



## “Shame Yourself”: 1950s American Television and the Discreet Disruptions of Gertrude Berg

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### Abstract:

*This article undertakes a re-examination of the comedy of *The Goldbergs*—a popular American serial that made its start in the early days of radio and was then adapted to television in the late 1940s. Under the guiding hand of its creator, Gertrude Berg, and through the dominant character of Molly Goldberg, the archetypal Jewish mother, the show expresses a distinctively feminine subjectivity whose tacit contestation of the dominant mores of 1950s American society can be recognized in numerous “discreet disruptions” that permeate the series’ episodes at the levels of narrative, character and relationship, and performance style. The show’s unique approach to comedy can be summed up as working to produce a particular quality of laughter: the laughter of “voluntary self-deflation,” connoted by the Yiddishism “shame yourself.”*

**Keywords:** Domestic Comedy, Early Television, Ethnic Humour, Laughter, Situation Comedy, Women’s Comedy.

Since the 1970s, it has been the fashion in much television scholarship to treat the 1950s American television show, and especially the sitcom, as the quintessentially naïve text—uncomplicated, univocal, and especially, “representational.” This view of 1950s television has tended to prevail in spite of the fact that early television in general manifests textual multivocality to the utmost degree. In their seminal essay “Television As A Cultural Forum,” Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch show how even an episode of *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) can represent a point of convergence for a variety of heterogeneous and often conflicting discourses.<sup>1</sup>

This reductive view of 1950s television has underlain the valorization of some figures—Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), for example—and the marginalization of others. Most conspicuous among these is producer and actress Gertrude Berg, the creator and portrayer of Molly Goldberg, U.S. television’s archetypal Jewish mother in *The Goldbergs* (1949-1957).<sup>2</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, “Television As A Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, edited by Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 561-573.

<sup>2</sup> Originally called *The Rise of the Goldbergs* during its time on radio, from 1929-1934, the show was popularly referred to simply as *The Goldbergs*. This was the name used when the show returned to radio intermittently from 1936-1949, before live-broadcast television episodes began to air under the same title.

the mid-1980s, feminist scholars like Patricia Mellencamp revived Lucy for feminism,<sup>3</sup> while Berg, the original first lady of American television, has remained relegated to the sidelines of television history. In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand why she had been overlooked as a women's comedian. *The Goldbergs* is overwhelmingly positioned as ethnic humour deriving from the caricatures of the vaudeville stage, and seminal essays on the series treat it as such, defining the show exclusively by its overarching narrative of a Jewish family in the Bronx optimistically seeking to become assimilated to the ways of the New World.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, Berg's enthusiastic collaboration with the American corporate superstructure renders the figure of Molly suspect as a potential mouthpiece for the show's sponsors and network patrons. Finally, Gertrude Berg's work has been overlooked for study as the locus of a distinctively feminine form of humour because, in each episode's movement from domestic harmony to its disruption and then back, the show works on at least on one level to reaffirm the patriarchal ideology conventionally associated with 1950s America.

However, Gertrude Berg was a genuinely fine artist whose creation, Molly Goldberg, took on a life of her own, and captured the attention of the United States for almost three decades. Her grip on the nation waned, George Lipsitz maintains, with the demise of the ethnic family sitcom as exemplified by *The Goldbergs*, and the move towards the more "ethnically neutral" television family which accompanied the rise of the telefilm format (initiated with *I Love Lucy*). In this essay, I argue that the comedy of Gertrude Berg represents a distinctively feminine, and proto-feminist, form of humour, with a rhetorical strategy—"discreet disruption"—and a mode of audience address that proposes a distinctive laughter theory of its own. This mode of audience address is exemplified, as I will show, by the formula "shame yourself." At the same time, the show's feminist comedy is concealed within, and to a certain extent discreetly disguised as, ethnic humour.<sup>5</sup>

In formulating this argument, I make a distinction between "feminine" and "feminist" which I argue is crucial to the task of forming a just appreciation of Gertrude Berg's comic practice. I will be using *feminine* to refer to a sensibility or subjectivity associated with female

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The television show was called *The Goldbergs* through the transition to the telefilm format until late in 1955, when, in the final months of its production by Guild Films, it acquired the alternative title, *Molly*.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, "Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourse of Gracie and Lucy" in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 80-94.

<sup>4</sup> Such as: George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1.4 (Nov. 1986): 355-387; Horace Newcomb, "The Opening of America: Meaningful Difference in 1950s Television" in Joel Foreman, ed., *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 103-123; Donald Weber, "Memory and Repression: *Goldberg* Variations," in *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 126-155; and Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got 'Berg-larized' in the Process)," *Cinema Journal*, 38.4 (Summer 1999): 45-67.

<sup>5</sup> As Kathleen Rowe astutely observes, "Tolerance for a wife/mother's disruptiveness tends to increase when a sitcom plays across ethnic or class difference. A husband's authority can be tested more boldly when he is a non-WASP like the Cuban Desi Arnaz or the Jewish George Burns." Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 81.

performing bodies, which articulates (or attempts to articulate) one of an indefinite number of possible femininities. I will be using *feminist* to denote the body of ideological, political, and aesthetic practices and discourses that seek to advocate on behalf of the feminine, and to interpret attempts at articulating various femininities. There is possibility for slippage here with respect to articulation, since the articulation of a feminine subjectivity may or may not be feminist in the sense that it invokes those practices and discourses in order to advocate for it. That is why I must hesitate to claim Gertrude Berg's practice as feminist, strictly speaking. Insofar as it represents the articulation of a distinctly female subjectivity it is *feminine* instead. But since it inevitably resists those cultural practices of 1950s America that tend to silence female voices, thus indirectly advocating on behalf of the feminine, Gertrude Berg's comic practice ought to be regarded as significantly anticipating the feminisms of subsequent decades. I have tried to mediate this apparent contradiction by referring to Berg's work as tacitly "proto-feminist."

The comedy of *The Goldbergs* is rooted in *heteroglossia*—the co-presence and mutual contestation of multiple voices within a single text. According to Bakhtinian theory, this is a sufficient condition for carnival<sup>6</sup> and by extension, carnival transgression. Looked at in this light, a number of features of *The Goldbergs* that seem quaint, arbitrary or idiosyncratic begin to come into a different focus. These include the insistent transgression of the "fourth wall" in the show's opening and closing product ads; the constant disruption of the action by shouts through the window from the other gossips in the apartment block ("Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Goldberg!"); the liminality of the setting (every space in the Goldberg apartment opens up into another space); and the characters' continual, almost farcical, bursting through doors, doorways, and windows. Most importantly, there is the figure of Molly herself in whom, as I shall argue later, the outlines of the carnival archetype as identified and described by Kathleen Rowe in her insightful study, *The Unruly Woman* (1995), are distinctly discernable. It is its nature as a multivocal, carnivalesque text that sets *The Goldbergs* apart from the thematically binary farces that have been accepted as the representative texts of the 1950s American sitcom.

