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Marge Simpson, Blue-Haired Housewife: Defining Domesticity on *The Simpsons*

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More than twenty seasons after its debut as a short on the Tracy Ullman Show in 1989, pundits, politicians, scholars, journalists, and critics continue to discuss and debate the meaning and relevance of *The Simpsons* to American society. For academics and educators, the show offers an especially dense pop culture text, inspiring articles and anthologies examining *The Simpsons* in light of American religious life, the representation of homosexuality in cartoons, and the use of pop culture in the classroom, among many other topics (Dennis; Frank; Henry “The Whole World’s Gone Gay”; Hobbs; Kristiansen). Philosophers and literary theorists in particular are intrigued by the quintessentially postmodern self-aware form and content of *The Simpsons* and the questions about identity, spectatorship, and consumer culture it raises (Alberti; Bybee and Overbeck; Glynn; Henry “The Triumph of Popular Culture”; Herron; Hull; Irwin et al.; Ott; Parisi).

Simpsons observers frequently note that this TV show begs one of the fundamental questions in cultural studies: can pop culture ever provide a site of individual or collective resistance or must it always ultimately function in the interests of the capitalist dominant ideology? Is *The Simpsons* a brilliant satire of virtually every cherished American myth about public and private life, offering dissatisfied Americans the opportunity to critically reflect on contemporary issues (Turner 435)? Or is it simply another TV show making money for the Fox

Network? Is *The Simpsons* an empty, cynical, even nihilistic view of the world, lulling its viewers into laughing hopelessly at the pointless futility of contemporary life (Jones 267; Spangler 14)? More specifically, to what extent does *The Simpsons* critique and ridicule the idealized nuclear family, as so often portrayed on 1950s televised domestic sitcoms (Douglas and Michaels 214–17)? And to what extent does it in fact reaffirm the nuclear family as the bedrock of our contemporary society (Cantor; Van Allen)? To what extent does it do both (Alberti xviii; Korte)?

In this article, I will argue that *The Simpsons* satirizes the mythology of sitcom suburban families and that Marge Simpson's character reveals the fictionality of the televised housewife in subtle and blatant ways, that is, she demonstrates that the domesticity embodied by TV housewives is unrealistic, fantastic, and cannot be reproduced by human beings. But for all its postmodern twisting and satirizing of both its form (a family sitcom on commercial television) and its content (contemporary American consumerism, celebrity culture, the work place, and family life), *The Simpsons* offers a relatively mild critique of domestic gender roles. It playfully and humorously questions the function of the nuclear family in American society, but it ultimately embraces the centrality of female domesticity to the very definition of "a family."

From its first season in 1990, *The Simpsons* derided the idealized family sitcoms of the past: the bickering Simpson family seemed the very antithesis of the placid, well-ordered families in postwar family sitcoms such as *Father Knows Best*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Leave it to Beaver*, and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. Although these shows never achieved more than mediocre to fair ratings when first aired in the 1950s and early 1960s, they all achieved notable longevity and substantial cultural influence in syndication (Leibman 267). *The*

Simpsons share a locale (the fictional Springfield) with the citizens of *Father Knows Best* (Jones 267), but in the Simpson family, Homer not only does not know best, but he is boorish, greedy, lazy, clumsy, obviously less intelligent than Marge, and often insensitive to the needs of his family.

Homer's character has plenty of TV precedents, particularly among families coded as "working class." Beginning with Ralph Kramden, continuing to Fred Flintstone and Archie Bunker, the chubby white male working-class buffoon, or "fat slob" character certainly did not originate with Homer Simpson (Butsch 576; Jernigan 96). The trend continues in other contemporary sitcoms as well, such as *King of Queens*, *Family Guy*, and *According to Jim*. Even upper middle-class families on contemporary TV have their share of inept, bumbling, wisecracking men married to women too good for them, such as Tim on *Home Improvement* and the title character of *Everybody Loves Raymond* (Gates 1). Still, even keeping in mind Homer's TV forefathers, *The Simpsons* clearly presented a direct challenge to the image of the attentive and authoritative father best embodied on *Father Knows Best* and on *The Cosby Show*—an enormously successful and influential show that ruled the airwaves when *The Simpsons* premiered (Chow 113; Frazer and Frazer).

