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'Might as Well be Dead': Domesticity, Irony and Feminist Politics in Contemporary Animation Comedy

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which contemporary animation comedy series such as *The Simpsons* (1989–present) and *King of the Hill* (1991–2010) employ the figure of the housewife to actuate a feminist critique of domesticity. It aims to answer the following questions: how can we situate and understand the enduring presence of such a traditional role in contemporary animation comedy series which are otherwise liberal and progressive in their political orientation? Can feminist politics and domesticity occupy the same space? And if so, what occurs in this genre when the ostensibly antagonistic subject positions of 'feminist' and 'housewife' are integrated?

Key words: postfeminism, housewife, domesticity, *The Simpsons*, animation, comedy

Since the publication of Betty Friedan's foundational 1963 polemic *The Feminine Mystique* [1963] (2010), the contention that domesticity is anathema to the aims of feminism has dominated scholarship. For Friedan, American suburban women in the 1950s were suffering from 'the problem with no name' (2010, 66), and the symptoms of this affliction included feelings of failure, of nothingness, of a lack of completion. For critics such as Friedan, women's location within the domestic sphere had played a central role in reproducing gender inequalities, and the figure most closely associated with domesticity – the 'housewife' or 'homemaker' – often operates 'as the feminist's "other"' (Gillis and Hollows 2004, 1). This critique of domesticity is not exclusive to second-wave feminist activism, for it experienced a revival in the early 1990s as part of the 'backlash' thesis that proliferated feminist scholarship during this period. Susan Faludi (1991), for example, argued persuasively that the emphasis on 'family values' in

the United Statues during the presidency of Ronald Reagan was central to a pervasive cultural trend which celebrated the homemaker as an antidote to the alleged problems created by both feminism and by the increasing lifestyle expectations of modern, liberated women. Just as Faludi positioned the career woman and the pursuit of economic autonomy as an antidote to such 'backlash' discourses, contemporary scholars continue to position the home as 'the root cause of women's oppression' (Hollows 2008, 54). Stephanie Genz observes that, more recently, 'prisoners' and 'robots' are merely some of the terms which have been 'branded on the housewife' by writers and filmmakers to the extent that the home has now become 'an almost "guilty" pleasure for some women' (2009, 51). Within the contemporary moment, domesticity, it appears, must be left behind if women are to become emancipated subjects (Giles 2004).

In the context of contemporary comedy on television, it is not difficult to identify women's resistance to domesticity, especially in productions that focus primarily on women's experience. One only needs to recall the highly popular and subversive series *Roseanne* (1988–97) to find evidence of what Kathleen Rowe Karlyn terms the 'disruptive potential' of an 'unruly' domestic subject position (1995, 14), while a rejection of domesticity has more recently occurred on television in a number of other ways. Indeed, while the television sitcom originated in the 1950s by focusing largely on the nuclear family (Spigel 1992), contemporary sitcoms reflect the surge in single-person households in Anglo-American contexts as a consequence of the changing status of women in the late twentieth century. Changes such as women's entrance into employment, their delayed marriage and the rising rate of divorce are all reflected in television comedy in both the United States and the United Kingdom, and popular series such as *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002), *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992–2012) and *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994–2007), to name but a few, chart the trials and tribulations of a female demographic in transition, moving away from the domestic sphere in pursuit of career advancement, heterosexual romantic love and/or recreational sex.

Even so, popular television's engagement with the domestic space has not entirely dissipated, nor has the presence of housewives. In the genre of animation comedy in particular, *The Simpsons* (1989–present), *King of the Hill* (1997–2010), *Family Guy* (1999–present) and *American Dad* (2005–present) all feature central female characters who are housewives and mothers. As space does not allow for an analysis of all of these animation series, this article will focus on two characters – Marge Simpson (*The Simpsons*) and Peggy Hill (*King of the Hill*) – with the aim of exploring how animation comedy positions the housewife within postfeminism. If, as Stephanie Genz asserts, the 'postfeminist housewife is no longer easily categorized as an emblem of female oppression' (2009, 50), resignified as a figure who actively chooses domesticity, then how can we understand the enduring presence of such a traditional role in contemporary animation comedy series which are otherwise liberal and progressive in their political orientation? Can feminist politics and domesticity occupy the same space, and if so, what occurs