Ironically, given the customary associations of carnival transgression, the conciliatory nature of Gertrude Berg's comedy becomes problematic, and forces us as viewers and scholars to re-examine some of our basic assumptions about the transgressive efficacy of comedy, and especially its "disruptive" capacities. Can disruption be less than revolutionary? Can comedy be disruptive and still work within dominant paradigms? Must it be violent or destructive to enact disruption? What are the signifiers of "disruption"? What are its objects, and what are its aims? As Todd Gitlin observes in relation to prime-time television, the dominant ideological order is never completely entrenched.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, there are always gaps in its hegemony which that order is constantly striving to fill; it is constantly attempting to assimilate oppositional or alternative orders and, indeed, the multivocality of televisual texts may well be the main symptom of its fundamental instability. The dominant order is therefore more susceptible to transformative disruption from within than demolition from without. What is important is whether the tendencies of that dominant order to suppress people are sustained or subverted. I suggest that disruption of the dominant order may be seen to occur whenever its ideological oppressiveness is thwarted. This is frequently accomplished in *The Goldbergs*.

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<sup>6</sup> That is to say, a state of free play in which the normative and the natural destabilize each other—in Bakhtin's own terms, "A 'world inside out.'" Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Todd Gitlin, "Prime Time Ideology," *Social Problems* 26.3 (Feb. 1979): 251-266.

We can recognize four major categories of disruption functioning in *The Goldbergs*: i) outright opposition, working through various forms of antithesis to obliterate the dominant; ii) transformation, proceeding by forms of inversion and substitution to reverse the efficacy of the dominant's ways and means; iii) more modest forms of redirection, working to channel the ways and means of the dominant towards ends other than those they were designed to serve; and iv) perturbation, the creation of dissonances to inhibit the smooth functioning of those ways and means. Therefore, in *The Goldbergs*, what may appear to be trivial dissonances on the surface of the text are often indices of more radical disruptions operating at a deeper level.

The comedy of Gertrude Berg is fundamentally *kindly*. Pressed on the subject, I believe she would agree with comedy theorists, from Aristotle to Stephen Leacock, that "it is a prime condition of humour that it must be without harm or malice."<sup>8</sup> For Berg, though imbued with left-wing political affinities,<sup>9</sup> the pre-methodical benevolence entailed by the humorous project extended to her network and sponsors as well, and it imposed on her a need to avoid explicit polemics. Berg's biographer Glenn Smith cites a memo from the Berg archive at Syracuse University in which she asserts the need for compromise:

I certainly wish I could say and act out what I believe to its utmost [...] I should like to get some of it into the Goldbergs because it has got an audience, but I have scrupulously refrained, trying to live up to my contract as honorably as possible. I mean to help the sponsor sell his product, which means creating good will for him. To say what is a personal belief on my part would be unfair because it might endanger some one else as well as myself, and an innocent party too [...]<sup>10</sup>

In Berg's case, not only would it have been courting cancellation, it would have been acting in bad faith to have made her series a forum for the kind of explicitly oppositional, overtly disruptive comedy that some later feminist theorists would demand. Thus, the disruptions of Gertrude Berg, though occasionally radical, are always discreet.

*The Goldbergs*, by means of its characteristically dialogic dissonances, its substitutions and inversions, both superficially affirms *and* profoundly (though discreetly) disrupts the dominant discourses of American society of the 1950s as expressed in the conventions of 1950s situational comedy. Through in-depth textual analysis, I shall concentrate on Gertrude Berg's comedy at three levels: narrative and genre, focusing primarily on Gertrude Berg as author of the series; character, focusing mainly on Molly as the primary influence on the series' production of laughter; and finally the level of performance, in which I will focus on Berg's embodiment of the "discreetly disruptive" character Molly.

A note on production is necessary to clarify the textual evolution of the series. *The Goldbergs* came to television on CBS on January 10, 1949. In June 1951 Berg's sponsorship agreement with General Foods expired and the show was cancelled. It returned to the airwaves in February 1952, this time on NBC under a "rotating sponsorship plan" between the Vitamin

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Leacock, "Humour As I See It," in *Further Foolishness: Sketches and Satires On the Follies of the Day* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1968), 159.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Chapter 1 of Glenn D. Smith, Jr.'s *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 10-21.

<sup>10</sup> Glenn D. Smith, Jr. *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007): 81.

Corporation of America, Ecko Products (steel), and Necchi Sewing Machines. However, by May of the same year, both Ecko and Necchi had pulled out; after July, the show was dropped from the NBC network schedule. Following a brief flirtation with the possibility of incorporation as a segment of Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theatre*, on July 3, 1953, the show returned to NBC under the sponsorship of RCA, running Fridays at 8:00 p.m., until November that year, when Berg suffered a collapse from which she remained convalescent until early 1954. By this time, audience ratings had declined and neither NBC nor CBS was interested in running the show. Berg brought it in its live-television format to the Dumont network while still under the sponsorship of the Vitamin Corporation of America. By this time, Dumont was also falling on hard times, unable to retain either its most popular programs or their sponsors. In the fall of 1954, *The Goldbergs* left the Dumont network (which folded completely a year later), and in spring 1955, Berg entered into an agreement with the independent production company Guild Films to continue *The Goldbergs* in telefilm format for release directly into the syndication market without a network run. The show continued in syndication until the spring of 1956.<sup>11</sup>

In his biography of Berg entitled *Something on My Own* (2007), Glenn D. Smith Jr. shows how, throughout the show's long history on both radio and television, Berg remained the dominant influence on all aspects of production. As the end credits of the show invariably emphasize, she wrote the scripts (assisted by Michael Morris as Script Editor from the NBC period). During the Guild Films period, she occasionally shared writing credits with both Morris and her son, Cherny Berg. Smith describes how the business model of early television enabled Berg to retain autonomy as the head of her own production company, although during the Dumont period and afterwards she delegated this responsibility to her son, Cherny.<sup>12</sup> The company then worked together with in-house producers—Worthington Miner at CBS, Richard Clemmer at NBC, Henry Opperman at Dumont, and William Berke at Guild Films—who provided directors for the show—Walter Hart and Matthew Harlib at CBS and NBC, Martin Magner and Walter Hart at NBC, and Marc Daniels (of *I Love Lucy* fame) at Guild.<sup>13</sup> Though her autonomy was evidently compromised by the Guild Films period, Gertrude Berg retained the final authority over the writing of the show, its production, and even its performances.

The show's production history is relevant when considering which period the textual analysis should rely upon most heavily. The bulk of the extant episodes are from the Guild Films period, but as Vincent Brook convincingly argues, by these episodes the show had begun to move toward the narrative approach of a show like *Father Knows Best*—shifting the action to suburbia, emphasizing the paternal authority of Molly's husband Jake, and removing Molly from the environment of the "Yoo-hoo" circle.<sup>14</sup> While both Brook and Donald Weber base their analyses of specific shows on the Guild Films episodes, my discussion will rely on the live-to-air

<sup>11</sup> For *The Goldbergs*' move from radio to television, see Chapter 7 of Glenn D. Smith, Jr.'s *Something on My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 111-143. For the cancellation of the show in the wake of the Philip Loeb affair, see Chapters 8-10, 147-181. For the moves to NBC, Dumont, and then into syndication, see Chapter 11, 185-203.

