



Genders 1998-2013



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Feminism, Postfeminism, Liz Lemonism: Comedy and Gender Politics on 30 Rock

May 1, 2012 • By [Linda Mizejewski \(/gendersarchive1998-2013/linda-mizejewski\)](#)

[1] The title of Tina Fey's humorous 2011 memoir, *Bossypants*, suggests how closely Fey is identified with her Emmy-award winning NBC sitcom *30 Rock* (2006-), where she is the "boss"—the show's creator, star, head writer, and executive producer. Fey's reputation as a feminist—indeed, as Hollywood's Token Feminist, as some journalists have wryly pointed out—heavily inflects the character she plays, the "bossy" Liz Lemon, whose idealistic feminism is a mainstay of her characterization and of the show's comedy. Fey's comedy has always focused on gender, beginning with her work on *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) where she became that show's first female head writer in 1999. A year later she moved from behind the scenes to appear in the "Weekend Update" sketches, attracting national attention as a gifted comic with a penchant for zeroing in on women's issues. Fey's connection to feminist politics escalated when she returned to SNL for guest appearances during the presidential campaign of 2008, first in a sketch protesting the sexist media treatment of Hillary Clinton, and more forcefully, in her stunning imitations of vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, which launched Fey into national politics and prominence.

[2] On *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon is the head writer of an NBC comedy much like SNL, and she is identified as a "third wave feminist" on the pilot episode. Liz Lemon's feminism is broadly caricatured on the series, as in the Season Four episode "Problem Solvers," when Liz learns that in the Chinese version of her newly published book, her name is translated "Lesbian Yellow Sour-Fruit," reflecting the stereotype of the humorless, man-hating feminist. However, at other times, the target of satire is not feminism but rather postfeminism, a concept very much debated as a theory, a politics, and a practice. Postfeminism is lampooned on *30 Rock* in its popular figuration as a lifestyle that invites independent (white, heterosexual, upscale) women to focus on consumerism, "girl" culture, traditional concepts of glamour, and a romanticized ideal of motherhood (Projansky 66-89, Negra 2-7). In its cover image, *Bossypants* morphs the stereotypes of both feminism and postfeminism, as well as morphing Tina Fey and bossy Liz Lemon, in a grotesque mash-up. The medium-shot photo shows Fey wearing tasteful makeup and lipstick, her hair arranged in loose waves down to her shoulders, but she also wears men's clothing—a fedora that sits back on her head and a man's white shirt and tie. More than that, she has rolled up her sleeves to reveal huge, hairy male forearms and gigantic hands—an unnerving way to picture the woman who "wears the pants" and a startling rebuke to the ubiquitous tee-shirt proclaiming "THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE." The conflation of these

two sets of images in the photo is a savvy comment on gender politics and visual culture, but its payoff is the joke rather than a challenge to the media that promote both stereotypes. Is the photo nevertheless a feminist joke? Or just a joke that references feminist issues in popular culture?

[3] This is the line of inquiry that informs this essay on *30 Rock*, which represents feminism as a contentious, often contradictory bundle of beliefs conveying mixed messages about female power and authority. Given the high expectations of Tina Fey's politics, online feminist media critics have expressed considerable disappointment with the series because *30 Rock* so often undermines Liz Lemon's feminist ideals and also because it replays the clichés of the feminist as frumpy, unfeminine, possibly a lesbian, or—as suggested by the Bossypants photo--secretly a man. The complaints often fall into the assumption that "bad images" of feminists and professional women are politically detrimental and out of place on a series that in most ways espouses a progressive ideology. The targets of these criticisms include Liz Lemon's hapless state as a "desperate" single woman, her lack of female friends and focus on male relationships, the ugly-feminist jokes, and the good-old-boys *mise en scène* that includes only one, habitually silent, woman writer on the staff ("Life Hands You Lemons;" McEwen; Sady; Dailey). The complaints on websites have emerged in feminist scholarship as well. Joanne Morreale, in an essay in *Feminist Media Studies*, objects to the negative images of Liz Lemon as a (supposedly) unattractive loser and also to the *30 Rock* narratives that make progressive claims and then recoup them, citing an episode in which Liz's feminist stand backfires, and she dissolves into tears and is literally carried out of the room ("The C Word"). Morreale argues that this exemplifies how the series "addresses but does not challenge gender politics" (486), implying that we expect feminist texts to do the cultural work of opposition to social norms.

[4] Far from claiming *30 Rock* as a feminist text, my primary argument here is that *30 Rock* does a different kind of cultural work than expected by Morreale and others by representing a feminist TV writer complicit in profit-driven, sexist mainstream media and by exploring the messy ways feminist ideals actually play out in institutions and in popular culture. *30 Rock* is significant precisely for the centrality of feminism and gender politics in Liz Lemon's characterization as the insider/outsider, a liminal figure, sympathetic for being on the fringes of the power structure. This liminal position--a standard comic trope--makes it possible for the comic protagonist to enact resistance and to critique the status quo, as scholars of comedy have pointed out, so that marginality itself can be an empowering strategy (Gilbert 3-8). On *30 Rock*, Liz Lemon is the out-of-place liberal idealist at NBC, her good intentions usually foiled by outrageous corporate and patriarchal politics, to which she usually capitulates. Significantly, Liz Lemon is a liminal figure not only in relation to corporate and cultural power, but also in relation to feminism itself, which is sometimes thematized as the central conflict of the plot, as detailed in the final two sections of this essay.

[5] In depicting feminism itself as a conflicted set of expectations and values, *30 Rock* demonstrates what has been described as critical postfeminism, a metacommentary on feminist politics and contentions. I am differentiating here between consumerist "popular postfeminism," which is cleverly mocked on *30 Rock*, and postfeminism as a critical stance, as mapped out by Amanda Lotz in her description of attributes often found in television series that use multiple discourses about feminism, both residual and emergent. Among the postfeminist strategies she finds in those series are two that are strikingly evident in *30 Rock*: the investigation of the diverse and uneven ways women are situated in power relations and the negotiation of "the connected questions of how to define feminism and its goals in the contemporary era" (115-17). Lotz notes that television comedies are more likely than dramas to experiment with feminist discourses because the genre of comedy can "both introduce and then contain potentially subversive content" (111).