in this genre when the ostensibly 'mutually exclusive and antagonistic' (Gillis and Hollows 2009, 7) subject positions of 'feminist' and 'housewife' are integrated? While acknowledging that contemporary animation comedy often employs the figure of the housewife to actuate a feminist critique of not only domesticity but also other women's issues, this article will argue that irony is employed as a strategy of containment that functions to undermine the texts' feminist politics, thus confirming their position within postfeminist discourse. It will also demonstrate the ways in which ironic humour functions to depoliticise the social contexts in which it operates. Prior to doing so, it is first crucial to explain why comedy as a genre constitutes an especially valuable location for exploring the movement between feminist affirmation and postfeminist disavowal in popular culture.

The Feminist Ethics of Comedy

Any critical analysis of comedy, even if only focused on aesthetics and formal dynamics, cannot be separated from the moral, ethical and political considerations associated with the 'real world' (Lockyer and Pickering 2009, 15). Comedy is, like all forms of popular culture, central to more discursive social, economic and political processes, within which the 'popular' provides space for consumers of texts to negotiate their meaning in order to understand them within their own particular social or cultural framework (Andrews 1998, 50). Irrespective of the aims and intentions of comedy performance – whether to teach, entertain, convince, affect, provoke, soothe or critique – comedy is a social action embedded in a 'snarl of agencies, vectors of influence operating under the skin of a society at any historical moment' (Weitz 2009, 171). The television situation comedy, 'the most popular American art form' (Hamamoto 1989, 10), has in particular been understood as a genre which exposes the mores, images, ideals, prejudices and ideologies shared by the majority of the American public. As Henry Jenkins asserts, the forms of humour that sitcoms convey often cluster around points of friction or rupture within the social structure, around places where 'a dominant social discourse is already starting to give way to an emergent counter-discourse' (1992, 251). Yet, while such statements may appear to confirm the imbrication of comedy and political dissent, the nexus between women, humour and feminist politics is more problematic.

Certainly, within many comedic genres both women as individuals and feminism as a political movement have been subject to ridicule and denigration, not least because the objectifying of women and the caricaturing of feminist politics by comedy is connected to women's subordinate position within the wider culture. This representation of women and feminism is perhaps not surprising given the threat that both may present to the male order, yet it is also important to bear in mind that the anarchic nature of comedy resides in conflict with the highly moral imperatives of feminist activism. After all, feminist movements have been most fundamentally concerned with human rights and the aim to

correct society's gender imbalances, while comedy performance consistently resists notions of political correctness and moral behaviour. It is constitutionally transgressive, a 'cipher for anti-social desires that cannot be expressed elsewhere and as such often exults in the breaking of taboos and canonical attitudes regarding the body, sexuality and social behaviour' (Porter 1998, 66). Moreover, comedy has been historically, and primarily still is, male-dominated, thus ensuring both women and feminism's further marginalisation. Even though women have always used laughter as a means of bonding with each other, as both a conscious response to shared oppression and merely for pleasure, female-oriented humour has often been regarded as too narrow to register within a male definition of comedy.

Comedy produced since the late-twentieth century has, however, increasingly documented the alliance between humour and women's issues. Series such as *Roseanne* (1988–97) in the United States and *2point4 Children* (1991–99) in the United Kingdom broke with convention by demystifying the mythology of motherhood as a consistently rewarding experience, while *Sex and the City* marked women's single status as a problem which, through humour, became a source of pleasure for audiences (Chambers 2009). More recently, series such as *Ugly Betty* (2006–10) and *Girls* (2010–present) continue this trend by investigating the uncertainties of heterosexual urban women's increasing sexual and economic independence. Beyond the television format, stand-up comediennes often adopt a tone of self-deprecation with an acute awareness of their own physical inadequacy, measuring themselves – and invariably failing to make the grade – against the image of the ideal woman. Women's perception of their bodies and the anxieties this generates is central to much female comedy produced by women and aimed at female audiences. This is significant, for as Laraine Porter observes, comedy is 'the one arena in contemporary culture where physical shortcomings can be translated into cultural capital' (1998, 81), and represents a much needed forum for the discussion of women's issues within popular culture.

