

**Pushback on TV: How Television Challenged a Conservative Revival**

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In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States experienced a resurgence of conservative movements. These efforts, including the Reagan Revolution and the rise of the Moral Majority, sought to reshape political discourse in the country, thereby influencing public policy and cultural life. Springing into action in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other social movements in the 1960s and 70s, these new conservative movements desired to reassert what they claimed to be traditional American values. The presidencies of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush coincided with the rise of these movements, and these administrations engaged with the debates over the nuclear family, gender roles, religious morality, and free-market capitalism. Furthermore, they saw feminism, LGBTQ rights, and environmentalism as elements of the decline of American culture rather than actual progress. Television responded to these claims, and certain shows used humor, satire, and relatable stories to push back against the conservative revival in relation to gender and sexuality, family relations, and environmentalism.

The debates over American cultural values easily made their way into popular culture. Different forms of media sought to engage in the discussion, highlighting the views of both liberals and conservatives. While political conservatives thrived thanks to the expansion of cable television, as well as the airing and expansion of talk radio and televised religious programming from individuals like Rush Limbaugh and Pat Robertson, liberals pushed back. Hollywood and network television provided an opportunity for viewers to observe ideologies that challenged this resurgence of political conservatism. While conservatives would argue that these programs were a blight on traditional values and an outright attack on topics like religion and family life, liberals argued that they were actually displaying the characteristics of many Americans. Television, specifically, became a powerful tool for liberals to advance their ideas during this time, and

shows like *The Golden Girls* provided the message. While going to the movies required the viewer to leave their homes, television programming appeared directly in homes, furthering the reach of liberal messaging. Families were able to watch television together while having dinner or sitting on the couch, and it provided an excellent opportunity for Americans to observe viewpoints opposite of the growing conservative movement.

Television was an important part of the American experience. It isn't just a means of entertainment, however. As a medium, television allows viewers to engage with characters and events and reflect upon their own experiences. John Fiske, author of *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, notes that media events, like the airing of certain television episodes, can serve to draw attention to social and political issues. He notes, "Media events become flashpoints where the underlying currents of social life boil over into the mainstream of society."<sup>1</sup> Episodes of popular television shows like *The Golden Girls*' "72 Hours" provide opportunities for viewers to examine the potential for resistance of the status quo if the storyline is relevant to contemporary social issues. Such was the case with regard to the conservative revival of the 1980s and 90s. Sitcoms and cartoons alike used humor and satire, storytelling and emotion, to engage characters in politically charged topics. These efforts allowed television to challenge conservative ideals related to gender and sexuality, the family, health, poverty, and corporate responsibility.

Popular shows like *The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women*, *Murphy Brown*, *Roseanne*, and *Captain Planet* all served as a means of resistance to the changing political tides in the United States. While the shows were not blatant propaganda, they allowed their writers to include

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<sup>1</sup> John Fiske. *Media Matters: Race and Gender in U.S. Politics* (Routledge, 2016), xiv.

various criticisms of social and political occurrences. Through doing so, these shows turned entertainment into education, carefully, and sometimes blatantly, introducing thought-provoking content to family audiences. For some, learning about topics like AIDS from a sitcom was their only means of engagement with the issue. As a result, these television shows served a powerful role in providing different perspectives.

One of the largest issues arising in the 1980s surrounded the role of the family. Traditional conservative values placed a man at the head of the family with an obedient wife whose role was to raise the children and keep house. Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, emphasized this idea in his opposition to feminism. Falwell noted in 1989 that “These women just need a man in the house. That’s all they need. Most of these feminists need a man to tell them what time of day it is and to lead the home.”<sup>2</sup> Popular television, however, would place strong female characters at the forefront of storylines, thereby challenging the views of conservatives like Falwell.

Conservatives saw feminism as a threat to motherhood, marriage, and the traditional nuclear family. The idea of a strong woman ran counterintuitive to the idea of a submissive homemaker. Television, however, opted to focus on women as leaders and those who could be successful in a career outside of the home. The character of Murphy Brown, for example, was a successful journalist, while Blanche Devereaux of *The Golden Girls* was an assistant at an art museum and Roseanne went on to open her own restaurant. The characters in *Designing Women*,

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<sup>2</sup> Nicole Casta, “Falwell called NOW ‘the National Order of Witches.’” *Media Matters for America*. 23 November 2004, <https://www.mediamatters.org/jerry-falwell/falwell-called-now-national-order-witches>.

as the title implies, ran an interior design firm. These various women demonstrated that life outside the home was not only possible but commonplace.

