

“Thank You for Being a Friend:” The Politics, History, and Fandom of *The Golden Girls* and Its Feminist Message for the Coming Decade

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I. Introduction

The Golden Girls, originally produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, was remarkable in that it challenged the dominant cultural and political ideology of what has come to be referred to as “the Backlash Era.” In a time in which women-centered shows were shunted from the networks, *The Golden Girls* was unique not only because it remained female-centered, but also because it maintained its popularity during the entirety of its run. Even after it left primetime its legacy continued as it was picked up in syndication, and it continues to run on two separate networks. Those networks, Women's Entertainment and the Hallmark Channel, have begun using the series as a means of bolstering their own identity as a particular kind of network, just as Lifetime (who originally held the rights to the syndication of the series) utilized it. Despite the fact that it has changed networks several times (each of whom used it as a commodity, though in markedly different ways,) the types of audiences associated with the series have remained largely the same in terms of composition, divided between scholars and laypeople. With regard to interpreting the “meaning” of the show, on the one hand are those scholars who read the show through the lenses of feminist or queer theory, while on the other are the audiences themselves. The Internet has changed the way that audiences interact with the series; audiences have begun to more intimately interact with the characters of the series, through such various means as online Wikis, discussion posts on the television network's Websites, and various other methods. Central to all of these groups, from the networks to the scholars to the numerous fan groups, is the power of the show's essential messages about the rights of the elderly, sexuality (especially of aging women) the AIDS pandemic, and the rights of the LGBT community. Thus, I will argue that these messages make the series appealing to various networks, especially those that identify as woman-centered, as it allows them to construct their brand as the ultimate woman's network. Furthermore, this new use of the series illustrates that, while it was always a commodity—which I here define as an object of value in the cultural marketplace, a concept especially important for a series as politically potent as *The Golden Girls*—the ways in which it has been used have shifted as it has passed from the world of the dominant networks (NBC and CBS) to those such as Lifetime and WE. At the same time, its audiences, scholar and layperson, female and LGBT, have each found something about the show's message that appeals to them, ensuring its continuing popularity throughout almost two decades of syndication. Clearly, the idea that women, especially older women, can be empowered continues to have an appeal, illustrating that the show's political and cultural power remains as powerful today as it was when it was originally produced. Perhaps even more importantly, its continuing popularity ensures that its message of female empowerment will continue to remain in the public sphere well into the

coming decade.

II. The Feminist Politics of *The Golden Girls*

The Golden Girls, written by Susan Harris, originally aired in 1985, and the series was immensely popular throughout the 1980s, regularly ranking high in the Nielsen ratings. However, its ratings began to slip beginning with the seventh and final season, and it soon became a victim of what some have characterized as NBC's attempt to appeal to a younger audience, part of what Becker has characterized as an attempt on the part of all the networks to shore up their slumping ratings. He notes, for example that when "NBC announced its prime-time schedule for the 1992-1993 season, several successful but older-skewing shows of its own had been canceled in what some advertisers called 'granny dumping'" (97). This willingness to abandon the series despite its continuing popularity indicates not just the network's bias against an older demographic in favor of what Becker calls "the slumping generation" (those between 18 and 49,) but equally indicates that a younger audience (at least at that historical moment) was assumed to not see these kinds of series as appealing as its replacements (which included such series as *Mad About You*, *Here and Now*, and *Homicide: Life on the Street*) *The Golden Girls*, it seemed, belonged to another age.

Throughout this seven-year run, *The Golden Girls*, unlike many other series of the era, continued to not only retain its all-female cast, but also to address some of the thorniest social issues of the day. Although Susan Faludi dismissed the series in her breakthrough book *Backlash* by stating "the heroines were confined to the home in non-threatening roles in a strictly all-female world," I disagree (159). Not only do the women frequently venture outside of the home for their various occupations and various political and social causes, but they also take a progressive stance on many very significant social issues of the time. Furthermore, the fact that the series consistently maintained its all-female cast not only shows how it defied the force of the backlash, but also served as a place of community, where female audiences could interact with these characters and the issues they addressed in intimate, female-centered setting. The home, far from being a prison for these women or their audiences, was instead a place where they could interact with one another in an intensely personal way, and the fact that it remained so popular among its viewers stands as a testament to its power to move women. Furthermore, the home became a place where these four women could address some of the most pressing issues of the period. The fact that it was four *older women* who were doing these things makes it all the more remarkable in a period in which most women of their age were not allowed such a significant voice. Among the many issues addressed throughout the series run were the mistreatment of the elderly by mainstream culture, a responsible embrace of sexuality, and the rights and acceptance of those in the LGBT community.

