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Can America Catch Up to the Wonderful Midlife Mother? *Postmaternal Characters in Contemporary Culture*

I Judging Amy's Mother

In 2000, CBS started running a dramatic/ comedy series called *Judging Amy*, about a postmaternal woman (played by feminist icon Tyne Daly) with three adult children. It is still running strong three seasons later. When it started, it was a fascinating but in some ways depressing representation of relations between adult children and their mother. It demonstrated what a vigorous life postmaternal stereotypes lead in the U.S. despite three decades of feminist activism around motherhood and the midlife.

"Amy's mother" was a widowed social worker who made room in her Hartford home for two of her three children: one, a newly divorced lawyer (Amy, in her 30s), appointed as a family-court judge, and Vincent, a would-be writer. Gathering the clan animated family dysfunction—more specifically, the failures of a midlife mom with regard to her adult children. It wasn't Amy we were judging, but Amy's mother. Early episodes fixed her character as an infantilizing nag with a superior air. She scolded the judge for not eating enough lunch, called the cops when Amy was speeding back to court. Undervaluing Vincent's creativity, she stole hours from his work and had the nerve to complain, "You don't thank me for raising you!"

The director put Daly's hair in an old-fashioned bun, made her stiffen her cheek muscles to look rigid. Vincent and Amy hid together to talk her over, but she had no ally to complain to about them. Old as they were—long as they had known her as adults—they still hadn't adjusted to her brusque style. Despite her 28 years of work experience, she was supposed to be just another Ever-Ready Mom whose worth is measured by how well she serves *their* needs. Judges relied on Maxine's experience but her kids never asked about her work. Several episodes required "Vincent's mother" to apologize, the first time for mistakes

she made raising him. She had depended on him too much and protected him too much—prosecutorial contradictions that would seem utterly irrational if they didn't describe mothering from a child's-eye view. When she came running into Vincent's hospital room after he was shot, he rolled away from her, saying wearily, "I'm sorry they told you."

I wrote an analysis of the show cum cultural complaint, which was published at the end of the first season (in an article in the *New York Times*' Arts and Leisure section (Gullette 2000a). Since then, "Maxine Gray" has had a character make-over. Slowly, producer-writer Barbara Hall and the other writers have reduced her defects and given her more selfhood. We hear people call her by her first name. As a social worker, her sweetness comes out with child clients; her lofty tartness is admirable in dealing with abusers. She inspires respect in her boss, a younger man who increasingly relies on her advice to run their agency. The writers gave her a rich lover, and therefore, occasionally, a more glamorous wardrobe and hair worn loose. (She still has no close friend, nor, in a town where everyone knows her, any drop-in neighbours.) Maxine smiles more, and she has various kinds of smiles. They're giving the expressive Daly a fuller range of emotions to play through.

Maxine's relations with her children and with a troubled charming nephew have become closer in important ways—ways that recognize the value of the "matriarch." Maxine can still be brusque, but when this happens the audience is plainly shown that she too is hurting. She handles her pert loquacious grandchild better than Amy does. She can sometimes advise her daughter and son Peter well, and sometimes refrain. Her children would *not* be better off as orphans. They all argue with each other better—an important skill for families of adults. They have grown up enough to attune themselves to her more. Psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin says that a child begins to recognize the mother as a separate being at age two. At times Judge Amy can now manage this at age 35. At her law-school reunion, mocked by her classmates as someone who still lives with her *mother*, Amy turns on them and defends the situation: "I want my daughter to know her." Amy tried an apartment but they are now happily back in the family house together. Sometimes, at the end of a separately dreadful professional day, Maxine and Amy pig out on ice cream in wordless sympathy side by side. In rare moments, they reach a goal that I believe is current in postmaternal and some young-adult thinking and dreaming: they become equally adults together.

