

“Don’t Ask me, I’m Just a Girl”: Feminism, Female Identity, and *The Simpsons*

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Our collective history of interacting with and being shaped by the mass media has engendered in many women a kind of cultural identity crisis. We are ambivalent toward femininity on the one hand and feminism on the other.

—Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (8)

SINCE ITS PREMIERE IN 1989, *THE SIMPSONS* HAS EARNED A STEADILY increasing notoriety and popularity within American culture. The inaugural episode, “*The Simpsons* Christmas Special,” aired on December 17th, 1989, and earned the fledgling Fox network an impressive 26.7 million viewers—a remarkable fact considering that the Fox network then reached approximately only 80% of American households; *The Simpsons* was officially launched as a television series on January 14th, 1990, with the airing of “Bart the Genius” (#7G02), which earned Fox an equally respectable 24.5 million viewers.¹ Less than a year after its premiere, *The Simpsons* was, as Harry Waters aptly describes it, “a breakaway ratings hit, industry trendsetter, cultural template, and a viewing experience verging on the religious for its most fanatical followers” (58). During its heyday in the early 1990s, *The Simpsons* repeatedly ranked in the Nielsen top ten for prime-time television shows—notably, from January 1990, until the start of the second season in October that year, *The Simpsons* was among the top three shows ten times—and throughout the decade it periodically ranked within the top twenty-five.² Currently in its eighteenth season

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on the Fox Television Network, *The Simpsons* now has the distinction of being the longest-running prime-time animated show as well as the longest-running prime-time situation comedy in television history, surpassing the current record holder, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which ran for fourteen seasons. Quite simply, *The Simpsons* is today one of the most recognizable and celebrated icons of American popular culture and clearly a bona fide cultural phenomenon.³

The intention here, however, is not to explain the popularity of *The Simpsons* but instead to examine the ideological implications of such enormous popularity and broad reach—in short, to explore the show's engagement with and influence upon highly politicized issues in contemporary American culture.⁴ For these purposes, the most salient point is that *The Simpsons* is above all a sophisticated satire on American culture. Although its satirical edge has waned somewhat in recent years, it continues to function in this capacity week after week, offering scathing critiques of America's numerous faults and flaws. Among other things, *The Simpsons* mercilessly exposes the hypocrisy and ineptitude of pop psychology, corporate greed, commercialism, consumerism, and modern child-rearing, as well as the potential dangers of fundamental religion, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Importantly, *The Simpsons* most commonly offers its satire from a leftist political position, and it works from this position to lambaste, among other things, the universality and normativity of so-called "traditional family values" and to satirize America's exclusionary practices. In particular, the show repeatedly critiques the treatment of various so-called minorities in American culture, notably those whose status is based on religion, race, age, sex, and gender.

These points provide a context for an examination of feminism on *The Simpsons*, an element of the show that has not yet received due critical attention. This essay specifically explores the representation of women on *The Simpsons* and explores how the show engages the politics of feminist movement and articulates a feminist sensibility within its satire. *The Simpsons*'s engagement with feminism is not simple, however, as the show both reflects and reflects upon the ideological preoccupations of the culture, which are invariably complex. Understandings of feminism in popular culture are imbued with a great deal of confusion and contradiction, a fact made quite evident by the current proliferation of "girl power" rhetoric and the varied articulations of female "empowerment." Indeed, as Amanda Lotz notes, in the new

millennium there is a vast theoretical confusion over what one even means when invoking the term “feminism.”⁵ As a result of the real changes in women’s lives and the shifts in theoretical perspectives since the height of second-wave feminism, many women’s lives today are marked by ambivalence and ambiguity, complexity and contradiction. This state of affairs has been commented upon by a host of contemporary writers, both mainstream and academic, including Susan Faludi, Naomi Wolf, Susan Douglas, Joanne Hollows, Bonnie Dow, Lauren Rabinovitz, Amanda Lotz, Ellen Riordan, and Katha Pollit. In “Feminism at the Millennium,” the introduction to her collection of essays entitled *Subject to Debate: Sense and Dissents on Women, Politics, and Culture*, Katha Pollit flatly states that “[an] ambivalence marks even the attempt to evaluate how powerful women are” (xvi). In *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, Susan Douglas similarly claims that “American women today are a bundle of contradictions” (9). As Douglas admirably demonstrates, much of this confusion about women’s “proper place” and roles in the culture derives from the mixed messages to be found in mainstream mass media. As a result, many women today seem to be in a conflicted state, torn between very traditional and stereotypical ideas about who and what they ought to be and rather progressive and liberating concepts of who and what they can be. As Douglas succinctly puts it, “The war that has been raging in the media is not a simplistic war against women but a complex struggle between feminism and antifeminism that has reflected, reinforced, and exaggerated our culture’s ambivalence about women’s roles for over thirty-five years” (12–13).

Given *The Simpsons*’s regular engagement with contemporary issues and its reflection of American cultural values, it is not surprising that much of the ambivalence and ambiguity that currently surround female identity is often reflected in characterizations and storylines on the show. What *The Simpsons* offers its viewers is a complex blend of progressive and traditional attitudes toward female identity and feminist movement. Of course, such conflicting ideologies and representations seem in perfect keeping with the times in which *The Simpsons* appeared, for the 1990s itself was an era of great ambiguity about women’s lives and widespread confusion over gender norms. By way of example, witness: the challenges to the male-only policies of colleges such as the Citadel and the Virginia Military Institute; the evolution of and debates over “third-wave” feminism, particularly in relation to the

rise (and subsequent commodification) of “girl power” rhetoric; the judicial re-evaluations of Title IX legislation and the establishment of professional women’s sports teams and leagues; and the conflicted representations of women in cultural phenomena as varied as music (e.g., Madonna, The Lilith Fair, The Spice Girls), television (e.g., *Murphy Brown*, *Roseanne*, *Ally McBeal*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), and film (e.g., *Thelma and Louise*, *G.I. Jane*, *The Long Kiss Goodnight*). These complexities and ambiguities are also apparent on *The Simpsons* when one focuses on the show’s construction of gender roles, both male and female, as well as its incorporation of ideological norms regarding gender in American culture. A full analysis of the issues attendant on feminism and female identity in popular culture and on *The Simpsons* is beyond the scope of this paper; therefore, this examination of *The Simpsons* concentrates specifically on three of the show’s primary female characters: Marge Simpson, Selma Bouvier (Marge’s sister), and Lisa Simpson.

“Family Values” and Gender Norms

The initial success of *The Simpsons* was due mainly to the willful manipulation of the image of Bart Simpson: the show capitalized upon the archetype of the male adolescent rebel and upon the rapid commodification of easily reproducible phrases such as “Don’t have a cow, man,” “Eat my shorts,” and “Ay, caramba!” However, from the very start, *The Simpsons* was concerned with adult themes and with issues relevant to both men and women concerning the relationships they have with one another and with members of their immediate families. As is well known, *The Simpsons* is foremost a satire upon the idealized images of family life depicted by both traditional and contemporary domestic sitcoms. Though the Simpson family is far from the media-constructed norm offered by television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best* in the 1950s or *The Cosby Show* and *Family Ties* in the 1980s, they are perhaps closer to the actual norm, a distinction well displayed in the debate over “family values” in the early 1990s. In a speech given at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters in 1992, George Bush, Sr. infamously stated that: “We need a nation closer to *The Waltons* than *The Simpsons*.”⁶ Bush’s comment was a lament for the loss of a supposedly better and more stable past and concept of family, perhaps best epitomized by the nuclear family of the

1950s and the paintings of Norman Rockwell. What Bush failed to see is that these were only *idealized* images of family and community, only media-constructed realities. *The Simpsons* are quite simply more akin to what we are today and more attuned to the realities of contemporary life. Nonetheless, “family values” is a concept that has had increasingly strong cultural purchase over the last decade. Not surprisingly, the conservative attitude expressed by George Bush, Sr. returned full force in the 1996 presidential election, with Bush’s sentiments strongly echoed by Bob Dole, and then again in the 2000 presidential “selection,” reiterated this time in the words of George Bush, Jr. The consistent theme of the conservative political rallying cry was for a return to “traditional family values”—meaning, it seemed, to bourgeois values, compulsory heterosexuality, male dominance, and female submission—and for an increased presence of such values in mainstream popular art forms such as film and television.