In addition to the all-knowing father figure, *The Simpsons* satirizes many aspects of American family and work life idealized in 1950s sitcoms. In this respect, the show very much reflects the sensibilities of its originator, Matt Groening. As a Los Angeles cartoonist, Groening relentlessly satirized the basic elements of the American dream, portraying schools, families, and workplaces as prisons of the mind and soul. The teachers in Springfield are bored and quick to stifle any creativity or curiosity in their pupils. The police officers, elected officials, and court

officers are corrupt, shiftless, and incompetent. The town's leading Christians are annoying and narrow-minded do-gooders or hypocrites. Springfield's biggest employer, Montgomery Burns, owner of the nuclear power plant, is evil incarnate, a monstrously rich and greedy man who routinely disregards employee safety and the environment. Meanwhile, the citizens of Springfield accept this with only sporadic protest.

But *The Simpsons* offers viewers more than a sad, cynical portrayal of contemporary life. At its best, *The Simpsons* thoughtfully and humorously satirizes these troubling aspects of life in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America. And satire is always more than simplistic cynicism: it asks readers and viewers to perceive the failings of the dominant paradigm. It invites the audience to notice what often goes unnoticed and accepted. As Philip Roth wrote, "Satire is moral outrage transformed into comic art" (Katz 1). In the words of George Meyer, a writer and producer of *The Simpsons*, the show asks "people to reexamine their world, and specifically, the authority figures in their world" (Turner 56). This element of *The Simpsons* sets it apart from other sitcoms, perhaps even suggesting a new televised form, a kind of antisitcom.

However, sentiment is as necessary as satire to the success of *The Simpsons* and is probably the source of its broad appeal. The Simpson family, for all its numerous and well-documented faults, in the end always affirms the core values that postwar sitcom families took for granted. For example, the Simpsons live in a tightly knit community where citizens know one another (including figures of authority and governance) and they all participate in civic life (Cantor). Scholars and commentators also make much of the fact that the Simpson family is the only sitcom family to regularly attend church and to frequently discuss God and faith (Heit;

Lehner; Mattingly; Pinsky; Satkin).

Perhaps even more importantly, the Simpsons, despite their arguments, conflicts, and even physical violence toward one another, also regularly demonstrate love, loyalty, and affection. Many journalists and critics in recent years point out this affirmation of “traditional” values on *The Simpsons* (Cantor; Corliss; Goldberg; Hibbs; Mason), effectively negating the early criticism of the show, particularly Bart’s rude, antiauthoritarian attitude toward manners, teachers, and parental discipline. Today critics are much more likely to discuss how the Simpsons ultimately embody the most important tenet of “family values”: a solid nuclear family. The Simpson children, despite their clear-eyed acceptance of Homer’s failings as a father, Bart’s disregard for authority, and Lisa’s frustration with the narrow worldview of her parents, often express their affection for and loyalty to Marge and Homer. Maggie, as the prespeech infant, obviously adores Marge and has a soft spot for Homer, although he is remarkably inattentive to her. As parents, Marge and Homer try to the best of their ability to raise their children right. And at the heart of the Simpson family, like so many other sitcom families, are the domestic roles of Homer and Marge: a male breadwinner and a female homemaker who enjoy an affectionate, faithful (heterosexual) marriage.

While Homer demonstrates new failings as a father and a husband in virtually every episode, Marge rarely falls short as a mother or a wife. Her unconditional love for both offspring and spouse often serves as the show’s nod to genuinely moving moments of familial affection. Critics point to Marge’s exemplary mothering as one of the most important ways *The Simpsons* embodies traditional values (Duffy, “An Ode to Marge’s Style of Motherhood”; “She’s Just Like My Mom”).¹ Even when she does make a parenting mistake, Marge’s unwavering

devotion to her family soon rectifies the problem. For instance, during an episode titled “Moaning Lisa” in the first season, Marge advises precocious Lisa, suffering from existential angst, to simply stifle feelings of despair and put on a happy face. But later, watching Lisa grin and bear it, Marge changes her mind and urges Lisa to go ahead and feel blue if she wants to. The first season also brought Marge perilously close to a marital mistake, in the shape of a seductive bowling instructor (“Life on the Fast Lane”). On the way to their first illicit rendezvous, Marge’s car stops at a crossroads: one way leads to the bed of suave Jacque, the other to Homer’s work place, the nuclear power plant. In the next *Officer and a Gentleman*-esque scene, Marge walks determinedly into the plant where a jubilant Homer sweeps her off her feet, announcing: “Tell [the boss] I’m going to the back seat of my car with the woman I love, and I won’t be back for ten minutes!” The scene vividly demonstrates *The Simpsons*’ unique combination of satire and sentiment.²