These shows readily countered the rhetoric of evangelists like Falwell. Rather than submit to a male authority, the characters sought to establish themselves as the authorities. Bonnie Dow argues that Julia Sugarbaker of *Designing Women* “takes the personal and makes it political, validating the feelings and experiences of the other women by placing them in a larger cultural context.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Dow notes that *Designing Women* provides that “such discourse can work to create a definition of reality that contrasts with the dominant definitions offered by a patriarchal culture”<sup>4</sup> and truly challenge the conservative expectations of women. In addition to the four main women, the characters also employed a male character, Anthony, who originally served as a delivery driver only to later become a partner. Making the women business owners who employed a male greatly contrasted with societal expectations of the era. Anthony’s character did not exist to tell the women what time it was, as Falwell suggested.

In the case of *The Golden Girls*, three of the women were widowed and one was divorced. Though each of them dated throughout the show, there was never a dominant male presence dictating their behavior. It was clear that each character was capable of making her own decisions, even if some of those decisions were poor. Rather than a man taking care of them, they cared for one another. Sophia, Dorothy’s mother, originally arrived because her retirement home burned down and she needed a place to live. While these women may not have exhibited the

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<sup>3</sup> Bonnie J. Dow, “Performance of Feminine Discourse in *Designing Women*,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1992): 135.

<sup>4</sup> Dow, 128.

submissive female role, they did retain the traditional feminine characteristic of compassion, a trait that would show up throughout the series as they engaged with social issues.

*Murphy Brown* also demonstrated that women could live without male dominance. Murphy Brown was a single woman in her 40s. As a journalist she had the respect of her peers, including male journalists. She did, however, have to work with a young, male executive producer named Miles Silverberg. Despite being in a supervisory role, Brown often butted heads with him, demonstrating that she, like the other women on television, was not going to simply be submissive. In another blow to traditional gender roles, when Brown has a child, she hires her male house painter as a live-in nanny. Despite the progressiveness of the show, Dow notes that “Excessive media treatment of *Murphy Brown* continually underscored its position at the forefront of progressive female representation on television.”<sup>5</sup> Though popular, the show was not without controversy, which may have contributed to its lack of positive media coverage of successful female characters.

While the previous shows involved women who were engaged in non-traditional environments, *Roseanne* featured a cast that did represent the traditional nuclear family. Roseanne Connor and her husband, Dan, initially had three children, with a fourth being born later in the show. Roseanne was never a stay-at-home mom. She was actively employed, and although she worked as a waitress at one point, she did go on to partner with sister, Jackie, to open up a restaurant of their own. Jackie, in a previous job at a plastics factory, led unionizing efforts. Roseanne’s husband, Dan, was also a member of a union. While their union membership

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie J. Dow, “Femininity and Feminism in *Murphy Brown*,” *The Southern Communication Journal* 57, no. 2 (1992): 145.

and activities contrasted with conservative politics, the characters did exhibit the desired family structure. Still, in their marriage Roseanne was an equal to Dan, never a subject.

While each of these shows features strong women, they are not so abnormal as to completely go against what individuals would see at home. On *The Golden Girls*, for example, though the women are living together without men, they redefine what a family might be. Though Sophia is Dorothy's mother, Blanche and Rose easily become a part of the family. Each of the women on the show is a mother, and viewers can observe that they are far from the idealistic vision of June Cleaver. Rather, as Beth Boser describes, the women have plenty of opportunity to learn from their mistakes as a mother. Boser notes that "*The Golden Girls* sends the message that mothers have control over—and are therefore responsible for—the actions of their children and others under their care. At the same time, various plots revolving around mothering emphasize the necessity of surrendering control."<sup>6</sup> Unlike Roseanne, who still had young children at home, the women of *The Golden Girls* all had adult children. Still, they must engage with their children when the need arises and help them solve whatever issue might have arisen.

Of the women of *The Golden Girls*, Blanche Devereaux is the more traditional southern woman. She expects things to occur in certain ways. As a mother, she is familiar with her own experiences of childrearing and relationships, and as a result, she expects her children to follow in her traditional footsteps. When she learns her daughter is seeking to have a baby through in vitro fertilization, she responds "So instead of trying [to find a man to marry] you're going to just

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<sup>6</sup> Beth Boser, "Thank You for Being a Mom: Contradictory Lessons in Mothering from *The Golden Girls*". In *The Golden Girls: Tales from the Lanai*, edited by Taylor Cole Miller and Alfred L. Martin, Jr. (Rutgers, 2025), 172.

give up and do this crazy baby thing?”<sup>7</sup> In this instance the show is using humor to highlight the irony of a woman trying to impose a man’s control over another woman as conservatives would expect. Later dialogue in the episode allows Blanche to realize the error of her ways, support her daughter’s non-traditional plan, and move into a more progressive view of motherhood.