While housewives have hardly been over-represented in Anglo-American television in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, contemporary animation comedy has documented a sustained commitment to politicising this subject position, and the genre itself offers a potentially subversive location to explore the trials of domesticity. The traditional domestic sitcom is 'largely limited to projecting a tame, normative, and uncontroversial version of family life' (Palmer-Mehta 2006, 183), yet animation 'seems to have given television comedy the appropriate mode in which a subversive view of [the] family could be presented' (Tueth 2003, 140). George H. W. Bush's now notorious declaration that the modern family should be 'a lot more like *The Waltons* and a lot less like *The Simpsons*' testifies to the extent to which animation has been understood in counterpoint to hegemonic constructions of the nuclear family. Accordingly, the type of subversion afforded by the form is more often than not framed in terms of liberal political orientation, with animation frequently described as a 'more

imaginative and less conservative' (Wells 1998, 6) way to 'push the envelope' (Sandler 2003, 90). The animation form provides a safe venue for the exploration of taboo content such as familial dysfunction and social dissent, not least because the aesthetic distance of the cartoon allows mainstream viewers to remove themselves from fully engaging with challenging issues (Tueth 2003). As such, it constitutes an appropriate mode within which a subversive view of domesticity may be presented in the confines of network, commercial and audience demands. Given that animation continues to be more radical than many other television genres, it is perhaps not surprising that in series such as *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* the subject position of the housewife is transgressive and more politically charged than it initially appears. By analyzing the construction of two female characters who occupy this role, Marge Simpson and Peggy Hill, this article argues that housewives in contemporary animation embody a contemporary moment in which feminist politics are asserted, yet ultimately contained and disavowed.

Domestic Critiques and Feminist Politics

The Simpsons and *King of the Hill*

The selection of *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* as the objects of analysis in this article needs to be explained. *The Simpsons* was chosen primarily for its popularity and cultural visibility; not only is it the longest-running prime-time animated series on US television, but also the longest-running situation comedy ever aired. Moreover, in its depiction of a working-class nuclear family it is an apposite location for exploring gendered identities. In the series, conventional gender roles are clearly demarcated, with Bart Simpson (Nancy Cartwright) performing the role of the disobedient and unruly son while his sister, Lisa (Yeardley Smith), is an essentially antithetical construction: feminine, studious, well-behaved, polite and good-natured. The children's father, Homer (Dan Castellaneta), is similarly highly gendered, and not solely in terms of his role as the family breadwinner; many episodes have focused on masculine anxieties concerning his performance as a husband and father. Most importantly, it is his wife Marge (Julie Kavner) who is positioned in the most traditional role, as the perfect mother and moral arbiter who is self-sacrificing, nurturing and fully committed to both child-rearing and marriage. In many ways, despite the fact that American society and women's position within it has evolved so rapidly in late modernity, Marge remains ostensibly locked into the position of the 1950s housewife critiqued so vitriolically by Betty Friedan. Industrial transformation, the diversification of the employment sector, a declining birthrate and the mechanisation of housework have all directly and indirectly contributed to women's entry into employment in the late twentieth century, and yet Marge remains a character dislocated from these cultural shifts and rooted in the domestic space.