There are many aspects of Marge’s role as wife and mother that deliberately, and brilliantly, satirize the televised stereotype of a preternaturally cheerful homemaker. Her appearance itself calls into question the character of “housewife.” Most obviously, Marge sports a huge blue beehive. Of all the members of this animated family, Marge’s hair designates her the most “cartoonish” Simpson and it is certainly her most distinguishing feature, stretching Marge’s height to an unnatural 8’6” tall (“Marge in Chains”). Any discussion of Marge in the press nearly always mentions her hair (Duffy, “Main Mom is Marge, Sky-Blue Hair and All”; Zehme) and in a humorous series of advertisements for Dove hair products, her hair appears soft and flowing, apparently freed from the confines of stiff and sticky hair spray. Attacked on the paintball field in a recent episode, Marge gasps at the resulting blotches of red and yellow

paint on her hair, exclaiming “My hive! My trademark hive” (“The Father, The Son, and The Holy Guest Star”)!

The writers often incorporate Marge’s blue hair into physical gags. They show Marge hiding or removing unlikely objects from her hair: the family’s Christmas savings in a large glass jar (“Simpsons Roasting on an Open Fire”), the cat (“I Love Lisa”), or Maggie’s pacifier (“Springfield”). Marge’s hair is also sometimes humorously chopped off: by Homer who mistakes it as part of the hedge and hacks it off with hedge clippers (“The Front”), or by the blades of a helicopter (“Last Exit to Springfield”). The writers probably intend these jokes to simply add visual humor to the show. However, these moments also draw attention to the fact that Marge is a cartoon character, not bound by the dictates of a real body. After all, her hair always grows back by the beginning of the next scene. The other characters occasionally demonstrate the cartoon ability to defy the laws of physicality; Homer does not develop cancer after exposure to enormous levels of radiation, for example. But Marge’s outlandish hair contrasts sharply with the pointy outline of hair on Lisa and Bart, drawings that are least reminiscent of human hairstyles. And their hair certainly does not grow back instantly: in a recent episode, after they have shaved each other’s heads during a squabble at the hair salon, Marge must make Bart and Lisa wigs (“Thank God, It’s Doomsday”). Homer’s baldness is definitely part of his image, an essential part of his buffoon persona, but his scant comb-over is a fairly realistic visual representation of baldness.³ Marge’s huge blue hair marks her as a fiction, a cartoon character that simply does not exist in our physical world. Like the sitcom “housewife” herself, Marge is not a real woman. Her hair is a constant marker: it never changes and continually flags Marge as unreal. Marge’s blue beehive could not be more different than the

sleek conservative styles seen on the vast majority of TV wives, mothers, and housewives, from the 1950s to today.

On at least one occasion, in the sixteenth season, Marge's hair directly calls into question the character of idealized housewife itself. In "She Used to be My Girl," Marge's old high school friend Chloe, a beautiful, glamorous, and successful journalist, visits Springfield. Marge clearly feels like "just a housewife" in Chloe's presence. She is dismayed when Lisa openly admires and wants to emulate Chloe. When Lisa sneaks out of the house to join Chloe at a women's conference, however, Lisa finds herself in serious danger: Chloe is instead covering the explosion of Mount Springfield and both she and Lisa become trapped by a river of lava. Marge barrels through a police barricade and sprints across the lava, carrying Lisa to safety:

Lisa: Mom, that was incredible!

Marge: Nothing's more powerful than a mother's love.

Lisa: [looking up and seeing Marge's hair on fire] Mom, your hair!

Marge: Don't worry. We've got two hours before it burns down to my head.