From the very start, *The Simpsons* has engaged with the political hot topic of “family values” in numerous ways—most obviously in the relationships between the Simpson parents and children, but also quite notably in the relationship between Homer and Marge. For example, in the first season, the show featured two episodes (interestingly aired back-to-back) that dealt openly with infidelity and the potential for extramarital affairs: “Life on the Fast Lane” (#7G11) and “Homer’s Night Out” (#7G10). In “Life on the Fast Lane,” Homer offends Marge by selfishly giving her a bowling ball as a birthday gift; the selfishness of the gesture is underscored by the fact that Homer has already had his named engraved on it, anticipating that Marge would just give it to him because, as he says, “You don’t even know how to bowl.” Out of well-controlled anger and spite, Marge decides to teach Homer a lesson: “I’ll learn,” she says. Shortly thereafter, Marge is taking bowling lessons—and being slowly seduced by her new bowling instructor, Jacques. Meanwhile, Homer is made to feel both jealous and suspicious; it is clear to Homer that something has changed between him and Marge, but he is not sure how to express it. One evening, when Marge is getting ready for yet another lesson and Homer is dressing, Homer finds a bowling glove that Jacques had given to Marge, and he sadly concludes that she is seeing another man. Things between Marge and Jacques do indeed escalate to the point where Marge not only considers but plans a rendezvous with Jacques at his apartment. On the way there, however, Marge literally comes to a fork in the road and,

thinking about her past and her family, reconsiders her choice. Instead of going on to the Fiesta Terrace to meet Jacques, Marge drives to the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. What we are given next is a beautiful parody of the ending of *An Officer and a Gentleman*, complete with cheesy theme music, although in this situation the gender norms—and, by extension, the conventions of romance in mass media—are inverted, for it is the woman, Marge, who surprises the man, Homer, at the workplace and offers a confession of love.

In “Homer’s Night Out,” infidelity is again the issue, but this time the roles are reversed. The problems begin when Bart uses his novelty spy camera to snap a photo of Homer dancing suggestively with a stripper at a friend’s stag party. The image is soon photocopied by Bart’s friends and quickly circulated around Springfield. When Marge discovers the photo, she is understandably upset and kicks Homer out of the house for the night. When Homer returns, he apologizes to Marge, although it is clear to both her and the viewer that he does not really know what he is apologizing for. As she and Homer discuss the situation, Marge says that what bothers her most is that Homer “taught Bart a very bad lesson,” and she explains her feelings to Homer as follows: “Your boy idolizes you . . . and when he sees you treating women as objects, he’s going to think it’s ok. You owe your son better than that, Homer.” What follows in the rest of this episode is an assertion of a feminist sensibility, initiated by Marge but intriguingly voiced through Homer. Marge insists that Homer take Bart to meet the “exotic belly-person” and apologize for the way he has treated her because she wants Bart to see that “this other woman is a real human being with real thoughts and real feelings.” Homer finds Princess Kashmir at a local dance club and explains that he is there “to apologize for treating [her] like an object.” He then reiterates Marge’s sentiments and states: “I also want my boy to find out that you’re more than just a belly. I want him to meet the woman behind all the spangles and glitter, and find out that she has thoughts and feelings too.” In typical *Simpsons* fashion, nothing remains completely serious for long: as Homer is talking, he is inadvertently lifted up in the air along with Princess Kashmir in the cage in which she will perform and subsequently dropped back onto the stage below. When members of the audience recognize Homer as the “swinging cat” from the photo, they begin to cheer; at this point, the music starts up again, the dancers begin their routine, and Homer spontaneously participates, but when

he sees Bart looking on in admiration, he pauses. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Homer, Marge appears and is mortified to find that Homer has “sunk even lower.” To her surprise, however, Homer stops the music and launches into the following monologue:

I have something to say to all the sons out there. To all the boys, to all the men, to all of us. It's about women, and how they are not mere objects with curves that make us crazy. No, they are our wives, they are our daughters, our sisters, our grandmas, our aunts, our nieces and nephews—well, not our nephews. They are our mothers. And you know what, as ridiculous as this sounds, I would rather feel the sweet breath of my beautiful wife on the back of my neck while I sleep than stuff dollar bills into some stranger's g-string.

Though somewhat simplistic, Homer's monologue touches everyone in the audience: one man comments on how much he loves his wife, another pulls out photographs of his kids, and the emcee leaves to call his mother. With tears running down her face, Marge calls out to Homer and runs onstage, where they hug and kiss.

Obviously, the text of Homer's speech is deeply influenced by a feminist sensibility and a regard for the equality of the sexes. But what is also interesting to note as Homer delivers his monologue are the visual clues of the *mise-en-scène*: the image, crafted like a low-angle film shot, captures Homer in the foreground to the left of the frame and positions Princess Kashmir in the background, above, inside of her cage. The visual image thus metaphorically underscores the literal message conveyed, i.e., the notion that sexism places women in narrow confines, effectively “imprisoning” them within the limited definitions of femininity.⁷ Considering the ideological implications of this episode, it is likely that such protofeminism, rather than Bart's antics, was what fueled the early conservative critiques of the show. In discussing representations of masculinity on *The Simpsons*, Karma Waltonen notes that “At the beginning of each episode, [Homer] embodies all that is bad about patriarchy and masculinity” but that by the end he comes closer to being “the early-twenty-first-century liberal, sensitive man.” What is firmly put in place with both “Homer's Night Out” and “Life on the Fast Lane” is what many fans of *The Simpsons* initially latched on to: the serious adult situations that the show engages with and the “realism” of these for the adult viewing audience. Despite the leftist politics of the series, at heart *The Simpsons* is a rather

traditional-minded show, one that not only embraces “family values” more deeply than many of the politicians who so vocally tout them, but also defines the term in a much more authentic way, for on *The Simpsons* “family values” most often means mutual respect and deep compassion for the other members of the family unit. In the two episodes discussed here, we see that neither Homer nor Marge is willing to sacrifice the love of the other nor of the family they have developed; instead, they choose to remain together and work through their differences, and this has been a sustained theme throughout the entire run of the show. The situations in both “Homer’s Night Out” and “Life on the Fast Lane” are a reminder of how, from the very start, *The Simpsons* has engaged gender politics to explore issues that are important to the adult viewing audience, both male and female.