Although in a broad sense the series was affirming and welcoming to the elderly as a

result of the ages of its characters, it also made specific commentary about the ways in which society often mistreats or ignores the elderly. The most scathing critique of this cultural phenomenon occurs when Sophia rescues her friend Lillian from a nursing home which has severely substandard operating procedures. However, faced with the difficulties of caring for another elderly person, Sophia and the other women find themselves unable to give adequate care. When Sophia and Dorothy confront the director of the nursing home about his operating procedures, the only thing he can tell them is that, since most of his patient's care money comes from the state, there are only a certain (and very limited) number of services he can offer to his patients. Faced with the uncaring necessities of an economic and cultural system that cares little for the elderly—especially women—after they have reached a certain age, Dorothy and Sophia discover that they remain virtually powerless to do anything to ameliorate Lillian's deplorable condition. It is only when Blanche generously donates her extra money that Lillian's future is secured at a better nursing home. This particular incident underscores the message that has occurred throughout the episode, that only with adequate funding can nursing homes and other facilities for the elderly hope to adequately care for their patients. When these institutions are forced to rely upon insurance companies or, even worse in some cases, the state, then the people who live within them suffer as a result and experience the same misfortune as Lillian. The commentary issued by the series on this issue was radical (and indeed could still be considered to be so) is because the elderly, especially those in nursing homes, are all too often relegated to the sidelines of society. Rather than continuing that trend, *The Golden Girls* tackled it head-on and showed the flaws inherent in the system.

Perhaps the series' most controversial commentary centered on the issues of sexuality, especially of the character Blanche, although all of the characters embraced their sexual natures (something I discuss in more detail below). Equally importantly, Blanche and the other women exhibit a responsibility about their sexual activities that signifies their knowledge and appreciation of the dangers that often accompany sexuality. For example, both she and the others consciously practice safe sex, even going so far as to announce it in a crowded pharmacy, pointing out that, though they might be sexually active, they do so responsibly. What's more, Blanche also points out that she always makes sure to know the sexual history of the men she dates, ensuring that she is conscious of her responsibility to maintain both her health and that of the men with whom she associates. Sexuality, therefore, far from being a means for men to control these women, instead becomes both a defiant act and a statement about the importance of sexual responsibility.

This sense of sexual responsibility finds its fullest expression when Rose believes that she might be infected with HIV, a situation that forces the characters to evaluate their own biases about the link between sexual morality and the disease. Rose, in understandable confusion and near-despair, complains that this sort of thing isn't supposed to happen to her; unlike Blanche, she has maintained a strong sense of

sexual morality. Blanche responds critically noting that “AIDS is not a bad person’s disease, Rose. It’s not God punishing people for their sins.” This conversation forces both the characters and their audience to critically examine the commonplace assumption in 1980s AIDS discourse, which continues in some venues to this day, that HIV and AIDS is either a form of punishment (in that it is the inevitable result of sexual promiscuity) or stems from an innate death wish on the parts of those practicing this “irresponsible” sexuality. Instead of perceiving this disease as stemming from some manner of wrongdoing on the part of the effected, Rose comes to understand that it is an unfortunate affliction that can happen to anyone, and that even the most responsible person can become infected.

Equally importantly, this episode shows the ability of the four women to not only more fully appreciate the agony suffered by those who are actually suffering from AIDS, but also points out the unhealthy and ignorant biases that sometimes afflict even the closest friends of an AIDS patient. After Rose learns that she might be infected Sophia, in a panic that she might be infected if she drinks from the same cup, marks all of Rose’s cups with an “R.” When Dorothy reprimands her, she responds that even though she knows that she cannot get AIDS simply from drinking from the same cup her fear overwhelms her, despite her best rational judgment. Dorothy then informs her that the stigma attached to those with AIDS makes it all the more necessary for them to stand by Rose. In a moment of solidarity, Sophia drinks out of an “R” cup, indicating her overcoming of her fear. This entire episode indicates a critical comment not only upon those who condemn those who have AIDS, but also those who let emotion cloud their judgment and therefore contribute to the growing fear and paranoia about the disease. It therefore claims that compassion and reason should rule our interaction with AIDS patients, rather than knee-jerk emotional reactions and that the stigma and aversion people have developed indicate more about the culture at large than it does those with the disease.

