

**“They’re all little boys who need a strong mommy:” Burke’s Theories of
Form and Terministic Screens Concerning Maternal Representations in *Sons
of Anarchy***

**A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

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May 2015**

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to analyze one contemporary television series' representations of mothers and what these depictions say about the trajectory of cultural perceptions. As one of the most pervasive forms of media in contemporary culture, television offers an opportune site of study about what American society deems important. While many scholars have begun exploring issues concerning gender on television, few have focused primarily on depictions of motherhood and their implications on society. Televised representations of mothers have traditionally remained in the background of shows, spending the majority of their screen time taking care of their children, husbands, and households in general. Today, however, maternal characters are beginning to push the typical boundaries, potentially signifying a shift in cultural perception of mothers. When conducting this analysis I utilize Kenneth Burke's theories of form and terministic screens to examine the ways in which the current television series *Sons of Anarchy* both reifies and reinscribes dominant ideology through the arrangement of revealing and concealing images to both create and satisfy audience desires. Analyzing the organization of these maternal characters ultimately establishes that *Sons of Anarchy* essentially furthers culturally created expectations of motherhood while intermittently complicating this image of the mother.

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INTRODUCTION: “I’M JUST A WIFE AND MOTHER, DARLIN’.”

Role of Television

No matter one’s opinion on the benefits or detrimental effects of television, he or she will no doubt agree with the claim that television serves as one of the most pervasive mediums in contemporary culture. Television has grown from a simple form of occasional entertainment to a staple in homes, doctor’s offices, and even classrooms. As Ashley Donnelly claims in her book *Renegade Hero or Faux Rogue*, “More than books, more than websites, more than radio, and more than independent media, television serves as a constant in the U.S. home” (5). While not every home in America contains a television set, the pervasiveness of this mode of popular culture insures that nearly everyone will either watch television shows or learn about them through other people and/or media. Those who do not own a television still possess limitless ways to view series that are originally made for television. Brett Martin discusses this transformation of television viewing in his book *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution*, stating that thanks to new technology including “TiVo and other digital recorders, online streaming, on-demand cable, Netflix, file sharing, YouTube, Hulu, and more,” now more and new viewers are able to watch greater amounts of television at an even faster rate (14). We all know several individuals, probably including ourselves, who have taken advantage of the fact that we can now “watch an entire series in two or three multihour, compulsive orgies of consumption-marathon sessions during which you might try to break away, only to have the opening credits work their Pavlovian magic, driving you forward into yet another hour” (14). The new methods for watching television have not only allowed for more people to be able to watch, but they have also amplified our cravings for more.

With people spending such a considerable amount of time consuming television, it becomes increasingly important for scholars to analyze the images in these series. Television obviously serves the purpose of providing viewers with entertaining stories that allow for escape from reality, but as Kathleen Ryan and Deborah Macey, editors of *Television and the Self*, claim, “television reflects our reality and helps us sort out what it means to be a twenty-first-century man or woman” (7). Television shows, just like any other artistic artifact, are created in a specific time, place, and culture, and as such they reveal, conceal, and challenge dominant values in society. By analyzing the depictions presented on popular television series, we can gain a clearer understanding of what American audiences find pleasing and, therefore, what social norms currently exist and what directions they may be heading.

In this work I examine FX Network’s well-received series *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA), a show that explores the ins and outs of an outlaw motorcycle club, to uncover what this scripted series can reveal about America’s contemporary conception of motherhood. What aspects and characteristics of motherhood this show reveals and what qualities it conceals in its representation of maternal characters allows insight into what a current American audience deems pleasing. Looking at these specific presentations and their overall arrangement on SOA reveals that the show, while set in an excessively masculine subculture, presents viewers with representations of motherhood that predominantly preserve socially accepted versions of the nurturing, protective, and conventionally beautiful mother, but that intermittently complicate these ideals.

Theoretical Framework

Television shows convey society's expectations through what parts of culture they choose to emphasize and what sections they select to shade throughout their storylines. When analyzing a television show, Kenneth Burke's theory of form offers an appropriate theoretical framework because it provides a method to "examine the entire continuum of communication, from artistry to audience response" (Kimberling 48). In Burke's *Counter-Statement*, he introduces his concept of form by claiming, "*Form* in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (124, emphasis in original). In a television show form exists as the arrangement of scenes in order to create, as well as satisfy expectations within the television show's audience. Form incorporates both preexisting experiences of viewers and desires that the show generates. According to C. Ronald Kimberling, author of *Kenneth Burke's Dramatism and Popular Arts*, "Burke's concept of form can be applied to a work of art viewed *extrinsically*, as it relates to the wider social context out of which it emerges, as well as *intrinsically*, in terms of the formal structures inherent in the work itself. It provides for an analysis of the contribution of the artist and for the interplay between the work and its audience" (43). Kimberling echoes the idea that form analyzes both the show's role in projecting certain representations and the audience's role in relating to these presentations. In order to express how form in television operates, I present an example from the television series I analyze (*Sons of Anarchy*), which demonstrates the arousing and fulfilling of desires. I will look first at this example only in relation to Burke's theory of form, and later in this section I will return to the same example in order to show how both form and terministic screens work in relation to one another. The matriarchal character of