[6] This convention of comedy--the "containment" of Liz Lemon's feminism and the recuperation of social norms such as femininity—is precisely Morreale's complaint, but this complaint underestimates

comedy's discursive effects. Describing its tentative and spotty cultural fall-out, Henry Jenkins describes comedy as a register of change and a clearing house of contended ideas, a forum in which edgy concepts can be articulated because the stakes seem so low—it's only comedy, after all, a mode that is itself liminally positioned in relation to mainstream culture. Analyzing American domestic comedy in the first part of the twentieth century, when gender roles were on the cusp of change, Jenkins claims that jokes recur at "points of friction or rupture within the social structure," and "allow the comic expression of ideas that in other contexts might be regarded as threatening." Comedy can be dismissed as trivial, but it can result in a shift in discourse: "The translation of social conflicts into jokes allows for a smoother negotiation of differences" (251). This concept of a "negotiation of differences" dovetails with what Lotz sees as a postfeminist attribute in texts that register multiple ideas of what feminism entails. In *30 Rock*, the contradictions and conflicts of contemporary feminism are never resolved, but they are brought into mainstream popular culture and thus into the public sphere as viable debates and discourses.

[7] The title of the series reflects this focus on feminism and mainstream representation in that the prestigious address—30 Rockefeller Center—stages feminism as a struggle rather than a teleology of achievement. The pilot episode opens with references to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77), acknowledged as an early representation of feminism on network television and a reassuring version of what feminism and a feminist might look like (Taylor 124-25, Dow 24-54). Unlike Mary Richards, who was the associate producer of a local news show, Liz Lemon works at a national level in a high-status position for NBC, housed at the renowned "30 Rock." However, the first glimpse we see of her series, *The Girlie Show* (TGS), is a rehearsal for a tacky musical skit, "Pam, the Morbidly Obese Over-Confidant Woman," featuring its star Jenna (Jane Krakowski) in a fat suit—blatantly satirizing the prospect of women's progress in media since *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. *30 Rock* takes great pains to show that dumbed-down programming such as *The Girlie Show* is the result of network pressure for ratings, and it mercilessly skewers NBC's drive for profits over quality, ethics, and aesthetics, a view personified by the right-wing network executive Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin), who is Liz's political foil, but also her mentor. Nevertheless, the series also shows Liz Lemon continually compromising her feminist ideals as the cost of working for a national television network.

[8] The larger question raised by Morreale and the online critics is what "counts" as "feminist comedy"—what topics can be satirized, what standard tropes such as self-deprecation can be deployed, what ideals need to be met or represented. Addressing some of these problems, Danielle Russell suggests that the traditionally "male" comic convention of self-deprecating humor can be an effective strategy for women comics so long as it "stems from self-confidence," an argument which has interesting implications for the Liz Lemon character given the strong inflection of Tina Fey in the way that character is read. Lemon is clearly the comic, klutzy version of a brilliant and accomplished celebrity/star. While these larger questions about feminism and comedy are beyond the scope of this essay, the gender politics of *30 Rock* can at least be framed by theories of feminism and of comedy that veer away from the good image/bad image criticism implied by objections to particular comic tropes, stereotypes, or narratives.

Liz Lemonism

[9] One of these "bad images" is a ploy which I would describe as postfeminist comedy and which has been debated in online forums as "Liz Lemonism." In a widely-quoted criticism of *30 Rock*, blogger Sady Doyle in 2010 complained about the limitations of Liz Lemon's politics as a white, "privileged semi-feminism" utterly detached from issues of race, queerness, and disability. Doyle admits that her anger about the *30 Rock* character is actually her anger at the much wider phenomenon of the de-politicization of feminism. Liz Lemon, she says, typifies the so-called feminist whose most active

concern is "'body image': . . . without taking much note of the fact that as a white, abled, cis [sic] person she conforms to the 'beauty standard'" herself. The political interests of this would-be feminist are limited to "certain issues only as they pertain to her own personal life." Newsweekblogger Kate Dailey quoted Doyle on this phenomenon and named it "Liz Lemonism," going on to compare its limitations to the more emphatic, straightforward feminism found in Amy Poehler's series *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009-). In all, Liz Lemonism sounds like the version of girlie postfeminism which has drawn extensive critique from feminist scholars for its myopic vision about politics and its nostalgia for traditional gender roles (Tasker/Negra,"Introduction," 10-16). Doyle's complaint also overlaps with the concerns of Morreale, whose primary argument is that Liz Lemon ends up confirming rather than challenging the status quo. Yet a very different reading of Liz Lemonism has been posited by Salon writer Rebecca Traister, responding to the online feminist critics of *30 Rock* and specifically to Doyle's disappointment in Fey's character. Traister argues that Liz Lemonism, far from being a flawed, tepid version of feminism, is *30 Rock*'s satire of that very phenomenon--the privileged, would-be feminist. The limitations of Lemon as a "a gutless, self-interested semi-feminist," says Traister, are jokes that appear in the series almost every week ("The Tina Fey Backlash").

[10] Doyle's protest of Liz Lemonism as politically reprehensible and Traister's recognition of Liz Lemonism as satire speak to the tension about how feminism can/should be represented in comedy. The portrayal of the *30 Rock* heroine as "a gutless, self-interested semi-feminist" makes feminist fans uncomfortable, Traister says, because it evokes the larger problem of feminism and comedy about women—where to "draw the line" about female targets of ridicule or satire. Traister points out that Fey herself has drawn controversy because she is "a professional comic . . . not a professional feminist," and has used female stereotypes, celebrities, and bodies as fair game for her humor dating back to her days at *Saturday Night Live*, when some of her most-quoted routines included "Old French Whores" and "Mom Jeans," the fake ad with the tagline, "You're not a woman, you're a mom." On *30 Rock*, the slipperiness of Liz Lemonism as comedy—and the reason I would describe this comedy as a postfeminist strategy—is that it captures the dilemmas of contemporary feminism by lampooning both girl-culture "popular postfeminism" and politically correct feminism that's blind to its own privileged status. Liz Lemon's series *The Girlie Show*, for example, parodies the postfeminist "'girling' of femininity," as Tasker and Negra have called it ("In Focus" 109), particularly through the character of Jenna, the self-absorbed middle-aged woman who tries to pass for a twenty-something and whose "empowerment" is cosmetic. But Liz Lemon herself is complicit in other popular postfeminist tropes such as her hapless quest to "have it all," her "baby panic," and her doomed attempts at adoption. *30 Rock* satirizes the strategies and discourses of second-wave feminism as well. When Liz ends up without a date on Valentine's Day, she decides to protest the holiday by celebrating an alternative one, the Feb. 14 birthday of American suffragette Anna Howard Shaw. "Valentine's Day is a sham created by card companies to reinforce and exploit gender stereotypes," she tells a puzzled little girl who's selling Valentine cookies. The little girl demurs, prompting Liz to recite bitterly her history of romantic failures and calamities, suggesting the feminist holiday is a politically-correct booby prize for losers ("Anna Howard Shaw Day").