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Something on My Own*, 116-120.

<sup>13</sup> For Berg's collaboration with Worthington Miner, see Smith, 115-116. Changes in production personnel are reflected in the show's credits as it moved from CBS, to NBC, Dumont, and finally to Guild Films.

<sup>14</sup> Vincent Brook, "The Americanization of Molly: How Mid-Fifties TV Homogenized *The Goldbergs* (and Got "Berg-larized" in the Process)," *Cinema Journal* 38.4 (Summer 1999).

episodes produced between 1949 and 1953. Though less numerous, these episodes are more representative of Berg's vision. In spite of the shifts in emphasis in the Guild Films episodes, however, I assert that the conclusions drawn here generally hold true for them as well.

### **Discreet Disruptions in Narrative: Structure, Story and Genre**

Molly Goldberg looks out of her apartment window into our living rooms and initiates the episode of September 28, 1954<sup>15</sup> with a characteristic blend of old-world candour and new-world optimism:

Hello? I'm not gonna ask you how you feel, because if you listened to me, you must be feeling good. And if you didn't, then shame yourself. And why shouldn't you feel wonderful on a beautiful fall day like this?<sup>16</sup>

She isn't merely rhapsodizing. Although Molly's paean to good feelings and good health is sincere, it is about to segue into a eulogy of Rybutol, the vitamin supplement produced by the show's sponsor. As Lynn Spigel has pointed out, these commercial messages, which began and ended each episode and were delivered in character and in direct address, privileged the "pure communication" of the commercial message over the "theatrical" artifice of the shows' stories,<sup>17</sup> thus subordinating the narrative drive to the commercial logic of competition and consumption. While performing this business-oriented function, Gertrude Berg utilized these spots skillfully at several levels. The spots amplify character and situation; they serve as classically formal preludes and postludes that introduce and comment upon the main action; and, most importantly, they disrupt the distance between performer and audience by incorporating the spectator into Molly's circle of friends, who hail each other through apartment windows with disruptive "Yoo-hoos" in order to gossip. In so doing, Berg subtly aligns viewers' sympathies with Molly and against her husband Jake (who frowns on her "mixing" with the Yoo-hoo circle) and positions their optical perspective with Molly's. When the commercial is at an end, and Molly turns in towards her apartment to begin the action of the episode, the camera follows her, and we look wherever she looks to see what is going to happen. At the end of the story, Molly looks back out at us to deliver, in the context of a final word on behalf of her sponsor, her own interpretation of the story's events. Unlike the masculine perspectives imbricated in the very titles of 1950s sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy*, *My Little Margie* (1952-1955) and *I Married Joan* (1952-1959), the structuring gaze of this series is unmistakably that of its female protagonist. The inversion of perspective discreetly positions the viewer within a community of interest (coded feminine) which, through television, she organizes around herself. In this way she subordinates the "pure communication" of the show's advertising function (the organ of a social order in which male

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<sup>15</sup> The live-to-air episodes of the show can be reliably identified by initial broadcast dates only. For Guild Films episodes from Sept. 22 to Dec. 12, 1955, both initial airdates and titles are available; for subsequent episodes, there are titles only.

<sup>16</sup> Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 3, Track 6, 00:00:44-00:00:56. The episode is accessible online at <https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-28September1954>.

<sup>17</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 168-169.

values dominate) to its ritual function: the communal dissemination of “gossip,” or informal wisdom (also coded feminine). As Donald Weber reminds us, the thrust of Molly’s wisdom is always to caution Jake, and her audience, about “the spiritual costs of acquisition”<sup>18</sup>—that is, to critique from a female perspective the “masculine” logic of competition and consumption that the series *seems* to affirm.

The typical structure of a *Goldbergs* episode likewise contests the retributive, or “talion,” formula of shows such as *I Love Lucy*, in which a character disrupts the initial equilibrium of the situation and is punished, the punishment marking the return to order. In each episode, a threat arises, either from without or from within, with the potential to disrupt the tranquility of Molly’s domestic economy. She attempts to deal with it, but is initially unsuccessful; matters are made worse, and Molly is typically blamed. But at the crisis point of the action, some character makes an unexpected gesture of humility; and suddenly the resolution of the problem that seemed inescapable becomes clear. The initial stability of the group is not simply recovered but enhanced.<sup>19</sup> Both in their positioning of the audience and in their typical structures, episodes of *The Goldbergs* posit antitheses to the paternalistic formal conventions of the 1950s sitcom.

The plots of these stories are dialogical in that they typically seem to represent compromises between two very different kinds of narrative: one with a classic “talion” resolution like that of *I Love Lucy* (A transgresses against B; B retaliates, putting A “back in his/her place”), and another, less punitive one that supervenes.<sup>20</sup> Another profound form of dialogical

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<sup>18</sup> Donald Weber, “Memory and Repression: *Goldberg Variations*,” in *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to the Goldbergs* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 149-150.

<sup>19</sup> For example, in the episode dated September 5, 1949, a new landlord, Mr. Peach, takes charge of the Goldbergs’ apartment building at 1038 Tremont Avenue. Jake wishes to circulate a petition in order to force Mr. Peach to make improvements to the building. Molly, fearing the tendency of this “masculine” approach to escalate, instead presents a list of requests from all the tenants to the new landlord “in mine fashion”—that is, during a friendly chat over a glass of lemonade. Ironically, Mr. Peach takes note of the chat as evidence that there has indeed been organized activity on the part of the occupants: “Mrs. Goldberg, I can see by this list of names and demands that there has been a tenants’ meeting.” He promises to meet the grievances, but he emphasizes that “This is a hardship.” When Jake learns of the ominous phrase “This is a hardship” (which he recognizes as a legal formula permitting a rent increase), he is instantly beside himself with feelings of betrayal, which he unhesitatingly vents on Molly. Learning of the impending increase, the other tenants turn on her as well. Only after Molly, with the collaboration of the “Yoo-hoo” circle, has prepared a surprise birthday party for Mr. Peach (at which they offer, and he accepts, a nominal increase of two dollars per month), does it transpire that Mr. Peach hadn’t intended to raise the rent at all. The community at 1038 Tremont Ave. ends up more secure than it would have been, on collaborative rather than adversarial terms with its new landlord.