This is especially curious since an early episode of *The Simpsons* (1991) constructs her as a politically active feminist while studying at college. In the second season episode 'The Way We Was' (2: 12) – which focuses on the beginning of Marge and Homer's romantic relationship – the audience meets the characters as teenagers in 1974. The year marks a highly charged historical and political moment within the peak of second-wave feminism and the final years of the Vietnam War (1956–75). The audience witnesses Marge reading a copy of *Ms.* magazine, followed by a scene in which she rallies against domesticity, addressing a large female crowd through a megaphone with the following words: 'I found out that to hire a professional to do all the jobs of a housewife costs $48,000 a year'. The episode also showcases Marge burning bras in order to free women from 'male imposed shackles', and even beyond these overtly political sentiments she is represented as ambitious, intelligent and diligent in her studies. Given the evidence of this early episode, it remains intriguing that Marge essentially acquiesces to the role of the housewife that she initially so clearly resists, forcing the critic to examine the political implications of her permanent location – the domestic space – in later episodes. This is especially important since other animated series such as *King of the Hill* have sought to complicate the position of the housewife by imbuing characters with a more enduring feminist consciousness. In this particular series, Peggy Hill (Kathy Najimy) embodies the dual role of both housewife and substitute Maths teacher. As Michael V. Tueth has previously noted, she possesses 'a mind of her own, clearly influenced by the trickle-down feminism that had made its way into the Texas suburbs' (2003, 140), despite the fact that the series is in all other ways as conventionally gendered as *The Simpsons*. Indeed, Peggy's husband Hank (Mike Judge) is, like Homer Simpson, conservative, middle-aged and working-class, a seller of propane gas in suburban Arlen, Texas, who spends most of his time indulging in stereotypically masculine pleasures: drinking beer, mowing his lawn and hanging out with equally reticent and emotionally unavailable male friends. Due to similarities in their construction of gender, this article presents a comparison of the subject position of the housewife in *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*, both of which offer direct critiques of domesticity in ways that clearly underscore feminist and liberal ethics.

In an episode of *The Simpsons* (1990b) titled 'The Crepes of Wrath' (1: 11), Principal Skinner (Harry Shearer) suggests that Bart takes part in a foreign exchange scheme. Bart agrees and finds himself in the care of two French criminals who own a vineyard in the Dordogne, while Adil Hoxha, an Albanian student, is exchanged to the Simpson family. The episode emphasises perceptions of cultural difference between the United States and France, for Bart is exploited as unpaid migrant labour in France while his sister Lisa, back at home in Springfield, proclaims America to be a land of freedom which embraces foreigners like Adil. Yet the oppositional, mythological positing in the US cultural imaginary of the nation as a land of equal opportunity for all is challenged by the visiting Albanian, who experiences the United States as a land of capitalist

oppression. This oppression is clearly gendered, for when Marge offers to clear the plates at the end of a family dinner, Adil replies 'No, Mrs Simpson, you have been oppressed enough today', centralising her unpaid domestic labour through humour. The episode thus corroborates feminist claims that the home is the locale of women's labour rather than leisure, a site of conflict rather than a sanctuary, and that the organisation of domestic life is frequently predicated upon – and works to reproduce – gender inequality. The critique endures, and occasional and incidental allusions to Marge's oppression as a housewife are common throughout the history of *The Simpsons*, occurring as one-liners or asides at some point in almost every series.

Yet, an understanding of the domestic space as a site of oppression is also contested in *The Simpsons*, and the home is resignified in ways that permit Marge a certain degree of agency. In 'Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish' (2: 4), Bart catches a three-eyed, chemically mutated fish in a river close to the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant. After the plant is inspected, and in order to prevent its permanent closure, the plant's owner Mr Burns (Harry Shearer) decides to run for governor. As part of his campaign, Burns attempts to dispel his reputation as a misanthropic billionaire – presenting himself as a salt of the earth, man of the people – by staging a televised dinner at the home of his employee, Homer Simpson. The occasion of the televised family dinner provides an opportunity for Marge to resist the inscription of the home as a space of oppression. At an earlier moment in the episode, both Marge and Lisa are informed that they must, during the meal, ask Mr Burns only innocuous, pre-scripted questions rather than conceive of their own. Mr Burns requires the Simpsons to conduct themselves in homage to the image of the ideal, post-war American family, within which females are restricted to domesticity and denied the political agency of expressing their opinions on current affairs. Prior to the dinner, Marge articulates her resistance to the limits imposed on her expression, and Homer tries and inevitably fails to comfort her by stating, 'You express yourself in the home you keep and food you serve'. While Homer is unintentionally advocating a reactionary belief about women's identity tied to the private space, away from public politics – the latter, by implication, the preserve of men – Marge subverts this within the home by cooking and presenting Blinky, the three-eyed fish, on a platter at the centre of the dinner table. After declaring that genetic mutations are in fact natural, and that such 'mishaps of nature' actually make fish even more delicious, Mr Burns is obligated to consume the monster that his plant has unwittingly created. Unable to swallow the fish, Burns is ridiculed on live television and consequently loses the election; a direct result of Marge's intervention. In this episode, then, the reinterpretation of the housewife as a flexible political subject that affords innovation and agency challenges the objectification and pathologisation of women's domestic personas that has long been a feature of popular culture and feminist criticism (Hollows 2008). By doing so, the episode upholds Stephanie Genz's contention that domesticity has become a fiercely debated concept in academia