[11] *30 Rock* also frequently critiques the white privilege of Liz Lemon's feminism by exposing her unconscious racism. When Liz finds herself seated next to Oprah Winfrey on a plane, she pours her heart out to the famous talk-show host and prostrates herself on Oprah's breast in a classic representation of the mammy and the "honey chile" ("Believe in the Stars"). Liz's racism is foregrounded in other ways as well on this episode: because Liz is hallucinating on tranquilizers she's taken for the flight, her seatmate is actually not Oprah Winfrey at all, but a plump young black girl, implying that for Liz, large black women "all look alike." Granted Liz is on drugs when this happens, but it's part of a larger pattern about how Liz Lemon sees or fails to see people of color. She mixes up the names of the black men on the set ("Do Over"), and in "Somebody to Love," she reports her Arab

neighbor to Homeland Security, certain he is involved in suspicious activities (putting maps on his wall, doing timed physical-fitness training), when he was actually preparing to be a contestant on *The Amazing Race*. Generally, *30 Rock* foregrounds the white privilege of the independent woman in ways overlooked in single-career-woman shows such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Sex and the City*, (1998-2004) and *Murphy Brown* (1988-98) that represented attractive versions of "popular postfeminism."

[12] Yet despite these examples of how *Liz Lemonism* satirizes both feminist hypocrisy and postfeminist bourgeois angst, Doyle is right to suspect a privileged, middle-class politics looming under the surface of *30 Rock's* comedy as its perimeter in imagining social change. This dynamic can be glimpsed in the Season Five episode "Brooklyn Without Limits," when Liz buys jeans from an independently-owned boutique and is smugly proud that she's not supporting a big corporation and is also supporting an American company: the label on the jeans says "Hand Made in USA." But she finds out the label is misleading; it actually means the jeans are made by the "Hand" people, Vietnamese slaves owned by Halliburton on the island of Usa. Liz agonizes because these are the only jeans that have ever made her look good, and she's bought multiple pairs. She is at first adamant that the nasty socioeconomic story behind the jeans is irrelevant, but her conscience gets the best of her, and in the end, she takes them all back. In the final scene, we see her wearing her beat-up overall-style jeans that balloon her backside into two basketball-size globes—a visual joke that could well have been labeled "This is What a Feminist Looks Like."

[13] At the level of the comic narrative, this episode both mocks and valorizes political correctness, and the payoff is a joke about how hideous political correctness actually looks on Liz's body. However, the darker joke is the absurdity of how global capitalism is masked in everyday transactions, and the episode positions us to sympathize with Liz's political conviction rather than the indifference of Jack Donaghy, who sees nothing wrong with Halliburton making a buck where it can. But what the episode—and generally, the trajectory of *30 Rock*—does not acknowledge is the limitations of Liz's liberalism. Liz doesn't stage a protest, write letters to Halliburton, or do an exposé of hideous labor practices—any of which a traditional social-change feminism might entail. Instead she makes a personal choice about her looks, money, and commodities—on the one hand, a traditional feminist axiom that the personal is the political, and on the other hand, a far less ambitious political move that accepts personal power as the only viable kind of power, so that social issues become entirely personal ones, spun on the axes of appearance and consumerism. This is the *Liz Lemonism* that slips under the radar of fans like Traister who appreciate the satire, and its implications are more unsettling than the "bad images" of Liz repairing her bra with scotch tape or eating entire blocks of cheese as a late-night snack.

[14] Although *Liz Lemonism* can be identified as both a satirical device and also a political perimeter, it works as part of a broader range of gender discourses that *30 Rock* typically puts into play, most often through satire and parody, but often as competing discourses. The remainder of this essay focuses on two episodes of *30 Rock* that take on the latter dynamic in narratives about the positioning of women comics in gender issues and in popular culture. Both episodes demonstrate the qualities that characterize *30 Rock* as a text engaged in critical postfeminist work: they query definitions of feminism, and they complicate relationships of women to power structures. While these narratives frequently engage the stardom of Tina Fey and emphasize her likenesses to Liz Lemon, neither episode was written by Fey herself; "Rosemary's Baby" was written by Jack Burditt, and "TGS Hates Women" was written by Ron Weiner. *Bossypants* goes into great detail in giving credit to the writers who help shape the show and contribute some of its best comedy, even as it reveals how much Fey participates in rewrites of the episodes she doesn't write herself (174-92). This distinction is worth noting because even the best of the online critiques often conflate Fey with the series so that her own politics and

feminism become the issue at hand. 30 Rock is certainly Fey's project, but my emphasis is Liz Lemon as a strategy, even though the series often draws on Tina Fey's stardom, as is evident in the two episodes discussed here.

"Rosemary's Baby"

[15] The Season Two episode "Rosemary's Baby" guest stars Carrie Fisher as Rosemary Howard, a television-comedy writer from the 1970s who broke barriers for women in the entertainment industry, providing a role model for the young Liz Lemon. This episode offers a backstory for Liz's career and political leanings, but its primary theme is the question of what socially-relevant comedy entails. Early in the episode, Liz excitedly talks about Rosemary as her childhood idol, the first woman writer for Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In (1967-73). Rosemary is fictional, and there were no women writers on Laugh In, but women had begun to make inroads in television production in the 1970s and were in fact writing comedy for other series of that era, including The Mary Tyler Moore Show, That Girl (1966-71), and Rhoda (1974-78). Laugh-In did feature an unusual number of women comics for its time (Goldie Hawn, Ruth Buzzi, Judy Carne, Jo Ann Worley), and it was known for topical humor that included the Vietnam war, the women's liberation movement, and the sexual revolution. So Liz is citing a series that, in its irreverence and platform for female talent, was a precedent for Saturday Night Live, and Rosemary's fame as first-woman-writer for the earlier series is an obvious reference to Tina Fey's fame as the first female head writer on the latter show.