On *Murphy Brown* the protagonist also sought to have a baby through IVF. While the use of IVF was a minor plot point on *The Golden Girls* it garners much more attention on *Murphy Brown* due to the heavy criticism of the storyline by Vice President Dan Quayle. The country was observing racial strife across the country due to the Rodney King beating in Los Angeles and the acquittal of the police officers who attacked him, and Quayle was attempting to place blame for the strife on the collapse of traditional family values within the African-American community.<sup>8</sup> Shortly after the acquittal, Quayle gave a speech as a part of his re-election campaign with Bush and heavily criticized *Murphy Brown*. He stated that “It doesn’t help matters when primetime TV has Murphy Brown, a character who supposedly epitomizes today’s intelligent, highly paid professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice.”<sup>9</sup> His speech demonstrates the conservative views on motherhood and relationships, and his criticism of *Murphy Brown* launched a storyline on the show that had the fictional journalist trading barbs with the real Vice President.

The birth of Murphy Brown’s child reflected a real world for many Americans. The audience was able to see the challenges of motherhood and the difficulty in challenging the status

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<sup>7</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 5, episode 3, “The Accurate Conception,” written by Gail Parent, directed by Terry Hughes, aired October 14, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Fiske, 21

<sup>9</sup> Dan Quayle, “Murphy Brown Speech” (speech, 19 May 1992), Voices of Democracy, <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/quayle-murphy-brown-speech-text-2/>

quo. The character responds to Quayle's speech by explaining her thoughts to her coworkers. She states "And what was that crack about 'just another lifestyle choice?' I agonized over that decision. I worried about what it would do to him and me. I didn't wake up one morning and say 'Gee, I can't get in for a facial. I'll have a baby.'"<sup>10</sup> Despite her sarcasm at the end, Brown highlights the struggle of the decision, one that many real women face when it comes to motherhood. William Benoit and K. Kerby Anderson note that the Vice President had claimed Brown was living a glamorous lifestyle, and yet "The story line depicts Murphy's life as anything but glamorous."<sup>11</sup> Although traditional conservative beliefs would have a husband present, the mother would still be predominantly responsible for childrearing. Murphy Brown's experiences show the challenges that all mother's face, regardless of their marital status.

Though conservatives initially opposed government restrictions on abortion citing the idea of small government, the rise of groups like the Moral Majority shifted conservative ideologies to vehemently oppose abortion. In a 1988 letter from President Reagan to Congress, he refers to *Roe vs. Wade* as permitting "abortion on demand."<sup>12</sup> A few years later, *Roseanne* featured a storyline about the protagonist unexpectedly getting pregnant and experiencing a high-risk pregnancy. As a result, Roseanne and Dan consider abortion as an alternative, openly discussing the possibility and allowing the audience to experience what couples might endure in such a situation. Roseanne's grandmother, Nana Mary, discloses that she had had two abortions in the past. She states "Well, it was pretty tough in those days. The laws were very strict. I had to

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<sup>10</sup> *Murphy Brown*, season 5, episode 1, "You Say Potatoe, I Say Potato: Part 1," written by Gary Dontzig et al., directed by Peter Bonerz, aired September 21, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> William Benoit and K. Kerby Anderson, "Blending Politics and Entertainment: Dan Quayle versus Murphy Brown," *The Southern Communication Journal* 62, no. 1 (1996), 76

<sup>12</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Message to the Congress Transmitting the Pro-Life Act of 1988," (letter, 8 June 1988), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/message-congress-transmitting-pro-life-act-1988>

go to some terrible place way out on the south side of Chicago. That was the first time, so the second time I went to Mexico... or was that to get wool?"<sup>13</sup> While the last bit of the line brings levity to the situation, the discussion shows the real experiences associated with pregnancy and abortion that families faced challenging the ideas of "abortion on demand" that politicians were promoting.