In an era of niche marketing by age and gender, the writers of this TV show aimed to expand the midlife share of their female audience, which includes many social workers. But even though they wanted to give a midlife mother a life, they could not at first manage it. They could not help identifying with the children-of-30, an identification that produced the clichés of generational warfare. On their side, Amy and Vincent were always going to "grow": that's what kids and sympathetic protagonists do. Producer/writer Barbara Hall had already determined that they would have "arcs," script-lingo for psychological

development or change. Giving Maxine her own arcs was probably an afterthought, or an effect of *that* process. Perhaps my article hastened the process.

Dramatic soaps mimic “reality,” or rather, they try to keep moving closer to the space where the writers think a (desirable) consensus about the real lies. It’s our good fortune that the consensus on Maxine Gray, Postmaternal Working Woman, seems to lie where anti-middle-ageism in the women’s movement and feminist social criticism have brought it: to a midlife character who is multi-faceted, complex, interesting, determined, and self-determining.

II Postmaternity in the Comics

The comics pages can be much less constrained by reality checks than social dramas. There the historicized unconscious bubbles up, sometimes in fear, sometimes in happy desire.

One of my favorite strips, by Nicole Hollander, is *named* after a postmaternal woman, a sarky cultural critic, a gourmandizing, navel-gazing, wise-ass freelance writer, schemer, and self-publicist: no other than Sylvia herself. When she isn’t doing cats and dogs, Hollander often uses this character for progressive political satire and belly-aching. This side of her work heavily depends on the relationship between Sylvia and her adult daughter, Rita. Over the years, I have closely watched her develop it. Nobody grows, exactly, but the implied situation emerges more clearly.

Sylvia is the center, quite obliviously self-centered. Rita is often a room away or a voice off, but that’s a minor material subordination in a realm where voice counts more than anything. Rita has as big a voice. (Comic characters—if you’ve never noticed the caps—shout.) Rita, like Amy, now lives in, and they share a bathroom. But this implies no comment on Rita’s psychic dependency or inability to pay the rent. It’s an opportunity to let dialogue spark. Sometimes Sylvia mock-orders her daughter to fetch something.

“RITA! GET MY SMELLING SALTS!”

(Offstage:) “MA! YOU USED THEM UP WHEN YOU DISCOVERED THAT REPEAL OF THE ESTATE TAX BENEFITTED ONLY THE VERY VERY RICH.” (Hollander, 2001)

Sylvia squeezes political implication out of every repartee.

Sylvia the character (and what a character!) spends her time typing and snacking, in the tub or in front of the TV, inventing scams, writing preposterous serials, commenting on life in America. Rita can be her mother’s straight-man, feeding her lines for Sylvia to top. Or she can tease her mother’s absurdities, sass her about not exercising. She has no inhibitions because there’s no fear of losing her mother’s love. There’s no meanness on either side; it’s all benign. When Sylvia gets truly irritated by the outrages of contemporary capitalism, government, and patriarchy, Rita is right there offering her comfort food. They both

wear big hair and big earrings: they *look like* a wild mother-and-daughter pair. Their persiflage is an everyday pleasure. There are hints about the child-rearing that brought them to this point on the stage of life—it was slapdash and not overclean but must have been lively. Their joking would not be possible if the characters were not always already performing equal-adulthood together. Hollander's feminist unconscious—I would argue—enables Sylvia to enjoy some benefits of age-hierarchy that most readers never notice and Rita doesn't resent. Madcap Mouthy Mother, Dutiful Daughter: Each winds up *voluntarily* playing her shtick.

On the same comics pages in my newspaper, *Dilbert* occasionally gets a middle-aged mother. This strip has been the typical parent-free, child-free workplace of alienated and resentful anomie. "Mom" wears a prim, scalloped dress and glasses like her son's. (Mother and child are also alike in having eyes set too close together and no necks). Unlike Dilbert, notoriously mouthless, Mom has a lip. In one strip she tells Dilbert over and over about the successes of "Norma's son." ("HIS CUBICLE IS DOUBLE-WIDE.") In the final frame, she concludes, "THANKS TO YOU, MY 'SCRABBLE' NIGHT IS A LIVING HELL" (Adams, 2002a). Scott Adams, probably now the best-known comic-strip creator in America, has picked up on the competition of the 1990s between working young-adults. Employees (whatever their age) were finding their working conditions steadily worsening, while the business media published articles about how rich "Generation Xers" in the New Economy were getting to be. "If you're so young, why ain't you rich?" was the implied taunt until the stock market crash of 2000. With Dilbert's Mom, Adams has displaced this competition—which certainly puzzled and saddened many parents—onto chagrined postmaternal women.