[16] Liz's thrilled description of Rosemary Howard cuts to a tongue-in-cheek flashback showing a little-girl Liz Lemon, already wearing her signature black librarian glasses, watching a (fake) Laugh-In segment that is supposedly written by Rosemary. The skit is a Watergate joke about Richard Nixon, which little-girl Liz interprets by turning to the camera and declaring with great seriousness, "It's funny 'cause it's true." This opening metacommentary on the dynamics of comedy refers to the political interests of 30 Rock itself, every episode of which is dense with allusions to contemporary politics and popular culture. The description also glosses Tina Fey's best known comedy, which has had particularly strong connections to "true" or historical events, beginning with her "Weekend Update" segment on Saturday Night Live and culminating with her impersonations of Sarah Palin. So the flashback acknowledges a history of women writing historically-relevant comedy for television, and it identifies Liz Lemon, and by implication, Tina Fey, as the inheritor(s) of this tradition.

[17] Liz is overjoyed to meet her childhood idol, but an early exchange between the two characters is suffused with wariness about the relationship between "real life" and popular culture. "I grew up wanting to be you," Liz gushes to Rosemary. In reply, Rosemary quips, "I grew up wanting to be Samantha Stephens on Bewitched. The closest I got was being married to a gay guy for two years." This joke is a reference to Fisher's brief marriage to film agent Bryan Lourd, father of her child, who left her for a man in the early 1990s. The joke also refers to the actor Dick Sargent, who played Samantha's husband on Bewitched (1964-72) and who announced he was gay shortly before his death in 1994. Together these references mobilize several chains of meaning in this episode. "Real life" turns out to be a twisted mix of fantasy and uncomfortable truths: Rosemary's girlhood wish is fulfilled in a cruelly ironic way because the fantasy of "being Samantha," that is, being a powerful woman, transmutes into being married to a man who is like the "real" person playing Samantha's husband. Rosemary's wisecrack also resounds with what we know about Liz Lemon's scant romantic history and her penchant for being attracted to gay men ("The Break Up"). It reminds us, too, of the homophobia that would keep actor Dick Sargent in the closet for most all of his life. Paradoxically, Sargent's best-known role would be the lapdog husband in a 1960s idealization of suburban family life — exactly the images and representations protested by second-wave feminists, who were often not as attentive to sexuality issues. Most of all, the remark predicts the Liz-Rosemary narrative in that Liz's

childhood dream to "be" Rosemary later snaps back with a horrible reality check and gets reversed: Rosemary insists that Liz is a young version of herself, and Liz is the one who vehemently denies it. So the quip considerably complicates the relationships among identifications, representations, available knowledges, and histories of gender and sexuality.

[18] Liz and Rosemary are linked as feminists in a commentary on how older women are treated in the entertainment world. Speaking to Jack, Liz quotes Rosemary that "women become obsolete in this business when there's no one left that wants to see them naked," suggesting she and Rosemary share a feminist perspective on systematic discrimination. In the context of Fisher's career, this remark is particularly relevant to the way women's bodies, rather than their words, have traditionally been more likely to get attention and prestige in popular culture. In the Star Wars films, Fisher's Princess Leia was a quasi-feminist heroine, the princess who could handle laser guns, but she was also an iconic sex symbol, the imperiled heroine in a gold bikini in *Return of the Jedi* (1983)—one of the earliest examples of the action heroine as a production of both the women's movement and pin-up culture. But on "Rosemary's Baby," Jack dismisses Liz's remark about sexism and discrimination, retorting, "You make enough money, you can pay people to look at you naked" —setting aside the question of how, in fact, older women in the entertainment business can earn a living.

[19] While Liz and Rosemary are united as feminists for equal rights—the standard liberal concept of feminism—the generation gap becomes an ideological gap when Liz arranges to have Rosemary work as a guest writer on TGS. Once they are co-workers, it becomes clear that their relationships to institutions and corporate life are very different. Liz is successful at NBC because she plays by the rules. Indeed, "Rosemary's Baby" begins with Liz being awarded the corporate "Followship" prize for being a good "follower," and she is about to reject it until she learns it comes with ten thousand dollars in cash—exemplifying wishy-washy Liz Lemonism. Liz takes the prize and the money, even though she later tells Jack she thinks of herself as a writer who is doing socially responsible work; she got into this business, she says, because she wants to be like Rosemary, who "pushes the envelope," writing sketches that "make people think." Yet far from "making people think," the comedy sketches we occasionally see from Liz's TGS series feature fart machines or shameless product placements, like a man who has a GE microwave oven for a head. So when Liz tells Jack that she wants to be like Rosemary, he disagrees and instead assures her that she is much more like him—interested in making money. The only people who want to "push the envelope," he says derisively, are "people who don't have the guts or brains to work inside the system," a perspective that this episode ultimately rejects by demonstrating comedy that, in fact, "pushes the envelope."

[20] As opposed to Liz Lemon's "followship," Rosemary has retained the political contentiousness that energized her as a trailblazer in the 1970s, so writing skits for TGS, she insists on touchy topics like blackface or "an abortion clinic in New Orleans." Liz is shocked and defensive, telling her uneasily, "You can't do race stuff on TV. It's too sensitive." This is ironic Liz Lemonism, mocking Liz's cowardice, because *30 Rock* has, in fact, done "race stuff" since its pilot episode, which focused on TGS's blonde star Jenna being displaced and upstaged by the hip black comic Tracy Jordan (Tracy Morgan). *30 Rock* often represents the conflict between white women and black men as rivals for special consideration or political sympathy—a move rarely seen on network comedy. In the Oprah Winfrey episode, Jenna and Tracy heatedly debate whether black men or white women are more oppressed, trenchantly satirizing identity politics. The episode "The Natural Order" also takes on the relationship between sexism and racism, lampooning the conservative idea of a "natural order," but also making fun of misguided attempts to resolve inequities through heavy-handed attempts to treat everyone "the same." And in "The C Word," feminine stereotypes are sharply juxtaposed with racial stereotypes in parallel plots about Liz and Tracy acting out their expected behaviors as minorities at NBC. Liz's collapse into tears at the end of that episode—the move Morreale describes as

"undercutting" the episode's feminist thrust—confirms her as an outsider to the hypocritical old-boys network and also emphasizes the contrast to Tracy, who has just put on a sham "feminine" emotional display as a way to ingratiate himself with NBC executives. That is, the episode's perspective on gender is shrewdly complicated by race. The point here is that, because Rosemary is later identified as a second-wave feminist, her ideas for TGS suggest that racial conflicts are prime material for feminist comedy.