Selma Bouvier and the Politics of “Choice”

Motherhood, which is a topic of special concern to female viewers, is continually dealt with on *The Simpsons*, although often in generic or tangential ways. However, in “Selma’s Choice” (#9F11), an episode from Season Four, the subject of motherhood and the highly politicized issues that surround it are intimately explored. At the beginning of this episode, Marge Simpson and Selma and Patty Bouvier (Marge’s twin sisters) are preparing for the funeral of their Aunt Gladys, a woman who “lived alone, died alone.” In the videotaped will that Gladys left for the family, she encourages her childless nieces to raise a family before its too late: “Don’t die lonely like me,” she advises them. “Do it now!” With an almost cruel irony, Gladys leaves the twin sisters her grandfather clock, which we hear ticking loudly in the backseat of the car as the Simpson clan drives home, a reminder—to the sisters, as well as viewers of *The Simpsons*—of a woman’s so-called “biological clock.” Of the two sisters, only Selma, always the more sentimental of the twin sisters, seems bothered by the fact that she is both single and childless. To regular viewers of the show, this is not surprising: Selma’s desires for both a loving partner and children were first made evident in “Principle Charming” (#7F16), an episode from Season Two. In this episode, Selma is feeling a sense of “emptiness” in her life, and she expects that love can fill this void. Marge, naturally concerned, challenges Homer to help find Selma a man. Notably, within the episode,

Selma is not criticized or humiliated for being alone; if anything, the show offers a critique of the men who populate Springfield—and, by extension, the United States—for being, by and large, slobs, snobs, workaholics, narcissists, or drunks; in short, both ineffectual and inappropriate as partners. As Homer finally realizes, “A good man really *is* hard to find.” In “Selma’s Choice,” the problems are exacerbated, and the satire is even more sophisticated, partly, I think, because this episode appeared early in 1993, shortly after two key cultural events: the publication of Susan Faludi’s influential book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, and the infamous verbal sparring match between Vice President Dan Quayle and the fictional Murphy Brown (from the television show *Murphy Brown*) regarding the title character’s decision to have a baby alone.

One of the most remarkable qualities of *The Simpsons* is its ability to quickly incorporate and respond to events taking place within American culture, and “Selma’s Choice” is a fine example of this. In May of 1992, as then Vice President Dan Quayle was speaking about “family values” to an audience in San Francisco, he rather casually commented that

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. (Yang)

Quayle was referring to the 1992 season finale of *Murphy Brown*, aired in May of that year, in which Murphy, a single professional woman, gives birth to a baby boy. Inadvertently, Quayle placed the thorny issue of “family values” at the center of the national conversation and the 1992 presidential campaign. What followed was a wide-ranging debate in the popular press over the definition of family, the rights of women, and the politics of popular culture. In the subsequent season opener of *Murphy Brown*, which aired on September 21, 1992, Murphy Brown (or was it actually Candace Bergen? or series creator Diane English?) responded to Quayle’s rebuke in a special hour-long episode. In a report on the American family on the fictional *FYI* newsmagazine, Murphy states that

Unfortunately, the only acceptable definition of a family is a mother, a father, and children. And, in a country where millions of children

grow up in nontraditional families, that definition seems perfectly unfair. Whether by choice or circumstance, families come in all shapes and sizes. Ultimately, what really defines a family is commitment, caring, and love. (Kubasik)

Then, in a scene that beautifully blurs the distinctions between reality and fiction, *Murphy Brown*, a fictional character, is joined in the fictional *FYI* studio by a group of real-life single-parent families who, she tells the audience, “might not fit into the Vice President’s vision of a family, but consider themselves families nonetheless.” Despite the “media circus” surrounding these events, the American viewing public was obviously interested in watching this debate unfold: bolstered largely by the controversy, the season premiere of *Murphy Brown* pulled in 44 million viewers (“Murphy to Dan”).

Unlike *Murphy Brown*, who had the “luxury” of a man in her life (however intermittently) and whose pregnancy was the result of a sexual encounter with him, Selma Bouvier has to work at finding a suitable partner and potential father; however, for a woman of her age and in her circumstances in American culture, this is still a daunting prospect. In a brilliant montage demonstrating the various means by which both Selma and Patty attempt to secure dates, *The Simpsons* offers a critique of the lingering sexist attitudes in the culture, including those regarding women’s personal hygiene and how readily they will “put out” on a date. The sexism is perhaps most powerfully highlighted by Patty’s use of a relatively “modern” method of finding a man: the video-dating service. In a particularly pointed satirical moment, we see Groundskeeper Willie (no prize himself in his 1970s era outfit and gold chains) viewing video profiles and then harshly dismissing Patty with the quip “Back to the loch with you, Nessie.” Although a small moment, it aptly demonstrates the show’s critique of the culture’s continued emphasis upon a woman’s appearance as the singular measure of her worth.

As in “Principle Charming,” we see that there are no decent prospects available for Selma or Patty. When Selma again becomes dejected, Lisa wisely suggests a very contemporary alternative—the sperm bank. Determined to have a baby, Selma goes to the Springfield Sperm Bank for more information. However, this too does not seem to provide the answer Selma is looking for. She returns home with a brochure entitled “101 Frozen Pops,” a catalog of “celebrity sperm,”

which makes her feel even more lonely and dejected. Marge and Patty are a bit uncomfortable with this avenue, and they question Selma about whether she is sure this is something she wants to do. "I've got a lot of love to give," she tells them, and then laments: "All I have now is sperm in a cup." Later on, Selma has an opportunity to play mother to Bart and Lisa when she volunteers to take them to Duff Gardens (a wonderfully rendered parody of Busch Gardens). While on the Beers of the World boat ride, Lisa drinks the water and begins to hallucinate; meanwhile, Bart sneaks onto a rollercoaster and nearly gets killed. Selma is both overwhelmed and undone by all of it; when she returns home, she asks Marge and Homer, "How do you do it?" Although her reasons are never explicitly stated, it is clear that Selma recognizes the difficulties of being a single parent, and finally decides that she does not want to pursue having a child. On the surface, this might seem a bit of a cop-out considering the issues at stake here. However, what seems fundamentally important is not the issue of motherhood *per se* but the issue of choice itself: the "choice" Selma makes at the end of the episode is not to pursue having a child on her own; Selma expects that the choice is hers and hers alone to make, and the show lends support to this position throughout. "Selma's Choice" also ends with an homage to *Murphy Brown*, underscoring the issue of choice: in the final scene, we see Selma through the lens of a videocamera nestling her pet iguana, Chub Chub, and singing Carole King's "You Make Me Feel (Like a Natural Woman)." Savvy viewers would recognize this as a direct allusion to the controversial 1992 season finale of *Murphy Brown*; the more important point, however, is the political nature of such an ending, which overtly places the episode within the cultural debate taking place and implicitly offers support for the decisions made by both Murphy and Selma, despite their different outcomes. Ultimately, "Selma's Choice" addresses what are still vexing problems for women in this culture: the inherent conflicts among compulsory heterosexuality, nuclear family "norms," and a woman's right to choose.

Although *The Simpsons* has not addressed this question again, it still is a timely topic and is as relevant today as it was a decade ago. Early in 2002, a similar stir was made by the publication of Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children*, a book that has spurred cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*, segments on *The Today Show* and *60 Minutes*, and reviews and editorials in newspapers nationwide. In a provocative article in *Salon* magazine, partly inspired

by a review of Hewlett's book but more broadly examining the status of women today, Michelle Goldberg bluntly claims "It is time for another backlash." In a review of Hewlett's book for *Dissent*, Ellen Willis similarly claims that "feminism is barely breathing." As both Goldberg and Willis point out, Hewlett's message is a dire one for single and childless women: reproduce now, before it's too late or you will be reduced to a clinically depressed and "empty" being. It is remarkable that a full decade after the airing of "Selma's Choice" and the debates over *Murphy Brown* the same conversation about women's lives and bodies is taking place. In a prelude to a recent interview with Susan Faludi in *Mother Jones*, Sue Halpern writes:

When Susan Faludi published *Backlash* in 1992, the moment seemed ripe for a feminist revival. Bill Clinton had been elected, essentially by women; Anita Hill had outed Clarence Thomas and sparked a national discussion on sexual harassment and gender inequality in the workplace; and Washington had hosted the largest pro-choice rally ever assembled.

