

# Prime Time; TV menopause, queerly a case for review

Rosalind Cooper

Chris Holmlund (2002) generates interesting questions about the roles older women get, or do not get, in film and television. Men have leading roles that allow them to age; in fact their aging may add depth to the storyline. Clint Eastwood remains successful as he ages, perhaps reflecting how we expect cowboys to weather as a result of their outdoor life. Women on the other hand, are not expected to visibly age on screen (Holmlund 2002), and those that do, largely “continue to be depicted on television as caricatures informed by ageist ideologies” (Hant 2007). In this paper I explore older women on American and British television, how menopause and women of menopausal and postmenopausal age are represented, and suggest that portrayed as “no longer being a real and proper woman” (Butler 1993, 238) these women are treated as queer.

Firstly, I will outline the medicalisation of menopause and stereotypes of menopausal women, then take a look at representations of menopause on television, and finally summarise and put propose alternative screen representations for older women and menopause.

## Medicalising Menopause and Stereotypes

Menopause, the cessation of menstruation experienced at some point by nearly half of the world’s population, is frequently referred to as a medical condition. A range of psychological and physical symptoms are variously attributed to peri-menopause, the phase leading to menopause, creating a potentially huge market for pharmaceutical companies, especially those selling hormone replacement therapy (HRT) products. Symptoms mentioned include; hot flushes, insomnia, fatigue, forgetfulness, depression, and irritability. Loss of libido, traditionally associated with menopause and the butt of much media culture humour, has been contested in recent research. (Berger 1999, 1–5.)

Health acquires gender specificity, with the implication that “the health experience of male physiology is normal and that of female physiology is abnormal” (Berger 1999, 6). Menstruation and menopause are often treated as illnesses, especially, but not exclusively, in western cultures and menopausal and postmenopausal women are treated as asexual beings. Referring to Peggy Foster, Gabriella Berger explains that HRT pills are “designed to keep

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women's bodies from growing older," as well as "fighting certain transient menopausal discomforts." (Berger, 6–8.)

Berger (1999, 8) suggested that menopause is a social and political issue rather than medical, and citing Paula Weideger claimed that "the biggest hazard of menopause is culture." Western culture rarely celebrates menopause as a time when women may have more time, money, independence and control of their lives than they have previously experienced, or indeed value experience that women have gained on their route to menopause. The negative image of loss of sexuality and youth complimenting increased physical and mental ailments tend to dominate references to menopause, even though recent studies indicate the positive implications of menopause. (Berger, 8–9, 17.) In a few societies menopause is seen as a positive time and older women are respected and privileged members of their communities (Northrup 2002). Japanese women do not fear menopause and are reported to have far less menopausal symptoms compared to North American women. For a woman, getting older in Japan is associated with "advancing in a social hierarchy, and this is accompanied by more responsibility and greater recognition of her maturity and wisdom." (Leng 2005.)

An increasing number of documented choices show how women can approach menopause and ageing; tackle them through exercise, diet and natural products, resort to medical products or surgery, or both, or grit their teeth and resolve to put up with the symptoms. But, do women have real choices, or is there societal pressure to retain

youth for as long as possible, thereby denying menopause and ageing? Perhaps there is a comparison between the desires some teenage girls experience to emulate their media culture counterparts and older women impossibly comparing themselves to their corresponding (airbrushed) images. As actors age, how many women continue to get strong female roles without resorting to cosmetic surgery?

If we understand a stereotype to be a common understanding of a concept with or without founding (cf. Dyer 2003) the most common images of menopause are connected to physical and psychological symptoms; loss of sexual interest, hot flushes, lack of concentration and a tendency to behave irrationally. The latter often explains away women who reach "a certain age" and drastically change their circumstances, upsetting the domestic status quo by, for example, putting time and energy into a new career or studies, taking trips abroad, or divorcing their partner. In other words, these women disturb the established routines of their [male] partners, and behave in ways societal age-norms do not account for (Neugarten 1975). Menopause is less frequently understood as an empowering time for women to take stock of their current circumstances, take steps to transform unsatisfactory situations, and take advantage of newly discovered freedoms. (Beyene 1989; Callahan 1993.)