[21] Jack dismisses the idea of comedy that "makes us think," but "Rosemary's Baby" cannily demonstrates how 30 Rock can produce such comedy. Irritated by Rosemary, Jack tells Liz, "Fire her. And don't ever make me talk to a woman that old again"-- confirming the sexism of the entertainment business. Liz stands up for the older writer, so Jack fires Liz, too, and this inspires the two women to team up. Newly empowered as women comics too radical to work for a corporation like NBC, Liz and Rosemary head back to the latter's apartment to collaborate. Here Liz is stunned when she realizes the truth about Rosemary: she's an alcoholic, possibly psychotic, living in poverty, her Emmy awards poking out of the clutter and trash in an apartment that might not have a bathroom. Seeing Liz attempt to flee, Rosemary rails at her about how she sacrificed her personal life so that women of Liz's generation could have prestigious jobs at NBC. "You wouldn't have a job if it wasn't for me. I broke barriers for you!" she shouts. "I sat around while my junk went bad, all for you! I didn't have any kids. You're my kid! You're my kid that never calls!" Rosemary's language pointedly identifies her as a second-wave feminist, the generation of women who "broke the barriers" in the 1960s and 1970s and now feel abandoned or betrayed by younger women who "wouldn't have a job" without these tough predecessors, who now appear radical and even unhinged in their fierce refusal to compromise. Liz Lemon is, in fact, Rosemary's "baby" in this sense, the product of a political movement that got at least a few women into the 1970s boys-club of the television industry.

[22] The problem is that this story about feminism is a lot like Rosemary's story about Bewitched—a mixed bag of fact and fantasy. The historically factual part is that women like Tina Fey/Liz Lemon who have high-ranking television jobs are indeed indebted to 1960s-1970s feminists who challenged sexist assumptions about "masculine" professions like television writing. It's also true that many of those older women toughed it out by working twice as hard as male colleagues, often sacrificing family life for professional success. But 30 Rock doesn't represent that history; instead, it represents the 1960s-70s feminist as the crazy lady who drinks wine from a thermos and whose offspring, the hapless Liz Lemon, "Rosemary's baby," is unnatural, born of a deluded mother who brings Satan—sell-out postfeminism—into the world. What this episode accurately represents, however, through the framework of babies and children, is the conflict between second-wave feminists and twenty-first century feminists/postfeminists as a struggle repeatedly pitched in emotional, generational terms. This conflict has often been characterized as a mother-daughter battle, with the individualist, consumer-oriented postfeminist pitted against the older generation that pioneered the social world in which postfeminism is possible. This dynamic in turn re-enacts previous representations of feminism as a revolt of daughters against mothers, as Kathleen Karlyn has described in detail in her analysis of contemporary films and television series that replay feminist versions of the maternal melodrama (1-21 and 25-48).

[23] The joke about mother-induced guilt—"You're my kid that never calls!"-- summarizes the messy emotional baggage of this tension, wrought with resentments on both sides. Satirizing the melodramatic mother-daughter metaphors used to describe intergenerational feminisms, Rosemary's outburst also satirizes the melodramatic metaphor of the ticking biological clock. The ticking clock is frequently used in antifeminist discourse to accuse second-wave feminists of denying the importance of motherhood; feminist critics, in turn, accuse postfeminism of sentimentalizing and idealizing motherhood (Negra 65-70). Postfeminist baby panic—the conviction that professional women must

urgently pursue diminishing opportunities for motherhood-- is frequently satirized on 30 Rock, as illustrated by Liz's accidental kidnapping of a baby on "The Baby Show" episode and her ill-starred attempt at single-mother adoption in "Do Over." In another episode, she ends up dating a dwarf because she's embarrassed to admit she mistook him for a child when she rumples his hair out of sentimental maternal longing ("Señor Macho Solo"). When Rosemary gets hysterical about the missing child, she acts out the panic we've already seen in Liz, though the baby in this episode is a metaphorical way of referring to Liz herself as a child of 1970s feminism. Stricken with horror at Rosemary's outburst, Liz escapes the apartment while Rosemary calls after her, "Help me, Liz Lemon! You're my only hope!"—mimicking Carrie Fisher's famous introductory lines in Star Wars (1977) in which she appears as the hologram princess in need of rescue by a Jedi knight—that is, reducing Rosemary to a stereotypically feminine, helpless figure.

[24] However, the episode recuperates Rosemary's perspective in other ways, even as it distances Liz from Rosemary's radicalism. First, it acknowledges Rosemary's importance as a female role model by literalizing Liz's indebtedness to her. In Liz's final scene with Jack—who has of course re-hired her-- Liz explains that she wants this job because she's alarmed and chastened by her glimpse of Rosemary's life. "I can't end up like that," she tells him. "I've got to make money and save it. And I have to do that thing that rich people do when they turn money into more money. Can you teach me how to do that?" This re-establishes Jack as Liz's mentor, despite her disgust with his sexism and politics, in a move that is standard Liz Lemonism—anxiety about financial security and willingness to work with "the suits," as Rosemary contemptuously calls them, to make money. The twist, though, is that Liz wants to get her finances in order so she can send Rosemary \$400 a month, "for forever." This is a gesture of social justice that distinguishes Liz both from Jack—who would never undertake conscience-driven monetary support—and from Rosemary, whose conscience and radical politics have driven her into poverty. Although both Jack and Rosemary act as Liz's mentors and claim her as a version of themselves, Liz is neither right-wing ruthless nor left-wing political. If she were to take on either Jack's values or Rosemary's politics, 30 Rock would lose its messy ambiguity about women's success and creativity in mainstream media. Nevertheless, the social action Liz takes as a feminist gesture of support is very similar to the one seen in the episode about the jeans from Usa. The stipend is charity that can assuage a guilty conscience but makes no change to the system where Liz still works in good "followship."