Although the series does not comment on the affect of AIDS on the GLBT community explicitly, it does comment on societal discrimination. In two episodes, Blanche must come to accept her brother Clatyon’s homosexuality and, even more importantly, his decision to get married to another man. Even though her acceptance is initially reluctant, the fact that she openly accepts him sends a clear message that members of the GLBT community should not be shunned and furthermore underlines the necessity of familial acceptance in the lives of gay men and women. Even more importantly, when Clayton decides to marry his partner, Blanche must come to grips with this fact. At the end she says, “I still can’t say I understand what you’re doing, but I do intend to try to respect your decision to do it. I want you to be happy.” Although her acceptance is conditional at best, it still signals awareness on her part that compassion and understanding, rather than unreasonable rejection, should inform and shape relations with the GLBT community. It is also worth noting how truly revolutionary this mention of gay marriage is, considering the relative dearth of openly gay characters, let alone gay issues, aired on television in the 1980s.

III. The Network Presence of *The Golden Girls*

Although the series ended in 1992, Rue McClanahan, Betty White, and Estelle Getty did return for a spin-off series, *The Golden Palace*, which was picked up by CBS in its ongoing appeal to a broader (yet still skewed toward the older) demographic (Becker 97). In this new incarnation, the three remaining women took up running a hotel, a very different proposition from the domestic sphere that had so characterized its predecessor. Although the presence of this series seems to suggest that CBS assumed an audience existed for more adventures, it only lasted one season (twenty four episodes,) before it was canceled. Although the failure of the series has commonly been attributed to under-impressive ratings and, presumably, a lack of interest on the part of those younger audiences that NBC had made such an attempt to court, I believe there are a couple of other factors that cannot be ignored. The lack of Arthur removed an element that was essential to the functioning of the series for, as Amanda Lotz notes in *Redesigning Women*, Dorothy was almost always associated with the “feminist voice.” As a result of this lack, the follow-up series did not address the same range of issues that its predecessor had, nor did it address them with the same aspect of critical evaluation. Without this razor-sharp social and political commentary, *The Golden Palace* was doomed to fail. It is important to note, however, that while the spin-off series ultimately failed, the original had already entered into syndication, indicating that its popularity was already well-established.

In the early 1990s, the television network Lifetime acquired the exclusive rights to broadcast *The Golden Girls*, and for several subsequent years the series would accompany other female-centered series such as *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown* and, more recently, series such as *Desperate Housewives*. Lifetime retained exclusive control over the series throughout the 1990s and through much of the 2000s as well. Indeed, *The Golden Girls* was the only one of these series to remain on the network's lineup without a cessation. Even more importantly, Lifetime was responsible for the production of several “Intimate Portraits,” documentaries that detailed the life of each of the four main actresses of the series. This emphasis upon their real-life personas seems to indicate the network's acknowledgment that viewers have a decidedly personal relationship with the characters, a subject I will return to later in my discussion of the series. Furthermore, during the time that it maintained control of *The Golden Girls*, Lifetime made a concerted effort to maintain a strong viewer interest in the series, even going so far as to offer viewers an opportunity to meet the three actresses then still maintaining a presence in public life (Estelle Getty had retired from acting due to serious health issues).

To further personalize the series and to take advantage of the evident popularity of the series, in June 2003, Lifetime produced a reunion show that reunited Arthur, McClanahan, and White who reminisced about their time on the show. The special also featured a number of clips that highlighted those episodes and incidents that the actresses found to be most entertaining. This reuniting of the characters from the

original cast again indicates a desire on the part of the network to further capitalize upon the popularity of the series that had formed such an integral part of its lineup. According to one of the fan sites (blancheonline.com,) the reunion was the most popular special ever run on Lifetime, indicating that Lifetime's re-commodification of the series, at least according to the numbers, was a success. Clearly, Lifetime's largely female audience continues to find something pleasurable and empowering about the women in the series.

The fact that *The Golden Girls* remained such a fixture on Lifetime indicates a certain kind of viewership, considering the fact that for many years Lifetime was the only cable network specifically designed for women. Lotz claims that "Lifetime might be understood as the CBS of the women's cable networks [...] It uses a network-era strategy of seeking a broad and heterogeneous female audience, comparable to that utilized by the broadcast networks from the 1950s through the 1980s" (54). Although Lotz's discussion largely focuses on Lifetime's original programming as an attempt to establish a Lifetime "brand," I see *The Golden Girls* as another attempt of Lifetime to establish itself as the network for all women. Realizing, as CBS did, that the series had serious earning potential, Lifetime kept it as part of its line-up and utilized all of the considerable resources at its disposal to ensure that it could fully exploit it and add it to its growing collection of syndicated television series, which in recent years has come to be characterized by such series as *Will and Grace*, *Frasier*, and others.