Gemma Teller Morrow, who embodies characteristics that society typically associates with motherhood, serves as a fitting maternal representation to analyze. She is conventionally beautiful, nurturing (sometimes to an extreme), and she protects her children and grandchildren. In this way *SOA* fulfills the audience's already established desires to watch a character who displays these qualities. The show also creates new desires within viewers throughout the series that it also fulfills. If we look particularly at Gemma's acts of violence, we see that her character pushes the boundaries of acceptable motherhood to the point where viewers expect her eventual demise. Her murder by her own son is only pleasing to an audience because the show has created an expectation for punishment through Gemma's murder of her son's wife. *SOA* does create and fulfill these desires, but the audience holds just as much agency in this process because they deem these representations as pleasing. Analyzing this work's form can not only show what society currently views as valuable and satisfying, but also how *SOA* strategically situates events into an overarching plot in order to convince its audience to continue to engage with the show's representations.

With the help of Burke's theory we can look at how particular scenes and characters in a television series are arranged in order to convey an ultimate affect of satisfaction within the audience. In Burke's *Language as Symbolic Action*, he introduces the concept of terministic screens, which occur in literature when particular selections of language direct a reader's attention toward one path and away from others simply because words cannot fully capture an event. According to Burke, any language "is a *reflection* of reality, [but] by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (45, emphasis in original). This guiding of attention naturally occurs in any

use of language, as “[w]e *must* use terministic screens, since we can’t say anything without the use of terms; whatever terms we use, they necessarily constitute a corresponding kind of screen; and any such screen necessarily directs the attention to one field rather than another” (50, emphasis in original). These decisions of what to say can be made consciously or subconsciously, but either way the end result is a spotlight on a particular aspect of a situation and a shadow on other features of the same setting. No one image can fully capture all facets of its reality, and this especially comes into play with television, a medium concerned with representing reality. While language plays a considerable role in a television production, an equally significant mode of communication in television is the visual. In his introduction to *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence Prelli explains how Burke’s concept of terministic screens that direct awareness into some channels rather than others relate to mediums other than literature. Prelli posits, “selectivity also is at work in visual as well as in verbal dimensions of display. Paintings, sketches, photographs, and other visual images are rhetorical in that they, too, emphasize some meanings even as they diminish or conceal others” (12). The visual representations that a television show presents to an audience result from a process of selection, so it is imperative that we analyze these representations in order to discover their rhetorical implications. In most cases “rhetorics of display often are deconstructed by explaining how these situated resolutions conceal even as they reveal, what meanings they leave absent even as they make others present, whose interests they mute as well as whose they emphasize, what they condemn as well as celebrate, and so on” (Prelli 11). In other words, when analyzing television through the lens of terministic screens, one must pay attention not only to what ideals a series demonstrates, but also (and especially) to what it consciously or unconsciously covers. The

judiciously selected images are arranged throughout a television series in order to create desires and then fulfill them within the audience.

This tactic of presenting images that direct attention to certain aspects and away from others throughout the course of a television series relates to Burke's theory of form in that these screens work together to generate and satisfy desires within the audience. This is especially evident in my previously discussed example of Gemma's representation of a violent mother. The audience is persuaded to accept her as a ferocious mother from the first season of the show. When another maternal character, Wendy, abuses drugs during her pregnancy, her son (Gemma's grandson) is born prematurely and with complications. While Wendy is recovering in the hospital, Gemma gives her a needle of drugs and tells Wendy to disappear because she no longer has a right to be a mother. This scene directs the viewer's attention toward Wendy's indiscretion and away from Gemma's act of violence in order to present Gemma as a protective maternal character who is simply caring for her family. In the sixth season, however, *SOA* reveals Gemma in a different light when Gemma brutally murders her son's wife, Tara, in Tara's own kitchen. In this scene the show directs the audience's attention away from Gemma's motives in enacting violence (she thinks she is protecting her son) and instead toward her viciousness. Here Gemma misuses her maternal strength, which defies social expectations of the nurturing mother. This creates within the audience a feeling of dislike toward Gemma and a desire to see her punished for her misconduct. *SOA* ultimately satisfies this desire near the end of the series when Gemma's own son murders her. The strategic revealing and concealing of these scenes leads the audience to desire what society would usually deem unnatural. The show may lay the groundwork, but the audience plays just as large a role in the situation.