<sup>20</sup> In the very earliest surviving episode of the *The Goldberg*’s glory days on CBS, from August 29, 1949 (<https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-29August1949>), the Goldbergs return to their apartment in the Bronx from a vacation at Pinkus’ Pines, their favorite summer resort in the Catskills. They have had a wonderful holiday and have made some highly advantageous contacts, which they enthusiastically share with all their friends. But these “contacts” turn out to be based only on big talk and self-promotion. As Jake bitterly fulminates, a phone call to Uncle David reminds the Goldbergs that they have been as guilty of shameless self-promotion as anybody else, and they acknowledge their fault. But it turns out that the critical contact Jake has made is genuine after all, and the Goldbergs finish the episode once again at the apex of their fortunes.

disruption is one of the most distinctive and remarkable regular features of the stories of *The Goldbergs*. In contradistinction to the farce-plots of other 1950s sitcoms, the generic frames of these stories will suddenly shift, so that a tale which began in the register of “domestic comedy” will, by the mid-point of the story, shift to that of melodrama, where it will remain until the sudden, startling climactic reversal that returns the narrative to the register of comedy.<sup>21</sup> The pathos with which these scenes are enacted is often so compelling that the show briefly crosses the line into soap opera and we find ourselves responding to dramas of heartrending loss. As in all great comedy, there is a tragic vision that underlies the comedy of Gertrude Berg; at the core of it is an attempt to express a genuinely female subjectivity within the constraints of mid-twentieth-century American culture.

The structural regularity with which Molly is threatened with this loss—or alternatively, reproached by those in whose interests she exerts herself—suggests that at the heart of Berg’s vision is an insight like that expressed in the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis by Judy Little in her landmark book, *Comedy and the Woman Writer* (1983):

[T]he primary world is especially the world of the infant’s relation to the mother – not to both parents. Since the mother, or nurse, cannot constantly be feeding the child or giving it attention, the child experiences its first sense of betrayal at the hands of a woman. [...] [M]ost of the ambivalences which human beings of both sexes feel towards woman—those ambivalences culturally documented in mythic symbols of woman as guide, fate, temptress, betrayer—are rooted in the very young child’s earliest interactions with the mother.<sup>22</sup>

Kathleen Rowe, in *The Unruly Woman* (1995), likewise finds the root of “matriarchal humor” in women’s defensive response when “the rosy illusions promised by the narratives of romantic comedy have been replaced by a very different reality”:

Women’s comedic traditions, whether in print or performance, have tended toward the less aggressive form of what Freud calls humor, which preserves the ego by denying or transforming threatening or painful emotions. Because anger is one of the most socially unacceptable emotions for women, it provides fertile ground for being reworked into

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<sup>21</sup> The best example is one of the earliest extant episodes of *The Goldbergs* dated September 12, 1949 (<https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-12September1949>). Molly’s wealthy and successful but selfish cousin Simon has come for dinner. When an argument between him and Jake escalates, Simon is suddenly taken ill and the Goldbergs’ home is turned upside down to accommodate him. As Simon contemplates his own imminent death, he is stricken with remorse for the way he has treated others. Seeking to make amends, he prepares to sign cheques to all his poor relations. However, the results of the cardiograph test come in and they are negative. Learning he is not about to die, Simon refuses to share his wealth and leaves the apartment, but not before a comedic deathbed scene—played with deathly seriousness—in which he proclaims to Molly: “I wanted the wrong things. Now I know when it’s too late [...] Why did I turn my back on my own flesh and blood? Why, Molly?” (00:14:15-00:14:54). The scene is a clear parody of what Mary Ann Doane, in *The Desire to Desire* (1987), has called “the medical discourse” in the women’s films of the 1940s—with Cousin Simon riotously feminized and substituted for the pathologized female protagonists of the cinematic melodrama.

<sup>22</sup> Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Sparks and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1983), 12-13.



humor [...] Domestic humor or ‘matriarchal laughter’ expresses accommodation and resignation, according to Judith Wilt, by piling ‘sandbags of wit against the flood of anger and pain.’<sup>23</sup>

But Gertrude Berg has a particular gift for the production of pathos by means of a skilful substitution of temporalities, which lifts the laughter of *The Goldbergs* out of resignation and restores to it the ring of triumph. As Mary Ann Doane observes in *The Desire to Desire* (1987), the pathos of the maternal melodrama is “generated by what [Franco] Moretti describes as a ‘rhetoric of the too late.’ [...] Pathos is thus related to a certain construction of temporality in which communication or recognitions take place but are mistimed.”<sup>24</sup> This same point is carried further by Linda Williams in her influential 1991 essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” who argues that the mistimed recognition is a fundamental distinguishing feature of the melodrama. For Williams, the deep structure of each of the “low” film genres (porn, horror, and the “women’s weepie”) resides in each of three primary forms of infantile “enigma” (sexual desire, sexual difference, selfhood) that is “solved” by means of an “original fantasy” (family romance, seduction, castration). This fantasy is endlessly repeated in the fantasies underlying the perversions (masochism, sadism, sado-masochism), each possessing a temporality of its own (“on time!”, “too soon!”, and “too late!”). Williams excludes low forms such as slapstick comedy from this schema on the grounds that slapstick comedy “has not been deemed gratuitously excessive;”<sup>25</sup> a position on which I differ. On the contrary, as Noël Carroll has argued, the affect generated by slapstick is the exact counterpart of that generated by horror—once the danger of harm has been removed. For Carroll, the slapstick clown is the counterpart of the monster, deprived of its ability to hurt.<sup>26</sup> But the hurt of the horror film is intrinsically related to its temporality, in which things typically happen before one is prepared for them (“too soon!”); the movement from horror to humour implies at the same time a modulation from the “too soon!” of horror to the temporality of the comic. This, I would argue, should be expressed as “just in the nick of time!” It will readily be seen that the distinction between melodrama and romantic comedy likewise resides in exactly the same substitution of the “just in the nick of time!” of the comic for the “too late!” of melodrama.

By means of this oscillation between pre- and post-Oedipal structuring fantasies, facilitated by the technical and industrial specificity of television, Gertrude Berg is able to offer a form of women’s comedy in which the female heroine repeatedly extricates both herself and others from the catch-22 of the Oedipal triangle that so imprisons the heroines of the cinematic melodrama of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>27</sup> In the looking-glass world of *The Goldbergs*, the castration complex, rather than an immutable condition of existence, becomes simply a curious irrelevancy:

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<sup>23</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 69.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 91.

<sup>25</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly*, 44.4 (Summer, 1991): 4.

<sup>26</sup> Noël Carroll, “Horror and Humor,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57.2 (Spring, 1999): 145-160.

<sup>27</sup> As described, for example, by Doane in *The Desire to Desire* and Alison L. McKee in *The Woman’s Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014).

frequently an obstacle, but never insuperable.

The substitution of temporalities underlies the radical shifts in tone in *The Goldbergs* that follow immediately on those moments of intense sadness when the characters renounce their follies by a profession of humility. In these moments the resigned pathos of “matriarchal laughter” as conceived by Judith Wilt, is suddenly transformed into a triumphal renewal of the vitality and optimism of romantic comedy as Molly shames herself, and then suddenly discovers the key to the solution she has been searching for “just in the nick of time.” With these substitutions comes a tacit but radical rejection of the classical positioning of female protagonists as passive sufferers that typifies the women’s films of the 1940s and the soap operas of the following decade. In her hands, the domestic comedy becomes a new chapter in an ongoing romance, to which courtship and marriage are only the prologue. Though *The Goldbergs* tirelessly rehearses the tropes of traditional domesticity, it looks past them towards a greater fulfillment at the same time.