[25] Second, "Rosemary's Baby" ultimately validates Rosemary's subversive approach to comedy by concluding with a tour-de-force satire of racial stereotypes. The set-up involves Jack's need to confront Tracy about his childish, self-destructive behavior that's bad for network publicity. Tracy sees Jack as a father figure to rebel against, so Jack calls in a psychologist to help steer Tracy away from this rebellious mode. When the therapy session gets into role playing, Jack leaps in to play the roles of Tracy's father, Tracy's mother, Tracy's mother's white boyfriend, the Hispanic neighbor lady, and even Tracy himself. In an outrageous scene that won Alex Baldwin an Emmy, Jack moves rapidly among racial and ethnic stereotypes, parodying Sanford and Son (1972-77), Good Times (1974-79), and even To Kill a Mockingbird (1962) to show the reductive way blacks are pictured in popular culture, usually in texts by white writers. Overall, Jack's mimicry of black representation in the media is "funny because it's true," validating Rosemary's "radical" ideas about racial topics for comedy and undercutting the Liz Lemonist caution that "You can't do race stuff on TV." The postfeminist stance of this episode, I would argue, is its savvy take on intergenerational quarrels within feminism, but also its ambivalent and multiple positioning of feminism itself—as a history and influence, as a dated set of strategies, but also as a valid critique of sexism and racism in the entertainment business, complicating the question of how social change can be maneuvered by those "with the guts or brains to work inside the system."

"TGS Hates Women"

[26] "Rosemary's Baby" comes down on the side of the edgy comedy being pushed by the second-wave feminist, but the edgy comedy she advocates, and what's demonstrated in the payoff scene with Jack, is not in fact about feminism or gender, but about race. Race is a more straightforward topic than gender for progressive comedy because racism is usually easy to identify (Liz's inability to tell apart the black workers on the set) and to censure. But sexism is often tolerated as a norm in mainstream culture, where racist jokes are verboten in a way that sexist jokes are not. Also, within popular culture, the definitions of sexism can become especially slippery given the popular-postfeminist dynamics that embrace the girly and glamorous ideals that earlier feminists had decried. Feminist disapproval of these ideals can come across as moralizing and naïve about the ways sexuality operates in popular culture and in power hierarchies.

[27] This complication is evident in the fifth-season episode "TGS Hates Women," which takes on the topic of sexy women comics who are accused by feminists of exploiting their attractiveness to get media attention. This episode successfully lampoons both sides of the controversy but fails to come to the kind of closure we find in "Rosemary's Baby," even though other sexist discourses are exposed and satirized in more straightforward ways. The lack of a closure or payoff scene demonstrates 30 Rock's willingness to explore controversies of feminism and representation without attempting to resolve them, but the uneasiness of the closure---protested by reviewers as bad writing or a "cop out"—also suggests a larger unease about how and if feminism works as a viable critique of popular culture.

[28] In "Rosemary's Baby," the generational conflict pitted Liz Lemonism against the second-wave feminism of Rosemary, but in "TGS Hates Women," Liz is the second-wave feminist up against the sexy younger writer and performer Abby Flynn (Cristin Milioti), who is being hailed by young feminists as "The Freshest Female Voice in Comedy." As bloggers quickly noted, the latter episode seems to have been a response to the online feminist criticism of Fey and her series. "TGS Hates Women" in fact opens by questioning the gender politics of a popular online magazine. The plot begins with Liz stunned that JoanofSnark.com has accused TGS of hating women. "It's this cool feminist website," Liz says, "where women talk about how far we've come and which celebrities have the worst beach bodies— Ruth Bader Ginsberg!" The website, which we actually see in a cutaway, is a parody of the real-life Jezebel.com, which advertises itself as "Celebrity, Sex, Fashion for Women. Without Airbrushing," and which immediately acknowledged the reference, claiming to be "thrilled and honored to be parodied by 30 Rock" (Hartmann, "Joan of Snark"). Jezebel.com perhaps typifies the "semi-feminism" or Liz Lemonism decried by Sady Doyle, given its coverage of traditional women's magazine topics as well as issues such as body image and airbrushing. As part of 30 Rock's parody, a later cutaway shows JoanofSnark links that include "She-mail: Free email for feminists" and "Fashion & Beauty: Because you're a goddess"—clearly a jab at glamorous versions of postfeminism. Because the cutaway is brief, these details are impossible to see without pausing the image, showing a distinct expectation for viewers who are invested in these issues of feminism and representation, and also showing 30 Rock itself invested in this elaborate joke about how, exactly, contemporary feminism is being defined and practiced.

[29] That question is picked up and fine-tuned into the question of what feminist comedy entails, although the first scenes give obvious answers by satirizing sexist comedy clichés. Liz is disturbed by the accusation that TGS "hates women" because, she says, the past few shows had been entirely focused on its female star Jenna. The scene then cuts to two of Jenna's skits showing her as Amelia Earhart crashing her plane and Hillary Clinton deciding to nuke England, both disasters happening because they suddenly got their periods. Realizing these are sexist jokes, Liz quickly explains that

they are actually "ironic re-appropriation," but she stumbles and admits she's "not sure anymore." She goes on to say that TGS "started as a show for women starring women. At the least, we should be elevating the way women are perceived in society." At that moment, Liz gets her period, goes crazy, and fires everyone in the room. Typical of the metacomedy on 30 Rock, these jokes target misogynist humor and the problem with "ironic re-appropriation" as a rationale for circulating sexist images. At the same time, they deploy irony by positioning Liz—and certainly Tina Fey-- as someone responsible for the production of the misogyny. This opening also slyly refers to the set of expectations that followed Tina Fey to 30 Rock—that it would be a show "for women" and even a show "elevating the way women are perceived in society"— the piousness of the latter statement marking it as a satirical take on the gender representation we see on both TGS and 30 Rock.

