

DAZE OF OUR LIVES

The Soap Opera as Feminine Text

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Soap operas are the only fiction on television, that most popular of mass cultural media, specifically created for women. This genre can therefore provide us with a valuable opportunity to examine the complexities of feminine cultural codes the more easily as they are writ large in feminine popular culture. . . . I argue that the fragmentation of soap narrative form reinforces the status quo with respect to the nature of sex roles and of interpersonal relationships in a patriarchal culture. Although the mixed messages of soap operas may allow scholars to construct subversive readings, actual viewers fail to respond in this manner. . . .

Since they appeal to so many women, soap operas have naturally attracted the attention of feminists. . . . One major problem in dealing with soap operas is the historical denigration not only of television but also of forms of feminine popular culture. Indeed, the very term "soap opera" has become so pejorative that it is applied condescendingly to a variety of genres and situations to indicate bathetic superficiality and kitsch. This is so

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much the case that one of the respondents to a recent survey I conducted attempted to justify her enthusiasm for *Days of Our Lives* by denial, insisting, "I really don't consider this show a soap opera."¹ Many feminists are similarly ambivalent about the genre: We desperately *want* to like a form that is popular with so many women but are repulsed by the conservative ideology. This ambivalence manifests itself when the same scholars who criticize soaps for promoting patriarchal stereotypes praise them for being "in the vanguard . . . of all popular narrative art" (Modleski, 1984, p. 13). In countering the denigration of feminine forms, however, we must be wary of going in the opposite direction, celebrating them just because they are female genres—especially when they might be potentially harmful. . . .

The cumulative effect of introducing in a fragmented text messages that reconcile women to traditional feminine roles and relationships is to reinforce patriarchal cultural behavior in a way that is difficult to identify during a typical—that is, casual—viewing experience. Perhaps the easiest way to demonstrate this process is by isolating soap tenets, abstracting them from the disjointed context in which they are embedded.

If soaps are featuring more career women, their romances and families take precedence over jobs, which may simply provide sites for gossip and personal relationships. The same could, of course, be said of the portrayal of male professionals. (Victor Newman, CEO of the multi-million-dollar Newman business empire, recently announced, "Generally I don't discuss business matters over the phone"—and generally he does not, and neither does anyone else.) Although soap jobs are hardly portrayed realistically, male professionals are depicted as superior beings who often transcend specialties. The same male doctor who handles AIDS patients, trauma victims, and neonatal care also delivers babies. Male corporate lawyers handle homicides. When we do see women engaged in professional activities, they are usually subordinate to men. For example, on one soap a

young female lawyer is solely responsible for a murder case until shortly before it goes to trial, when she feels compelled to hire a more seasoned (male) co-counsel.

Women who devote too much time to jobs at the expense of their relationships and families are usually punished. For example, the son of one career woman who spent little time with him turns out to be a rapist. Another strong, aggressive, competent, and well-meaning career woman, *All My Children's* Barbara Montgomery, glanced away while she was babysitting for a friend whose child was consequently hit by a car and killed. Is it pure coincidence that this accident occurred even as Barbara was composing an updated resume? Here we can ask of the soaps what Rosenblum (1986) asks concerning the "careerless career women" of other media who make a mess of their personal lives: "Is there a hidden message here, namely, that women had better stay out of the corner office or they'll get what's coming to them?"²

All this should not be surprising since in the soap world pregnancy within a marriage has always been the supreme state and children the ultimate "achievement" for women (Rogers, 1988). . . .

Mother Moran, a character in a radio soap, early elaborated the soaps' endorsement of patriarchal marriage and parenting ideas: "A cake ta bake, and a floor ta sweep. And a tired little babe ta sing ta sleep. What does a woman want more than this—A home, a man, and a child ta kiss" (quoted in Allen, 1985, p. 194). Similarly, on contemporary soaps, if childbearing is necessary for completeness, having both a child (or children) and a "good marriage" constitutes true bliss. (This sentiment may present some problems for women in the audience who, while they have their husbands and their babies, are still miserable.) For example, on *The Young and the Restless* Nikki tells her husband, Victor, "I am so lucky. I have everything a woman could want. . . . I have a beautiful daughter and a loving husband, and a wonderful marriage. . . ."

... In the fictionalized representation of motherhood on daytime soap operas, the myth of maternal omnipotence conceals the subordination and marginalization of women.