For the Lifetime network, as for NBC and CBS before it, *The Golden Girls* was a commodity—but a politicized and distinctly gendered commodity. Although it was certainly a commodity when it ran on the original networks, in some sense it was a "generalized" one; although it was clearly intended for a particular audience group (an older, female demographic,) it was not meant to brand NBC as a "woman's network." It was, in other words, just another aspect of NBC's comedy line-up. This drastically changed, however, when it passed into Lifetime's explicit control. As mentioned earlier, Lifetime consistently brands itself as "television for women," indicating its belief that *The Golden Girls* fits into its rubric of what is meant to be entertainment specific for women. Indeed, *The Golden Girls* was a crucial element in helping Lifetime brand itself as a network intended solely for women. Furthermore, the fact that Lifetime kept its control over the series for almost twenty years indicates its recognition of the power and popularity of the series among its various female audiences.

Furthermore, it is clear that Lifetime saw the nature of the series, with its messages of female empowerment and community, as well as its commentary on social issues, to be of particular relevance to women. According to Lifetime's own website, they are committed to offering "the highest quality entertainment and information programming content that celebrates, entertains and supports women" and they also claim to be the "preeminent television destination and escape for women," both of which in turn suggest that *The Golden Girls*, when it was in Lifetime's control, was

seen to be an essential part of this project. There is something more at stake here than just attracting viewers; Lifetime, in making sure that the series remained in consistent circulation (and a very wide circulation at that) ensured that the empowering messages (both implicit and explicit) present in the series continued to reach those women who could most benefit from them.

In late 2009, Lifetime's exclusive rights to the series expired, and so it passed into the joint control of the Hallmark Channel and Women's Entertainment. Obviously, these two networks represent widely different demographics and ideologies. The Hallmark Channel states that it is "the quintessential 24-hour television destination for family-friendly programming." This strikes me as particularly ironic, given the fact that *The Golden Girls* is not what one would typically identify as "family-friendly," since it often includes adult situations and language. Upon closer inspection, however, this is not as strange as it seems. On the one hand, it is clear that Hallmark is using *The Golden Girls* as it has used other popular series that no longer run on the air (including *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, and *Little House on the Prairie*) to reinforce their standing and to bolster viewership among an audience nostalgic for these series. At the same time, Hallmark uses a deliberate set of editing practices to make *The Golden Girls* more palatable for a "family" audience. For example, most "inappropriate" words are deliberately bleeped out, indicating that these words are what are deemed unsuitable for family viewing. Most of the other "adult" aspects of the show, such as Blanche's overt sexuality, to say nothing of the many themes explored by the show (which were controversial upon its inception) remain intact. This seems to indicate that not only has the series' commentary on these subjects remained relevant enough to be included, but that such commentary is consistent with Hallmark's avowed family-friendly orientation. Clearly, progressive, popular, and feminist politics is not, as might be assumed by some, completely at odds with maintaining a family-friendly image.

Unlike Hallmark, which has repackaged *The Golden Girls* as "family entertainment," the Women's Entertainment Channel has attempted to keep the series closer to its woman-centered roots. The channel claims that it is "the premier source for women looking to satisfy their curiosity with fascinating, original stories and entertaining, informative content that is relevant to key stages of their lives. WE TV's programming gives viewers compelling perspectives on women's lives that range from provocative to extraordinary." Clearly, the network believes that *The Golden Girls* fits into this rubric. However, it remains unclear exactly which "key stage" of their lives the series is meant to represent, and the series can hardly be claimed to be original. What, then, is the purpose of having *The Golden Girls* occupy such a prominent part of its lineup (in fact, the series is only one of a couple of mainstream series on the network, one of the others being *Ghost Whisperer*)? It's possible the network believes that *The Golden Girls* will fill a niche that is not currently occupied and that its relation to female audiences retains as much power as it did (if not more so) during its original broadcast. Like Lifetime before it, WE seeks to use the series to

complement and cement its image as a network centered on the needs of women. Again, like Lifetime, WE seems to believe that the messages contained in the series are worthy and supportive of women.

The Golden Girls has come to represent a struggle over female representation in the cultural sphere, especially as it relates to women's programming, because it has served a similar purpose for two different, competing networks. This is especially important when considered in the light of what Lotz has described as the segmentation of the female viewing population. She considers WE's claim to represent all women as "true only of women for whom dating, fashion, and style are of prime importance" (61). Clearly, *The Golden Girls* does not fit neatly into this formulation, and I would argue that it signifies a claiming of a different kind of female audience, one that has traditionally been associated with *Lifetime*. Although the series remains a commodity, it is one that is used to bolster WE's identity as the newest network for every woman, rather than just the young. Furthermore, this shows how the series is also continuing to reach new audiences, allowing its empowering message to reach the younger female demographic that constitutes the majority of WE's viewership.

