

Aging Well: Politics of Aging, Sexuality, and Womanhood in *The Golden Girls*

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DOROTHY:

Oh c'mon, Blanche. Age is just a state of mind.

BLANCHE:

Tell that to my thighs.

From its pilot on September 14, 1985, to its finale on May 9, 1992, *The Golden Girls* was one of the most beloved sitcoms on television. The seven-season, 180-episode series follows the lives of four women: Blanche, Rose, Dorothy, and Dorothy's mother Sophia. All four women, age fifty and older live together as friends in a house in Miami, Florida. Not only was the show very well received at the time, winning eleven total Emmy Awards¹, but *The Golden Girls* continues to delight its audience today and even find new viewers three decades after the show stopped airing. Sure, the show is full of hilarious jokes and delivery, and that's a large part of its popularity, but *The Golden Girls* isn't all fun and games. The show's creator, Susan Harris, once told the *Chicago Tribune*, "I don't like lighter shows. I like substance."² The "substance" of *The Golden Girls* lies in the complex social issues that the series deals with in an on-the-mark and thoughtful way. In this essay, I assert that *The Golden Girls* has aged so well because of its progressive depictions of social and cultural issues including aging, sexuality, and womanhood, which have, in turn, altered our society's perception of those topics.

I. Is *The Golden Girls* Aging Well?

The Golden Girls is not only aging well, but it is also a fantastic example of media created decades ago that still holds up today. The series is still critically acclaimed - in 2013, almost thirty years after the show first aired, TV Guide ranked it as one of the top sixty television shows of any genre ever made.³ However, it is still gaining popularity in the general public. In 2019, Terry Tang of the Associated Press wrote in an article that in recent years, there has been a new "wave of merchandising" featuring shows, including Funko figures, PEZ dispensers, and even a Golden Girls themed cruise,⁴ which continues to operate for an exciting upcoming 2024 season touring Sicily.⁵

While some of this renewed interest can be attributed to nostalgia, seeing as many of those fans who watched the show as children are now nearing the age of the main characters, much of it is fueled by new fans with whom the show resonates. It would be easy to assume that the reason for its popularity is just its brilliant humor. However, as I am sure we have all experienced, a show that was initially considered hilarious can often be cringe-inducing today. As Jeremy Urquhart of Collider puts it, "The humor and messages could be out of touch with current social mores," which ends up "souring" the experience.⁶ Thus, a crucial component of a show's longevity is how its humor and themes deal with social and cultural topics, and as we will soon discuss, *The Golden Girls* does so through a progressive and forward-thinking lens, allowing it to continue to hold up to this day.

In a panel with the rest of the cast in 2006, Betty White, who played Rose, noted that whenever the cast got fan mail, spanning from right when the show started up until at least 2006 when the panel was held, 70 percent of it was from people under the age of twenty-five.⁷ Incredibly, that is a similar age demographic that the show attracts to this day, generations later. In 2019, Marc Berman of *Forbes* wrote that the current obsession with the show is particularly among the millennial generation,⁸ many of whom were either infants or not even born when the show started running.⁹ Thus, whatever appealed to the young generation when the show aired continues to appeal to young people today.

II. Were *The Golden Girls* Aging Well?

A large part of this appeal is the series' depiction of aging. Perhaps the most important aspect of *The Golden Girls* is that all four of its stars are women over fifty years old and either widowed or divorced. However, the four women aren't held back by their pasts with their husbands, instead leading exciting and happy lives full of friendship. *The Golden Girls* is a paragon of depicting modern healthy aging for older people.

In her 2022 book *Marginal People in Deviant Places*, Janice M. Irvine notes, "The story of old age told by *The Golden*

¹"The Golden Girls" Television Academy, n.d., <https://www.emmys.com/shows/golden-girls>.

²Frank Sanello, "From 'Soap' Madness to 'Empty Nest' Sadness," *Chicago Tribune*, October 20, 1988, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1988-10-20-8802090551-story.html>.