Menopause has been more openly talked about in recent years, perhaps due to discussions deriving from pharmaceutical interests and a backlash against those interests from some feminist and natural health advocates. Douglas

Kellner (1995) proposed that media culture is the dominant culture today influencing our world view, so by observing media culture products we should be able to gain an insight into contemporary society's view of menopause.

### TV Sitcoms, Soaps and Series

Myrna Hant (2007, 3, 11) identified three roles for older women in the paradigm of ageism on television; firstly as 'the other', meaning no longer a young woman, secondly, invisible except for mother and grandmother roles, and thirdly as a metaphor often linked with "disease, isolation, worthlessness, vulnerability, dissatisfaction and decrepitude." Older women are rarely portrayed as "intellectually vital, sexually active, productive member[s] of society" (Hant 2007, 8). Opportunities for women extending their acting careers are mainly found in comedy programmes, soap operas and historical dramas. Most menopause storylines are in sitcoms, with soap operas trailing somewhat behind as a second source where any menopausal character tends to be the least stable and least competent woman in the programme.

However, as Hant (2007, 1) pointed out there are signs of change; we can now find "counter hegemonic television portrayals of older women" in series such as *Judging Amy*, *Queer as Folk* and *Six Feet Under*. Maxine (Tyne Daly) in *Judging Amy* is a respected social worker who connects with people of all ages. She does not try to hide her age, is confident and has a believable love life which is not made

fun of. As Hant (2007, 18) observed "it is not only older women who will benefit from a new paradigm but all of society as well." Young people can look forward to a phase of life that may offer "new opportunities and possibilities, a time of increased agency and renewed activism."

*All in the Family* tackled often ignored issues of the time, such as racism and sexism, and is credited with being the first American sitcom, in 1972 (season 2, episode 28), to raise the issue of menopause (Parsons 2004). The 70s series revolved around Edith (Jean Stapleton) and Archie Bunker (Carroll O'Connor). Much of the humour in the menopause episode, unfortunately but no doubt reflecting prevailing beliefs titled "Edith's Problem," revolved around how Archie would cope with the strain of having a menopausal wife. The doctor said that menopause is particularly difficult for nervous types and prescribed pills to be taken three times a day for Archie, who did his best to keep Edith on an even keel, but at times was merely patronising.

Archie's efforts served to emphasise Edith's irrational and emotional behaviour, which we soon saw was a lot less irrational as she astutely told her daughter that her husband was not talking to her, but to some old lady. As soon as Archie lost his new cool attitude and reverted to his old self, Edith was reassured that he did not think she was old and that he loved her. From my perspective today, more than thirty years since the episode was aired, I initially thought it was regrettable that the episode portrayed Edith's view of menopause and getting older so negatively, as well as

strongly linking the two phenomena and thought that an opportunity to counter stereotypes was missed.

However, on reflection I think it was to the credit of the writers and director (John Rich) that menopause was even considered as a potential storyline at a time when the subject was taboo and doctors resorted to prescriptions for Librium and Valium or advocated a hysterectomy for “women’s problems.” Edith’s counter-hegemonic moments were truly groundbreaking and Archie’s ignorance reflected society’s attitude. Audience perceptions and reactions at the time would be a better indicator of how successful the programme was at attempting to break through stereotypes and myths.

*All in the Family* was based on the British satirical sitcom *Til Death Do Us Part* which ran from 1965–1974 and received a lot of criticism for promoting racism and sexism, the societal issues the writer (Johnny Speight) and the BBC were trying to address. Although many people read Archie’s British character, Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell), as extremely racist and sexist, there were many others who agreed with his rantings. These programmes provide a good example to illustrate Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model of preferred readings, negotiated readings and alternative or oppositional readings (Hall 2001; O’Shaughnessy & Stadler 2005, 103). In retrospect, I would say that whilst his family ridiculed him for his opinions, Alf was insufficiently challenged about his views and therefore it would be easy to go along with them in the humorous manner they were given.