This overall form of a television show does not exist solely within the vacuum of the show. According to Burke, form is appropriate only when it connects with what pleases the viewers, claiming that “[t]he artist’s manipulation of the reader’s [and in our case viewers’] desires involve his use of what the reader considers desirable” (146). Television shows rely on the viewers’ preceding experiences to help produce and fulfill desires because “[p]opular audiences do not seek to ‘block out’ the external world when they encounter popular art. Rather, they must bring in every facet of the external world to aid in interpretation” (Kimberling 94). Analyzing how a show interacts with its audience to advance, challenge, and avert certain depictions of motherhood can reveal the existing tensions in current ideology.

Analyzing the Maternal Figure on Television

Utilizing these frameworks from Burke becomes especially helpful when analyzing representations of motherhood in television because it brings attention to the fact that society tends to view motherhood as the ultimate goal for women to achieve, while simultaneously ignoring the stresses, struggles, and other labor-intensive aspects that accompany motherhood. Ann Hall and Mardia Bishop, editors of *Mommy Angst: Motherhood in American Popular Culture*, highlight this idea that “[b]y what all of these media choose to emphasize and valorize, as well as what they leave out, media play a profoundly important role in constructing societal norms and expectations for women at all stages of their lives” (2). Countless scholars analyze these televised portrayals of women, speculating on what they reveal about society. However, the particular analysis of maternal depictions is only recently rising in popularity. Rebecca Feasey, author of *From Happy Homemaker to Desperate Housewife: Motherhood and Popular Television*, mentions that

representations of motherhood and motherwork have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familiar relations and provide ‘common sense’ understandings about appropriate, inappropriate, acceptable and other maternal behaviors for a contemporary audience. As such, it is crucial that we examine those representations of motherhood and motherwork that dominate contemporary popular programming, and consider the ways in which these depictions relate to the wider social, sexual, political and economic context. (178)

Critically examining portrayals of motherhood will not only show what American society currently views as significant, but also how these images could reflect change in the future.

The image of the mother on television has changed dramatically in recent years. Products of popular culture seem to be offering more varied, and therefore more realistic depictions of mothers than they have produced in the past. As Suzanna Walters and Laura Harrison posit in their article “Not Ready to Make Nice: Aberrant mothers in contemporary culture,”

For much of the history of the representation of motherhood [. . .], mothers have been depicted along the binary lines of saintly sacrificers (think *Stella Dallas* or, more recently, the kidney-donating mother of *Steel Magnolias*), giving all for their progeny’s upward mobility and emotional sustenance, or viperous spiders—weaving webs of neurosis and deceit that endlessly entrap hubby and kids in a mire of unrequited love and emotional bankruptcy. (39)

In the past, this tendency to homogenize motherhood resulted from “culture’s desire for a simple, reliable definition and representation of motherhood, one that answers all questions, addresses all

situations, and perhaps, requires nothing on the part of the American culture in return. Americans want[ed] a ‘mom’ definition of motherhood—a nurturing, accepting, easy definition” (Hall and Bishop ix). In an attempt at reaching this distinct meaning, society oftentimes produced representations of mothers who perpetuated ideals that people had grown to expect. These past representations of motherhood included women whose identities were completely dependent on their status as mother (and wife of course). Their storylines and actions revolved solely around their families, and they were presented as content with the one-dimensional identities of mother/wife.

New maternal characters, however, do not fit snugly into any expected roles, as “[t]hey are uncontrolled and uncontrollable, full of urges, desires, and identities that are antithetical to what we imagine of a good mother” (Walters and Harrison 50). With gender roles in our culture fluctuating so much in recent times, it is no surprise that the traditional televised representation of the mother is changing as well. Mothers on television today, on the other hand, are more complex characters than they have been in the past. Not all television moms wear aprons that match their kitchen décor or wait patiently by the door to take their husbands’ coats when they return home from a long day of work. More mothers on television are written as strong, independent women who may or may not have careers. Since television has grown exponentially in the past several years, “[t]he sheer proliferation of venues and types of programming is at least in part responsible for the more diverse types of mothers populating our cultural imagination and thus it is no accident that TV provides a richer array of roles for women” (Walters and Harrison 51). While this gradual progression is occurring, Feasey argues that “[t]he contemporary media environment is [still] saturated by romanticized, idealized, and

indeed conservative images of selfless and satisfied ‘good’ mothers who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering” (3). Television may portray mothers who have careers or raise children without the help of a husband, but it still manages to keep these women chained to idealized versions of what society deems normal. This phenomenon demonstrates that society prefers to believe that motherhood is a one-size-fits-all experience. However, this appears to be changing. We all know that mothers’ identities are more complex than any representation has previously shown, and the positive in current television is that these series are attempting to portray this complexity.