Despite their differences in purpose and their assumptions about audience, all three networks have appropriated the series to bolster their own original programming and movies. Lifetime would often show the series several times in a given day; Hallmark gives the show its own morning and late-night blocks, while Women's Entertainment takes over in the afternoon. The passing of two of the main actresses from the series has reinforced the enduring popularity of the series while simultaneously indicating the willingness of the networks to respond to the desires of their fans in order to protect the status of their important commodity. With the deaths of both Estelle Getty and Beatrice Arthur, the networks were forced to take account of their viewers' preferences and launch a special memorial run of the best episodes of that particular actress. In Hallmark's case, the Arthur retrospective was only expanded after fans had made their wishes known. As observed by Adam Bryant of *TV Guide*: "after being flooded with calls in support of a Memorial Day *Golden Girls* marathon tribute Bea Arthur, Hallmark Channel has decided to give fans more of what they want. And sooner" (Bryant). On the one hand, these retrospectives illustrate the awareness the networks have of this series' continued popularity and their ability to sense that the death of an actress can serve as a tremendous ratings booster (as morbid as that may sound to some). Even more significantly, however, the Hallmark case in particular illustrates the ways in which viewers, rather than networks, have come to characterize, exemplify and produce the perennial popularity of the series and thereby its messages.

IV. The Online Female Fandom of *The Golden Girls*

All three networks have sought to personalize *The Golden Girls* by offering a number of activities that users can partake in, including trivia such as the "Which Golden Girl

Are You?" Quiz and more. This personalization has potential consequences that are both political and empowering in nature. The quiz is especially revealing, as it indicates awareness on the networks' part of the immensely personal appeal these women have for their audiences. In creating a quiz that actually allows the viewer to explicitly associate herself with the characters in the series, the networks ensure that viewers will remain involved to an extent not possible during its original airing. Although Lynne Joyrich in discussing the personalizing of and identification with fictional characters has claimed that "as consumers continue to search for the path to the 'real' self, they are led in circles, a situation which reinforces rather than resolves this sense of weightlessness and the process of rationalization" (56), I have a more positive reading of this process. On the one hand, the series' very powerful feminist politics can serve as a positive role model. On the other hand, the quiz allows female users of the website to continue creating the kinds of female community that also formed an integral part of the series' appeal. Furthermore, the types of questions asked on the poll are structured in such a way that they represent a wide cross-section of women, allowing those who take it to find a sense of belonging, community, and inclusion.

Female fans have also begun to make their presence known in a variety of other ways, including a *Golden Girls* Wiki, numerous discussion posts, and a number of fansites, one of which is blanchonline.com. Of particular note is a "floor plan," which essentially creates the house that the women inhabit throughout the duration of the series, located on the website blanchonline.com and drawn by one of the fans of the site. This floorplan is especially important in that it allows users to enter into the "safe space" manufactured by the women of the series, a space in which anyone, gay or straight, young or old, could find acceptance. Although these online practices may strike some as eccentric or obsessive, what strikes me as particularly important about these groups, however, is the fact that these communities would not have been possible when the series was originally on the air, and so they represent a different *kind* of viewing. Entities such as the Wiki and other sites allow fans, both established and new, to develop new ways of interacting with the series that were not possible when it was produced or possible on those websites controlled by the networks that control the television series itself. Furthermore, these online communities, whether they be found on the networks' Websites or independently owned can, as Sharon Mazzarella notes, serve as sites where women can produce media of their own, even if only in the context of a fansite (145-146). Although her discussion focuses specifically on young women I would argue that it can be applied to women of all ages. In essence then, the women who build their own Websites are forging their own media and thus spaces for themselves where they can not only enjoy the series, but also find enjoyment in their relationships with other users and fans of the series. Equally importantly, they are showing the world that they have the power to *create* identities and communities for themselves.

Although many of the fan sites devoted to *The Golden Girls* do not specifically

mention the series' politically empowering aspects, there are several that show just how powerful an impact this series has had upon its female audiences. In a post by a fan known only as "lovemysadie," the author speaks of the ways in which her daughter has come to identify with the series: "[She] has clearly found this show to be the most positive and influential half hour of each and everyday [...] She tells me, 'Mom, this is what lifts my mood. If I am frustrated or sad, all I have to do is put on one of the episodes.'" This particular post illustrates the powerful ways in which the series' audiences often respond to it. Unlike other series with a strong fan following, *The Golden Girls* is significant in that it not only provides women with a positive role model for how to practice their own feminist politics, but also provides a means by which women, both young and old, can find pleasure in the shared experience of viewing the series itself. As the above anecdote illustrates, the series crosses generational boundaries, allowing women to create a sense of community not unlike that created within the show. In fact, it is precisely that message of female solidarity that makes it so appealing and uplifting to those audiences who so fervently enjoy it.