Adams has recently pitted mother against son in a weird direct battle. Mom decides to sue Dilbert's company, which they both rightly understand is run by "weasels." In typical corporate fashion, the weasels enlist her son, their employee, as a "goon" to force her to back down. In another strip where the two are arguing about her lawsuit, in the final frame she doubts her parentage of a son capable of such betrayal: "I DEMAND A DNA TEST" (Adams, 2002b). One can scarcely imagine more open references to young-adult fears of (post)maternal rejection. If Mom wins her righteous suit, Dilbert says, he will lose his job. There's no win-win imaginable here. The dog-eat-dog world of postindustrial capital will have degraded all human relationships, even the one that Freud said was the tenderest, that of a mother toward her son. Adam's readers may be able to see this, but a sloppier reading would consider Mom a mean nold mother who makes her son's life harder. If Adams is actually distracting attention from the powerful corporate forces he usually excoriates, that would not be the first time that the postmaternal woman has been blamed for not being able to rescue her children (see Gullette, 2000b).

If we hypothesize a spectrum of existing popular-culture attitudes toward the postmaternal, *Dilbert* and *Sylvia* might be at opposite poles of it. *Sylvia*

represents a feminist fantasy, in which postmaternal and (female) young-adult desires for the ideal relationship just—wonderfully—happen to coincide. *Dilbert* may develop “Mom” in unexpected ways, but so far she is the far side of North American unconscious fantasies of mother-responsibility: she seems to represent the (male) adult child’s dread of powerful midlife motherhood: out to get him, never satisfied by what he accomplishes. The Superego as Postmaternal Woman. For myself, I think any loving son could imagine himself saying Rita’s lines, and any unloving daughter could fit herself inside *Dilbert*’s mindset, but in the strips the adult children’s natures are gendered just as Nancy Chodorow, over twenty-five years ago, expected them to be.

In between *Dilbert* and *Sylvia* is *Judging Amy*, whose evolving situation is being developed by writers who seem to be working their way out of a hostile and self-centered young-adult subject position toward a more self-conscious, cross-generational, egalitarian, and feminist, point of view. Would that more Americans could follow this trajectory.

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This may be the point at which to note how ubiquitous postmaternal figures are in contemporary culture—although feminist cultural critique and mothering theory have been slow to discover them. Where ever (female) gender, (middle) age, and the coming-of-age of adult children coincide, there stand imaginary postmaternal figures in wide array. Literature has long been fascinated by the broad range of ethical, psychological, familial, social, and dynastic relations between midlife mothers (and fathers) and their adult offspring. Mainstream culture worries the dyadic personal relation as endlessly as the Greeks did. But this doesn’t mean that the issues are “universal.” Our own socioeconomic and political issues remain hidden behind stereotypes.

Postmaternal matrophobia lives

The contemporary cultural problem for women whose children are independent is often represented in pop psychology books as “empty-nest syndrome.” I believe that this was once a common subjective/ historical emotion, constructed for those women in advanced patriarchal societies who had fewer children than in the past and thus finished their child-rearing too early, before being legitimately old. Since women in the middle-classes couldn’t work for pay outside the home, their major identity as mother ended without there being many alternatives (see Gullette, 1995). This was so in the U.S. at about the time Mother’s Day was invented, a century ago.

Now, there should be fewer mothers likely to suffer from it. Most women-who-raise-children also work while their children are still young; they experience the resultant stress. In the new paradigm (which I have described elsewhere [Gullette, 2002]), the postmaternal period is far likelier to be anticipated as a space of relief, and subsequently lived as a space of freedom and/or growth, with revolutionary consequences for mothers and their adult children and society at large. Thus “empty nest” feelings may affect only the first

ten minutes of the new postmaternal story, if that.¹ Many women, like Maxine, have nests that are quite full.