This scene at first appears to be conforming to a post-World War II sitcom episode in which the stay-at-home mother is rewarded for her work by the love and gratitude of her child and the career woman's glamorous life is revealed to be far less fulfilling than the more womanly job of homemaking (Douglas 51; Leibman 194). But there is an important caveat here: the writers draw attention to Marge's outlandish, inhuman hair, and Marge, the model housewife, is revealed as a fiction: it forces the viewer to note that Marge does not really exist, and, subsequently, her supermother ability to rescue Lisa from lava is only a story. Her body is the satire; it belies the sentiment of the scene.

Marge's gravelly voice, the wonderful creation of actor Julie Cavner, is another element of Marge's body that pokes fun at earlier televised versions of housewives. Unlike the musical tones of Harriet Nelson, an exemplary good wife (Meehan 111), Marge's voice utterly fails to conform to the idealized standard of the maternal domestic woman. For all her devotion to Homer and her selfless care of her children, Marge is not subservient and her voice—scratchy, rough, undomesticated, the opposite of sweet—reflects that. Marge's voice rarely swoops or screeches; it does not make a mockery of her words or satirize the domestic in directly comic ways as Lucy Riccardo's might have done (Press 30–31; Spangler 34). Rather, Marge's voice is hers and hers alone: distinctive, almost genderless, and often raised in polite but persistent indignation in defense of her family.

Marge's character (as imagined by executive James Brooks) voiced a refusal to be demeaned or belittled during the Simpson family's most famous, real-life feud. In 1990, First Lady Barbara Bush briefly mentioned *The Simpsons* during an interview with *People* magazine. Bush characterized the show as “the dumbest thing [she] had ever seen” (“Bush vs. Simpson”). Producer James Brooks assumed Marge's voice and sent a letter to Mrs. Bush politely but pointedly refuting the slur: “Ma’am, if we’re the dumbest thing you ever saw, Washington must be a good deal different than what they teach us at the current events group at the church . . . I hope there is some way out of this controversy. I thought, perhaps it would be a good start to just speak my mind” (Radcliffe). The press soon learned of the letter and Mrs. Bush quickly sent back what James Brook characterized as “an almost gracious reply” (“Bush vs. Simpson”): “How kind of you to write. I’m glad you spoke your mind . . . [sic] I foolishly didn’t know you had one. . . . Please forgive a loose tongue” (Radcliffe). Despite this civil

exchange, Barbara Bush apparently did not take it all in good humor. She openly snubbed Brooks during a reception at which both were present. And President G. H. W. Bush clearly disagreed with Barbara's response to Marge: during a January 27, 1992 speech to the National Religious Broadcaster's convention, he asserted that Americans needed "to make American families a lot more like the Waltons and a lot less like the Simpsons" ("Bush vs. Simpson").⁴ On perhaps the most notable occasion that the fictional world of the Simpsons collided with political reality, Marge's voice offered the most pointed defense of the Simpson family.

Although "Marge" in this case is really "James Brooks," it is no coincidence that Brooks chose Marge to defend the family. Lisa, a consummate liberal activist, often raises her voice in feminist or environmentalist protest ("Lisa Simpson"; Turner 189–229). But it is Marge's uniquely jarring voice that takes on the job of moral guardianship of the family—and the town. Only a few episodes feature Marge as reluctant but determined social reformer. These are, however, among the best and most multilayered episodes. In "Itchy, Scratchy, and Marge," Marge single-handedly begins an effective campaign against cartoon violence. In "Marge vs. the Monorail" she is the only citizen of Springfield who sees the monorail as the con job it really is. She fights for the health of the whole town when she goes to court to ban sugar from Springfield in "Sweet and Sour Marge." She frees the brainwashed townspeople, including her own family, from the clutches of a bizarre cult in "The Joy of Sect." She even publicly criticizes America and its sensationalistic, loud mouth talk show hosts in "Bart Mangled Banner." In this era of rigidly defined "patriotism," Marge's act marked her as a radical critic of American society.