On the level of narrative, then, *The Goldbergs* offers several forms of disruption which all discreetly subvert the ideological work of the 1950s television sitcom. Berg’s tactics to that end are to substitute a female structuring gaze and narrative perspective in place of the typical masculine ones of 1950s television; to contain the inflationary logic of consumption and competition (coded “masculine” in the context of the show’s character typology) within the ritual logic of sharing and communion (coded “feminine”); to interweave the conventional talion plots of sitcom farce with stories that substitute the expansion of the community for the punishment of a scapegoat; and to shift between the generic frames of melodrama and romantic comedy.

### Discreet Disruptions in Character and Relationship

As I have suggested, *The Goldbergs* constitutes a conspicuous exception to Rowe’s otherwise astute observation that “[t]he pleasure of situation comedy does not arise primarily from narrative suspense about the actions of its characters or from its one-liners, but from the economy or wit with which it brings together two opposing discourses.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the typical *Goldbergs* episode is primarily concerned with what the characters will do and how their choices will affect their relationships.<sup>29</sup> But this is not to claim that the personages of *The Goldbergs* are particularly strong characters—on the contrary it accounts for them sufficiently to view her husband Jake, her son Sammy, her Uncle David and cousin Simon, her daughter Rosalie, her extended family and the “Yoo-hoo” circle as simple functions of their relationships with Molly, the “fixerkeh” who, above her husband’s protests, resolves all their difficulties.

As a literary construction, Molly’s primary characteristic is the “Mollypropism.”<sup>30</sup> These range from simple Yiddishisms (like substituting “mine” for “my”), to redundant high diction,<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 81.

<sup>29</sup> The discovery of a solution, moreover, typically involves Molly thinking her way out of the box of an apparently inescapable dilemma (frequently one in which a woman is caught by the division of her loyalties between two different men) and asserting a third discourse that it has excluded.

<sup>30</sup> I have been unable to trace the provenance of this label for Molly’s signature verbal mannerism. Glenn Smith references it in the context of Berg’s radio work in *Something On My Own: Gertrude Berg and American Broadcasting, 1929-1956* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 94. He cites Donald Weber’s essay “The Jewish-American World of Gertrude Berg: *The Goldbergs* on Radio and Television,

apparently innocent *doubles entendres*,<sup>32</sup> quaintly mixed clichés<sup>33</sup> and other more complex structures. In the episode about the new landlord, Jake tells her “Molly, it is on account of people like you that the world revolves on its axis and never changes.” To this she responds, with delicate mock-offense, “Oh, so it’s my fault the void is revolving on de axis?”<sup>34</sup> The way that these Mollypropisms distort, and even invert, the meaning of everyday English furnishes an excellent example of what Judy Little, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin in her essay “Humoring the Sentence,” calls “women’s dialogic comedy”:

A woman’s discourse usually carries with it some hint of the language and worldview of the patriarchal structures in which she lives. There is [...] an “infection in the sentence.” But one might also say that the infection from the male language and culture produces antibodies: there is a “dialogic” tension, often comic, between the two “voices” that contend in the same sentence.<sup>35</sup>

We have already seen how this dialogic tension manifests itself in Gertrude Berg’s technique of plot construction. But one of the show’s primary inversions of the logic of the marketplace that underlies its sponsorship, is its insistent affirmation of people’s moral value for each other as relatives and friends over their use-value as consumers and items of consumption. This affirmation is often expressed in a particularly tendentious mode of Mollypropism that is in constant use throughout the series: a Yiddishism that substitutes the pronominal indirect object of an action for its direct object.<sup>36</sup> Molly employs it with the utmost frequency with reference to the actions she performs on behalf of other people, especially Jake, often with bizarre results. For

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1930-1950” in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 85-99. Although Weber discusses Molly’s speech in detail in each of three articles examining *The Goldbergs*, he does not use the term ‘Mollypropism.’ Neither does George Lipsitz in “The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs,” *Cultural Anthropology* 1.4 (Nov. 1986): 355-387. The term *is* cited, however, in Joseph Litvak’s chapter “Comicosmopolitanism” in *The Un-Americans: Jews, The Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 161. In Litvak’s analysis, the Mollypropisms are “dialectic booby-traps” that function to subtly subvert the politics of ethnicity in much the same way that I am claiming they function to discreetly disrupt the politics of gender.

<sup>31</sup> Molly: “Hello? Yes? Speaking, conversing on the phone [...]” (Sept. 5, 1949).

<sup>32</sup> “Jake, darling, I’m thinking now that we have a new landlord that I should ask him to do me [...] decorate me, paint me the whole apartment” (Sept. 5, 1949).

<sup>33</sup> Jake: “Ignorance is nine-tenths of the law,” or Molly: “Jake, don’t turn over the apple cart till you’ve tasted the apples” (Sept. 14, 1954).

<sup>34</sup> Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 1, Track 2, 00:05:32-00:05:40.

<sup>35</sup> Judy Little, “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>36</sup> It is an ethnic subversion that implicitly reproaches the English language for having no dative case, unlike Yiddish or German.

instance, she demands of him at the breakfast table: “Should I fry you?”<sup>37</sup> In another episode she asks Uncle David for help preparing supper: “David, come, peel me, yes, darling?”<sup>38</sup> and in yet another she requests of Rosalie, “So take my leg out of the oven and Papa’ll carve it.”<sup>39</sup> In some episodes these Mollypropisms verge on the grotesque:

MOLLY: [*Leaning out of the window of a neighbour’s apartment where she is visiting, to Jake, at her own*] Did Rosalie take my leg out of the oven?

JAKE: It’s standing on the table...

MOLLY: Slice me, I’ll be in in a minute.<sup>40</sup>

These are typical of Berg’s comic technique in discreetly disrupting the language of the dining table to incongruously raise for a moment the question of who is being made an object, and for whose benefit. Beneath the dissonances created by this form of Mollypropism, traditional gender-coded notions of activity and passivity are being subtly subverted (i.e. disrupted) by a characteristically dialogical technique.

Thus, as she is premised on *heteroglossia*, it is plain to see how Molly is a carnivalesque figure. In fact she bears a striking, though distant, resemblance to the archetypal “unruly woman” or “woman on top” described by Rowe. Rowe persuasively locates the origins of this figure in the carnivalesque, and its latter chapters trace its elaboration through Hollywood’s romantic “screwball” comedies of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>41</sup> She observes: “as the drive towards domestication and containment associated with the 1950s was closing down familiar options for representing female audiences on the big screen, others were opening up on TV, modified to suit the needs of the new medium.”<sup>42</sup> For Rowe, the relocation to television furnished the character with new opportunities for transgression rooted in three specifics of the medium: “flow,” the comparatively low definition of the televisual image, and its address to its audience.<sup>43</sup> In her first chapter, Rowe gives a taxonomy of the character’s definitive features that startlingly confirms this genealogy:

1. The unruly woman creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men. She is unable or unwilling to confine herself to her proper place.
2. Her body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites.
3. Her speech is excessive, in quantity, content, or tone.
4. She makes jokes, or laughs herself.
5. She may be androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social

<sup>37</sup> “Is There A Doctor In the House?” (1956), 00:10:00. Jake responds, “On both sides, please.”