Halpern offers an apt description of the era. The decade that followed indeed seemed to fulfill the promise of the time: we witnessed an increase of women into the workplace as well as colleges, and more sexual liberation for many women, visible in part in the large number of female-centered films and television shows, including HBO's wildly successful *Sex and the City*. But by 2002, we seemed to have come full circle. When Susan Faludi was writing her book, George Bush was in the White House; a decade later, another George Bush is in the White House, and the nation has largely retreated from the leftist political agenda of the Clinton administration. Looking back on the 1980s, Faludi saw a rollback of the many gains made by the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s; as she noted, prominent in the backlash was the belief that women, biologically "destined" to bear and raise children, were doing the country a disservice by placing their own needs, desires, and careers ahead of family life. Ten years later, Hewlett's book is offering the same argument. The return to a traditionally conservative perspective is troubling; however, the situation is not completely the same. Looking back on the 1990s, it seems that the era is marked not so much by a backlash as it is by a continual questioning and contestation of existing ideologies that are almost constantly in

conflict and, indeed, sometimes contradictory. It is these very contradictions that are consistently reflected within the text of *The Simpsons*.

Marge Simpson, Liminal Lady

When one examines the entire run of *The Simpsons*, this contradictory quality is displayed quite well, but it is perhaps best embodied by Marge Simpson, a woman who lives in what Lori Landay has called a “liminal” space. More than any other character, Marge exists “betwixt and between” social categories, behaviors and spaces, and she embodies the ambivalence that still exists regarding female identity and its relation to the public and private spheres. In her examination of *I Love Lucy*, Landay argues that the series articulates an ambivalent attitude about female identity and ultimately “reflects anxieties about woman’s place and women’s power” in the era in which it appeared (161). Curiously, the same can be said of *The Simpsons* in its own era in relation to Marge Simpson. The intention here is not to argue that Marge Simpson is a trickster figure, but to highlight that Landay’s assertion that the trickster “can be seen as an articulation of the contradictory position in which women were placed by the processes of modernity” (92) is perfectly applicable to Marge and her situation. Marge, after all, is a baby-boomer—according to sources on *The Simpsons Archive*, she was born in 1956—and, as such, she is very much a product of her generation. Although we are not given a very full history of Marge, we have enough glimpses of her past in the series to see that she was raised with a rather proscriptive domestic ideology. As Landay observes, the contradictions of postwar domestic ideology represent marriage as an equal partnership yet insist on “polarized gender roles and a separation of the public and private spheres” (166). In her examination of 1950s suburban sitcoms, Mary Beth Haralovich similarly argues that the middle class homemaker was defined by “contradictions which held her to a limited social place” and which, paradoxically, made her both central and marginal to the economy (111). She was central as a homemaker—i.e., as the subject of consumer product designers and marketing strategists—yet marginal as a worker within the home because the value of her labor existed outside the means of production. As noted, *The Simpsons* self-consciously adopts the model of the postwar nuclear family evident in the 1950s domestic sitcoms such as *Ozzie and*

Harriet, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. In discussing the latter two shows, Haralovich claims that Margaret Anderson and June Cleaver “are two representations of the contradictory definitions of the homemaker in that they are simultaneously contained and liberated by domestic space” (112). In the 1990s, Marge Simpson, not unlike Margaret Anderson and June Cleaver, has established herself as the consummate homemaker, housewife and mother; her life is primarily defined by private domestic space, and her primary functions revolve around tending to her home, her husband and her three children.

Nonetheless, Marge's formative years are in the 1970s, during the peak of the second-wave feminist movement, and we can see that she has been deeply influenced by the ideas and the cultural events of this time period. In various episodes, we learn that Marge was a feminist in college—in one sequence, for example, we see a young Marge holding a copy of *Ms.* magazine—and that she once had aspirations of being an artist. This is likely why Marge often aspires to something beyond her domestic life, and she often takes jobs outside of the home. Landay points out that in *I Love Lucy*, Lucy's desire to work outside of the home, i.e., to transcend the limitations of the domestic sphere, is continually questioned and contested by male authority figures, such as her husband, and by the restrictive social codes of the time. In *The Simpsons*, by contrast, Marge's choice to take on outside employment is never questioned; indeed, more often than not, Homer embraces the idea, though mainly because it will provide a second income for the family. Landay also claims that the image of a modern public femininity in the early decades of the twentieth century is both liberatory and containing: liberatory because it expresses women's independence, promotes active participation in the public sphere, and encourages the pursuit of erotic and/or economic satisfaction, yet containing because it also legitimates marriage as a woman's goal, locates pleasure in commodity consumption rather than political freedom, and reifies the sexual division of labor (92). Strains of this very same tension can be found in the 1990s among many of the female characters on *The Simpsons*, but most notably within Marge Simpson. Overall, then, the series maintains Marge within a liminal space in which her own ambivalence about conflicting ideologies is played out of the stage of the show, thus revealing the degree of ambivalence still evident in American culture regarding women's “proper position.”

The tensions of contemporary femininity and the consequences that can result from living in a perpetually liminal state can be seen clearly in a number of specific episodes of *The Simpsons* that feature Marge in situations both inside and outside the home. The contradictions are made evident, for example, in “Homer Alone” (#8F14), an episode from Season Three. This episode opens with a very harried Marge attempting to get her family ready for their day: in a fast-paced montage, we see Marge feed, change, and burp baby Maggie; prepare lunches for Homer, Bart, and Lisa; make a list of items to get at the market and errands to run; and then drive the kids to school because, in their sloth, they have missed the bus. After doing her shopping, while driving home, Marge is beset on all sides by stress factors—namely, practical jokers on the radio, heavy traffic, a rude tailgater, and finally Maggie, who spills her bottle of milk all over Marge and the car. At this point, Marge lets out a chilling “Nooooooooo” and slams on the brakes, stopping her car in the middle of a bridge and creating gridlock in both directions. When another driver approaches her car to see what is wrong, she simply turns and roars at him like an angry animal (appropriately enough, the sound effect used here is the infamous roar of the MGM lion). Shortly thereafter, the situation is featured on the local traffic report, and newsman Kent Brockman shows up to report on the situation. Pointedly, the script here highlights the gender issues in question. According to Brockman, “An overworked and under-appreciated housewife has snapped and parked her car on a bridge.” The police arrive and cordon off the area with police tape that reads “Distressed Mother—Please Stay Back.” Hence, a situation is established that will allow the show to examine the strains placed upon modern-day mothers and the current position of such women within the domestic sphere.

A short time later, Homer arrives and pleads with his wife to move her car and come home. To secure the deal, Homer promises to “help out” more at home; Marge agrees, although she insists that she first have a vacation away from the family in order to decompress. In a rather typical sitcom reversal—one reminiscent, in fact, of episodes of *I Love Lucy*—Marge goes off to enjoy the amenities at Rancho Relaxo and Homer stays behind to tend to the children and the home. Of course, being ill-prepared to do either task, he is ultimately seen to be incompetent. In a series of juxtapositions, we see Homer’s incompetence contrasted to Marge’s indulgence in the things one assumes she

rarely has time for: tellingly, in one scene, we see Marge soaking in a bubble bath while eating a hot fudge sundae, drinking tequila, and watching *Thelma and Louise*. What one might expect at this point—and might well see in other domestic sitcoms of the time such as *Home Improvement*—is that Marge would be pulled away from the “dangerous” feminist fantasies of independence and freedom and summoned back to repair the damage done by Homer and restore “proper” order to the domestic realm. Instead, however, we are given a variation on this theme: Marge completes her vacation, and as she is traveling home, Homer is desperately trying to pull everything together to make it appear that all went well in Marge’s absence. Interestingly, the image of domestic harmony that Homer is looking to cultivate—an image long made the responsibility of women within the family—is self-consciously offered to us at the end of the episode, contrasting the ideal and the “real”: as the train arrives, Marge holds up a photograph of her family, a typical family portrait in which everyone is well-groomed and content; she then lowers the photograph, revealing (to us and to herself) the disheveled group waiting for her on the platform. The episode ends as Marge says that she expects “more help around the house” from the entire family to lessen her stress level, and the family members promise to pitch in. It is debatable how sincere this promise is, and I think that, despite the variation noted above, the episode ends on a rather ambiguous note, again highlighting its ambivalence about women’s “proper” place and role. On the one hand, the show seems to fall back upon rather comfortable and well-established gender norms for resolution, returning to the traditionally dichotomized gender roles and the separation of the public and private spheres. On the other hand, the resolution seems to be a testament to the labor involved with taking care of the home, labor that has long been devalued or unacknowledged, and thus a validation of women within the domestic sphere.