While television in the 1980s and 90s sought to show the issues women and mothers faced, shows also addressed topics of sexuality and gender, and further challenged traditional conservative beliefs about these issues. Though evangelical religious leaders like Falwell and Robertson would speak out against LGBTQ rights, conservatives outside of religious leaders would rally as well. Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen turned singer, launched the Save Our Children campaign in 1977 to oppose efforts to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Despite the rhetoric of individuals like Bryant, shows like *The Golden Girls* sought to embrace sexuality and teach that homosexuality was nothing to be feared.

While homosexuality was not regularly portrayed on television media in the 1980s, when it was, it provided an opportunity for characters to examine it and how members of the LGBTQ community lived. In an early episode of *The Golden Girls*, a friend, Jean, visits. Jean is a lesbian, though not all the characters are aware of her sexuality. Upon learning, Blanche reveals her initial confusion. She states "I've never known any personally, but isn't Danny Thomas one?"<sup>14</sup> After initially confusing Lebanese and Lesbian, she realizes the difference. Blanche continues, "Well, I'll never understand what Jean doesn't see in the opposite sex, but if that makes her

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<sup>13</sup> Roseanne, season 7, episode 10, "Thanksgiving," written by Miriam Trogdon et al., directed by Gail Mancuso, aired 23 November 1994.

<sup>14</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 2, episode 5, "Isn't It Romantic," written by Jeffrey Duteil, directed by Terry Hughes, aired November 8, 1986.

happy, that's fine by me."<sup>15</sup> The show's focus on individual happiness rather than cultural or political expectations allowed viewers to relate with Jean's sexuality and the character's reaction to it.

Blanche's humorous response to Jean's sexuality allowed the issue to be presented in a lighthearted manner. In a future season, Blanche would have another opportunity to examine homosexuality, and once again, the show presented the issue in a humorous way. In this situation, Blanche's brother, Clayton, reveals he is gay and that he is hoping to marry his boyfriend. Blanche, ever the traditionalist, doesn't understand her brother's desire to get married. Sophia, whose character is supposed to be much older, clarifies the situation through a discussion with Blanche.

“Blanche: Oh, look, I can accept the fact that he's gay, but why does he have to slip a ring on the guy's finger so the whole world will know?

Sophia: Why did you marry George?

Blanche: We loved each other. We wanted to make a lifetime commitment. Wanted everybody to know.

Sophia: That's what Doug and Clayton want, too. Everyone wants someone to grow old with. And shouldn't everyone have that chance?”<sup>16</sup>

Through their discussion Blanche and Sophia share the parallels between Doug and Clayton's relationship with those of heterosexual couples. This conversation allows the viewer to see the homosexual couple as if they were their friend or neighbor and develop sympathy for similar couples. Though same-sex marriage would not be legalized in the United States for more than

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<sup>15</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 2, episode 5, “Isn't It Romantic,” written by Jeffrey Duteil, directed by Terry Hughes, aired November 8, 1986.

<sup>16</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 6, episode 14, “Sister of the Bride,” written by Marc Cherry and Jamie Wooten, directed by Matthew Diamond, aired January 12, 1991.

twenty years after the airing of this episode, it stands as one which stood firm in its support to the rights of LGBTQ individuals, despite the opposition of individuals like Anita Bryant.

While the inclusion of homosexual characters on television shows served to offer a slight pushback against conservative ideologies, the demonstration of homosexual acts on air further challenged conservative beliefs. *Roseanne* featured an episode in 1994 titled “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” in which the protagonist is kissed by a lesbian. While the viewer does not actually see lips touch, as the kiss itself is hidden by back of the character’s head, the act of kissing triggered conservative groups to rally against the airing of the show. Taylor Cole Miller noted that “sponsors pulled their ads, and conservative/parent watchdog groups protested its representation of homosexuality, transforming ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ into something of a cultural event.”<sup>17</sup> Miller further explains that ABC’s Senior Vice President, Steve Weiswasser, claimed he opposed the scene because such behavior wasn’t “the lifestyle that most people lead.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the opposition, Roseanne Barr pushed back, arguing that “the real cause for concern should be centered around the endless depictions of women being raped, mutilated, and killed, every day on prime-time TV.”<sup>19</sup> While the episode’s kiss may not have reflected traditional conservative values, Barr’s claims about television violence against women espoused a striking contrast against the conservative rhetoric of family values on television.

Though shows like *Roseanne* and *The Golden Girls* highlighted homosexuality with humor, homosexuality in the real world was tied to struggles. With the emergence of HIV and AIDS, the gay community faced new criticisms. Though the virus was not caused by

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor Cole Miller, “*Roseanne*: Programming Flow,” In *How to Watch Television*, edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York University Press, 2020), 287.