To see how menopause is handled in a more recent sitcom, 2001, I turn to Britain’s *Absolutely Fabulous* (season 4, episode 6). Patsy (Joanna Lumley) breaks her arm whilst giving her friend Edina (Jennifer Saunders) a shoulder massage. Edina’s daughter, Saffy (Julia Sawahla), suggests menopause has arrived; Edina and Patsy are horrified at even hearing the word. Saffy arranges a home meeting for Menopausal Anonymous. Patsy is in denial both of her age, claiming she is 42, and of being menopausal. Edina is appalled and makes the potentially incontinent guests sit on bin-liners, protesting that she can feel her hormones being leached away by them. Menopause symptoms discussed include sleep and memory loss, growing a third nipple from hormone replacement therapy and brittle bones. Bo (Mo Gaffney) informs the group that “we don’t have that [menopause] in America, we don’t believe in it, certainly not in L.A.”

It appears that Patsy’s entrance into menopause signals the end of her raunchiness and a complete change of character occurs; she takes up a new life of domesticity, loses her bitchy humour and decides to have a baby. However, the new Patsy is in Saffy’s dream, the original Patsy is seen drinking champagne and smoking a cigar; sufficiently re-masculinised to be sexy again. Ironically this episode was planned to be the last of *Absolutely Fabulous*, but another series followed in 2003. Joanna Lumley was 55 when the episode was broadcast and appearing as menopausal Patsy has not diminished her sex appeal or glamorous image; she was listed in Channel 4’s (British TV station) 2007 Top 100 sexiest people in history, website poll.

American television series *Sex and the City* broached menopause when Samantha (Kim Cattrall) receives an unsolicited catalogue for pre-menopausal women (season 3, episode 38). Charlotte (Kristin Davis), somewhat horrified reads from it “listen to this: sometime in the ten years before menopause, you may experience symptoms including all-month long PMS, fluid retention, insomnia, depression, hot flashes or irregular periods. The friends agree it would be a relief not to have periods and the accompanying stomach cramps. Samantha, depressed because her period is late and she believes she has reached the menopause, gets drunk on a date with a guy from her apartment block, unable to endure his boring stories any longer Samantha sleeps with him, at which point “flo came to town.” A delighted Samantha returns to being a “hot pre-menopausal creature.” By season 6 (episode 93), Samantha seems to have adopted a characteristically optimistic attitude “you cannot *believe* the hot flashes! I can barely keep my clothes on.” The *Sex and the City* film spin-off missed an opportunity to celebrate menopausal women’s sexuality; menopause was “explicitly absent whilst implicitly present” (Bedford 2008).

Soaps cover a wide range of social issues, but menopausal storylines are quite rare and rather than dispelling stereotypes or myths, characters greet menopause with dismay and their out-of-character actions are explained to be a result of reaching a certain age. Even British soaps, which tend to be more down to earth than their American counterparts, rarely have menopausal characters. *Emmerdale*’s Viv Hope (Deena Payne) was horrified to be told her preg-

nancy symptoms were most likely signs of menopause. Viv’s irrational and emotional character did little to challenge menopause stereotypes. In the 1970s, Emily Bishop (Eileen Derbyshire), one of *Coronation Street*’s longest running characters had an early menopause, which put a strain on her marriage, nothing to celebrate there.

An Internet search for menopause in American Soaps did not find any related storylines in *The Bold and the Beautiful* or *Beverly Hills 90210*, but revealed menopause has been included in other soaps. In *Days of our Lives*, Addie (Patricia Barry) falsely assumed she was menopausal in the 1970s, and in *Guiding Light* nine times married Reva Lewis (Kim Zimmer) has experienced menopause since 2005. *Cybill*, an American programme somewhat based on the life of Cybill Shepherd the actor who played the leading character, was said to have gained credibility by presenting a number of women’s issues including menopause; it was apparently stopped, despite its successful audience ratings, by CBS due to the feminist and “frank content about women’s sexuality.”<sup>1</sup>