The other half of women’s dichotomous existence—namely, female identity in the public sphere—is fully explored in an episode entitled “The Springfield Connection” (#2F21), from Season Six. In this episode, Marge takes a job as a police officer, thus moving out of the traditionally feminized domestic space of the home and into the traditionally masculinized public space of the law. At the onset of the episode, we see that downtown Springfield is a crime-ridden area. As Homer and Marge leave a local theater, they stumble upon the petty

thief Snake conducting a three-card-monte game on the sidewalk. Homer is naive enough to think he can win, but Snake quickly steals his money and runs off. In a sudden and very surprising move, Marge boldly gives chase; unfortunately, she pursues him into a blind alley, where he turns and pulls out a knife. Marge is initially fearful, but with a rush of adrenaline she grabs a trash can lid and defends herself by striking Snake in the head. After the police and Homer arrive on the scene, Marge describes the experience as “scary but exhilarating.” In a condescending tone, Homer says “Yes, it is exhilarating to see the police get their man and save a hysterical woman.” “For crying out loud,” Marge replies, exasperated. “Easy now, sweetheart,” Homer assures her, “Homey’s here.” Homer’s response is intentionally designed to be patronizing, and to indicate to us that he is operating out of a simplistic and outdated notion of patriarchy, one in which women are passive and helpless victims and men are the heroes who rescue them (bear in mind here that Homer watches *a lot* of television).

In the next scene, Marge is back home and tending to the family, but her domestic sphere is not quite as sheltered as it once was, for the very public events of the day have intruded upon it. Lisa, who is quite excited by both the adventure and the attention her mother’s actions have attracted, animatedly asks “Mom, was that the most exciting thing you have ever done?” “Yes,” Marge tells her, “but celery soup is also exciting.” It is clear from Marge’s tone, however, that something has changed and that she is trying to convince herself as much as Lisa of the truthfulness of this statement. While shopping the next day, Marge picks up a can of ham, pauses, and reflects “Hmmm. Regular ham just doesn’t thrill”; she then replaces this with a can of deviled ham. A moment later, she is running with her cart down the aisle, recklessly seeking a thrill. Looking over the magazine rack, Marge reaches for the new issue of *Sponge & Vacuum* but then suddenly opts for an issue of *Death Sports*. Finally, after she arrives home, in an inspired moment of derring-do (and in a beautiful allusion to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), Marge impulsively rolls underneath her garage door a mere moment before it closes. Inspired perhaps by her own physical capabilities, and assuredly by her newfound desire for “thrills,” Marge goes the next day to the Springfield Police Department and tells the men gathered there that she wants to join the police force. There is a momentary pause, and then all of the men laugh out loud—and they laugh a long time. The intent here seems to be to give the viewer time to process the sexist

attitude on display and perhaps condemn these men for thinking the idea of a female cop is laughable. However, just as this idea is gelling in the mind, they abruptly stop laughing and Police Chief Wiggum simply says "Welcome aboard."

Homer's response to the news reveals his narrow-minded views and his belief in polarized gender roles. He says: "Marge, you being a cop makes you the man, which makes me the woman, and I have no interest in that." At this point, Marge plays the role expected of her and to which she has been well conditioned: she reassures Homer that there is no need for him to feel "threatened," a fine acknowledgment of the perceived threat to patriarchy that feminist movement has long represented. However, as we watch Marge train for the force (in a montage that shows her completing an obstacle course, navigating a driving course, and shooting in a target range) we see her easily outperform all of the other cadets, as well as the current officers, who are shown to be a perpetually gluttonous, slovenly, and lazy bunch. When we next see Marge, she is in uniform and patrolling her beats in Junkieville and Bumtown. We are led to believe that Marge is the best cop on the force, but we also see that her reputation as such is causing numerous problems. Once again, in its presentation of contemporary femininity, *The Simpsons* is conflicted and determined to have it both ways: the storyline in this episode toys with the viewer's expectations and forces interpretation into the same liminal space that Marge inhabits. Whereas one might expect Marge's problems to stem from sexist attitudes within the community about her role in a male-dominated profession, what the residents of Springfield latch onto is her status as a "cop," as an enforcer of the law, and this is what positions her as an outsider. The women in the beauty parlor, for example, are afraid to even gossip for fear of giving up "incriminating" information, and Homer's gambling buddies are afraid to visit Homer and play a game of poker for fear of "breaking the law." Of course, considering the plotline offered and the cultural context in which the episode appears, the issue of gender cannot be fully avoided; fittingly, it is Homer who raises it. After his poker partners run off, Homer tells Marge "You've become such a cop," a sentiment in accord with that of the entire town. However, unlike the other residents of Springfield, Homer is unable to see beyond the confines of narrowly defined gender roles. He continues his complaint, and in the process he makes clear just where the problem resides, at least for him: "Not that long ago, you were so much more to

me. You were a cleaner of pots, a sewer of buttons, an unplugging of hairy clogs." In other words, she was a housewife, both domesticated and servile. Marge replies, "I'm still all those things, only now I'm cleaning up the city, sewing together the social fabric, and unplugging the clogs of our legal system." Homer, locked into a dichotomized view of his and Marge's roles, simply asks "You're cooking what for dinner?"

Marge's idealism about her role in the public sphere is tempered by a number of experiences, including her first taste of police corruption (a point that is important in the resolution of the episode). This occurs when Marge first enters the local Kwik-E-Mart and proprietor Apu Nahaasapeemapetilon, assuming she has come to collect on a bribe, tries to pass her a stack of cash. Her idealism is also challenged by the cool logic and political savvy of Lisa, who at one point asks "Mom, I know your intentions are good, but aren't the police the protective force that maintains the status quo for the wealthy elite? Don't you think we ought to attack the roots of social problems instead of jamming people into overcrowded prisons?" Marge, unprepared for a debate on public policy, merely tries to distract Lisa with a hand puppet, saying "Look, Lisa, it's McGruff the Crime Dog." Most significantly, I think, Marge is made to confront the reality of her position when Homer openly and publicly challenges her authority. In this scene, Homer steps out of the Kwik-E-Mart and finds Marge writing a ticket for his car, which he parked across three handicapped spots. "How's my little piglet?" he asks, nonchalantly. Marge, already exhausted and frustrated by her day on the beat, criticizes Homer for being so irresponsible; Homer, appropriately enough, then teases her like a child about her job and claims that she is "not a real cop." During all of this, a crowd begins to gather, and Marge feels embarrassed by the "spectacle" she and Homer are making in public. Homer then grabs the police cap off Marge's head, symbolically disempowering her even more, and begins to verbally mock her, which intensifies the sense of shame and humiliation Marge feels. Pushed to the limit, Marge finally demonstrates the "realness" of her job by arresting Homer. This, of course, causes a variety of tensions at home. Marge later apologizes to Homer for arresting him, but she maintains that she did the right thing. "Some day," she tells him, "when you really need it, you'll be happy there are dedicated cops like me out there." "I have nothing more to say to you, Marge," Homer says. But, in typical *Simpsons* fashion, he does offer more, adding a statement that perfectly

encapsulates the gender politics of popular culture in the postwar era: "I'm drawing a line down the center of the house, à la *I Love Lucy*. You stay on your side and I'll stay on my side."