While several scholars have analyzed representations of mothers on television, most of these evaluations are only sections in more expansive analyses of gender representations. In her book about mothers on television, Feasey writes a call to action for this type of analysis, asserting, “although much work to date seeks to investigate the depiction of women on television, little exists to account for the depiction of mothering, motherhood and the maternal role in contemporary popular programming” (1). In the work that has been done, scholars analyze specific images of maternal characters on television and how these meet with or break from dominant ideology, but rarely do these authors look at how a complete story arc creates/fulfills within viewers a sense of satisfaction. By utilizing Burke’s notions of form and terministic screens, we have the opportunity to analyze both the inner workings of the television show and how these interact with the audience to establish and satisfy desires created by the show and societal norms. This type of analysis reveals that *SOA* does push boundaries with their maternal representations, but the form of the maternal representations are nearly as conservative as past televised depictions. *SOA*’s complex representations of motherhood and the show’s

audience interaction with these depictions mirror the fluctuating ideas surrounding what it means to be a mother in America today.

FX Network's *Sons of Anarchy*: A Unique Specimen

Using the concepts of terministic screens and rhetorics of display, this work will analyze what it says about society that maternal characters on a male-centered series are both breaking from and keeping with societal norms. FX network's *Sons of Anarchy* (SOA) serves as an ideal example of a current television series that utilizes the image of the mother to highlight the aspects of motherhood that typically evoke feelings of respect in our culture and conceal the work it requires of mothers in today's society. In turn, it works with its audience's desires to not only reflect but also create and perpetuate existing social customs concerning motherhood.

According to the show's website:

Sons of Anarchy is an adrenalized drama with dark comedic undertones that explores a notorious outlaw motorcycle club's (MC) desire to protect its livelihood while ensuring that their simple, sheltered town of Charming, California remains exactly that, charming. The MC must confront threats from drug dealers, corporate developers, and overzealous law officers. Behind the MC's familiar lifestyle and legally thriving automotive shop is a ruthless and illegal arms business driven by the seduction of money, power, and blood. ("Sons of Anarchy About the Show")

This series, which defines itself as a mixture of comedy and drama, acts as a unique study because it possesses a largely male audience, with the network "covet[ing] men in the 18-49 age range as their target audience" ("FX Network: There is No Box"). In her book about

representation of men on television, Amanda Lotz explains that *SOA* was FX's attempt at "building a particular brand of programming targeting mature viewers desiring more complicated plotting and characterization with an array of shows inconspicuously investigating men's existence in contemporary America" (54). The show's network created and geared the series toward males, but "the gratuitous aesthetic among FX programming no longer appears to appease only the young male demographic" (Castleberry 270). As the show continued to rise in popularity, women grew fonder of these male characters and their female counterparts. Recent ratings show that *SOA* was the second highest rated show "among women 18-49 on basic cable in 2013" (Thielman). This notable surge of female viewers suggests that there is some facet of a show that has been repeatedly described as "the most macho show on TV" that appeals to both genders (Sheffield). However, since FX created *SOA* "as a raw, edgy show for men," all aspects of it, including the representations of motherhood, aid in attracting and keeping men entertained (Donnelly 55). Viewers tune into *SOA* each week (or whenever they please through various technologies) for many of the same reasons that they watch any other scripted television series: to escape either the pressures of life or the monotony that comes with living as a law abiding citizen. A show that features adult men who support themselves and their families by participating in illegal (yet unquestionably thrilling) dealings seems like the perfect means of escape for this demographic. In addition to these prospects of escape and danger, the show also touches its audience on an intimate level with its focus on more universal issues. In her article "When a Charming Woman Speaks," Leslie Aarons describes some of these issues as the "ebb and flow [. . .of] hopes and fears, gains and losses, friendship and enmity, love and resentments, and regrets and triumphs that [. . . viewers] can identify with" (172-173). The club itself acts as

a family for the most part and, with such a focus on family values such as loyalty, affection, and togetherness, the role of the mother takes on the same significance seen in today's society.

When analyzing the depictions of these mothers it is readily apparent that the bodies of these women serve as their defining characteristics. In "Body Studies in Rhetoric and Composition," Sharon Crowley makes it evident that this trend is time-honored when she argues that "[w]omen's worth has been measured through and by their bodies: Are they virginal or not? 'Attractive' or not?" (179). Crowley's claims about women's bodies especially apply to maternal bodies because their bodies are the sites of gestation. This often generates feelings of the maternal body as fragile and even sanctified. In a world of gunrunning and motorcycle gangs, however, the maternal body must take on novel meanings. Lindal Buchanan states in *Rhetorics of Motherhood* that this "quandary of employing maternal rhetorics [. . .] is that both their force and peril derive from entrenchment within dominant systems of gender, knowledge, and power," and that there rarely exists a balanced product because of this (5). The male dominated sphere within the show and surrounding it does attempt to show images of motherhood that break through some of the stereotypes that surround traditional ideals of the mother. The complex identities that result from *SOA*'s representations break boundaries with respect to the typical role of the mother, allowing its women more opportunities to exist outside of the usual binaries, and "do[ing] a commendable job of avoiding the 'virgin-whore' dichotomy that has shaped many of our ideas about femininity and motherhood" (Kolb 180). At the same time, however, when the viewer looks more closely at how the show presents these maternal characters, he or she realizes that while the women do possess these revolutionary

characteristics, they are only assigned traits that pander to conventionally accepted maternal traits.