V. *The Golden Girls* as Gay Icon

In all of its various manifestations, however, the series has remained a perennial favorite among both LGBT viewers and critics, although for different reasons. For scholars, the series' social commentary and affirmation of GLBT issues and persons has proved to be of the most interest. Steven Capsuto in *Alternate Channels*, for example, notes that the series was very affirming of homosexual relationships, focusing especially on the episode "Scared Straight" that I discussed above. He notes that *The Golden Girls* typifies the early 1990s approach to gay relationships; rather than enforcing a conversion upon a straying gay character, *The Golden Girls* instead "acknowledges that a heterosexual can try to be happy for a gay couple, even without comprehending why the couple are together" (356). Capsuto sees these messages as positive, precisely because *The Golden Girls* marked such a difference from the series that came before it; thus, he sees it as encouraging and affirmative. This interpretation shows the ways in which *the message* of the show is what makes it important, rather than the ways in which individual audience members partake in or respond to it.

On a similar note, Alexander Doty sees potentially empowering notions in the women's homosocial relations with one another; in essence, the fact that they continually make jokes and double entendres allows a queer and potentially subversive reading. At the same time, however, he also notes how *The Golden Girls* and other series like it can also be conceived of as homophobic, in that they continually draw a distinction between homosexual relationships as such and those of "just friendship." He notes that "with the surfaces of their characters, actions, and mise-en-scene insistently straight-coded, these sitcoms are allowed to present a wide range of intense women-bonding that straight audiences can safely enjoy because the codes of lesbian femme-ininity can also be read as representing the straight feminine" (44). Other scholars, including myself, find the series significantly

less problematic. Nevertheless, his argument also points out the ways in which the series has been read by queer viewers as empowering and affirming, if in a somewhat troubling way. Again, however, his argument does not address the ways in which specific gay audiences react to the series and these messages that it projects.

However, the series has also been popular among gay audiences, and from the beginning it seems to have served as a means of finding a common identity and enjoyment. In a recent interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Betty White noted that "[t]here has always been a huge cult following for the show in the gay community. When the show was originally airing, the gay bars on Saturday night would all shut off their music at nine o'clock, put on the show, and then start up the music and start dancing again afterwards. We always got such a kick out of that" (Barnes). Although she does not go into particular detail about why she believes this to be so nor the consequences, I believe that the fact that *The Golden Girls* occupied such a central role in gay culture, especially social settings, indicates the ways in which gay men have associated with it. They felt it to be both welcoming and affirming, so much so that they were willing to embrace it in communal settings. As with female audiences, gay male audiences clearly saw the series as a means of attaining and reinforcing a sense of community. This has always been a pivotal concern for the GLBT movement, which has continually had to create its own community in the face of mainstream rejection.

Another explanation for the show's appeal to gay men is offered by Brent Hartinger, a poster at AfterElton.com (a website that collects a number of news bits and reviews about gay and bisexual men in the entertainment industry) who argues that *The Golden Girls* "championed to the world the truly radical notion of the "chosen family" — a rare occurrence among heterosexuals, but an almost universal one for out gay people." Like Doty and Capsuto, Hartinger does see the radically welcoming potential of the series; even more importantly, however, he also seeks to understand why it is that particular audiences find it appealing. However, he does not fully explain why this notion of the "chosen family" is so appealing to gay men and women. In numerous episodes, the women make it clear that this is a family that they have deliberately chosen to create, and they hold to this family even in the face of enormous outside pressure. Furthermore, this creation of a "chosen family" allows these women to create a woman-centered space, one in which men, while certainly welcome on a temporary basis, are nevertheless never part of the main action. Even more importantly, this chosen family is accepting to all comers, regardless of their orientation. Thus, we find this family accepting those that a larger society has rejected, including and especially those who are GLBT. Dorothy's friend Jean and Blanche's brother Clayton are two notable examples of this acceptance. Furthermore, this notion of a family made by choice allows for a negotiation on the part of gay viewers, a means by which they can find the acceptance that they sometimes are denied by their family and by mainstream culture in general. The fact that *The Golden Girls* so clearly espoused and supported a lifestyle built on a chosen family,

therefore, would make it all that much more appealing to gay audiences.