Employing the rhetoric of female apotheosis, soaps define having a baby as "the single most important thing in a woman's life." As one soap character remarked on the day she discovered she was pregnant: "This is what I've wanted all of my life, and now it's all coming true. ... This is the most important day of my life." Male dominance is ideologically reinforced by the belief that women are gloriously suited for child care because they are by nature cheerfully domestic, nurturing, and self-sacrificing. This "innate" selflessness, essential to fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers, allows for the happiness of women to reside in being constantly attentive to the needs of other family members. For example, after being told sarcastically, "Lucky you—you get to listen to everybody's problems," one soap mother responded in all seriousness, "That's part of being a mother. You'll find out about it some day." Other soap mothers have recently made statements like "I'm here whenever you want to talk" and "I only want what's best for him" and have been asked such rhetorical questions as "what kind of mother are you, to put your feelings before the feelings of your child?" ...

Without offspring, women are incomplete. Take, for example, the case of *General Hospital's* Bobbie Meyer, who acknowledges the terrible emptiness of her barren state: "I'm thinking about the babies that I'm never going to have. ... I just feel empty. ... [My husband] is a man who *deserves* to have a child." Since failure to comply with moral norms is usually punished on soaps, and Bobbie is a former prostitute, her sterility may be no accident.

On another soap a new father extends this baby ethic to men:

Having a child of my own was one dream I just could never turn loose of. And when [my wife] became pregnant, I

thought ... the gods are smiling on me. And there was nothing left for me to ask for because there was nothing else I wanted. Ya know, I was—complete.

If such sentiments of completeness imply more male sensitivity, they never seem to extend to beliefs about shared parenting. It is therefore likely that these expressions may simply be a variation of the traditional male fantasy of procreation as immortality. This myth is stressed repeatedly on the soaps, where men "deserve" to have children and, as one character puts it, "any man ... would just go crazy to have a son that would carry on your name and follow in your footsteps."

... Although women are overtly respected for bearing children and for being mothers, ironically, men treat them like children. For example, one soap husband tells his wife she should go "sleepy-bye," while another calls his baby daughter his "other little good girl," equating his wife and his infant. On *One Life to Live*, at the very moment she tells her husband, Cord, the results of her pregnancy test, Tina is infantilized:

Tina: Well, aren't you the least bit interested in whether you and I made a baby?—we didn't. What are you smiling for?

Cord: Well, to tell you the truth, I kinda' didn't think we did, but I tell ya—I think it's real cute you being so excited about it.

Another soap wife gets worked up because she has tried to serve "the most important dinner of my life—and I blow it. ... I spill the appetizers. ... I burn the dinner. ... " Her husband predictably responds, "I think you're cute."

Although it is difficult to see how women can be taken seriously as long as they are being treated like children, their subordination may be obfuscated, as they collude in this pattern, decoding it in terms

of "cuteness" and male protection. Soap women are repeatedly imaged as children: like children, they frequently "flood out," losing control in gales of laughter or in tears. They are playfully fed by men and are the objects of mock-assault games (of the food- or pillow-fight variety) that are usually reserved for children. Although on the soaps these "attacks" usually collapse into lovemaking, sociologist Erving Goffman (1979) has pointed out in another context that such "games" suggest what men could potentially do, should they ever get serious about it.

Unsurprisingly, on the soaps men give more orders and advice than women. This often extends to female topics (Turow, 1974). Women have no relief from this ubiquitous male instructor—a de facto role of authority that demands subordination—even during commercial "breaks," when they are subject to predominantly male voice-overs.³ Not only do male voice-overs dominate the commercials themselves, in what Robert Allen (1985, pp. 154-170) considers to be a vestige of the omnipotent male announcers of radio soaps, today's announcers—all of whom are male—seem to control the networks' programming. They point to commercials, promise that the soap will resume after interruptions, signal the end of the commercial segments, and urge us to continue watching or to tune in tomorrow. While all these little expressions of male dominance and female submission may seem insignificant in and of themselves, they add up to create an effect that is overwhelming. Unfortunately, typical viewers do not seem to regard this behavior as suspect. . . .

Applying reader-response theories specifically to soaps, Jane Feuer (1984) finds *Dallas* and *Dynasty* "potentially progressive" because their serial form with its multiplicity of plot lines admits to unchallenged ideological stances: "Since no action is irreversible, every ideological position may be countered by its opposite" (p. 15). John Fiske (1987, pp. 179-197) argues that such a variety of reading positions allows for

an interrogation of patriarchy. Ellen Seiter (1982) is hopeful about the progressive potential of the soaps for similar reasons:

The importance of small discontinuous narrative units which are never organized by a single patriarchal discourse or main narrative line, which do not build towards an ending or closure of meaning, which in their very complexity cannot give a final ideological word on anything, makes soap opera uniquely "open" to feminist readings. (p. 4)

Although I find that the dominant ideology of the soap is patriarchal and that any challenges implicit in contradictory readings are regularly trounced on as patriarchy continually rears its ugly head, the potential that Feuer, Fiske, and Seiter posit for constructing feminist interpretations of soaps from their inconsistencies certainly exists. But let me raise a crucial question: What if viewers fail to identify the subtext? . . . For example, most of the respondents to my survey are partially attentive viewers likely to gossip about soap characters for fun but unlikely to read or analyze soap operas as texts, watching with the rapt attention of the critic. . . .

