

EXPLORING SOURCE TYPES

from “Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast”*

...A number of recent situation comedies depict smart, witty, and attractive women who are married to inept, overweight, and immature men. As *New York Times* critic Richard Marin observes, “[A]ll family sitcoms—virtually all sitcoms now—are about a fat guy with a hot wife” (2)...Marin leaves an important question unanswered—“Whose fantasy of the American family is this: men’s, women’s or both?” (2). Here is where this analysis begins. What gender ideology is presented in these sitcoms? Why do we find these gender constellations funny?

This study takes a closer look at the gender portrayals in *The King of Queens* (1998–2007) and *According to Jim* (2001–07), two typical examples of this genre. While the apparent role reversal suggests that the wives on the shows represent liberated women, a detailed analysis renders a more problematic reading: this type of sitcom actually reinforces the same patriarchal ideology reflected by *I Love Lucy* more than fifty years ago....

...Several scholars have pointed out the unique gender constellations in U.S. sitcoms. Patricia Mellencamp examines how the situation comedy genre historically served to “contain women” (70). Focusing on two shows from the 1950s, Mellencamp explains how both Gracie (Gracie Allen) on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and Lucy on *I Love Lucy* seem to rebel against male dominance, pointing out that Gracie often ignores George (George Burns) and that Lucy is always disobeying Ricky. Women often succeed in the narratives of each episode, as when it is discovered that one of Gracie’s improbable stories is true or when Lucy humiliates Ricky during one of his performances. Despite this, however, Mellencamp finds that “shifts between narrative and comic spectacle,” central characteristics of the sitcom genre, serve to downplay the issue of the “repressive conditions of the 1950s” (73). Thus, the humor in these shows functions to replace female “anger, if not rage, with pleasure” (73).

Despite this discursive containment of women in early sitcoms, it is striking that over time the genre seems to have worked out a peculiar representation of men. Fathers and husbands in situation comedies often play by different rules than men on other kinds of television shows. For example, Muriel Cantor writes, “The dominating, authoritative male, so common in other genres, is rarely found in domestic comedies” (276). According to her, domestic comedies do not feature “macho men” because the major theme of domestic comedies since the 1950s has been “the myth of female dominance and breakdown of male authority” (283). The central reason for this story line might be that women are the target audience of domestic comedies (Cantor 275).

Richard Butsch adds the important category of class to this analysis when he compares the portrayal of working-class fathers and middle-class fathers in situation comedies. He notes that from the 1950s to the 1990s, the common sitcom working-class father is often an “inept bumbler and even a buffoon” (391). In most working-class sitcoms from this time frame, it is commonplace that the stereotypically stupid and immature protagonist gets himself into a predicament, which his wife helps him solve. Working-class wives are “typically portrayed as more intelligent, rational, sensible, responsible, and mature than their husbands or fathers” (Butsch 391). However, middle-

Marin, p. 2:
Argument

Mellencamp, p. 70 and 73:
Argument

Cantor, p. 275-6 and 283:
Argument

Butsch, p. 391 and 394:
Argument

* Walsh, K., E. Fürsich, and B. Jefferson. “Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast: Gender Role Portrayals in Sitcoms Featuring Mismatched Couples.” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 36.3 (2008): 123-132.

class sitcoms tend to portray successful and mature fathers. If any character on the show becomes the target of humor, it is the wife (Butsch 394)...

...New episodes of *The King of Queens* aired on CBS from September 1998 through May 2007. The show, which was co-created by Michael Weithorn and David Litt, currently runs in off-network syndication on several channels including TBS. Weithorn recalls having trouble selling the show to writers and executives, who expressed concern that if Doug was just a truck driver, “people [would] find him a loser” (qtd. in “With Blue Collar” 8). Weithorn disagreed, claiming, “[F]or a couple to have their own house, for [the husband] to have a union job, he’s living the American dream” (qtd. in “With Blue Collar” 8)...Completing nine successful seasons in 2007, *The King of Queens* was a hit with prime-time audiences and has consistently performed well in off-network syndication (Frankel A2)...

...In a typical *King of Queens* episode, what Seymour Chatman calls the “satellite narratives” or minor events of the plot (qtd. in Rybacki and Rybacki 113) portray Carrie as dominant: she orders Doug around, threatens him, corrects his mistakes, and makes fun of his obesity. Conversely, the “kernel narratives” or major plot events (Rybacki and Rybacki 118) reveal that Doug is in charge. Doug routinely goes against what Carrie asks of him, and then he lies or tricks her, not respecting her enough to tell her the truth. In the end, Carrie feels guilty, admits she is wrong, or easily forgives Doug so that he never has to feel bad about his behavior.

In the “Bun Dummy” episode, several satellite narratives demonstrate Carrie’s dominance over Doug. Carrie’s superior looks are often emphasized by the jokes that she makes about Doug’s laziness and weight. In one scene, she tells him that she must not have seen a movie he is talking about because, unlike him, she does not watch “112 hours of TV a week.” Seconds later, after he makes fun of her hairstyle, she points out that he might like her bun better if it “had powdered sugar on it.”...

...Although Carrie appears dominant in these minor plot events, the kernel narratives within the “Bun Dummy” episode show that Doug tricks Carrie, that she submits to his requests, and that he is correct about the whole situation.

“With Blue Collar,” p. 8:
Background

Frankel, p. A2:
Background

Rybacki and Rybacki, p. 113:
Method

Rybacki and Rybacki, p. 118:
Method

“Bun Dummy” episode:
Exhibit

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