Marge, on certain memorable occasions, demonstrates the way women have expanded

their domestic sphere to include a public, political role. Marge will, when strongly provoked, take up the “social housekeeping” or “municipal housekeeping” espoused by Progressive-era reformers who asserted that the rough masculine world of politics needed the input of women; that women, as inherently moral beings, could provide ethical checks to the masculine realm of civic life (Evans 119–44; Sklar 271). Marge’s actions infrequently but significantly echo those of nineteenth-century reformers who argued that women and mothers possessed the best qualifications to act as advocates for child welfare reform or those of the activist housewives who angrily protested high food prices during the Great Depression, and atomic testing during the Cold War (Freedman 329; Orleck).

However, the most frequent way that Marge’s character challenges the idealization of the domestic sphere is in those episodes that reveal Marge’s frustration, anger, or exhaustion. On notable occasions, Marge’s tolerance of Homer’s inadequacies and her pleasure and satisfaction in homemaking abruptly disappear. In the first season, Homer’s inability to give her a thoughtful birthday gift drives Marge into the clutches of the aforementioned bowling instructor (“Life in the Fast Lane”). In another early episode Marge turns to a radio psychologist to vent her despair about her marriage: “My problem is my husband. He doesn’t listen to me. He doesn’t appreciate me. I don’t know how much more of this I can take. . . . When we were dating he was sweeter and more romantic and twenty pounds thinner and he had hair and he ate with utensils (‘Some Enchanted Evening’)!” In “The War of the Simpsons,” Marge insists they attend a marriage seminar and is outraged when Homer tries to sneak in a morning of fishing.

In “A Streetcar Named Marge” Marge lands the leading role in a community theater musical adaptation of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and playing the character of Blanche

allows Marge to get in touch with her pent-up feelings of rage and frustration. When the director urges Marge to fight Stanley (played by Ned Flanders) on stage, Marge demurs, saying “‘Couldn’t she just take his abuse with gentle good humor?’” But in a short while, Marge is envisioning Homer’s head on Ned’s muscle-bound torso and attacking him with fierce growls and a broken bottle. Homer at first is oblivious to Marge’s undertaking and then actively resents her absence from the home, in turn provoking a rare outburst of anger from Marge when she leaves dinner early to attend a rehearsal:

Homer: But what about dessert?

Marge: For god’s sake, you can pull the lid off your own can of pudding.

Homer: Fine, I will. [breaks off pudding lid tab] Oh no, my pudding is trapped forever! I can open my own can of pudding, can I? Shows what you know, Marge.

But on opening night, Marge’s performance deeply touches Homer, who sees himself in Stanley. Marge, touched by Homer’s shame, forgivingly embraces him. And this, in fact, is how all such episodes end: Homer expresses his love and devotion—he throws back the fish; he books a night out on the town for Marge—and Marge rushes into his arms, with a loving look and an “‘Aw, Homie.’” Marge’s satisfaction with her marriage is always restored.

Her frustrations with homemaking are somewhat less easily resolved. In “‘Homer Alone,’” Marge cracks under the strain of household and family demands and departs for a restful weekend at “‘Rancho Relaxo, Springfield’s only two-star spa.’” After a long sleep, a bubble bath, a hot fudge sundae, and a few tequila shots, Marge is refreshed and ready to return home. In other episodes, however, the exhausting, stultifying routine of housework is not so easily relieved. In one such episode, Marge tries to show Lisa that homemaking offers many opportunities for creativity and creates bacon and eggs smiley faces for Homer and Bart, who

gobble them obliviously (“Separate Vocations”). Marge acknowledges the drudgery of housework during “She Used to BE My Girl,” comparing her life to career woman Chloe’s:

Lisa: Mom, Chloe just won the Peabody Award!

Marge: Well, I just made the bathroom floor smell like lemons. Where’s the award for that?

Marge puts it quite plainly here: there is indeed little reward or outside validation for doing housework, even doing it as well as Marge does.