A short time later, we discover that Hermann, one of Homer's poker buddies, is running a counterfeit jeans operation out of Homer's garage. Homer quite literally stumbles upon this information while in search of more beer; Marge, being ever vigilant, is already one step ahead, and she arrives a moment later to arrest the criminals gathered in the garage. Homer, enacting his expected role as male "hero," steps between Marge and Hermann and yells "Leave the girl out of this," but he is inept in this role and is captured by Hermann. Marge is thus thrust into the position of being the hero and saving the day. What follows is a dramatic chase sequence in which the contradictory messages about female identity and women's "proper place" are very curiously combined. Marge chases Hermann into the Simpsons' back yard and then up a tree to Bart's treehouse. As she climbs, we see Bart and Lisa in the background cheering her on from the second-floor bedroom window. Marge pauses momentarily and admonishes them to "Get back to bed!"; "Don't make me come up there!" she warns. After she has successfully captured the criminal, Homer admits that Marge is a good cop and that he is proud of her. However, as in "Homer Alone," this somewhat progressive ending is placed in check with a quick denouement that returns the characters to their "normal" state: when Marge sees all of the other cops trying on the contraband jeans, she asserts "There's too much corruption on this force," and she quits.

Once again, the show ends on a rather ambiguous note, highlighting its ambivalence about feminism and female identity in the 1990s. Although the episode returns the characters to their traditionally dichotomized gender roles and separate spheres, it also makes abundantly clear in the process that a female in a traditionally male-dominated profession is not only capable of performing all of the duties of the job, but is at times even better at it than those who are considered the "appropriate" jobholders. This seems to be a particularly powerful statement in an era in which women nationwide have been challenging the exclusionary practices of police and fire departments, as well as the military. Nonetheless, *The Simpsons* leaves Marge positioned in a liminal space, and she remains in many ways the embodiment of the cultural contradictions of contemporary femininity. A much clearer stance is evident in Lisa Simpson, who is positioned quite strongly as a

young feminist, one more in the second-wave mold than her mother, and there is little ambiguity about where she stands, what she believes, and what she represents.

Lisa Simpson

By its fifth season, which began in the fall of 1993, *The Simpsons* had hit its stride and was receiving enormous amounts of press coverage, both positive and negative, due to the “bad-boy” antics of Bart Simpson and, increasingly, of Homer. Significantly, however, by the end of that season, in the spring of 1994, it was the Simpson women who were making a name for themselves within the culture at large and who were standing out more dramatically than the Simpson men. In honor of Mother’s Day that year, for example, *Entertainment Weekly*, the newly established arbiter of popular cultural tastes, ranked television’s moms and named Marge Simpson as “the best,” praising her for being “at once progressive and traditional” (Tucker, “Yea, Mamas” 68). More significantly, later that same year, Lisa Simpson appeared in an issue of *Ms.* magazine, alongside notable feminist activists such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Bella Abzug, in a section called “The Many Faces of Feminism.” In the article, the editors of *Ms.* magazine claim that Lisa “wages a one-girl revolution against cartoonland patriarchy” (48). This is true, but it is important to point out that Lisa’s activism is not really relegated to cartoonland—it is actually a part of our land, i.e., the United States—and her concerns transcend the narrow confines of the animation cel or the television screen. It is perhaps no surprise that Lisa appeared in the *Ms.* magazine spread in 1994 when one considers that her battle against patriarchy and sexism was quite powerfully demonstrated in an episode that aired the very same year.

“Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” (#1F12), which first aired in February of 1994, provides what is perhaps the most overt critique of sexism and patriarchy to ever appear in an episode of *The Simpsons*. In this episode, Lisa is excited about acquiring the new “Talking Malibu Stacy” doll and thus flocks to the mall with the other excited consumers to purchase one on the day of its release. In a section of the store appropriately named The Valley of the Dolls, Lisa warns her mother “I may get a little crazy, Mom.” Before Marge can even finish acknowledging her understanding, Lisa is wrestling another little girl for a “Summer Fun

Set.” The frenzy over, and now back at home, Lisa constructs a diorama of what appears to be a mock UN and prepares her audience (i.e., her other dolls and the viewers of *The Simpsons*) for Stacy’s grand entrance: “A hush falls over the General Assembly as Stacy approaches the podium to deliver what will no doubt be a stirring and memorable address.” But when Lisa pulls the string on the back of the doll, Stacy simply says “I wish they taught shopping in school.” Discouraged, but not without hope, Lisa tries again. This time, Stacy says “Let’s bake some cookies for the boys.” Frustrated, Lisa says “Come on, Stacy. I’ve waited my whole life to hear you speak. Don’t you have anything relevant to say?” and pulls the cord one last time: “Don’t ask me. I’m just a girl [tee hee, tee hee].” Bart flippantly says “Right on. Say it, sister.” In response, Lisa launches into a heartfelt and politically charged monolog:

It’s not funny, Bart. Millions of girls will grow up thinking that this is the right way to act, that they can never be more than vacuous ninnies whose only goal is to look pretty, land a rich husband, and spend all day on the phone with their equally vacuous friends talking about how damn terrific it is to look pretty and have a rich husband.

And with that, Lisa angrily hurls the doll out of her bedroom window.

Before proceeding with a detailed analysis of the episode, it is important to again note the context in which this episode appeared to highlight how *The Simpsons* engages politically with trends in American culture. Malibu Stacy is obviously a fictional stand-in for the immensely popular Barbie doll in the “real world,” and “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” was clearly inspired by the furore over the Teen Talk Barbie, which was introduced in 1992. Teen Talk Barbie was the first talking Barbie doll on the market in twenty years, and it was expected to be a huge hit with consumers who were increasingly jaded by “high-tech” developments in the toy industry. Each doll could speak four of 270 preprogrammed one-liners (Leo, “The Indignation”). Among these, however, was the phrase “Math class is tough,” which sparked a heated debate among parents, educators, and concerned citizens. In reaction to the controversy surrounding the Teen Talk Barbie, a small contingent of performance artists based in New York’s East Village formed a group called the Barbie Liberation Organization (BLO). With the appearance of the Talking Duke G.I. Joe doll in 1993, the BLO saw potential for

social commentary and began switching the voiceboxes of the Teen Talk Barbie and the Talking Duke G.I. Joe and then placing them back on store shelves for unsuspecting consumers. Needless to say, confusion ensued. The group says its aim was to “startle the public into thinking about the Stone-Age worldview that the dolls reflect” (Firestone). Though small-scale and short-lived, this guerilla tactic highlighted a valid point. As one BLO spokesman put it, “We [were] trying to make a statement about the way toys can encourage negative behavior in children, particularly given the rising acts of violence and sexism” (Firestone). Timely as ever, *The Simpsons* capitalized upon this controversy in “Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy” in order to raise similar questions about sexism in American culture and the influence of toys upon such attitudes.