and beyond, proving that the meaning of 'home' is 'far from being domesticated' and remains 'unresolved despite sustained attempts (from feminist, political and media quarters alike) to settle it' (2009, 49).

This particular episode of *The Simpsons* illustrates the ways in which the domestic space can be modified as a location of empowerment. However, I would like to now move the focus of this article towards the manner in which animation comedy employs the figure of the housewife in order to interrogate women's position in society beyond domesticity. In *King of the Hill* (1997a), Peggy Hill only partially reifies the traditional role of the housewife, for she inhabits the multiple roles of wife, mother and part-time substitute teacher and – in a conservative, suburban context – is frequently forced to examine the often competing ideologies of her subject position. In the episode 'Square Peg' (1: 2) – the title itself drawing on the idiomatic expression 'square peg in a round hole' to symbolise Peggy's inability to reconcile her many roles – her son Bobby (Pamela Adlon) brings home a permission slip for a sex education class. Opposed to the way that sex education is conducted in schools, Peggy's husband Hank encourages his wife to educate the boy at home. Yet, when Peggy attempts to talk to her son about sexuality, she almost faints from shame. The conservative suburb of Arlen is similarly uncomfortable with the topic, outraged that it even exists on the school curriculum. This anger prompts Hank's ultra-right wing friend Dale (Johnny Hardwick) to threaten the school's current sex-ed teacher, forcing her to resign. As 'Substitute Teacher of the Year', Peggy is invited by the school's principal to teach the topic, a challenge she accepts.

From a feminist perspective the episode is interesting in a number of ways. At various points the audience witnesses Peggy recollecting her own experiences as a child, and a noteworthy scene shows her reading a sex education picture book titled *The Loveliness of Women*. The book is a gift from her mother, and contains nothing other than photographs of flowers – clearly intended to symbolise burgeoning female sexuality. The humour in this scene provides a retrospective critique of not only the forms of education and knowledge deemed appropriate for young women in 1950s America, but also the contemporaneous patriarchal culture that prescribed girls' sexuality as a taboo subject. Moreover, Peggy acknowledges that her discomfort concerning sexuality as an adult is a consequence of not only the residue of 1950s cultural ideology, but also due to the 'crippling sense of shame' passed on by her mother, an admission that speaks to feminist analysis of girls' socialisation which focuses on the ways in which parents act as ciphers of patriarchal values and moral custodians of their daughters' sexuality (Jackson and Scott 2010). Nancy Friday argues that this 'mental clitoridectomy' is 'done in the name of mother love and with the full accord of society' (1991, 44), and the remainder of the episode confronts how the parental and curricular evasions of women's bodies, feelings and sexual politics serve to reinforce traditional gender roles. This message is conveyed through the relationship between Hank and Bobby, with the latter informing his father: 'I just want you to know that you don't have to worry about me

because I am never going to have sex'. Typical of many fathers – who wish for their progeny to grow into virile embodiments of their youthful, former selves – Hank is appalled, and informs his son that a young man should never aspire to chastity. He admits, however, that if Bobby were born female then a commitment to chastity would be admirable. After Bobby directly asks his father, 'Why is it not OK for girls [to have sex], but it's OK for boys?', Hank is forced to concede that he is guilty of perpetuating a sexist double standard, an outcome of his own limited exposure to any form of positive sex education curriculum.