<sup>38</sup> Sept. 14, 1954, 00:26:28-00:26:30.

<sup>39</sup> May 25, 1954, 00:08:55-00:08:58.

<sup>40</sup> Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 2, Track 1, 00:11:28-00:11:36.

<sup>41</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 31-34.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

construction of gender.<sup>44</sup>

In the looking-glass world of the Goldberg home Molly is the dominant character. In fact, her defiance of her husband's cautions against "mixing" (i.e., intervening in her neighbours' problems) due to her excessive benevolence, effectively appropriates his Talmudic responsibility to perform *mitzvot* (acts of charity) on behalf of the family, thus disrupting the traditional Jewish patriarchal family structure. Molly's dominance is made visible through her body and the space it commands on screen in comparison to other characters as she is physically excessive. She is repeatedly teased about her weight and in two separate episodes tries unsuccessfully to reduce it. Her speech also habitually runs over its boundaries and is marked as excessive not only by the Mollypropisms, but by radical contrasts of tempo, pitch and volume, and is often punctuated with gentle laughter. But though she is the mother of two children and is unrestrainedly affectionate with all the members of her family, always reaching out a maternal hand to touch or stroke them, her sexuality throughout the series (consistent with the era's prejudices about the sanctity of motherhood) is made conspicuous by the absence of intimacy between her and her husband. Indeed, several episodes pointedly contrast her with more slender, more sexually desirable (though not necessarily younger) women.<sup>45</sup>

Molly's relationship with her husband Jake is unquestionably the major axis through which her character expresses itself: Jake's opposition to Molly's "mixing," and his antagonism towards the "Yoo-hoo" circle is the series' central structuring convention. However, his attempts to confine her to her domestic duties are half-hearted and always fail. The reason is that Jake genuinely loves and admires his wife, and his pride when her "mixing" is successful is ungrudging. Jake realizes, and in often acquiescing to his wife tacitly acknowledges, that it is his relationship with Molly that keeps him on an even keel and makes it possible for him to play the role of father in a secure and happy home. So while it is undeniable that a great deal of the comedy in *The Goldbergs* is, as Patricia Mellencamp observes in respect to the comedy of *I Love Lucy* and *Burns and Allen* (1950-1958), a comedy of containment, I would argue that what is celebrated in *The Goldbergs* is a state of *mutual* containment: that what makes the Goldbergs' a happy home is that Jake and Molly mutually both contain and complete each other. That is why the balance they strike is so delicate.<sup>46</sup> However, it cannot be denied that it is achieved at the cost of the evident suppression of both Molly's and Jake's identities as subjects of specifically sexual desire. Whereas unrestrained desire is the profoundly threatening essence of the unruly woman type as Rowe conceives it, in Molly the threat of excessive female desire is consistently—though never quite satisfactorily—sublimated into motherhood.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>45</sup> These also tend, interestingly, to be women in the show that have personal accomplishments outside the home and that have achieved independent social stature and earned the respect of men: women like her husband's forewoman, Natalie Felsen, or her son's prospective mother-in-law, Mrs. Barnett.

<sup>46</sup> For me, the image in which this state of affairs is summed up is the potted flower on Molly's windowsill (in the CBS episodes it is a Sanka tin). While the flower pot contains the plant, the plant contains both the seed from which it sprang and the seeds which will spring from it; and it is these which make the pot what it is rather than some other kind of vessel; held in this delicate balance, though they have nothing but each other to keep them there, both flower and pot teeter precariously on the windowsill, but never fall to the alley below.

Consequently, the more gender-transgressive aspects of the unruly woman type as described by Rowe are displaced from Molly onto her constant ally and frequent surrogate, Uncle David.<sup>47</sup> In Uncle David, we have a radically feminized “little old man” who regularly transgresses the boundaries of gender. Throughout the series we see him playing a surprising variety of roles, ranging from the hyper-masculine to the quasi-feminine, and subverting each role he undertakes—though always under the protective aura of “Jewish humour.” He is Molly’s friend and confidant, often conspiring with her in her schemes to solve other people’s problems. He frequently dons an apron to iron clothes, helps Molly with her knitting or with the cooking, sometimes providing meals for the family. Indeed, the extravagance of his pride in his son “Solly de doctor” is far more reminiscent of the stereotypical Jewish mother than of the authoritarian father. However, despite these stereotypically feminine qualities, he is also stereotypically masculine in his insecurity and competitiveness.<sup>48</sup> After Molly, he is the series’ prime exponent of pathos. For instance, in the episode of September 7, 1954, Uncle David is baited by his shrewish sister, Molly’s Tante Elke, into moving out of Molly’s home and in with his son Solly.<sup>49</sup> Here, he is waited on hand and foot by servants, but hardly sees his busy son. Eventually, we see David sitting at a richly laden table in his son’s home and hear the chatter of voices at a social gathering. As the camera draws back from medium close-up to long shot, we see that the table is set for one, and that David is alone, listening to the radio. Invited back for dinner at Molly’s house he rhapsodizes over the pampering he receives at his son’s, getting more and more tearful as he goes on:

UNCLE DAVID: And then, the supper table ... the supper table, all my Solly’s doctor friends are sitting. I’m sitting on the top of the table ... and there isn’t a question in the conversation that my Solly don’t look to me for an opinion. “Papa, darling, what do you say? Papa, darling, what do you say? [*He begins to weep*] I’m a king. A king.”<sup>50</sup>

“King” David’s line is repeated in a high falsetto that makes it sound like nothing more than the cry of an unhappy child: the paradigmatic Jewish patriarch is subverted here by dissonant citation through the figure of a lonely and wistfully mendacious old man.

In accordance with the core values of 1950s American television, the containing narrative arc of *The Goldbergs* seems to privilege the male side of the family. At its beginning, Jake and Molly are still struggling to establish themselves and their children are still in school. Throughout the live-to-air episodes, Jake’s business becomes increasingly successful while the children grow up, and, coinciding with the move to Guild Films and the telefilm format, the family ultimately moves out of their Bronx apartment to a home in the New York suburbs. In the final episode of the series from 1956, Sammy gets married to his girlfriend Dora Barnett, and the

<sup>47</sup> As Rowe further states in *The Unruly Woman*: “She may be old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque” (31).

<sup>48</sup> In the episode from August 7, 1953, David makes the family miserable with his jealousy of Jake’s Uncle Berish, who has come to stay with them, championing his son Solly as a real doctor against Berish’s son, who is only a dentist. See: <https://archive.org/details/TheGoldbergsLiveAug.71953>.

<sup>49</sup> Available at: <https://archive.org/details/theGoldbergs-7September1954>.