<sup>18</sup> Miller, 289

<sup>19</sup> Miller, 289

homosexuality, conservatives had tied it to homosexual behavior. Conservative firebrand Rush Limbaugh launched a segment on his radio show known as the “AIDS Update” in which he targeted “militant homosexuals”<sup>20</sup> and stated that “The AIDS update is *meant* to offend them. Damn right.”<sup>21</sup> While Limbaugh sought to mock those who were dying of the disease, television shows offered a more educated experience.

Because AIDS was a new condition, the general public was not that aware of what it involved. A misunderstanding of how it spread led to stereotypes and promoted fear. Andrew Owens argued that *The Golden Girls* had a great opportunity to provide education on the topic. Owens notes that the show

Aired in the middle of George H.W. Bush’s presidential administration, which continued predecessor Ronald Reagan’s near total disregard of this public health crisis, *The Golden Girls* sat at the intersection between increasingly empathetic viewers and a wider American populace and media culture that remained fundamentally uneducated and prejudiced about the infection/syndrome.<sup>22</sup>

While the general public was focused on the ties between AIDS and homosexuality, the episode “72 Hours” demonstrates another reality. Rose had been hospitalized and received a blood transfusion which may have been infected with HIV, similar to what had happened to tennis star Arthur Ashe. During the episode, Rose laments the disease, telling her roommate Blanch that “This isn’t supposed to happen to people like me. You must have gone to bed with hundreds of men. All I had was one innocent operation.”<sup>23</sup> Here Rose tries to tie the disease to sexual activity,

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<sup>20</sup> Mike Dupree, “Controversy Comes to WMT with a Rush,” *The Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA), 19 March 1990

<sup>21</sup> Dupree

<sup>22</sup> Andrew J. Owens, “AIDS is Not a Bad Person’s Disease, Rose’: Contagion and Comedy on *The Golden Girls*. In *The Golden Girls: Tales from the Lanai*, edited by Taylor Cole Miller and Alfred L. Martin, Jr. (Rutgers, 2025), 138-9.

<sup>23</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 5, episode 19, “72 Hours,” written by Tracy Gamble and Richard Vaczy, directed by Terry Hughes, aired February 17, 1990.

much like the rhetoric of conservatives. Despite being the more traditional of the women, Blanche fires back, directly addressing conservative talking points, exclaiming “AIDS is not a bad person’s disease, Rose! It is not God punishing people for their sins!”<sup>24</sup> The episode’s conflict highlights the struggle occurring across the United States as people sought to understand the disease, its spread, and its effects.

*Designing Women* also sought to address the AIDS crisis a few years prior. In a second season episode, the women learn that one of their friends, Kendall, a fellow designer, has contracted AIDS. They approach the school to discuss materials for sex education as a way to combat the disease only to be met with opposition. They engage in a conversation with a woman, Imogene, who serves to echo conservative talking points.

Imogene: Now I don’t like to hurt anyone’s feelings, but if these boys hadn’t done what they do, they wouldn’t be getting what’s coming to them now.

Mary Jo: Imogene, gays aren’t the only ones getting it.

Imogene: No, but they’re the ones who started it.

Kendall: Actually, nobody knows how it got started. Gays are just one of the first groups it showed up in.

Imogene: Yes, and for a good reason. You reap what you sow. And you boys brought this on yourselves. As far as I’m concerned, this disease has one thing going for it. It’s killing all the right people!<sup>25</sup>

Imogene’s responses paralleled that of men like Limbaugh who sought to place AIDS firmly within the context of sexual orientation and behavior. The episode, however, served to demonstrate that such beliefs were not accurate, and it highlighted the lack of humanity that many conservatives were espousing at the time.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 5, episode 19, “72 Hours,” written by Tracy Gamble and Richard Vaczy, directed by Terry Hughes, aired February 17, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> *Designing Women*, season 2, episode 4, “Killing All the Right People,” written by Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, directed by Harry Thomason, aired October 5, 1987.