One of the few older women to get glamorous roles and an onscreen sex-life is Joan Collins. She was in her fifties when she played Alexis Colby Carrington in *Dynasty*, an American soap which provided roles for a number of forty plus sexually active characters, and in her seventies as glamorous publisher Eva de Wolffe in British *Footballers’ Wives*. However, before applauding the availability of the

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.aarpmagazine.org/entertainment/Articles/a2004-05-19-mag-cybill.html>

roles, we should note lovers are attracted to the characters by wealth and power, rather than personality; mirroring the more common rich and powerful older man, poor younger woman relationship. Eva instructed her young lover to call her “mama,” suggesting a barrowful of oedipal, incestuous, controlling connotations, even her name conjured up a predatory image. Conditions and explanations attached to the storylines imply that it is unacceptable for menopausal and postmenopausal women to simply be sexually active.

In *The L Word*, when Kit (Pam Grier) told Angus (Dallas Roberts) that she was too old for him he listed a number of famous women with younger lovers, normalising an older woman/younger man relationship. So far so good, however, she then mentioned some of her “other faults” equating their age difference with the abandonment of her son and alcoholism, none of which put Angus off. He was rendered speechless though, when she pulled the ultimate punch and told him she was menopausal; his passion for Kit was only temporarily suppressed and he won her over by singing David Bowie’s *Changes* to her. The relationship was not allowed to happily tick along in the storyline, there were subsequent ups and downs, which substantiated Kit’s fears of getting involved with a younger guy.

The fourth season of *The L Word*, introduced a new character; the aforementioned Cybill Shepherd plays Phyllis Kroll, a fifty-something, dynamic, executive vice-chancellor of a university who leaves a heterosexual relationship to step out of the closet and passionately follow her lesbian desires. Unlike most television characters, Kroll

emphatically demonstrates that menopausal women are sensuous, and seek to fulfill their sexual desires; perhaps more accurately reflecting a society where the same women who fought for sexual freedom in the sixties are defying traditional abandonment of sexuality at menopause.

### Summary and Suggestions

Menopausal and postmenopausal women on television cease to be subjects and fall into what Judith Butler (1993, 3) refers to as the ““unlivable” and “uninhabitable” zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject.” Television’s menopausal and postmenopausal women are frequently depicted as sexless beings who fall outside regulatory norms of gender identification and in being disidentified as women are effectively queered. These women inhabit a space with drag queens and pantomime dames, seen by normative heterosexual mainstream society as unfulfilling the role of their gender. (Butler 1993.)

Television intimates that “sexual relations rarely occur before the age of 15 or after the age of 50” (Nichols 2001, 155). Withdrawing sexual activity queers any reference to sexuality within the groups, suggesting it is something perverse or eccentric. Sexual desire in women no longer possessing a reproductive body becomes an unspeakable desire locked in the closet. (Butler 1993, 17–19, 176.)

The question remains, how could menopause, menopausal and postmenopausal women be represented on our screens,

what images would we like to see or dispel? If we are to “expand the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world” (Butler 1993, 22), and challenge stereotypes, there must be a broader representation of menopausal experiences and older women’s sexuality. Kathleen Woodward (2001, 47) noted that “ageing is associated with a lack of sexual activity,” I add that many portrayals of older women’s sexual activities are often ridiculed. Affirmative and empowering representations are required; it would be refreshing to see intelligent, strong menopausal characters. I would encourage explorations of whether dramatic changes in lifestyle, such as changing careers and leaving partners could be attributed to becoming more experienced and reaching a time in life when reassessment is valuable, rather than simply ascribed to changing hormones.

Women currently need to be doubly attractive to maintain a screen career, as Holmlund (2002, 144) observed, “in our culture, women are aged twice, once at menopause and once in old age, whereas men are only officially aged once, at retirement.” Although, parallels are being drawn as ageing men are urged to extend sexual activities through erectile dysfunction medications such as Viagra. There is a deficit of research about representations of women’s aging and menopause in film and television series which leaves plenty of scope for future studies. I hope to stimulate discussion and calls for a broader representation of older women on our screens; one which does not shy away from showing them in a vibrant and sexually active phase of their lives.

The time is well overdue to bring menopause and older women’s sexuality out of the closet.

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