Employment or volunteer work outside the home never provides a lasting solution to Marge’s occasional discontent with homemaking. Whether it is a job at the nuclear plant (“Marge Gets a Job”), filling in during a teacher’s strike (“The PTA Disbands”), becoming a police officer (“The Springfield Connection”), becoming the church’s “Listen Lady” (“In Marge We Trust”), opening a pretzel business (“The Twisted World of Marge Simpson”), working as a realtor (“Reality Bites”), or writing a novel (“Diatribes of a Mad Housewife”), Marge’s forays into the world of paid employment never last more than one episode and always end by her reentering the home and reasserting the primacy of her domestic role. For one reason or another (Mr. Burns sexually harasses Marge; Homer sells out the pretzel business to the mob; Marge gives advice to Ned Flanders that consequently imperils his life; her conscience will not allow Marge to be an effective realtor), Marge’s attempts to dislocate herself from her domestic role fail.

Marge even fails to procure a modicum of self-fulfillment outside the home via that most domestic of routes, a bake-off (“All’s Fair in Oven War”). When an unscrupulous fellow contestant ruins Marge’s entry, Marge takes the low road and poisons the other entries with Maggie’s ear medicine. Lisa discovers the treachery, and Marge tries to convince her daughter

to ignore this ethical lapse: “Right now people just know me as the wife of a guy who doesn’t go to work. Can’t you understand that I need this?” In the end Marge cannot let her daughter down: Marge reveals her cheating to the contest’s judge, disqualifying herself from the contest. Homer tries to cheer her up:

Homer: And Marge, you’ll always be the best cook in our house.

Marge: Eh, B.F.D. I’ve had your scrambled eggs, Homer. The secret ingredient is whiskey.

Again, although Marge’s unconditional love resolves any episodic tensions in her marriage, her periodic frustrations with the limitations of domesticity are more complicated and are not soothed by Homer’s words of affection. “Eh, big fucking deal,” she replies.

On these occasions, Marge’s character clearly calls into question the stereotype of the idealized housewife. At the very least, Marge’s raspy “B.F.D.” challenges the total acquiescence of 1950s sitcom wives to traditional gender roles (Haralovich; Shullman 32). Marge voices a knowledge shared by anyone who has labored to maintain a home while raising children: housework offers few opportunities for a sense of satisfaction or achievement. Marge, in this moment, speaks out against the limitations of housewifery. Marge rejects the notion that Homer’s facile compliment will compensate for the frustrations and confines of housework. She pointedly refutes the myth of the TV housewife; she belies the image of the eternally cheerful, content, utterly domesticated wife and mother.

Despite these revealing moments of disquietude, however, Marge is a fundamentally domestic character. Not only does Marge always return to her role as housewife: she in fact makes the Simpson home. Without Marge attending her domestic tasks, the Simpson family cannot function. Like virtually every other sitcom family, the household’s female leading

character (whether employed or not) clearly maintains order in the home and thus, the family. When Marge is removed from the home, emotional and physical chaos ensues. For instance, in “Homer Alone,” Marge’s short spa vacation requires Bart and Lisa to stay with Patty and Selma, Marge’s strange spinster sisters. Maggie fares even worse: left alone with Homer, who cannot feed or diaper her, Maggie crawls away from home after making her way through a jungle of dirty dishes and old pizza boxes. In another instance even brainy, capable Lisa cannot fill Marge’s shoes when Marge is disabled by a skiing accident (“Little Big Mom”).

An especially revealing episode, “Marge in Chains,” begins with all the Simpsons except Marge falling ill during the town’s flu epidemic. Marge, exhausted from caring for her sick family, accidentally shoplifts a fifth of bourbon during a trip to the Kwik-E-Mart and is subsequently sentenced to thirty days in prison. Left alone with the kids, Homer is unable to maintain order. In no time at all, the kitchen is in ruins, with the pets eating off the floor and out of the fridge, the oven on fire, the sink overflowing, and an alligator wandering through the smoking mess. Homer cannot even pack Bart’s lunch, sending his son off to school with a pack of sugar and peanut butter smeared on a playing card. The household chaos extends to the town. Without Marge’s marshmallow squares to sell at a community fundraiser, Springfield is forced to purchase a substandard statue for the park, resulting in angry rioting and looting. As Helen Lovejoy states: “This never would have happened if Marge Simpson were here.”