<sup>50</sup> Gertrude Berg, creator. *The Ultimate Goldbergs*. UCLA Film and Television Archive. Shout! Factory, 2010, Disc 3, Track 3, 00:24:41-00:25:08.

suggestion is that the wedding marks the conclusion of one cycle tracing the rise of a Goldberg male with the beginning of another tracing the rise of his son. But earlier, by the show's 1953 season (when he meets Dora), Sammy has already virtually ceased to be a presence in the family, only cropping up momentarily at the beginning or end of an episode on his way to or from a date. By 1954 he has left for college, so that the destiny of Jake Goldberg's son and heir becomes more and more of an irrelevancy as the series proceeds.<sup>51</sup>

Instead, the fate of Molly's daughter Rosalie becomes the primary concern of the show. The "Young Woman With A Problematic Future" is, indeed, one of the tropes of 1950s television that has been most overlooked by television scholars, despite the ubiquity of the character type—from Babs in the earliest episodes of *The Life of Riley* (1953-1958) to Betty in *Father Knows Best*. But in *The Goldbergs*, it takes on special prominence as the series turns on the problem of how much of the spirit of her mother will continue to survive in the figure of Rosalie. By the Guild Films period, the series' proairetic drive is sustained largely by our concern for Rosie and the problem of what she should do with her life.<sup>52</sup>

There is a fundamental inversion, then, in *The Goldberg's* valorization of character and relationship over the farcical action typically given priority in the American sitcom. This inversion is itself a function of the show's incarnation of the unruly woman in the person of Molly Goldberg, which is itself reflected in a variety of dissonances (as through the Mollypropisms), inversions (as in the power dynamics within the Goldberg household), and transgressive substitutions (such as the treatment of gender roles in the figure of Uncle David), all of which are delivered under the pretext of "Jewish humour." In so doing, the show discreetly disrupts our complacent acceptance of the representational conventions of American television of the decade. The same conventions conceal our own ambivalence towards the women who play the most significant roles in our lives and tend to rationalize our complicity in their oppression.

### **Discreet Disruptions in Performance: The Laughter of Voluntary Self-Deflation**

As Molly sets out to solve her friends' difficulties, she is repeatedly made the object of her loved ones' scorn. Her family patronizes her, her friends castigate her, successful women like Mrs. Barnett humiliate her, and her extended family frequently bullies her. We are constantly made to pity her; but never to identify with her. On the contrary, as spectators we are most frequently aligned with the characters who denigrate her. But when we laugh, we never laugh *at* her—we always laugh *with* her. Humorous pleasure in *The Goldbergs* is always related to a reconciliatory movement between the characters and ourselves, to sudden but discreet disruptions of the

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<sup>51</sup> Molly's relationships with her children are evidently the reverse of Gertrude Berg's with hers: Gertrude's son Cherny was permanently on hand as the producer of her show, whereas, according to Glenn D. Smith, Gertrude's relationship with her daughter Harriet was on the back burner as long as she continued to be occupied with the series.

<sup>52</sup> At the same time, an egregious example of the series' accommodation of contemporary attitudes to gender is furnished by its treatment of the character's interpreter, Arlene McQuade, who blossoms, between 1949 and 1954, not only into a versatile and highly engaging performer, but also into an attractive young woman. With increasing frequency, as she does so, the show repeatedly abandons both its forward narrative movement and its stylistic integrity to pause and present Arlene/Rosalie in more or less static long shots (rather than the medium shots it typically favors) that linger dotingly over her, decked out in bathing suits, dressing gowns, and form-fitting fashions, and occasionally leaning provocatively over desks and tables.

distance between the characters and us.

Our positioning in these instances is, of course, partly a function of the writing, but it is constructed mostly by a delicate manipulation—and frequent inversion—of the signifiers of closeness and distance between herself and her audience that is the hallmark of Gertrude Berg’s performance style. Early in her career, she apparently learned that radio technology made it possible to reverse expectations and render the most dramatic moments in the softest tones of voice. She may also have learned early on that this enabled her to experiment with similar reversals of pitch and tempo. In any case, we frequently find her doing exactly the opposite of what a theatrical comedian would do in taking a dramatically “strong” position. For example, in the episode with the new landlord, when Jake rebukes her and she responds, “Oh, so it’s my fault de voild is movink on de axis?” another comedian, Lucille Ball for example, would likely speak the line loudly, with numerous *portamentos* up and down in pitch on “Oh” and “my” to highlight the absurdity of the idea. But Berg’s Molly does the opposite: she speaks the line softly, wonderingly, remaining within a narrow cluster of tones high in her falsetto voice, as though Molly found Jake’s rebuke somehow plausible, and were struck, even hurt, by it. While we may have been, up to now, on Jake’s side in the argument, we are suddenly swung over to sympathy with Molly and we laugh, not at her, but at the injustice of Jake’s hyperbole and at the double meaning of the even greater hyperbole she substitutes for it; one that absurdly, but significantly, equates her with God, bearing the reproach for the wrongs done by humans.

On the other hand, Molly’s *yiddishe* dialect is just one feature of her persona that may prevent many viewers from coming *too* close to her until the crucial moment. It enables Berg to reserve maximum intimacy and expressiveness for the emotional high point of each episode, when the distance between spectator and performer is suddenly (but discreetly) collapsed.<sup>53</sup> She communicates pathos as profound and as widely accessible as Chaplin’s, but it is pathos of a different sort—one rooted in feminine subjectivity. Performed in this delicate manner, the humour that the scene elicits is a form of what Freud calls “‘broken’ humour—the humour that smiles through tears.”<sup>54</sup> So similarly when Molly’s loving husband criticizes her wardrobe, or her children snicker at her dowdy hats, Gertrude the actor is able to register a combination of dowdy frumpiness and genuine hurt that both amuses spectators and reproaches them for their complicity. The mode of engagement that Berg’s performance technique seems to solicit most is empathy: an intuitive association mediated by a distance that is both respectful of her difference and sensitive to the burdens it imposes on her.<sup>55</sup>

For Patricia Mellencamp, the laughter of *I Love Lucy* is not primarily comic, though it partakes of physical comedy. Rather it is humorous as it involves “an economy of expenditure on

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<sup>53</sup> The approach of Gertrude Berg the performer to these moments is masterly. For example, after her cousin Simon has reproached her bitterly for poisoning him rather than thanked her for nursing him to health, and exited, her voice becomes even softer than usual, almost inaudible, and lingers tremulously in her upper register. Her eyes widen, though they do not fill with tears—rather than self-pity, what projects itself through the televisual window is the unbearable weight of her hurt.

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 298. This is a description that is regularly applied to Jewish humour.