[30] The satire of sexism continues in the following scene with Jack. Liz asks him if he thinks she "hates women," and he replies with a lecture on how women are "genetically predisposed" to compete with each other for "strong powerful men like myself"—a parody of certain supposedly scientific explanations of female behavior. Jack pompously explains that if you breed this competitiveness out of women, you end up with "a lesbian with hip dysplasia." In the same scene, he ruminates on the proper life goals for an ambitious young woman: "a doctor's nurse, or a lawyer's mistress, or the President of the United States' shopping assistant." Not surprisingly, he refuses Liz's request to hire Abby Flynn as a guest writer until he sees a photo of the blonde, buxom Abby, which prompts him to agree immediately. As this scene suggests, egotistical masculinity is an easy target for feminist comedy.

[31] Liz exclaims that the hiring of Abby will be a "fem-o-lution," but the feminist sisterhood collapses when Abby arrives at the studio flaunting her miniskirt and pigtails. To Liz's horror, Abby uses a cutesie baby voice to flirt with the writing staff and bounces her ample cleavage by jumping up and down on a trampoline (where she's joined by an enthralled Jack). The trampoline confirms the Abby Flynn story as a reference to the 2010 feminist quarrels around comic Olivia Munn, a former Playboy model who appeared in a bikini on the January 2010 cover of Maxim and in a photo shoot that included suggestive poses on a trampoline. Olivia Munn was hired by The Daily Show in 2010 after Jezebel.com had criticized it for being an old-boys club despite its liberal politics (Carmon, "The Daily Show's Woman Problem"). But feminist forums protested that Munn is not as funny as other available women comics (Itzkoff, Williams), and Munn received even more salacious attention when she appeared on the January 2011 Maxim cover wearing a small tee-shirt and transparent underpants (Hartmann, "Olivia Munn's Groin"). However, the debate about Munn's looks versus her talent generally overlooked the image and persona that launched her to fame: between 2006 and 2010, she co-hosted Attack of the Show! on the G4 network, where she represented the "girl geek" as articulate and techno-savvy, updating viewers on video game news, reviewing new games, and confidently situating herself in a notoriously all-boy milieu. That is, her hire on The Daily Show taps this previous persona of the brainy computer whiz even if it was overshadowed by her later career on men's magazine covers.

[32] Tina Fey has acknowledged Munn as the subtext of the "TGS Hates Women" episode and admitted the controversy was about her looks. In an NPR interview, Fey remarked that if Munn "were kind of an aggressive, heavier girl with a LeTigre mustache posing in her underpants, people would be like, 'That's amazing. Good for you.' But because she is very beautiful, people are like, 'You're using that.' It's just a mess! We can't figure it out" ("Tina Fey Reveals All"). The "mess" Fey cites here is the issue that could be a tee-shirt slogan: "This is what a female comic looks like." For decades, women comics were "funny looking" (Fanny Brice) or presented themselves as "funny looking" (Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers) as a strategy of self-deprecation that defuses the assertive nature of stand-up comedy as a "challenge" to the audience (Russell). But as women comics have risen to prominence,

the cultural double standard about the attractiveness of mainstream entertainers has kicked in.

Alessandra Stanley summed it up in a 2008 cover story for *Vanity Fair*: "It has become a supply-and-demand issue: the supply of good-looking female comedians is growing, and the industry demands that they keep growing prettier" (185). The rise of former model Chelsea Handler as a late-night host attests to this phenomenon, as well as that of Maxim cover girl Sarah Silverman, whose physical resemblance to Abby Flynn is difficult to miss. The larger issue here is that the "looks" of the female comic parallels the "looks" of the feminist as a cultural problem: how to picture the woman who is disruptive and witty, and whose power is what she says rather than what she looks like (Gilbert 100-107; White 355-56).

[33] In "TGS Hates Women," the stakes of this question are raised by making it clear Abby's good looks are her only power. Her jokes are terrible: "You know what sucked about my last lesbian orgy? Right in the middle of it, one of us had to get up to go use the bathroom, and then we all had to go," she says to the fascinated TGS writers, who chuckle at her supposed wittiness while Liz fumes. The "looks" controversy is played out in a brilliant scene that pits Liz's feminist moralizing against what she calls Abby's "baby-hooker" act. Deciding to educate Abby, Liz meets her in Central Park in front of the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt, "champion of the rights of women and the lid on my high school lunchbox," she proclaims. In what follows, Liz's self-righteous pitch is grounded in standard feminist discourse about sexiness as a construction rather than a natural behavior: Liz implores Abby to talk in her "real voice," and to drop the "sexy-baby" act, the gross jokes, and the pigtails. In response, Abby insists she really is a sexy baby and that she can't help it if men are attracted to her—as proven by a homeless man who is watching her and playing with himself.

[34] More slyly, Abby also poses a question that makes an indirect reference to Tina Fey's own star image and its sexualization: "What's the difference between me using my sexuality and you using those glasses to look smart?" Liz Lemon's schoolmarm glasses are a prop inherited from Fey's anchorwoman persona on "Weekend Update" on Saturday Night Live. The dark-rimmed glasses have been a key factor in the "sexy librarian" image of Fey that signals a nervous affirmation of the importance of looks for a star who is known for her wit. However, Fey herself is complicit in the history of her increasingly glamorous star images; like Olivia Munn, Fey is a cover girl. Between March and September, 2008, Fey appeared on the covers of four mainstream magazines and a fifth early in 2009 (Haramis). In an ironic blowback effect, Fey's media images became sexier and more conventionally feminine after the Palin performances launched her to heightened national attention in late 2008, as if Palin's beauty-queen status adjusted the lens on Fey as well. Even if her images are not as sexualized as those of Munn, they conform to mainstream standards of attractive femininity embraced by popular postfeminism. In fact, defending her ubiquitous bikini images, Munn has invoked Fey as a comparison: "Hey, Tina Fey has been on the cover of [Vanity Fair](http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/2009/01/tina_fey200901)

https://web.archive.org/web/20141218113849/http://www.vanityfair.com/magazine/2009/01/tina_fey200901) and Entertainment Weekly, and she always looks like a bombshell. . . . It is possible in this world to be pretty and funny and successful all at the same time" (Spitznagel).