Of course, the person on the show most suited to raising such questions is Lisa Simpson. After her diatribe against the doll in her bedroom, Lisa goes to the playground at school where she challenges her female peers to examine the import of what Stacy says. Lisa pulls the string on her doll once again, and this time Stacy says “Let’s put on makeup so the boys will like us.” Lisa then asks her playmates “Don’t you see anything wrong with what she says?” One girl admits that she does; but when she pulls the string on her doll, we hear Stacy say “My Spidey sense is tingling. Anyone call for a webslinger?” Admittedly, it is a humorous moment; more significantly, however, it is also a very knowing nod to the sabotage enacted upon real-world Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls by the BLO, and thus to the serious political nature of the subject at hand. Lisa retorts “No, Celeste, the things she says are sexist.” Sadly, their collective response is to simply giggle and say “Lisa said a dirty word.”

Ever the activist, Lisa is convinced that something has to be done about the situation. However, when she shares this idea with the family, they discourage her from doing so. Here the show displays its own ambivalent position toward political action. Although Marge and Lisa are often united in their beliefs and goals, Marge does not readily support Lisa’s position. Once again, the show offers a contradictory moment in which it has to rely upon its positioning of Marge as a traditional housewife and homemaker to emphasize her culpability in her own subjugation. Though an ardent feminist in many ways, especially at a younger age, Marge is still a product of her generation, and she often displays an unquestioning acceptance of female identity

defined in rather traditional ways, i.e., through service to men, second-class status, and a passive mindset. Marge tells Lisa, "I had a Malibu Stacy when I was your age, and I turned out just fine. Now, let's forget our troubles with a big bowl of strawberry ice cream." Without comment, Lisa pulls the string and makes her point through Stacy, who says "Now, let's forget our troubles with a big bowl of strawberry ice cream." Clearly, generational differences set Marge and Lisa apart. Whereas Marge is often conflicted in her opinions and vacillates between positions, Lisa has inherited the successes of first- and second-wave feminists and has grown up with a faith in true equality; she is a political activist, a vegetarian, a voice of reason, and an avowed feminist. She is also most often the moral center of the show, which gives her views on gender and feminism special relevance.

Undeterred, Lisa calls the Malibu Stacy hotline to complain and discovers that she can take a factory tour and thus "complain in person." Perhaps in reconsideration of her earlier statement, Marge accompanies Lisa on the tour. Lisa and Marge (the only persons on the tour) watch a brilliantly conceived parody of corporate propaganda films, this one detailing the origins of Malibu Stacy, "America's favorite eight-and-a-half incher." The film ends with Stacy again claiming "Don't ask me. I'm just a girl [tee hee, tee hee]" and a male voice-over that concludes "She *sure* is." At this point, the show takes on a number of political concerns, though most prominently the sexist attitudes that persist in the workplace and women's own responsibility in perpetuating sexism in the culture. When the woman giving the tour asks if there are any questions, Lisa says "Yes, I have one. Is the remarkably sexist drivel spouted by Malibu Stacy intentional, or just a horrible mistake?" Without missing a beat, the woman says "Believe me, we're very mindful of such concerns around here," after which a male employee opens a door behind her and calls out "Hey, Jiggles. Grab a pad and back that gorgeous butt in here." Good naturedly, "Jiggles" giggles, enters the room, and closes the door behind her with her rear end. Marge and Lisa simply grimace "Mmmmmmm."

Having witnessed sexism in action, Lisa is more determined than ever to do something, so she seeks out the creator of Malibu Stacy, Stacy Lovell, and proposes that they make an alternative talking doll. At first, Ms. Lovell is skeptical, but after hearing what the Malibu Stacy doll is saying to an entire generation of little girls (e.g., "Thinking too much gives you wrinkles"), she decides to help Lisa design a

new doll. In describing her template for the doll, Lisa offers viewers a clear example of her influences and role models:

She'll have the wisdom of Gertrude Stein and the wit of Cathy Guisewite; the tenacity of Nina Totenberg and the common sense of Elizabeth Cady Stanton; and to top it off, the down-to-earth good looks of Eleanor Roosevelt!

In a later scene, in which Lisa is recording statements for her talking doll, we get a telling glimpse of Lisa's political beliefs. She first records the line "When I get married, I'm keeping my own name" but then pauses to reconsider and says "Maybe that should be 'If I *choose* to get married'." Ultimately, the phrase that is settled upon—and repeated twice in the show for emphasis—is "Trust in yourself and you can achieve anything!" an apt summation of Lisa's own feminist philosophy. In tribute to her inspiration, they name the doll Lisa Lionheart.

Word of the development of Lisa Lionheart soon reaches the ears of executives at Petrochem Chemical Corporation, the makers of Malibu Stacy, and the head of the marketing division, rightly seeing the new doll as a threat, tells his staff that they need to "sink this Lisa Lionheart fast." To do this, the executive says, they have to "reinvent Malibu Stacy for the 90s." Meanwhile, erstwhile reporter Kent Brockman is persuaded by his young daughter to do a news report on the new "talking dolly" ("Well . . . you were right about the Berlin Wall," he concedes). Brockman's report, as might be expected, fuels even greater interest in Lisa Lionheart, and at the end of the episode we are returned to where we began: outside the Springfield Mall waiting for the doors of The Valley of the Dolls to open. Again, there is a crowd of eager young consumers waiting to get their hands on the newest commodity; however, when the doors open and they are making a mad dash to the Lisa Lionheart display, an employee rolls out a pallet of Malibu Stacy dolls—"Complete with New Hat"—and blocks their path. They pause momentarily, confused, and then one excited child says "Look, they've changed Malibu Stacy." Another exclaims "She's better than ever!" Lisa, aware of the ruse, inserts herself between the crowd and the dolls and tries to explain. "Wait," she says. "She's still the same Malibu Stacy. The only difference is her stupid, cheap hat. She still embodies all of the awful stereotypes she did before." Again there is a pause, and then Waylon Smithers, "owner of the world's largest Malibu Stacy

collection,” shouts “But she’s got a new hat!” and that’s all it takes for the crowd to surge forward, claim their Malibu Stacy dolls, and ignore Lisa Lionheart. Lisa sighs and sadly concludes, “I guess you just can’t beat big business. There’s no room for the little guy.” But just as soon as the words are out of her mouth she hears her own voice saying “Trust in yourself and you can achieve anything!” and she turns to see one little girl standing before the Lisa Lionheart display, smiling at the doll. Proudly, Lisa then says “You know, if we get through to just that one little girl, it’ll all be worth it.” Not content to let liberal pieties go uncontested, the writers have Lovell quietly say “Yes, particularly if that little girl happens to pay \$46,000 for that doll.” “What?” Lisa asks. “Oh, nothing,” Lovell replies. “Kudos to you, Lisa. Kudos.”

Conclusion

How are we to read such an ending? On the one hand, this episode is offering its viewers an image of youthful idealism, can-do individualism, and grass-roots activism in the service of contesting prevailing ideologies and providing alternative ones, an image in accord with the progressive politics of *The Simpsons*. On the other hand, in acknowledging capitalism and the reality of a profit-oriented consumer marketplace, the episode is also offering a rather pessimistic view of the ability of individuals (or even small coalitions of individuals) to truly effect social change. In this regard, the politics of the episode is marked by an ambiguity that seems to me in perfect keeping with the times in which it appeared. The 1990s itself was an era of great ambiguity, epitomized perhaps in the year-long public debate over whether or not we should care about the private sexual activities of the President of the United States. More to the point here, the creators of *The Simpsons* seem to have mixed feelings regarding feminism and female identity in the contemporary age. Ironically enough, considering the largely egalitarian climate in which *The Simpsons* is both set and produced, the show seems to be, in the words of Lori Landay, “at a crossroads of reactionary and liberated definitions of femininity” (192). Some of this can assuredly be attributed to the fact that *The Simpsons* is, after all, a mass media product, produced for and marketed to the largest demographic possible, and that, as such, it needs to cater to prevailing

ideologies more often than not. However, considering how often the show functions to contest prevailing ideologies of all sorts, this seems an interpretive sleight of hand.