<sup>55</sup> In a preludic Rybutal ad for the episode dated June 8 1954, she complains, regarding the oppressive summer weather: “It’s not the heat; it’s the humility.” Rosalie appears at the window to correct even this: “Humidity, Ma!! (00:00:47-00:00:50).



feeling”— i.e., on women’s feelings of anger at their domestic oppression.<sup>56</sup> Humour, in the Freudian schema, stands in contrast to jokes, which consist instead in “an economy in expenditure on inhibition.”<sup>57</sup> It also contrasts the comic proper, which consists instead in “an economy in expenditure on ideation (cathexis).”<sup>58</sup> That is to say, on the energy that is invested in a particular thought, represented by a comparison between the laughter and the object of laughter.<sup>59</sup> In slapstick comedy, for example, the disproportion between the energy invested in the violence of the clown, and the energy one would invest in real violence, renders one’s own violent energies superfluous, and they are discharged in laughter. Freud doesn’t discuss character comedy as a distinct category, but the notion of comedy as “an economy in expenditure on ideation (cathexis)” is perfectly appropriate to the character comedy of Gertrude Berg. The indignities Molly suffers are things we would resent very much if they happened to us—but she doesn’t resent them at all. As viewers we may look down on her for this— until the pivotal moment when she shames herself and is proven to have been right after all. At that point, we are prompted to shame ourselves by a reciprocal movement, and to acknowledge that our own investment in our resentments is similarly disproportionate and should be economized on likewise; and as we imagine it so, the now-superfluous resentful energy we’ve been carrying around with us is discharged in laughter. The pleasure of our laughter is the reward of abandoning our common sense (and the selfish husbanding of our resentments that goes with it) and uniting with Molly in a voluntary act of humility.

In this way, the comedy of Gertrude Berg moves beyond mere “accommodation and resignation” at women’s domestic oppression in postwar America. It shows instead how resentment can be transformed into triumph; how the cathexes of psychic energy that are bound to women’s sense of their victimization can be liberated and set in service of their egos once again. The transformative laughter of “voluntary self-deflation” can enable women to look with indifference and even a sense of superiority on the depredations to which men have subjected them. It thus suggests a matriarchal folk wisdom that has lain latent in the popular culture of all ages, and one that may be associated with Hélène Cixous’ description of the laughter of the Medusa.<sup>60</sup> As Kathleen Rowe asserts, laughter such as this can even mobilize “the uncanny and ambivalent power of the female gaze to look on the castrated man and restore his potency,”<sup>61</sup> as Molly does for the parade of hapless young men that seek her assistance throughout *The Goldbergs*. But the precondition for this laughter rests in a psychological attitude that is the antithesis of that which finds in comedy an outlet for more or less un-displaced rage—for example, in the stand-up comedy that has been the principle subject of theorization for feminist

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<sup>56</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, “Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourse of Gracie and Lucy” in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 93.

<sup>57</sup> Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 302.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Mellencamp is one of the few commentators to realize that the humour of *I Love Lucy* is not that of slapstick comedy, though she is evidently unaware that this is true even of Lucy’s physical humor.

<sup>60</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 355.

<sup>61</sup> Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 211.

scholars of comedy such as Linda Mizejewski, Susan Lavin, Rebecca Krefting, and Domnica Radulescu.<sup>62</sup> On the contrary, its preconditions are the renunciation of rage, the disavowal of threat, and a movement towards reconciliation.

## Conclusion

Gertrude Berg was evidently not a feminist—though she likely would have been one had she not accepted that her silence on social issues was the price she had to pay for a conspicuously successful career in a male-dominated industry. In her writing she drew heavily on the ethnic, class, and gender stereotypes that were hallmarks of the overwhelmingly white protestant, bourgeois, and patriarchal ideologies that prevailed in televisual culture of postwar America. In framing the product spots that both began and concluded each of her live-to-air episodes as “gossip” exchanged among friends across the airshaft, and in aligning her diegetic apartment window with the televisual apparatus, Berg did, to some extent, subvert her construction of a community of interest (coded feminine) to the ultimately patriarchal interests of Madison Avenue. And in each of her stories she did affirm the consonance of conventional domestic harmony, relying on a traditionally gendered division of labour, with progressive American social values. Superficially, *The Goldbergs* can be read as a representative, “naïve” American sitcom of the 1950s. But Gertrude Berg was both a talented writer and performer, who articulated a distinct subjectivity through her creation of Molly Goldberg, which she rooted in her own experiences as an American-Jewish woman. In so doing, she made this subjectivity communicable and, to an extent, “universalized” it by making it accessible to a mass audience. She thus made women’s dialogic comedy available to viewers able to adopt an appropriately empathic subject position. To those who were not, she offered alternative pleasures: *The Goldbergs* is a text that remains legible from a variety of perspectives.

As I have shown, the feminine subjectivity latent in *The Goldbergs* comes into conflict at every level with the antithetical (patriarchal) values imposed on it by the postwar television industry as conditions of its articulation. The effect is to produce a series of textual disruptions analogous in television to what Judy Little calls “an infection in the sentence” in literature.<sup>63</sup> To summarize these in the reverse order to that in which I proposed them: there are first of all numerous surface perturbations, best exemplified by the Mollypropisms, that discreetly problematize the order of subjects and objects in the Goldberg household. Others include the incursions of the “Yoo-hoo” circle on Jake’s domestic autonomy; the denigrations Molly repeatedly suffers, and the reversals of performance technique by which Gertrude Berg the actor registers them. Second, these are the symptoms of numerous redirections: for example at the level of story, in which narratives that tend towards what I have called a talion “masculine” ending, terminate instead in more inclusive “feminine” resolutions. At the level of the series, there is a redirection of the overarching narrative from a concern with Sammy’s future to one

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<sup>62</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014); Susan Lavin, *Women and Comedy in Solo Performance: Phyllis Diller, Lily Tomlin, and Roseanne* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); and Domnica Radulescu, *Women’s Comedic Art As Social Revolution: Five Performers and the Lessons of Their Subversive Humor* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Little, “Humoring the Sentence: Women’s Dialogic Comedy,” 19.

with Rosalie's. Thirdly, these are related in turn to a number of outright inversions and substitutions that transform the discursive effect of each episode. Of these, two are the most conspicuous: first, the inversion of melodramatic and comic temporalities in the development of the action; and second, the substitution of the "laughter of voluntary self-deflation" for the laughter of sadistic deflation of the other (more proper to farce) at its climax. Underlying all of these, however, there is deeply concealed within the fabric of every episode a fundamental antithesis that we may read as straightforwardly (though subtly) oppositional. Ultimately, it is Molly's kindly will that governs the progress of the plot and provides its resolution; and it is Molly's perspective, established formally during the beginning and ending product spots, that structures the story. The hand that holds the Rybutol bottle is the one that rules the diegetic world of *The Goldbergs*.

At the same time, then, as it enthusiastically rehearses the tropes of 1950s television and reproduces its ideology, serves the interests of its male-dominated social order, and affirms its values, *The Goldbergs* also resists them. In this essay, I have shown that this is not due to any conscious ideological project on the part of the series' author and lead performer, but is instead the consequence of Berg's truthful articulation throughout the series of her own subjectivity as a Jewish-American woman through discreetly disruptive humour, and the often surprising multivocality of 1950s television.

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