The real problem for American mothers at midlife is not empty rooms but “matrophobia” or mother-blaming. Feminists have studied mother-blaming as directed at the mothers of *young* children, but at least in America today the type that targets the mothers of young adults is probably more frequent.

Postmaternal matrophobia is a psycho-cultural disease still acquired by adult children. They are trained to stop listening to their mothers and to blame them for “hovering,” bossiness, “Oedipal” failure to detach, “overinvestment” or inability to help with problems of love and work. In an era of heightened youth-cultism, the remedy prescribed is to “back off” and renegotiate on the terms the children set. Postmaternal matrophobia wars against the idea that mothers are people, or that adult children might be responsible for treating them with consideration, as they themselves expect to be treated.

In movies as in TV, adult children can be as selfish as babies. In *Steel Magnolias*, Shirley Maclaine’s mother is about to donate a kidney to save her adult daughter. Playing “Go Fish,” her grown children laugh uproariously at the line “Give me ... all your internal organs.” Only if a mother is dying—now I’m thinking of *One True Thing*—can she get her daughter’s attention. Only if she is caring for her dying daughter—*Terms of Endearment*—is she worthy of ours. Postmaternal women are exposed to meanness, even contempt, they *deserve*. Think of Woody Allen’s huge mother floating over New York City embarrassing him in *Oedipus Wrecks*. Even in *Modern Maturity*, the journal of the American Association of Retired People (AARP) (which might be expected to be sensitive to sexist ageism), mothers-in-law are patronized as “buttinskies” and patronizingly lectured to remember “there is more than one way to make potato salad” (Grieder, 2000: 57-58).² It’s as if the entire culture empathized only with adult children, and then primarily during that brief developmental stage when the young fear that they will never be independent and blame their parents for infantilizing them. Cultural amnesia to this degree requires not only dissing mothers and sometimes fathers, but also forgetting the other young adults who have more easily become less dependent and who remain (for the rest of their lives) in the stage of being—or working toward being—equally adults together with their parents.

Adults should start asking, of all the “Amy’s mothers” and “Dilbert’s mothers” dumped on us: When will they give us fictions and documentaries for wide-spread popular consumption, starring women who have a full subjective world, and whose adult children are “best supporting actors” who like, respect, and rely on them? Not to have such worlds depicted is cruel to women with adult children and terrifying to women whose children are younger and being dosed with these slow toxic drips.

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Each era of literature uses the postmaternal to explore certain problems most relevant to that interesting phase of family life and national needs when

two (and sometimes three) generations of the family are adult at the same time. And each artist who uses a postmaternal figure takes a stance in relation to that problematic. Postmaternal women have been compelling moral figures since Clytemnestra³ killed her husband Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia to the gods of war. Isak Dinesen (1942) recounted the tragedy of a woman forced to work herself to death trying to save her adult son in the feudal conditions of “Sorrow Acre.” Virginia Woolf (1981) showed how fully Mrs. Dalloway was invested in life even though her daughter was momentarily in love with a mother-substitute. The term *postmaternal* is capacious enough to be applied to, among other twentieth-century figures, Mrs. Robinson, Ms. Klein, and Mrs. Bridge, Ma Joad and Ma Barker, Mildred Pierce and Stella Dallas, Mother Courage and the mother betrayed in *The Iceman Cometh*.

There is material enough to teach a course in postmaternal heroines (I have). Contemporary artists too sense that the lives of midlife mothers intersect with high themes. Many find their subjectivities more absorbing than those of young-adult protagonists: Pearl Tull in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (Tyler, 1982), Sethe in *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987), and Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* (Marshall, 1983). In two post-apartheid novels, Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer (1998, 1994) has chosen to portray aspects of the postmaternal situation, most notably in the austere intense *House Gun* (1998). In Mary Gordon’s divertimento about the perfect midlife, *Spending*, when cocky painter Monica Szabo gets in trouble with the religious right, daughter Rachel “organized her friends from Brown to come and picket for her mom. Filial devotion takes many forms; this was a new one” (1998: 192).