³Bruce Fretts and Matt Roush, "TV Guide Magazine's 60 Best Series of All Time," *TVGuide.Com*, December 23, 2013, <https://www.tvguide.com/news/tv-guide-magazine-60-best-series-1074962/>.

⁴Terry Tang, "'Golden Girls' Appears to Get Better with Pop Culture Age," *AP News*, April 21, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/803d42ed224049ca9747001fe3e43032>.

⁵"2024 Rooms / Pricing — Golden Fans at Sea," *Golden Fans at Sea*, n.d., <https://www.goldenfansatsea.com/rooms-pricing-2024-sicily>.

⁶Jeremy Urquhart, "10 Classic Movies With Content That Hasn't Aged Well," *Collider*, March 18, 2023, <https://collider.com/movies-that-havent-aged-well/#39-around-the-world-in-80-days-39-1956>.

⁷Justin Ullmann, uploader, "The Golden Girls at PaleyFest LA 2006: Full Conversation," January 14, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4cghCwvIbw>.

⁸Marc Berman, "Age Is Just a Number...And the 50+ Category Matters," *Forbes*, May 9, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/marcberman/2019/05/09/age-is-just-a-number-and-the-50-category-matters/?sh=3b1c39fa665b>.

⁹Alicja Zelazko, "Millennial | Definition, Characteristics, Age Range, & Birth Years," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 12, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/millennial>.

Girls...emphasized that aging is a culture as much as it is a biological experience."¹⁰ In today's society, the culture of aging is shifting in a world with increased technology, a longer average lifespan (especially among women), and higher senior divorce rates.¹¹ In line with that, the qualities of healthy aging have changed dramatically in the past century. Furthermore, not only does *The Golden Girls* reflect those qualities of healthy aging, but it also does so in a way that subverts stereotypes about its main characters' age group. What comes to mind when you think of middle-aged to elderly women? None of the four main characters fixate their entire lives on their family or their children, or show signs of mental regression. Most importantly, they simply all seem to be happy in their own lives. To that point, in a 2014 presentation, Drs. Satinder K. Mahal and Pei Huey Nie noted that the way *The Golden Girls* portrayed independence, activity, and even sexiness in old age not only broke the mold for television at the time but also aligned with qualities that scientific research has found to reflect healthy and happy aging. They concluded that the portrayal of successful aging in media such as *The Golden Girls* can both "reduce ageism and sexism against older generations while promoting healthier behaviors in this age group."¹²

As such, just as television and popular culture are affected by the society in which they are created, they can have tangible effects on society itself. It is not surprising that many people saw the four women of *The Golden Girls* and wanted to follow in their footsteps. Thus, the "Golden Girls Model" was born, in which senior citizens, often without romantic partners, live together as housemates.¹³ One might think that while it sounds appealing in theory, it would be much more challenging. After all, buying a house is a huge monetary commitment, and housemates with different desires could make for an unsustainable and harmful situation. However, in a recent survey by LendingTree, 29 percent of Americans said they would be open to the idea of living as roommates in a Golden Girls Model home,¹⁴ and it's not altogether surprising that the idea is becoming popular. After all, it could solve many of the most difficult problems for single older people: cost of living, household work, and being part of a community with no assisted living.¹⁵ Therefore, with the right housemates, *The Golden Girls* Model can serve as a style of living that promotes healthy aging, beautifully exemplifying how a great piece of art can influence the society in which it was created.