Another way of understanding the ambiguities inherent in *The Simpsons* is to point out the predominance of men in the creation of the show. By and large, *The Simpsons* is a television show dominated by men: the show is produced by Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, and Sam Simon, and it is overseen by a host of male writers, directors, and animators. According to information in *The Simpsons Archive*, only five women were involved in writing episodes of *The Simpsons* from its premiere in 1989 through the tenth season in 1998, and only two episodes written by women appeared before 1995: "Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire" (#7G08) and "One Fish, Two Fish, Blowfish, Blue Fish" (#7F11).⁸ The largest number of episodes attributed to a single female writer is only five; these are all the work of Jennifer Crittenden, whose very first effort, "And Maggie Makes Three" (#2F10), did not appear until January of 1995. Although these facts might help in part to explain the subtle ambivalence about feminism on *The Simpsons*, essentialist notions of authorship are ultimately quite limiting, and it is naive to say the ambiguities noted above are the sole result of male creativity. Curiously, of late *The Simpsons* has had more contributions by women in episodes that focus strongly on the female characters and interrogate the gender politics of their (and our) society. Carolyn Omine, for example, has recently penned two: "Little Big Mom" (#BABF04), in which Lisa temporarily takes over as the mother of the household when Marge is injured in a ski accident, and "The Strong Arms of the Ma" (#EABF04), in which Marge begins lifting weights and abusing steroids. Additionally, Dana Gould, whose work first appeared only in Season Thirteen, has also written an intriguing examination of gender issues in the episode entitled "The President Wore Pearls" (#EABF20). However, despite such recent developments, ambiguities abound on *The Simpsons*, and the ambivalence about women's power and position is still strongly evident in many recent episodes. With this in mind, it is important to point out once again that the episodes discussed above were all produced in the early seasons of *The Simpsons* and were all written by men: "Homer's Night Out" was written by John Vitti; "Life on the Fast Lane" by John Swartzwelder; both "Homer Alone" and "Selma's Choice" by David M. Stern; "The Springfield Connection" by John Collier; and "Lisa vs.

Malibu Stacy” by Bill Oakley and Josh Weinstein. The fact remains that *The Simpsons* is primarily produced, written, directed, and even animated by a stable of men. This point is offered not as a critique of the possible limitations these individuals might have by virtue of their sex, but instead as a reminder of the ability of the show’s writers—both male and female—to transcend essentialist notions of authorship and to produce a mainstream television show that contains an overt feminist sensibility.

Admittedly, progressive representations of women in American mass media are still quite rare. Indeed, in recent years there appears to have been yet another “backlash” against the image of strong and independent women, brought on in part by the return to a conservative political agenda at the start of the new millennium. However, it is potentially detrimental to cast an examination of media forms into such a dichotomized schema. Living in a largely dichotomized world, we are quick to label representations of women in the mass media as either “positive” or “negative” or, in more academic terms, “empowered” or “disempowered.” But things are rarely so simple, as *The Simpsons* admirably demonstrates. In her provocative examination of women in the mass media, *Madcaps, Screwballs & Con Women*, Lori Landay argues that representations of female “weakness” and “power” are not really contradictory but are instead “two streams of feeling which commingle and feed each other” (192). In other words, traditional and progressive ideologies of “femininity” and “womanhood” exist simultaneously, in both the mass media and the culture itself, and at this particular moment in American history they remain in conflict. As noted above, many women’s lives today are marked by such conflict, and this is a reality that is reflected—and reflected upon—in the text of *The Simpsons*. As Barry Hodge succinctly claims, “*The Simpsons* doesn’t constitute an “out-and-out” feminist text, but one of a feminine culture asserting its values within and against patriarchy.” This seems to be precisely the understanding of the show that the editors of *Ms.* magazine were articulating with their claim that Lisa Simpson “wages a one-girl revolution against cartoonland patriarchy” (48). What *The Simpsons* offers viewers regarding female identity is a complex combination of “strength” and “weakness”; in other words, of activism and submission, of protest against and acquiescence to male dominance and patriarchal structures. It is through this lens, then, that we can perhaps best understand the ending of an episode like “Lisa vs. Malibu

Stacy”—and of *The Simpsons*' representations of female identity and a feminist sensibility.

NOTES

1. “The Simpsons Christmas Special”—officially known as “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” (#7G08)—ranked thirtieth for its timeslot the night it premiered and earned Fox a twenty-two percent share and a 14.5 rating (“Nielsen,” December 20, 1989); “Bart the Genius” (#7G02) ranked forty-eighth for its timeslot and earned Fox a nineteen percent share and a 12.7 rating (“Nielsen,” January 17, 1990).
2. Although *The Simpsons* often ranked within the top ten for weekly or monthly Nielsen totals, the show has not ranked high overall: at the end of the 1989–90 season, its first full season on the air, *The Simpsons* ranked only thirtieth (“Final Season Ratings”); curiously, it has never been among the top twenty-five in the Nielsen seasonal totals (Brooks and Marsh 1271–73). Although no longer the ratings juggernaut it once was, new episodes of *The Simpsons* still rank in the Nielsen top fifty among prime-time television shows, and often still in the top twenty among television shows in syndication (Nielsen Media Research).
3. As Russell Shorto points out, *The Simpsons* has also become a monumental merchandising entity. He states, “When you add merchandising (which reportedly tops \$1 billion to date), foreign distribution (it is seen by an estimated 60 million people worldwide), product endorsements (Butterfinger and Burger King head the list), CDs, books, video games and the multimillion-dollar market in cels sold through fine-art galleries (each episode requires about 25,000 hand-painted acetate cels that, after filming, are sold to collectors for upwards of \$1,000 apiece), it’s clear that the show is a flourishing franchise.”
4. I have discussed the popularity and appeal of *The Simpsons* at length in a previous essay. For a fuller explanation of these issues, see Henry, “The Triumph of Popular Culture.”
5. A theoretical confusion arises in part from the abundance of terms in use today, such as feminism, anti-feminism, second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, neo-feminism, and postfeminism. For a full and complete examination of the complexity of the terms surrounding female identity and feminism, see Amanda Lotz’ essay “Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes.” I do not wish to engage in the debates over terminology, and for the sake of simplicity will employ the terms “feminism” and “feminist” throughout the essay, modifying them where appropriate to illustrate a difference in perspective.
6. Stein, 31. It is important to note that the creators of *The Simpsons* managed to speak back to the president’s criticism. The next new episode of *The Simpsons* began with a brief segment showing the Simpson family watching live footage of George Bush’s speech. What followed was a sharp critique of the Bush administration and the legacy of Reagan-era economic policies; Bart simply turned to the camera and said: “Hey, we’re just like the Waltons; we’re praying for an end to the depression too.”
7. I am indebted to my colleague Rachel Jane Barber for pointing this out to me. I am also grateful for her many contributions to the project overall: her patience through long nights of viewing episodes of *The Simpsons*; her insights into its various meanings, garnered through many lengthy discussions about the show; her constructive criticism throughout the drafting process; and her careful editing of the text.
8. Episode #7G08, written by Mimi Pond, aired on December 17th, 1989; Episode #7F11, written by Nell Scovell, aired on January 24, 1991 (“Episodes by Writer”). Surprisingly, “Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire” was not written by Matt Groening. Mimi Pond, who

made a name for herself writing for the sitcom *Designing Women*, also works as a cartoonist. Ironically, Pond has never worked again on *The Simpsons* (Williams).

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