This episode employs plenty of satire. The show exaggerates Marge’s domestic role to the point of absurdity: upon her marshmallow squares alone rests the stability of the Simpson family, nay, the whole of Springfield! Yet, at the same time, the family truly requires her at home. Marge is absolutely essential to the cohesion of the Simpson family. In one interview, Matt

Groening noted the crucial part Marge plays in the Simpson home: “I shudder to think what would happen if Marge weren’t there to keep Homer from killing the kids” (Horowitz). The official Simpsons Web site (TheSimpsons.com) characterizes Marge as “the putty that just barely holds the Simpson family together week after week.”

As cinema scholar Philip Green notes, sitcoms generally rely on women’s domestic work to maintain the family unit itself:

[A]ll domestic sitcoms, without exception, are jokes built around the premise that this is the kind of work women are expected to be doing and the space in which they are expected to be doing it, and they are expected to be doing that work in this space as part of a nuclear family; and isn’t it funny when a man does it instead or a woman does it poorly, or theirs is not a nuclear family but instead some other weird arrangement, and so forth. (Green 71)

Isn’t it funny when Homer cannot feed the baby, wash the dishes, or pack a school lunch? Isn’t it funny when Springfield itself falls into riot and ruin when Marge is not home to mix up a batch of marshmallow squares? Without Marge in the domestic role, there is no nuclear family; there is no Simpson family. Like Groening, nobody in Springfield or out here in the TV audience can imagine the Simpson home or family without Marge the homemaker. *The Simpsons* ultimately does not satirize the role of homemaker as much as it reifies it.

Although Marge’s character often parodies the quintessentially domestic woman, she also embodies it. Marge’s “domestic hyperactivity” (Turner 234) falls short of true satire: it pokes fun at the idealized televised housewife but does not ask us to truly question the domestic roles of Homer and Marge; we are in fact often reminded that Marge is a good and conscientious housekeeper. Viewers, reassured by the loving bond between Marge and Homer, may very well not perceive the sharp limitations of domestic ideology that constrain Marge’s

social and familial role. Long-time Simpsons fans and commentators, such as author Steven Keslowitz, even praise Marge for assuming traditional, gendered, household duties:

[S]he is content being a housewife, and although she occasionally pursues other interests (painting, real estate), she is happy with the way things are. Thus, she is the paradigm of the modern housewife in contemporary society. She doesn't have to be a housewife—she wants to be a housewife. And she teaches us that there is nothing wrong with that; perhaps it is admirable She knows that her job is important, and she is content with her role as the contemporary housewife. (Keslowitz 81)

For Keslowitz and possibly for many viewers, the sentiment of Marge's character—her love and care for her home and family—largely outweighs the satire.⁵ Marge's adherence to “traditional” domesticated gender norms ensures that viewers such as Keslowitz perceive and remember not the way *The Simpsons* satirizes domestic ideology—the ridiculous notion that a woman should strive to make her bathroom floor smell like lemons, for example—but rather Marge's acquiescence to that ideology: “she wants to be a housewife.” Keslowitz reads Marge as the polar opposite of a satire: rather than “moral outrage,” Marge represents contentment “with the way things are.” We keep laughing, but we stop reexamining our world when we watch Marge Simpson.

The satire slips and fails when Marge insists, for example, with a crazed look in her eyes, that Homer is an ideal husband: “Well, most women will tell you that you're a fool to think you can change a man. But those women are quitters! When I first met your father, he was loud, crude, and piggish. But I worked hard on him, and now he's a whole new person.” Lisa makes a disbelieving noise, and Marge slowly and forcefully reiterates: “He's a whole . . . new . . . person, Lisa” (“Lisa's Date with Destiny”). The writers are satirizing the institution of heterosexual marriage, in which many women must fool themselves into feeling fortunate in their

mates. But the writers are also much more powerfully mocking Marge's refusal to acknowledge to Lisa and the world the reality of her situation. In fact, the show often pokes fun at Marge's narrow domestic worldview and her unwillingness to look many unpleasant things squarely in the eye, such as the time when Homer's new venture as an astronaut runs into serious trouble and a newscaster reports imminent disaster ("Deep Space Homer"):

Marge: Don't worry, kids. I'm sure your father's all right.

Lisa: What are you basing that on, Mom?

[awkward pause]

Marge: [with determined cheerfulness] Who wants ginger snaps?!