While both *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women* sought to educate their viewers about the AIDS crisis, their audiences were more adult. Younger audiences, who were likely also hearing conservative talking points about the disease at school or from their parents, were a prime audience for the animated *Captain Planet*. It, too, had an episode dedicated to AIDS awareness and education. The episode, titled “A Formula for Hate” involves a teen basketball star, Todd Andrews, who contracts AIDS, most likely through a blood transfusion. Still, as Miller shares, the episode “alludes several times to an unusually-close friendship between Andrews and his friend Jeff, and a potential physical relationship between them in a way, I would argue, enables the show to show male-male casual contact without enforcing an anti-gay stance.”<sup>26</sup> The episode also seeks to educate the younger audience by explaining that AIDS is not spread through casual contact. In the episode’s closing scene, students are in the gym ready for a basketball game. A parent protests Andrews’ presence, noting his HIV status. Captain Planet remarks “This is supposed to be a school, but I think these people need a little education about the HIV virus. A lot of you are worried about AIDS, and there’s a rat in your midst who has been spreading lies.”<sup>27</sup> He then turns it over to Andrews’ coach, who continues, “You can’t get AIDS from casual contact. Hugging, touching, they’re okay. You can use the same water fountain or even the same cafeteria. It’s safe!”<sup>28</sup> The episode seeks to debunk some of the fears that were being spread about the disease. While *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women* took a more mature approach to the topic, *Captain Planet* spoke plainly on the issue, making it clear for its

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<sup>26</sup> Taylor Cole Miller, “Queering Captain Planet and HIV/AIDs,” *In Media Res*. 2014. <https://mediacommons.org/imr/2014/07/31/queering-captain-planet-and-hivaid>s

<sup>27</sup> *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, season 3, episode 11, “A Formula for Hate”, written by Nicholas Boxer et al., directed by Stan Phillips, aired November 21, 1992.

<sup>28</sup> *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*

younger audience. The rat, however, that Captain Planet referenced, was a character on the show, who in this instance, was a stand in for conservative voices like Limbaugh.

While the resurgence of conservatism was clearly tied to social issues like homosexuality and women independence, conservatives under the Reagan and Bush administrations also sought to reduce the scope of government through a combination of deregulation and devolution. Furthermore, conservative politicians offered tremendous support for corporate interests over the interests of unions and individuals. *Captain Planet* aimed to address the environmental issues of its day, which were often the result of such deregulation and a focus on profits over conservation. Other shows, like *The Golden Girls*, addressed environmental issues periodically. For example, Rose attempts to save a 200 year old tree from being cut down in the episode “It’s a Miserable Life”.<sup>29</sup> Despite the focus of that episode, it was a one-off issue. *Captain Planet*, on the other hand, maintained environmentalism as its focus. It sought to combat corporate greed and pollution.

As a series designed for children, *Captain Planet* was perfectly placed for educating youth about environmental issues with the hopes that they might be addressed in the future. The characters on the show were diverse, indicating that protecting the earth was in everyone’s best interest. The young Planeteers had been given magic rings that they could use to combat corporate abuses of the environment, and when necessary, called upon Captain Planet to aid them in their endeavors. On their many adventures, the teens often went head-to-head with villainous representations of corporate CEOs with names like Looten Plunder and Hoggish Greedly. These

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<sup>29</sup> *The Golden Girls*, season 2, episode 4, “It’s a Miserable Life,” written by Barry Fanaro and Mort Nathan, directed by Terry Hughes, aired November 1, 1986.

names were reflective of the belief that corporations were resources and harming populations all in the interest of corporate greed and increased profits.

In these confrontations, the teens often destroyed equipment used to pollute and destroy. Though the show's villains were often acting within the law, they highlighted a significant issue. As Robert Lively notes, "The Planetees are sponsored by the Earth spirit, and she has a higher moral law which supersedes those of man. A moral law which condones destruction of polluters and greedy developers."<sup>30</sup> The show explicitly portrayed the teens' focus on the needs of the environment and the general population, and it placed these needs over the needs of businesses. Such display was a significant challenge to the pro-business conservatism under the Reagan and Bush administrations. *Captain Planet's* environmentalism served a dual purpose. It taught about the need to preserve the environment while also holding corporations accountable for their actions.

Television in the 1980s and early 90s provided numerous examples of pushback against conservative ideologies. Shows offered alternative viewpoints, and they often highlighted human elements of the struggles that many Americans faced. Women were starting to work outside of the home in larger numbers, Americans faced a major health crisis, and the youth learned about environmentalism. Though conservatives argued against these topics, making claims like feminism destroyed families, AIDS was a punishment for being gay, and corporations should have little accountability, television offered mass audiences the opportunity to hear liberal ideas. Shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Captain Planet* engaged different audiences, and in doing so, helped to counter conservative talking points.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert L. Lively, "The Power Is Yours: The Deep Ecology of Captain Planet." *Popular Culture Review* 27, no. 2 (2016): 120.

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