[35] Unlike the earlier scenes that had satirized sexist comedy in a recognizably feminist dynamic, the park scene complicates the question of feminism and comedy by characterizing Liz's feminism as both judgmental moralism but also as a valid perspective. When Abby protests that her image is her own career and is none of Liz's business, Liz replies, "Except it is, because you represent my show, and you represent my gender in this business, and you embarrass me." This is a fairly straightforward assertion that representation matters and that it affects more than the individual artist or performer. Far from undermining this perspective, the script follows up with a demonstration of how embarrassing Abby's performances can be. The homeless man yells "Kiss!" and Abby, after reiterating her position on sexiness, says, "Shall we give the gentleman what he wants?"—leaning toward Liz with her tongue

outstretched.

[36] Unfortunately, after setting up the topic of feminism and representation so richly, a preposterous plot turn dismisses it altogether. As it turns out, Liz Lemon is proven correct in her feminist conviction that Abby Flynn's sexiness is a performance. On the internet, she finds footage of the "real" Abby Flynn, who is actually Abby Grossman, a far funnier and less glamorous comic. Liz triumphantly posts the footage on JoanofSnark, but her strategy backfires with terrible consequences. Abby furiously confesses that she had taken up the blonde "baby hooker" persona to disguise herself from her abusive ex-husband, who is trying to kill her. Liz's posting has already alerted him about Abby's location at the TGS studios, so Abby must flee for her life. Liz Lemon's feminist intervention is a disaster, and even though abusive male power—the horrible ex-husband—is actually at fault, the end result is that it looks like Liz and TGS both hate women.

[37] In the interview in which she discussed "TGS Hates Women" and the Olivia Munn controversy, Fey admitted the episode "confused and sort of delighted the internet in a way." The reference here is to the episode's mixed online reviews and outrage about the ending, which was widely perceived as a cop-out. "That story is so loaded and complex that I was really glad that we did it . . . because it sort of opens up more questions than it answers," Fey continued. For her part, she thought Liz was "in the wrong" to criticize the young comic's use of her sexuality, but she also thought that it was a "tangled-up issue . . . and we didn't go much further saying anything about it other than to say, 'Yeah, it's a complicated issue and we're all kind of figuring it out as we go'" ("Tina Fey Reveals All"). The raw process of "figuring it out" produces a less conclusive episode than "Rosemary," but it also demonstrates the tendency of 30 Rock to make tentative explorations of gender issues rather than to take a feminist stand about them. For Morreale, this constitutes the series' failure as feminism, but my argument here has been that the dynamic of 30 Rock is not in fact feminism but the contesting and disputing of popular ideas of and versions of feminism—quite literally "figuring it out as we go."

[38] A good example of this critical-postfeminist dynamic is the way "TGS Hates Women" represents the contradictory ways that power circulates in gender relations and in popular culture. Traister, who praises this episode for "slicing and dicing nearly every angle of the arguments that crop up any time anyone tries to talk about gender, popularity and perception," pinpoints a line which she characterizes as a "truth" about gender. When Jenna wants to destroy Abby Flynn out of pure jealousy, Liz says, "No, Jenna, that's exactly the problem: men infantilize women and women tear each other down." Traister notes approvingly that there's "No contradictory punchline here. Liz spoke the truth!" ("30 Rock' Takes On Feminist Hypocrisy"). Traister is accurate in characterizing the seriousness of Liz's comment on how women lose power. Yet conflicting concepts of women and power are central to this episode's thematic. Liz does not in fact have the power to hire Abby until Jack sees a photo of Abby's cleavage, and when Abby comes onboard, her sexuality is powerful. Liz believes she is helping Abby Grossman restore her power as a "strong, smart, beautiful woman," she tells Jenna, but even though Abby Grossman's comedy was funnier, she clearly had no media power until she became the "baby hooker" Abby Flynn.

[39] These intriguing contradictions are shut down when they're trumped by the power of the abusive ex-husband, and tellingly, the comic energy of the episode shuts down at this point, too. Traister's exclamation about Liz speaking the "truth" about women and power is a reminder that the best and wittiest comedy in this episode is the sharp, "true" barbs at all sides of the issue—Liz's moralism, Abby's sexy-baby pose, Jack's sexism—confirming the young Liz Lemon's insight that the best comedy is "funny cause it's true." In contrast, the weakest scene is the final one, where Liz is flummoxed by the dramatic revelation of the death threats from the maniac ex-husband. "I thought it was, like, pressure from society," she says lamely. The episode ends with Liz meekly getting the writers back to work: "We were on page six where Wonder Woman gets her period . . ." That is, the

episode circles back to its opening joke as if the entire question of the sexy woman comic had not been raised, indicating an inability to articulate what's "true" about feminist critique of sexualized representation.

[40] In this episode's exploration of feminism and comedy, a subtle detail tips a hat to the political comedy of Rosemary Howard, who—though last seen as impoverished and possibly psychotic--turns out to be successful after all. The first cutaway to JoanofSnark.com shows that the website is advertising Rosemary Howard's play: "I'm Only Laughing Because It's Funny--Now on Broadway." When Rosemary was introduced in "Rosemary's Baby" she had just published a book with that title. This follow-up reference also alludes to Carrie Fisher, whose 2008 memoir *Wishful Drinking* was adapted as a one-woman Broadway play in 2009 and was still on tour when "TGS Hates Women" appeared the following year. By acknowledging the success of Rosemary (and Carrie Fisher), this allusion confirms the value of the second-wave feminist as a successful comic--even as the ad appears on the website praising Abby Flynn as "The Freshest Female Voice in Comedy." After all, "TGS Hates Women" undermines the funniness of Abby Flynn's comedy, but it never undermines its marketability. Likewise, it successfully takes some witty swipes at sexism, but satire of sexism is much easier than the questions of what feminist comedy entails, the impact of both sexist and progressive representations on television, the gender politics of sex-as-power postfeminism, and the moral authority—or audacity—of feminism in criticizing that stance. This ambitious set of questions exemplifies the postfeminist critique that I see operating in *30 Rock*, which never settles on a definitive answer for what feminism or the feminist looks like.

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