III. Sexuality and Womanhood in *The Golden Girls*

In a 2015 article, Tracey Ross stated, "The very premise of *The Golden Girls*... is feminist in nature."¹⁶ I see two ways to look at *The Golden Girls* in the historical context of the feminist movement. First, one could argue that because the show took place between the second and third waves of the feminist movement, the feminist ideology of the first and second waves was beginning to settle into the general public.¹⁷ The premise of the show reflected the progress made by society toward accepting women as equals to men, in a way that would not have been possible ten to twenty years before.¹⁸ While one could also argue that during this lull in the women's movement—a lull reflected in the AIDS crisis and whispers that the movement had ended for good—the show was even braver and more radical than the first opinion suggests.¹⁹ Perhaps its confidence in radicalism is what made it so successful, and possibly even contributed to the third wave of feminism, which began to surge in the final years of the show's run.²⁰ Nevertheless, the women's movement of the mid-to-late twentieth century was crucial to the writing and reception of *The Golden Girls*. This is particularly evident in the show's depiction and empowerment of older women as the main characters, sexuality and queer representation, and the lack of male characters in the show.

Let us first consider the show's empowerment of aging women. Paul Junger Witt, an Executive producer of *The Golden Girls*, explained that the writers "approached the series...with thought and a great deal of study."²¹ He further states, "[They] asked a number of mature people whom [they] knew about certain elements of their lives. [The writers] incorporated some of those philosophies into the show. The reaction from mature audiences over the age of 55, has been remarkably enthusiastic."²² Indeed, the empowerment of the middle-aged women viewers is evidence of the effects the show had on the general public's perception of mature womanhood. In the 1980s, some women needed reassurance that "there's life after 50,"²³ and *The Golden Girls* is famous for its unashamed portrayal of older women's sex lives as free and natural. According to Ross, on a talk show in which Betty White and Bea Arthur, two of the stars of the show, were guests, a woman called in and thanked them for making

¹⁰Janice M. Irvine, "Conclusion," In *Marginal People in Deviant Places: Ethnography, Difference, and the Challenge to Scientific Racism*, (University of Michigan Press, 2022), 257, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11519906.13>.

¹¹Kristen Hicks, "Senior Living Options: The Golden Girls Model," *SeniorAdvisor.com Blog*, October 14, 2020, <https://www.senioradvisor.com/blog/2015/12/senior-living-options-the-golden-girls-model/>.

¹²Satinder K. Mahal and Pei Huey Nie, "Thank You For Being a Friend. The 'Golden Girls' as a media model of successful aging," *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 22(3), S97–S98. [https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481\(13\)00545-9/pdf](https://www.ajgponline.org/article/S1064-7481(13)00545-9/pdf).

¹³Hicks, "Senior Living Options: The Golden Girls Model."

¹⁴Taylor, Chris, "The Golden Girls approach: Buying homes together amid high prices," *Reuters*, August 17, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/golden-girls-approach-buying-homes-together-amid-high-prices-2023-08-17/>.

¹⁵Hicks, "Senior Living Options: The Golden Girls Model."

¹⁶Tracey Ross, "30 Years Later, 'The Golden Girls' Is Still the Most Progressive Show on Television," *Common Dreams*, September 9, 2015, <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/09/09/30-years-later-golden-girls-still-most-progressive-show-television>.

¹⁷Kerri Lee Alexander, "Feminism: The Second Wave," *National Women's History Museum*, June 18, 2020, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-second-wave>.

¹⁸Datan, Nancy, "Aging Women: The Silent Majority," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 17, no. 1/2 (1989): 12–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40003974>.

¹⁹Special thanks to Professor Jean Pedersen for her sharing personal experiences for this argument.

²⁰Kerri Lee Alexander, "Feminism: The Third Wave," *National Women's History Museum*, June 23, 2020, accessed November 16, 2023, <https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-third-wave>.

²¹"The Golden Girls," *Simply Put Blog*, January 14, 2018, <https://destinedtodenvr.blogspot.com/2018/01/the-golden-girls.html>.

²²Simply Put Blog, "The Golden Girls."