When asked whether soaps contain messages, most of my respondents said yes and pointed to blatant messages about issues like sex and alcoholism. Many remarked that soaps teach about relationships and practical matters. One respondent, who credits the soaps with helping her get pregnant, first heard of ovulation prediction kits on *All My Children*, where they were mentioned obliquely—"It's blue. Let's get into bed"—when Brooke was trying to conceive. Some even mentioned worldview and distinguished between the obvious and the subtle. For example, an especially thoughtful respondent wrote:

A "say no to sex before you are ready" (married was the suggested time to be "ready") campaign was written into one story line in hopes of preventing teenage

pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. I also see the message that being rich and powerful is not synonymous with happiness. There are both obvious and subliminal messages. The subliminal messages are male dominated and family oriented, but the blatant messages may have in some cases redeeming social value.

Now consider one of the messages widely praised in the press and by respondents as having this "redeeming social value." An astonishing number of respondents mentioned the rape story on *Santa Barbara*, recognizing the obvious moral: report rapes to the authorities. They were totally oblivious to the subtext which undercut this message, insidiously destroying the social value of this plot. On the soap *Eden Castillo* is raped. While this story line is developed, daily after the program we see the constructedness of the fiction, which is rare in the soap world (usually reserved for occasions like the death of an actor). At the end of each episode, Marcy Walker steps out of the frame, announcing that she is the actress who plays Eden and advising victims to report rapes. Perhaps part of the reason for this strategy is that the rape sequences are so gripping the audience needs to be reassured that this is a fiction. The ostensible reason—to promote the message—is, however, vitiated. In the story Eden does indeed report the rape and undergoes a pelvic examination. Our perspective is of her raised knees covered with a sheet. In the end we discover that the rapist is the very same gynecologist who performed the examination.

Unfortunately, the subtext here—the authorities we should report rapes to are equivalent to the rapists themselves—went unnoticed, even as it subverted the blatant message. This could create considerable anxiety for viewers who may find themselves unwilling to report male violence and brutality. The whole misogynistic plot may speak to women's fear of trusting male authority. . . .

Another familiar soap plot with a subtext that often goes unrecognized concerns the reformed rake. In perhaps the most famous example, *General Hospital's* Luke raped—and later married—Laura, who subsequently referred to the event as "the first time we made love," perpetuating the fiction that women really want to be raped. (*General Hospital* producer Gloria Monty described the rape as "choreographed seduction"; Dullea, 1986). Luke and Laura became a romantic super-couple, as Luke underwent a transformation, eventually becoming not only mayor of Port Charles, but heartthrob to countless teenage girls. As Janice Radway (1984) found in her study of romances, in a society where male violence against women is a constant, women may deal with their fears by decoding male brutality as love. Such a strategy, however, fails to remedy the problem. In a cartoon in *Soap Opera Digest*, a woman tells a man, as they watch a male image on the screen, "For your information, he's now a sweet, sensitive person. You're not supposed to remember he used a chain saw on his sixth wife in 1982" (July 11, 1989, p. 59). Such transformations of soap villains are obviously recognized. Unfortunately, however, most viewers are oblivious of the fact that reinterpreting soap rapes and brutality as romance denies—if not legitimates and glorifies—male violence by reading it as love. Instead of constructing subversive readings of soaps, many viewers simply fail to recognize latent discourses. . . .

Notes ♦

1. This ongoing survey, which is composed of seventy-one multiple-choice questions and eleven additional questions requiring a written response, has been completed by over 100 viewers.

2. Rosenblum (1986) argues that if movies, theatre, and prime time are now featuring women professionals, their careers are like

"touches of trendy window dressing to spruce them up for the late 80s." From Glenn Close's Alex in *Fatal Attraction* to Heidi in Wendy Wasserstein's *Heidi Chronicles*, the portrayal of professional women of the eighties with their "toy careers" is far removed from the depiction of 1940s career women like Katharine Hepburn in *Woman of the Year* and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*. Although the message of such movies is that what a woman really needs is a good man, the women were consummate professionals.

3. According to Butler and Paisley, 90% of voice-overs in television commercials are male (cited in Cantor & Pingree, 1983, p. 202).

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