Marge ignores the troubling reality in front of her, or at least decides that it must not be acknowledged or discussed, and rushes to offer a comforting cookie. This is much less a parody of the unnaturally cheerful televised housewives of the 1950s and much more of a simple mocking imitation. It is laugh-out-loud funny, but it is not a sharp, thought-provoking critique of gender norms. We are laughing at Marge, the ideal homemaker, not at the mores of American society that restrict her character to the home.

I do not mean to suggest that *The Simpsons* creators have a duty or obligation to provide audiences with such a critique. As a long-time fan of *The Simpsons*, I have enjoyed countless hours of what many consider the consistently best show on television and I do not mean to imply that Marge's character renders the show pointless or unduly problematic. Rather, I wish to demonstrate the almost insurmountable power and longevity, as illustrated by Marge Simpson, of our gendered definitions of the domestic. *The Simpsons* offers viewers humorous but pointed and even powerful critiques of virtually every aspect of American society. Disdaining the sugary family sitcoms of the Reagan era, *The Simpsons* ripped apart many

aspects of the idealized images of family life so common to TV. It is the darkest, most successful, most influential, satire of cherished American values ever to appear on television. And yet in Marge we see only sporadic satire of the “housewife” character, and only partial critiques of domestic gender roles; conflicts that are always resolved when Marge returns to homemaking.

Perhaps there is simply nothing funny about a wife and mother who resists the limitations of domestic gender roles. That would explain the lack of humorous sitcoms that feature a woman truly struggling to balance family life and employment.⁶ But I think it more likely that the writers and creators of *The Simpsons*, like so many of us, have trouble even imagining a home (at least, a televised sitcom home) without a female homemaker. Even on one of the most innovative and certainly the most broadly satirical shows on television, a woman’s place is in the home.

Notes

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¹. When social workers mistakenly question Marge’s parenting and housekeeping abilities and remove the children in “Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily,” much of the humor revolves around the fact that Marge is in fact an exemplary mother, though Homer is indeed an “unfit”

parent.

². In contrast to the housewives of post-World War II sitcoms, Marge often expresses sexual desire and satisfaction. We see her obviously postorgasmic after a night at a hotel with Homer, for example (“Some Enchanted Evening”), and attacking Homer lustfully in the conjugal visit trailer during her incarceration in “Marge in Chains.” *The Simpsons* enjoy an active, even playful sex life. “Natural Born Kissers” featured the couple discovering the excitement of having sex in public places. At the same time, the writers sometimes invite the audience to view Marge as an almost asexual woman obsessed with the domestic. Watching acrobats twist and gyrate at “Cirque de Pure e: The Eighty Dollar Circus,” Marge says suggestively “Watching these women is giving me ideas.” When we see her fantasy, however, she is imagining herself contorted into a pretzel shape, busily cleaning the bathroom with her hands and feet (“Skinner’s Sense of Snow”).

³. The show’s creators featured Homer’s hair in fantastic situations on several occasions. For example, in “Simpson and Delilah,” Homer obtains a hair tonic that produces amazing but temporary hair growth. Homer also enjoys cartoon-fast hair growth on his face, regrowing his perpetual five-o’clock shadow seconds after shaving (“Some Enchanted Evening”). Moreover, as the “Malibu Stacy” creator points out, the Simpsons “all have hideous hair” (“Lisa vs. Malibu Stacy”). Lisa even suggests, on one occasion, that her hair is cartoonish. When she has to go to the barber to get gum cut out of her hair, she leaves with a stylish bob, exclaiming “I finally look like a real person” (“22 Short Films About Springfield”)! These exceptions notwithstanding, Bart, Lisa, and Homer’s hair is, overall, far less markedly unreal than Marge’s.

⁴. *Simpsons* creators responded quickly: When the next broadcast of *The Simpsons* aired on

January 30 they added a new scene with the family watching Bush's address, a real-world news clip. Bart responds: "Hey, we're just like the Waltons! We're praying for an end to the Depression, too" (Turner 226).

⁵. The popular view of Marge as rather one dimensional and far less interesting than the other characters is evidenced by the complete absence of fan Web sites devoted to Marge.

⁶. Two notable exceptions to this statement: *Grace Under Fire* and *Roseanne*.

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