²³Ross, "30 Years Later, 'The Golden Girls' Is Still the Most Progressive Show on Television."

her “feel 52 and gorgeous.”²⁴ The emphasis that the writers put on mature sexuality cannot be understated. The blog *Refinery29* counted up all of the different men that *The Golden Girls* slept with throughout the show’s seven seasons, and Blanche came out on top with 165.²⁵ The show had 180 episodes.

Sex positivity for older women was not the only tough topic that the show delved into. For example, in just the third episode of the first season, Rose is romantically and sexually involved for the first time since her husband’s death, and instead of shying away from the topic or making a joke about it and moving on, the writers chose to base the arc of the episode around dealing with this very real problem. Similarly, the show portrayed issues of sexual harassment, infidelity, teenage pregnancy, AIDS, poverty, domestic violence, and much more. “All the issues are so real that [*The Golden Girls*] talk about, even though it was 35 years ago,” says Marsha Posner Williams, one of the show’s original producers.²⁶

Notably, the show explored sexual orientation in a manner that was certainly ahead of its time. In his article “Staying Golden: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Jazz in *The Golden Girls*,” Elliot H. Powell notes several queer characters in the show: Blanche’s gay brother, Dorothy’s lesbian best friend, and Sophia’s cross-dressing son. Yet, even more than that, Powell notes, the familial relationships of the four women reflect the idea of “‘queer kinship’ or ‘chosen family,’” important aspects of queer theory which can even be seen as a home life alternative to the confining structure of marriage.²⁷ This exemplifies just how radical *The Golden Girls* was.

Perhaps the most radical of all of the show’s qualities was the most simple: the comparative lack of men. Sure, there were often male love interests, especially for Blanche, but the reality is that almost all of the dialogue in the show occurred between and about women. One way to put into perspective how rare this is in Hollywood is the Bechdel Test, which is a quick process to measure how male-centric a show or movie is. The Bechdel Test asks three questions: Are there at least two women? Do they talk to each other? When they talk to each other is it ever about something other than a man? While it is a limited and surface-level test, seeing some pieces that are outwardly feminist still fail to pass this test, it can be useful as a baseline in many scenarios.²⁸ Instead of struggling to pass this test like so many movies and episodes of television do, *The Golden Girls* consistently passed. However, the show has trouble passing the “Bechdel Test,” seeing as very often, there is only one man in each episode, and his only role in the story is as a love interest for one of the women. To sum up, *The Golden Girls* was a show that had progressive ideas about feminism, aging, gender, and sexuality at its core. As Powell puts it, *The Golden Girls* “centered women as sexually desiring and desirable agents whose everyday lives challenged and did not de-

pend on the normative ideals of heteropatriarchy.”²⁹

The Golden Girls continue to appeal to young people to this day due to its fearless and purposeful exploration of perpetually relevant social and cultural subjects. The series demonstrates that regardless of its premise, target audience, and generation, a truly great piece of art will endure through the decades and continue to touch the lives of those who experience it. *The Golden Girls* especially goes one step further – through its normalization of feminist ideas, breaking of boundaries in the perception of aging women, and creation of new social possibilities for people entering their older age, the show brings the flow of ideas full circle, from society affecting the art to the art leaving its permanent mark on society.

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²⁴Ross, “30 Years Later, ‘The Golden Girls’ Is Still the Most Progressive Show on Television.”

²⁵Ross, “30 Years Later, ‘The Golden Girls’ Is Still the Most Progressive Show on Television.”

²⁶Tang, “Golden Girls’ Appears to Get Better with Pop Culture Age.”

²⁷Elliot H. Powell, “Staying Golden: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, and Jazz in *The Golden Girls*,” *Jazz Research Journal* 12, no. 1 (2018): 86–109, <https://journal.equinoxpub.com/JAZZ/article/view/12923/15051>.

²⁸Rund Abdelfatah, “What Is the Bechdel Test? A Shorthand for Measuring Representation in Movies,” *NPR*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/05/1168116147/what-is-the-bechdel-test-a-shorthand-for-measuring-representation-in-movies>.

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