Both of the episodes discussed so far present positive forms of feminist politics in different ways. *The Simpsons*' 'Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish' demonstrates a resignification of the domestic space, while *King of the Hill*'s 'Square Peg' conveys both a critique of the historical regulation of female sexuality and a clear feminist message about contemporary double standards pertaining to men and women's sexuality. Yet, it is important to also recognise that, as Matthew A. Henry asserts, contemporary animation comedy is far from pro-feminist and instead offers 'a complex blend of progressive and traditional attitudes' (2012, 81) towards female identity. This complexity is in part connected to the desire to elicit laughter from the audience, for while many episodes of these popular animations continue to express feminist sensibilities, the central source of humour often derives from ironic modes of address, generating a textual and political ambivalence that undercuts any ostensible resistance to patriarchy. In the next section of this article, then, I will focus on two examples from *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* which demonstrate how various forms of feminist sensibilities are ultimately undermined or indeed negated by postfeminist irony and the formal aesthetics of humour.

Postfeminist Irony and the Negation of Feminist Politics

In its simplest definition, irony operates 'in the gap between the said and the unsaid' (Weitz 2009, 171) as a mode of discourse that challenges notions of absolute truth or authority. It functions within the comedy format to signify something other than it directly expresses; sometimes the opposite, even, of what is explicitly or denotatively conveyed. The contradiction created by this disjunction is, of course, at the centre of the formal aesthetics of humour, and postfeminist discourse – which is itself inherently contradictory and divisive – has proven to be fertile territory for the articulation of ironic modes of address. Yvonne Tasker has astutely observed that postfeminist discourse is 'cognizant of sexism and knowing with respect to sexual innuendo' (2007, 68), and so it is hardly surprising that postfeminist media culture is 'intensely ironic in tone' (*Ibid.*). The feminist implications of this mode of humour are significant, for recourse to irony often indicates moments of acute cultural uncertainty or difficulty pertaining to shifts in the construction of gender, commensurate with the movement in postfeminism between an affirmation and a disavowal of feminist politics (Gill 2007). Moreover, irony is a form of 'doubleness', an embodiment

of layers of contested meaning, and Angela McRobbie has noted that postfeminism, too, is characterised by a pervasive 'double entanglement': the existence of 'neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality, and family life' alongside 'processes of liberalization in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual, and kinship relations' (2007, 33). In contemporary animation comedy this point of friction – between liberal, feminist politics and neoconservative values – is arbitrated through the mode of irony.

Indeed, an example of this in action can be seen in *The Simpsons* (1992)' 'Separate Vocations' (3: 18). In the episode, Lisa takes a career aptitude test and discovers that she is destined to follow in her mother's footsteps as a homemaker, thus destroying her dreams of becoming a professional saxophonist. From the first series of *The Simpsons*, Lisa has been constructed as a strident and ambitious young feminist, and is understandably dismayed by the outcome of the test. She states that she 'might as well be dead', echoing Germaine Greer's highly pessimistic positing of the housewife. While the previously discussed episode of 'Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish' showcased Marge's reclamation of the domestic space, her attempts to console her daughter in this particular episode emphatically fail. This failure is enacted through the mode of irony, for when Marge urges Lisa to accept her conviction that 'homemaking can be creative', she proceeds to showcase her creativity by turning the bacon and egg she has just cooked for Homer into a smiley face. This moment is important, not only because the banality of Marge's expression of creativity serves as an ironic critique of domesticity, but also because the scene raises an important question: if the episode is indeed critiquing the limits imposed by domesticity on personal expression, then how do we account for the fact that throughout the history of *The Simpsons* Marge is rarely shown to be capable of anything other than domestic labour, despite any further aspirations she may have? The answer to this question is implied in an earlier scene in the same episode, which offers an exploratory flashback to Marge's childhood in which her younger self expresses to her sisters, Patty and Selma (both Julie Kavner), a desire to become an astronaut. In their dismissive response – 'Women cannot be astronauts because they distract the men astronauts' – the audience is encouraged to laugh at the absurdity of the sisters' explanation of gender inequality and, more seriously, to recognise that the transmission of negative messages about women's career aspirations may dramatically affect their ability to actualise these aspirations in the future. At the same time, however, the episode also upholds more conservative values by refusing to afford Marge any degree of agency in her current position as a housewife, negating the more empowering conceptualisation of domesticity offered in the earlier episode discussed in this article. The episode demonstrates the postfeminist 'doubleness' of irony; it may be used to critique domesticity, yet it can also work to deny agency.