SOA errs on the socially accepted side of this equation by creating three core maternal figures who generally fall into three stereotypical categories that Leigh Kolb identifies in her article. The first is “the powerful matriarch,” Gemma Teller Morrow, who is the mother of the current MC president, Jackson (Jax) Teller (Kolb 175). For the first five seasons of the show, she is married to Clay Morrow, the previous club president and best friend of Gemma’s first husband. Her deceased husband, John Teller (Jax’s father), was one of the founding members of Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Original (SAMCRO), so she has been part of the MC since its inception. Because of this, she has reached the status of club matriarch, with members often referring to her as mom or “the beautiful queen of bikers” (“Fun Town”). Gemma believes in family more than anything and prides herself on being a good mother, frequently making comments such as, “I am his mother, and until I am dead and cold I am going to do anything I have to do to protect him” (“Patch Over”). Kerry Fine, author of “She Hits Like a Man, but She Kisses Like a Girl: TV Heroines, Femininity, Violence, and Intimacy,” describes Gemma “as a protector of her immediate family, her extended family [. . .] SAMCRO, and the entire town of Charming” (157). Throughout the development of the series, Gemma’s nature remains constant, and her version of extreme mothering eventually triggers her own death near the end of the series.

The next role depicted on the show is that of “the mothering healer,” Dr. Tara Knowles, who generally acts as a gentler version of Gemma, at least in the beginning of the series (Kolb 175). She and Jax were high school sweethearts, but she moves away from Charming for college

and medical school. In the pilot episode she has recently returned to Charming as a neonatal surgeon. She and Jax live together for the vast majority of the show although they do not marry until the season five premier. *SOA* utilizes Tara's character to show the perspective of someone who has not been surrounded by SAMCRO for her entire life. Throughout the course of the show Tara's character is "[p]resented as a thoughtful, intellectual woman, [. . .and she] struggles with her definitions of morality, love, and loyalty. Yet from the pilot episode, it is clear that a large portion of Tara's world has and always will revolve around Jax" (Donnelly 132). From the very first episode she fills the mother role for Jax's newborn son, Abel, who is from Jax's previous marriage. Abel's biological mother abuses drugs during her pregnancy, and he is born with heart issues that are due in part to the drug usage and in part to a genetic heart defect. Tara assists on the surgery of Abel and helps to save his life. Soon after the ordeal she begins dating Jax again and takes over the role of mother to Abel. She and Jax also share another son, Thomas, who is born between the third and fourth seasons of the show. The show constantly emphasizes the fact that Tara exists on the outer fringes of the club. While she does adjust to some conventions of the SAMCRO lifestyle, she never completely assimilates. As a result of her aversion to the club, her death transpires near the end of the sixth season.

Lastly, the show presents "the bad mother (few things are considered worse in our society) who endangers her child" but who undergoes a transformation throughout the course of the show (Kolb 175). Abel's biological mother and Jax's first wife, Wendy Case, plays varying degrees of significance throughout the series. She is absent for the majority of the series, having served her original purpose as the bad mother. Just as viewers hope, she is punished by not having any contact with her child. However, she returns later in the show and attempts to spend

time with her son. She wants to be part of Abel's life, and she makes it known on multiple occasions that she "gave up the right to raise him, but [. . . she] did not give up the right to know him" ("Call of Duty"). Eventually, after she proves that she can remain sober and fulfill expected maternal roles for Jax's sons (and after both Gemma and Tara die), Wendy is rewarded with the opportunity to raise both Abel and Thomas.

All three of these women are representations that *SOA* uses to give their viewers a picture of motherhood that combines the traditional female/mother traits while occasionally allowing the characters to push these typical boundaries. *SOA* successfully challenges these boundaries in some ways by imbuing maternal representations with particular characteristics that society does not typically associate with motherhood. In this manner the series presents the more realistic notion that a mother's identity is more complex than has been previously presented on television. While analyzing these traits and specific scenes where they emerge would demonstrate that *SOA* is presenting progressive images, an analysis of how these scenes are arranged in such a way to involve viewers in the formation of these characters will demonstrate that the series' depictions of mothers are not as progressive as we might think.