For the GLBT community, as with the series' female viewers, there is also an element of personalization involved, due in large measure to the ways in which the women as individuals outside of their roles on the screen have come to be associated with the rights of the GLBT community. Arthur and McClanahan won GLAAD Awards and Estelle Getty and Betty White have been very accepting and supportive of the GLBT community. As a result of this, many gay men have come to associate very sincerely and personally with these women. One poster on AfterElton, upon hearing of Estelle Getty's death noted that "I always enjoyed Estelle's work in *The Golden Girls* as she represented the ideal mother/grandmother for someone with my temperament. Nothing against the real thing, but the acerbic laughter made me smile," while other posters on this thread noted their love and appreciation of her and her consistent support for the GLBT community. Similar posts also occur on Bea Arthur's death announcement, although these also include testimonials from gay men describing how the series served as a bonding experience with members of their family

Finally and most recently, the death of Rue McClanahan on June 3, 2010 brought out a renewed wave of mourning and grief from those in the gay community. Again, the posters on AfterElton were active, and there are two that are particularly illuminating. A poster named simply Morgan states that "I always wished each and every "GG" was my grandma when I was a kid. Naughty and full of life. I loved my grandma but she was NOTHING like these funny fabulous ladies on my TV every week. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say as a gay man I LOVE brassy bossy funny ladies! Lucy, Carol, all the "Golden Girls." Similarly, a poster known as Warren notes that he spent a great deal of quality time watching the series with his grandmother thus pointing out the ways in which the series provided gay men with the opportunity to forge bonds with the precious members of their family. Although McClanahan was primarily known for her portrayal as Blanche, several of the comments on this post reveal that her presence in GLBT-friendly media, ranging from films of the 1970s to her recent work in the gay-themed series *Sordid Lives*. A number of Facebook pages and groups were also formed in McClanahan's memory, illustrating the powerful presence she continued to have in the lives of many.

In all of these instances, the thing that makes these women and their series so appealing stems from two factors. First, gay men feel accepted in the lives of these women in a way they are often denied in mainstream culture; secondly, the series serves a means of bonding with family (especially mothers and grandmothers;) an important and vital aspect of many people's lives. This bonding is especially important for gay men, who often face rejection from their beloved families as a result of their sexual orientation. Thus, through both the diagesis of various episodes and through the star text of its primary actresses, *The Golden Girls* offered (and continues to offer) members of the GLBT community (especially gay men) a warm, welcoming, and safe atmosphere in which powerful emotional bonds can be forged

and maintained. Although the deaths of these actresses is tragic, they bring these various elements into sharp relief, allowing gay men and women to find solace and solidarity even in the face of these unfortunate and saddening events. Even death cannot stop the empowering and welcoming nature of these women and the series for which they are so well-known.

VI. The *Golden Girls* and a Feminist Decade

Due to its continued network presence and its increased fandom as well as the potent feminist politics embedded in its comedy, the series should be considered an emblem of feminist power in the popular culture realm, both now and in the years to come. It is particularly important for the messages it contains about the sexual freedom and empowerment of older women and for the many messages it sends about the power of female community and solidarity, across both age and class lines. These last two are particularly important, considering the rift that is commonly perceived (whether it really exists or not is up for debate) to exist between the older and younger generations of feminists.

In an era in which the feminist voice in popular culture has been disrupted and taken over by more dominant discourses about having sex as the sole means to empowerment, *The Golden Girls* offers a welcome reprieve and a model for feminist discourse in the coming decade. Of course, it cannot be denied that sex forms a prominent part of the series. I would argue that that emphasis on sexuality is peculiarly empowering because of the age of the women. Kathleen Rowe, author of *The Unruly Woman*, notes that:

Her [the unruly woman's] sexuality is neither evil and uncontrollable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/madonna. Associated with both beauty and monstrosity, the unruly woman dwells close to the grotesque [...] The unruly woman often enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head (11).

All four of these women, from the provocatively sexual Blanche to the rather austere and “manly” Dorothy, from the pure and virginal Rose, to the aged Sophia, exhibit a disruptive sexuality due to their age. In a culture that still systematically derides older women as either asexual or, even more perniciously, as sources of amusement (witness the “cougar” phenomenon, in which older women going after younger men are, either implicitly or explicitly mocked) the fact that these women so openly own their sexuality makes them models of empowerment. Although sexuality is an essential aspect of their lives, they do not use it as a crutch nor as the only way that they empowered. Their sexuality is, instead, part of a larger package of traits that allow them to be empowered and to serve as role models for older women who, despite what the larger cultural discourse may tell them, are still very much interested in a sex life.

