children being raised in married, male-breadwinner families to a new norm of children being raised by working mothers, many of them unmarried. Instead, we can better understand this transformation as an explosion of diversity, a fanning out from a compact center along many different pathways. » Philip Cohen, « Family Diversity is the New Normal for America's Children, » The Council on Contemporary Families, 2014, 1. https://familyinequality.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/family-diversity-new-normal.pdf

Résumé

Entre 1994 et 2004 la sitcom américaine *Friends* a connu un très grand succès auprès des téléspectateurs américains. Depuis sa première diffusion, la série n'a cessé de gagner en popularité auprès de nouvelles générations à travers le monde grâce, notamment, à sa présence sur la plateforme Netflix. Si cette fiction télévisuelle a fait l'objet d'analyses universitaires depuis quelques années, elle n'a été que très peu abordée sous l'angle des figures maternelles, qui occupent pourtant une place essentielle dans le récit. En effet, tout au long de ses dix saisons, *Friends* repense et retravaille cette figure emblématique et propose une écriture novatrice qui semble tenir compte (et engendrer) des changements sociétaux au tournant du millénaire aux États-Unis. Ainsi la maternité lesbienne, la gestation pour autrui, la maternité célibataire et l'adoption sont autant de formes différentes de maternité interrogées par cette série dont l'impératif comique propre au genre de la sitcom reste primordial. S'appuyant sur les études culturelles et les *motherhood studies* et à travers des micro-lectures de scènes ainsi que l'analyse des arcs narratifs de grossesse et de maternité, cette thèse propose de porter un regard approfondi sur la représentation des mères et de la maternité dans la sitcom en général et dans *Friends* en particulier. L'analyse prend en compte les aspects esthétiques, narratologiques, génériques et idéologiques de cette sitcom iconique afin de mettre au jour les complexités du discours qu'elle porte sur les mères et les différentes formes de maternité.

Mots Clés :
Friends, Sitcom, Maternité, Mère, Figure maternelle, Série télévisée, Genre, Comédie, Idéologie, États-Unis

Abstract

Between 1994 and 2004 the American sitcom *Friends* was tremendously successful among American television viewers. Since its original broadcast, the series has continued to gain in popularity among new generations of viewers around the world, thanks in large part to its availability on the streaming service Netflix. If this televisual fiction has recently become the object of academic study, until now, very little attention has been paid to its maternal figures who nonetheless play an essential role in its diegetic sphere. Indeed, throughout its ten seasons, *Friends* rethinks and reworks this emblematic figure and proposes innovative writings of her which seem to take into account (an in turn, perhaps, contribute to) certain societal changes at work at the turn of the millennium in the United States. Thus, lesbian motherhood, gestational surrogacy, single motherhood and adoption are among the different forms of motherhood interrogated by this series, of which the comic imperative is a fundamental generic element. Anchored in Cultural Studies and Motherhood Studies, this dissertation proposes an in-depth analysis of the representations of mothers and motherhood in the sitcom genre in general, and in *Friends* in particular, through micro-readings of scenes as well as analyses of its pregnancy and maternity narrative arcs. The study takes into account the aesthetic, narratological, generic and ideological aspects of this iconic sitcom to reveal the complexities of the discourses surrounding mothers and the different forms of maternity.

Key Words:
Friends, Sitcom, Maternity, Mother, Maternal figure, Television series, Genre, Comedy, Ideology, United States