In order to reveal how *SOA*'s maternal representations operate in relation to the show's audience, the following chapters focus on certain aspects that society typically associates with motherhood. I look first at how the physical appearances of the maternal bodies are presented. Since television relies so heavily on the visual, the physical appearances of all characters play a pivotal role in their depictions. This significance of appearance is intensified when analyzing depictions of motherhood because the body serves as a vital part of a mother's identity. The body is a mother's instrument for creating and sustaining life, and they have typically appeared

on the television screen as physical representations of tools. Next, I look at the spaces where the series places these maternal bodies. *SOA* is a male-focused show that concerns a patriarchally concentrated subculture where the maternal characters exist primarily in relation to the men of the MC. Society usually expects mothers to reside in private spheres in order to manage their families, and this expectation is intensified by the fact that the outlaw motorcycle culture “tends to be a somewhat misogynistic culture [. . .with] not a lot written about the women” (“Ask a Motorcycle Mama”). Analyzing how the television show meets with these anticipations and creates new ones can reveal information regarding the current state of American ideology. Finally, I analyze another significant aspect of both motherhood and outlaw culture: violence. While people may not automatically associate violence with motherhood, they do readily associate protection with motherhood, so there exist some expectations within viewers to see maternal characters enact violence in order to protect their families. By depending on viewers’ socially nurtured expectations, the series creates and fulfills desires within the audience to see maternal representations that generally meet with culturally cultivated ideals of motherhood. By the end of *SOA*, mothers who push boundaries are ultimately separated from their children as punishment for stepping outside of the socially accepted boundaries of motherhood.

CHAPTER I
THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE MATERNAL BODY: “I JUST
WALKED TWELVE MILES IN SPIKED BOOTS SO NO, I’M NOT
REALLY OKAY.”

Since television is a medium that relies heavily on visuals, it seems natural to first consider the physical appearances of the maternal characters on *SOA*. Male and female characters on television are both subject to evaluation based on their physical appearance, but this is not an area people traditionally associate with mothers. The mother's body is usually considered a tool or machine used to create and nurture life. In the past, television series have not sexualized maternal bodies because they instead focused the viewer's gaze on the mother's body as functional. Therefore, emphasis was most often placed on the more nurturing, gentler aspects of a mother's physical appearance. On *SOA*, however, the maternal characters' physical appearances do not solely revolve around their maternal status. Analyzing "whose bodies get represented, and where and how this representation occurs, is an effect of the circulation of power," and it is telling that *SOA*'s audience enjoys watching women whose physical identity does not depend solely on their status as mothers (Crowley 178).

Presence and Absence of the Pregnant Body

The most recognizable image of motherhood is that of the pregnant body, and of the three maternal characters on *SOA*, two of them experience pregnancy during the series' run. Even though pregnancy plays such a significant role in motherhood, the only pregnant body that actually appears on screen during the entire series is that of Wendy in the pilot episode. When the audience first meets Wendy she is rummaging through her house in search of drugs, clearly in the midst of a craving. During the opening of this scene, the camera is angled in such a way that the only image of Wendy that is revealed is of her from the chest up. The audience is unaware that she is pregnant because her stomach is concealed, but even the restricted image provokes a negative reaction from viewers because it breaks from what they would normally

expect from a woman's appearance. Wendy's hair is wet from what appears to be sweat and clings to her face, and she is furiously puffing on a cigarette. She clearly has more imperative needs than her appearance, and in American society appearance (particularly a first appearance) means everything. Women are expected to look their best at all times, drug addict or not, and since Wendy appears so disheveled, the viewer automatically feels hypercritical of her and her choices. Wendy eventually finds her methamphetamine, heats it over the stove, and calmly sits down at the kitchen table. At this point the camera pans down to reveal Wendy propping her arm on her visibly pregnant stomach in order to access her vein. In a matter of seconds, the scene shifts to the events involving another character, not lingering on the image of the junkie mother any longer. While this entire scene lasts less than a minute, the amount of time offers viewers enough opportunity to pass judgment, and this seems to be the purpose of this particular camera strategy. The only other moment the audience sees Wendy's pregnant body is when Gemma finds her passed out from an overdose on the floor of the kitchen with thick bloodstains covering the front of her jeans. Wendy is immediately taken to the hospital, where she prematurely gives birth to Abel.

If we analyze this scene through the lens of Burke's form and terministic screens, we see that by concealing Wendy's pregnancy when viewers first see her drug abuse, *SOA* avoids conjuring any feelings of compassion toward her character. The audience's culturally shaped response to drug addicts immediately makes viewers respond negatively to her image. However, this attitude toward Wendy changes when the show directs attention toward her pregnant body. Since "the code of motherhood (re)interpellates the audience; placing members in familiar subject positions, eliciting conventional feelings, and inspiring trust," *SOA* briefly summons this

sensation of esteem toward Wendy (Buchanan 7). When Wendy props her arm on her stomach to inject herself, however, the two discordant responses from the audience combine in a manner that splinters both anticipations. Because of this reverence that accompanies pregnancy in American culture, viewers immediately feel the dissonance of a pregnant body combined with drugs. *SOA* utilizes this inherent response to create a need in the viewer's mind for Wendy's immediate punishment and future redemption. Seeing Wendy in such a jarring appearance makes her ultimate transformation more pleasing for the show's audience.