Blanche is the most potent example of a woman in control of her sexuality, and as

such can be seen as a bridge between the older generation of women and a younger, more sexually liberated generation. As the youngest of the three women, at the most basic level she has an appeal for younger women who see in her the same sexual liberation that they also desire. However, her sexuality is also disruptive to the overall social order in that she continues to blatantly use her sexual currency, despite the cultural mythology that says that sexual older women should be mocked. Blanche, however, remains in clear control of her sexual power, and it is the men who come to her for her favors, rather than the other way around. Although her sexual exploits are often a source of amusement for the other characters, it is not the kind of belittling humor that is often currently attached to women who are known as “cougars.” Furthermore, her speech indicates an ownership of her sexuality that shows that she is not ashamed to be a sexually active and engaged older woman. Even more importantly, she claims a responsibility for her sexuality that ensures that she remains in control. Not only does she consistently make sure that her partners are free of STDs, she also makes sure that she carries protection should the need arise. Blanche, then, combines the sexual liberation of a younger, “Third Wave” generation with the responsibility of an older, “Second Wave” sensibility.

Furthermore, the series illustrates the ways in which women can form a welcoming and embracing community, both within the narrative of the series itself and through its increasingly inter-generational fandom. As the above example shows, women of many generations can come together and watch the show together, an important joining of feminist generations that, if mainstream media is to be believed, happens all too infrequently. Kellie Bean, in her book *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media Since Reagan/Bush* notes that, “a group of self-described ‘young feminists’ announce their intent to battle generational prejudices against youth present within the upper echelons of the movement and create their own brand of feminism” (67). What the continued popularity of the series shows is that feminist politics of the Second Wave variety continues to have an appeal, even to those young women who may have more in common with the ideologies and politics of the Third Wave. Rather than pointing out the differences between generations, the series both implicitly and explicitly forges connections across generations, with its unique mix of sexual empowerment and the frequent generational mixing that occurs throughout the series. As feminism continues to develop throughout the next decade, *The Golden Girls* will serve as an important reminder of the importance of feminists reaching across generational boundaries in their ongoing fight for women’s rights.

Even more importantly, *The Golden Girls* reminds us that, even though we are commonly said to live in a “post-feminist” age, when feminism’s work is supposed to be done and finished, there are still many critiques to be lodged against the dominant culture. Bean notes that “the work of feminism is not done—women and children still make up the majority of the poor and underinsured, for example, are more likely to be abused and homeless than men—yet, the spokeswomen for this wave insist that feminism must turn its attention not toward issues of social justice but toward the personal concerns and disappointments of women like them” (66). What makes *The*

Golden Girls unique, then, is that it takes the best of both Second and Third Wave Feminism and presents them to an increasingly younger audience. Since so many of the problems that were addressed by the series, including the plight of the elderly and homeless, the fear of world war, the victimization of women, and discrimination against the LGBT community continue to be potent issues today, its relevance continues to grow along with its increasing fan base. *The Golden Girls*, then, has a central role to play in the coming decade, especially considering the fact that there are remarkably few recognizably feminist series now on the air. Although each of the groups that interact with the series have differing purposes in supporting *The Golden Girls*, ranging from the brand-driven capitalism of the networks to the community-building of its fans, to the affirmation of GLBT identity, each shares one thing in common, their reliance upon the many meanings produced by the series. There is no single meaning that should take precedence over others. It is precisely this multiplicity of meanings that makes the show so significant and so easily appropriated by the various groups that have sought to either control or, in the cases of audiences, enjoy it. Although there are multiple audience groups that partake in *The Golden Girls* fandom, they all share a desire to become involved in the series in one way or another. While other series have enjoyed a similar popularity in the world of fandom, *The Golden Girls* is largely unique in that its political message has continued to remain in the cultural domain as a result of its continuous presence. Even those series that featured all-female casts, such as *Designing Women* (which was never quite as overtly political as *The Golden Girls*), have not remained in syndication as long or as consistently as *The Golden Girls*. Clearly, its politically-charged feminist message still serves a perennial source of enjoyment and empowerment for the women who consume it. Furthermore, its release upon DVD has opened up entirely new audiences, who can now access the episodes as they were originally aired, i.e. uncut and unedited. Its syndication and release on DVD ensures that it will continue to be a source of community, empowerment, and a powerful feminist force for an entirely new set of audiences. As it moves into its second date in continuous circulation, *The Golden Girls* will no doubt continue to be of interest to women of all ages who, one can hope, will see in its revolutionary message the power to change *their* reality and forge a new feminist decade.

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