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The Golden Girls: Addressing Issues of Gender, Stigma, and Illness on Network Television

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THE GOLDEN GIRLS:
**ADDRESSING ISSUES OF GENDER, STIGMA, AND ILLNESS
ON NETWORK TELEVISION**

**BY
MILES MARTIN**

**SENIOR HONORS PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND HONORS PROGRAM
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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the mature, mighty women in my life: Catherine Winfield Pearson, Martha Langer, and Pamela Martin. Thank you for being a friend.

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Introduction

More Than a Laugh: *The Golden Girls*

“Women like me don’t grow on trees.” – Dorothy Zbornak

(“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”)

The Golden Girls has recently staged a comeback in an off-Broadway show entitled *That Golden Girls Show... a Puppet Parody*, written and directed by Jonathan Rockefeller (Genzlinger). Over thirty years after its 1985 premiere, Rose, Blanche, Dorothy, and Sophia are still iconic figures in American popular culture. There is an incredible allure and nostalgia to this classic sitcom that is difficult to articulate; in this work, I investigate exactly what it is about this magical show that has rendered it such an enduring presence in American cultural consciousness, and in so doing, illuminate how television in general can transcend incidental popularity and have a larger lasting impact on those who view it. I frame this examination within the topic of disenfranchised illness, a subject that, given events such as the rise of HIV/AIDS, the emergence of crack-cocaine addiction, and the discovery of chronic fatigue syndrome in the 1980’s, was highly relevant to contemporary audiences of *The Golden Girls*.

In Chapter 1, I posit that television is capable of influencing its audience in ways unique to it as a form of media by critically engaging the work of postmodern popular culture scholars. I then argue that *The Golden Girls* was uniquely capable of transmitting ideas to audiences, particularly ideas concerning and of consequence to women, as a result of its intersectional position in the range of programming available in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. In Chapter 2, I fortify my argument by bringing focus to the topic of disenfranchised illness in American culture of the 1980’s and 1990’s; I claim that the topics of illness and gender are inextricably

linked, thus *The Golden Girls* was well prepared to address the complex and gendered social issues surrounding addiction, HIV/AIDS, and chronic fatigue syndrome in this period.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I engage in close readings of five episodes of *The Golden Girls* that feature representations of these illnesses. Through each episode, I demonstrate that this series both facilitated and complicated its audience's understandings of these conditions and the stigmas, discrimination, and hierarchies attached to them. While not always hitting the mark in terms of realism, *The Golden Girls* articulated such issues to audiences through engaging storylines and characters who are consistently hilarious and heartfelt. It served as a vital vector for important information, filling a hole that could not be filled by film or by strictly educational television.

Ultimately, whether we view the four wonderful, witty women on *The Golden Girls* as our long-lost sisters, mothers, or grandmothers, they are ingrained in our collective cultural memory due to their terrific humor, relatability, and nostalgia. As Dorothy wryly puts it in the series finale, women like these “don’t grow on trees” (“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”). However, *The Golden Girls* offers us more than this; the creators of this show were brave adventurers, diving into complex, underrepresented topics through narratives of the mature woman, who was nearly invisible on American television. This work serves to demonstrate how four post-menopausal ladies have captured our imaginations for so long. No other academic work has specifically unpacked this show as a vehicle for social issues, presenting a gap in television scholarship that I aim to fill. It is humorously appropriate that I do this writing just as *The Golden Girls* has returned to us in puppet form, showing us that, like any good friend, Rose, Blanche, Dorothy, and Sophia will always be there for us.

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