In *King of the Hill*'s (1997b) 'Shins of the Father' (1: 8), irony is more explicitly deployed to undercut the feminist politics of the narrative. In this episode, Hank's father Cotton (Toby Huss) – a stereotypically sexist Texan bigot – imposes

himself in the Hill household by gatecrashing Bobby's birthday party. Peggy attempts to tolerate his company for the sake of family harmony, however she soon loses patience when her son begins to emulate his grandfather's chauvinistic behaviour of spanking women on the buttocks. Peggy suggests to Hank that Cotton should leave the family home, to which her husband replies: 'Are you turning into some kind of feminist?' While Peggy responds that she does not self-identify as a feminist, she breaks down at a later point in the episode and makes the following statement:

> I work hard, I sweat hard and I love hard and I got to smell good and look pretty when I am doing it. I comb my hair, I reapply lipstick 30 times a day, I do your dishes, I wash your clothes and I clean your house, not because I have to, Hank, but because of a mutual unspoken agreement which I have never brought up because I am too much of a lady.

Though this speech constitutes an admission from Peggy that she acquiesces to her role as a feminine subordinate of patriarchy – a role she adheres to for the sake of the family – it nevertheless affects a feminist critique of domesticity, raising the issue of servitude to the narrative surface. Her statement has a dramatic impact on her husband, who agrees to ask his father to leave the family home and, in the process, declares his marriage 'a partnership of equals'. As in the earlier discussed episode 'Square Peg' – where Hank is forced to admit to perpetuating a sexist double standard and undergoes a feminist makeover – in 'Shins of the Father' Hank too revises his attitudes to women and admits the error of his ways by offering this moral lesson to his son in the final spoken line of the episode: 'Women are not put on earth to serve you and me'. However, unlike in 'Square Peg', where Hank's change of attitude appears to be genuine and is not expressed ironically, in this particular scene situational irony complicates the feminist ethics of his statement. After speaking these words in the car to Bobby, the camera withdraws to reveal that the father and son are parked outside a fast food restaurant, populated by young female waitresses in short skirts who serve an exclusively male clientele. The scene is highly significant. Angela McRobbie has asserted that postfeminism 'takes feminism into account' (2009, 28) while Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon suggest that the term implies that the project of feminism has ended because 'it has failed and is no longer valid' (2009, 13). Likewise, while this episode takes feminism into account by critiquing Cotton's sexism, its closing scene underscores the continued presence of women's subordination in the lowly-paid service industry, thus implying the failure of the feminist project. Even though drawing attention to the subordinate and sexualised position of women could be interpreted as a form of positive, feminist critique in its own right, feminist ethics are coopted by postfeminism through the mode of irony. The humour generated by the ironic disjunction between the 'said' – Hank's assertion of a pro-feminist message – and the 'unsaid' – women's subordinate position in society – is postfeminist,

for it elicits laughter in the audience which consequently negates any serious critique of patriarchy.