As exhibited in the image of Wendy, the pregnant body invokes a fervent response from viewers. Therefore, it is particularly significant that *SOA* denies another maternal character the physical symbol of impending motherhood. In addition to Wendy, Tara also experiences pregnancy during the course of the series. Tara's pregnancy contrasts that of Wendy's completely, however, with the most prominent difference being the fact that the audience never actually sees Tara with a noticeably pregnant body. She tells Jax of her pregnancy near the end of the third season when she is eight weeks along. When the show returns for the fourth season, it begins fourteen months after the time season three ends, and the audience sees Tara with the same body she has pre-baby. American society places such an emphasis on the beauty of pregnancy and the magical experience of creating life, and maternity "invites—perhaps even commands—prescribed emotional responses, such as respect, obedience, and love," that one would expect the pregnant body to play a key role in a television program that revolves around familial issues (Buchanan 7). Such an evident lack of the pregnant body, however, suggests that viewers would rather not spend time watching a woman deal with all aspects that accompany pregnancy, including the less than pleasant work it requires on the part of the woman. If the

show were to realistically reflect pregnancy, it would show Wendy and Tara confronting hormonal changes, swollen ankles, morning sickness, and all other bodily alterations that accompany pregnancy. There would also be scenes that show the actual delivery of these babies and the pains that go along with that. Instead, the show completely ignores the pregnant body and experiences that accompany it in the case of Tara and only uses it to reinforce the image of the bad mother in the case of Wendy. This invisibility displays the tendency to ignore the work required of mothers, and it also allows this ignorance to continue. Rather than erecting a screen that focuses on the mother's work, the show directs the viewer's attention toward the end product of pregnancy, which I discuss in further detail later in this chapter.

As signs of an upcoming birth, pregnant bodies also prepare people for a future event. When the show reveals Wendy's pregnant body alongside drugs, the audience is primed to anticipate a birth that holds some manner of significance (otherwise it would not appear on screen). The strategic revealing of Wendy's pregnant body prepares viewers to anticipate both a baby and Wendy's redemption because of our cultural experiences surrounding maternity. As I previously established, the implications of Wendy's pregnant body are that the audience possesses a desire for her retribution and revolution. With Tara's case, on the other hand, viewers do not receive any indication of preparation. Instead, the absence of her pregnant body signifies her continued exclusion from the conventions of motherhood and SAMCRO. Showing viewers Tara with a pregnant body would create an image of her as a traditional mother. Since the television series needs to maintain her persona of an outsider from the club, it is imperative that viewers do not have the opportunity to perceive Tara as conventional. Even though Tara fulfills the role of maternal healer in most aspects, she also serves as a constant opponent of the

outlaw lifestyle. Since *SOA* conditions its viewers to care for characters on the show, Tara's refusal to assimilate into the world of the other characters makes her less appealing. By continually reminding the audience of Tara's segregation, the show leads viewers to expect either her complete absorption or prohibition from both the world of the club and the television series.

The absence of Tara's pregnancy directs the audience's attention away from her position as a mother to her role of producer of a son. American society expects women to use these pregnant bodies to give birth to boys who will grow up to preserve the family, and this ideology is enhanced in a male-dominated culture of a motorcycle club. Most people like to imagine that society has moved past placing this pressure on the mother because science has proven that women play no part in determining the sex of their child(ren). The reality is, however, that even if society knows more about the science of reproduction, people generally still hope for women to produce males. Giving birth to a male may be deemed noble in American society because a son can carry on the family name, but the monarchy type of system displayed on *SOA* is an emphasized version of American cultural desires. Since the television show is a dramatic representation of our reality, it presents more exceptional situations.

At the same time, however, the notion of monarchical preservation is still notable to other cultures. A look at the media frenzy that surrounded Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge and Prince William, Duke of Cambridge immediately following their marriage demonstrates how prevalent this pressure continues to be today. The press consistently placed all expectations on the Duchess to produce a male heir to the throne, and this prince/heir mentality also appears in *SOA*, especially since sons of SAMCRO members often take over the same roles as their fathers

in the MC. In the fifth season Jax becomes president of the club just like his father and stepfather once were. At the time of Jax's ordination, there are several club members who are decades older than him, but his status as son of two former presidents trumps seniority. In order to perpetuate a monarchist lineage, "Gemma and Tara both have 2 sons and no daughters" (Aarons 168). Aarons only mentions Gemma and Tara in her comment about the birth of sons rather than daughters, but Wendy can also be included in this section since she is Abel's biological mother. The show only focuses on Gemma's son Jax, but there do exist several references to Gemma's second son Thomas, who died in infancy. While the show never directly places blame on Gemma for the death of her son, she does pass on a genetic heart defect from her side of the family, which ultimately causes Thomas's death. Therefore, in a subtle way, Gemma is still responsible for the death of her son. This storyline allows Gemma to serve both as the image of a good and bad mother because even though her genetic makeup was responsible for her son's death, she still was capable of producing two sons.