Foreign film-makers with progressive agendas have captured the political bravery of women whose boys are old enough for conflict. In *Any Mother’s Son*, Hellen Mirren becomes the activist arms and voice of her imprisoned IRA son. *Prisoner of the Mountains* confers legendary stature on all the Russian mothers who went to Chechnya to rescue their sons in the first phase of that war, and by extension, all midlife women who fight state power.

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The actual conditions of postmaternity—which include women’s new freedoms, energy, and power, and changes in the parent-child dynamic—are well-kept secrets outside of a few excellent surveys in anthropology, psychology, and sociology. Why?

Postmaternal matrophobia may be easier to understand if we treat it as a historically separate phenomenon from mother-blaming. We could reserve the term “mother-blaming” for what patriarchy says about women raising *younger* children. It’s another way of constructing younger women in traditional ways as instinctively maternal and wholly responsible for child-rearing. This construction helps determine the values and personality-types that dominant society wants mothers to inculcate or reproduce. Patriarchy uses female responsibility to scapegoat mothers and avoid blaming fathers.

Historically, postmaternal matrophobia kicks in whenever young adults rather than dependents are seen as “in crisis” and when midlife mothers are imagined to be getting too much power. Both were true in the flaming 1920s, right after women won the vote, when young adults were experimenting with sexuality, booze, drugs. Midlife mothers were portrayed as idle, unwanted, and out of a job, as well as “Victorian” in opposing their children’s sexual interests and need for independence.

The postmaternal matrophobia of our time is more puzzling. I would almost say it is anachronistic. Many of us—I include myself in here—raised our children to be eventual friends. Helped by the women’s movement, we had respect for ourselves. Of all generations of women, we best know the working world. We can recognize that many adult children joining the workforce are in real trouble. Despite the past triumphalism of Wall Street, we see them overworked and mostly underpaid, without secure futures or pensions, and, as a result, delaying marriage, children (and, for us, grandchildren). Unconsciously, I think, we expected to grow into a friendly, sensitive, upper position in the family age hierarchy—accomplishing something thereby that most of our mothers were unable to accomplish.

But this has not always happened, or not fully enough. I suspect hidden disappointments, mainly unspeakable. Otherwise empowered and experienced, with our children we may feel more estranged than we should be. How can we speak for their interests when we’re not supposed to speak “for” them at all? Silencing serves political needs: to diminish our potential influence, to keep us from unifying as “mothers of kids working 24/7,” “mothers of economic victims,” “mothers of Iraq-bound soldiers,” women who identify with any of the above.

This brief essay is intended to highlight problems and point directions, not to answer all the questions. To raise postmaternity as a central issue in the analysis of culture has been my main goal. What is clear is that writers in all media need to take more advantage of the vast unexplored territories here. Hypotheses such as mine need to be disconfirmed or amplified by qualitative interviews and by the production of more autobiographical narratives by diverse postmaternal women. On the heels of the United Nation’s Year of the Older Woman, I have some free script advice. Grow up, America. To overcome the unconscious cultural identifications with youth, give us deep stories about whole women who happen to have adult children. Let a few juicy drops of our diverse realities leak into representation.

¹Nevertheless, 30 years into second-wave feminism, this tired-old “empty nest” fantasy plays out in not just in cartoons, nonfiction books, and TV but in movies and novels. It’s driven by “news” features about “Boomer”—women’s maternal “dread” and “depression” in the autumn, when the next batch of kids trudges off to college. The Library of Congress still uses “Empty Nesters” as the subject

heading for a group who would be better off if more neutrally termed “postmaternal.”

²Even in *Sylvia*, an adult daughter once told her mother that she’d rather “eat glass” than move back home. Now Rita seems to be settled in pretty comfortably.

³Clytemnestra is a character in many Greek plays, including Aeschulus’s *Oresteia*.

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