With reference to *The Simpsons*, Matthew A. Henry has asserted that ambiguity surrounding feminist politics is hardly surprising since 'the 1990s itself was an era of great ambiguity about women's lives and widespread confusion over gender norms' (2012, 81). Yet, in counterpoint, I would like to suggest that the ambiguity in shows such as *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* cannot be singularly accounted for as a reflection – deliberate or otherwise – of shifting social norms. Rather, I would like to suggest that political ambivalence is a considered narrative strategy that is central to the aesthetics of comedy; after all, if these shows were indeed stridently feminist, or aligned coherently with any definitive political standpoint, then this didacticism would surely conflict with the aims and intentions of the satirical mode. This leads me to conclude this article by asking an important question: does humour always serve to depoliticise the context in which it is expressed, and what are the limitations when attempting to situate television animation comedy as a politically agentic form of 'feminist humour'?

Conclusion: Towards a Feminist Poetics of Humour

In her analysis of the role of women in comedy, Andi Zeisler asserts that feminist comedy can be defined as a form of humour which aims to enact a revisioning of gender roles that acknowledges stereotypes but, crucially, ultimately rejects them. Moreover, it posits that women 'see themselves not as the butt of the joke but as its instigator' (2006, 152). Laraine Porter has contributed to this discussion by asking the following questions: 'To what extent is the objectification of women universal and transhistorical, and to what extent is her objectification compatible with her ability to create humour as a subject in her own right? In other words, can women be simultaneously sexy and funny and how do they negotiate the split between object and subject?' (1998, 77). At the center of these considerations is the notion of an agency contingent upon a resistance to objectification, in all its forms, and a move towards subjectivity. However, the format of animation complicates this understanding of women's agency within comedy, for the female characters of *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* are *representations* in the most explicit sense of the word; they are not real women – and therefore circumnavigate the problem of objectification raised by Porter – and the real actors who dramatise these characters do so only via a disembodied voice. This is important, for it means that animation comedy should, at least notionally, permit the possibility of women's issues being dealt with in a serious and impactful manner. Within this format, the audience is able to consider the words spoken by female characters and the political messages these words convey, unencumbered by the problematic exigencies of female corporeality.

Yet, while the format of animation may hypothetically provide a space for the actualisation of feminist comedy, this article has aimed to demonstrate that

postfeminist irony functions to curtail the feminist possibilities of the genre. Even though the episodes discussed challenge patriarchy, irony positions serious women's issues as ultimately 'unserious'. Moreover, it is important to note that while the episodes discussed in this article certainly demonstrate 'female humour', this should not be confused with 'feminist humour'. The distinction is an important one to make, for while female humour may ridicule a person or system from an accepting point of view, feminist humour, by contrast, demands a non-acceptance of oppression (Zeisler 2006). *King of the Hill*'s 'Shins of the Father' typifies the difference between the two. In this episode, Peggy's critique of domestic drudgery represents a form of female humour as it is tempered by an admission that she has always been 'too much of a lady' to resist her role. Her verbal expression of frustration is not a catalyst for change and does nothing to transform the unequal distribution of domestic labour in the home, and thus upholds the hegemonic status quo. In a similar manner, animation comedies are essentially a sub-genre of sitcoms, the episodic format of which constitutes a narrative structure which denies female characters the agency of effecting change. Characters are returned each week to the political position from which they initially originate, ensuring that any resistance to patriarchy that occurs within each episode is essentially erased by the following week and, therefore, contained. Irrespective of how 'unruly' the female characters of animation comedy behave within a particular episode, they are eternally returned to domestic subordination via the repetitive structure of the sitcom format.

However, even though both the format of the sitcom and the mode of irony ensure that it is difficult to thoroughly embrace the representation of housewives in contemporary animation as positive or agentic, the centralisation of domesticity and women's issues within *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* is nevertheless important. Unemployment, low women's wages and the high cost of childcare in most Western societies force many to remain as housewives (Andrews 1998), and in neoliberal times – when individual agency is constructed as predicated on women's ability to be active consumers and producers in the labour market (Harvey 2005) – women who work full-time and without pay within the home often experience a strong sense of isolation and a personal sense of failure, relegated as 'other' to neoliberalism's ideal citizen (Hollows 2008). Animation comedy is unable to change this social reality. However, series such as *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* provide important critiques of domesticity, and indicate that in a postfeminist era – within which women apparently 'choose' commitment to the home – the experience of the housewife remains politically charged and socially relevant.

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