The club's resemblance to a monarchy, with women helping to continue the legacy by creating successors, works to reinforce this longstanding custom. In this manner, the audience members remain attracted to the maternal characters even on a biological level, because they have seen proof that these women are capable of producing males. *SOA*'s production takes an American cultural wish and intensifies this desire by setting the show in a monarchy-based subculture. The structure of the MC, with sons taking the roles of their fathers, creates a need within the viewer to see women in the club produce these male heirs. Gemma, Tara, and Wendy all fulfill these expectations by giving birth to sons over the course of the television series. The show's emphasis on Tara's provision of a son rather than her pregnancy also attests to the

viewers' propensities to find gratification in a character who can meet expectations. Tara may exist as an outsider for the majority of the show, but she must still be a likeable character.

Allowing her to give birth to a male heir fulfills the audience's expectations of what a mother's role entails, ultimately resulting in a congruent character.

Sexualizing the Maternal Body

While maternal bodies are often associated with pregnancy because of society's tendency to see mothers' bodies as sites of creation and production, *SOA* prefers to depict the maternal body as the heterosexual fantasy woman. Throughout the entire series, despite being mostly identified as mothers, "the women's bodies are displayed in ways that make them unmistakably female" (Fine 168). All three mothers have slim figures with long hair and close-fitting clothing. Of all the maternal characters, Gemma dresses most like a stereotypical biker. At least one piece of her outfits is made of leather, and her form-fitting jeans are usually adorned with a flashy belt or bedazzled in another manner. Gemma may be the oldest maternal character on the show, but this does not keep her from wearing the most revealing clothing. Her shirts accentuate her femininity by drawing attention to her chest, waist, or both, and she never appears on screen without wearing heels (most often high heeled black leather boots). Gemma's wardrobe consists of predominantly dark colored clothing. In fact, the only color in her style of dress exists in the thick blonde highlights in her otherwise dark brown hair. Every facet of her style serves as a reminder to the audience that Gemma completely embodies the image of a biker wife and mother.

In opposition to Gemma, Tara's dress falls into the category of what society usually expects from a mother (at least in the first several seasons of the show). She typically wears tee

shirts in solid, dark tones and tank tops with her jeans: comfortable clothing that connotes a wholesome vibe. This is reinforced by her naturally colored, dark brown, straight hairstyle and minimal makeup. As the show continues, she begins to wear more revealing clothing, and her overall “physical appearance changes: she dresses differently and is more sexualized [. . .] She has gone from a doctor-girlfriend of a gangster to the old lady of a gangster” (Donnelly 134). Near the fourth season, after she has given birth to Thomas, she adopts an edgier look that consists of blunt bangs and plenty of leather clothing. This progression coincides with her involvement in SAMCRO, and as Andrea Zanin points out in her article, “Sometimes a Motorcycle is Just a Motorcycle: Freud and Hamlet Come to Charming,” “Tara’s character development can be tracked in the changes she makes to her appearance. The mild-mannered Dr. Knowles of Season 1 has traded in her scrubs for hardened biker chic by Season 5” (158). Each of the slight alterations in her wardrobe and overall style until this point in the series reflects the progression of her personality. The more she looks like the other women in the club, the more the audience sees Tara as an insider of the club and is more willing to accept her character. At this point in the series, Tara has given birth to Thomas and will soon marry Jax, legally becoming Abel’s mother. In order to make this storyline pleasing to viewers, the show must first create a desire within the audience for Tara to become Jax’s wife. One way in which the show accomplishes this is by gradually having Tara dress in a stereotypically biker style of clothing.

When the show needs to present Tara as less desirable to the audience in the sixth season, it changes her appearance once more. At this point in the series, she has been arrested for her involvement in the club and is beginning to pull further away from SAMCRO and all that

accompanies it. While in prison she cuts her hair so short that it hangs above her shoulders. Her decision to sport a less feminine hairstyle directs attention to her rejection of her role in the life of SAMCRO. Since the audience has come to love the majority of the MC members, Tara's rejection of it causes viewers to turn against her. By altering her appearance Tara looks less feminine, which ultimately conveys the idea that a more masculine maternal character does not appeal to *SOA*'s audience. This final adjustment to her physical image signals to the viewers that she is officially an outcast and primes the viewers for Tara's only means of escape from the club: her death.

Wendy possesses a more hippie style of dress as opposed to the biker look of Tara and Gemma, but she still only wears form-fitting and/or revealing attire. Viewers most often see her sporting high-waisted jeans and either a tucked-in tank top or a solidly colored tee shirt. Her blonde hair is regularly down and curled. These styles of dress are not generally expected of mothers, mostly because they place emphasis on the sensual aspect of the female body. Mothers are usually seen as nurturers rather than sexual human beings, but "[t]hese TV moms are having none of that separation of maternity and sexuality that has so marked motherhood tropes" (Walters and Harrison 50). In a television show that was originally created to cater to men, female characters must be capable of both nurture and sexuality. This representation helps to prove that mothers can effectively balance these two traits. The styles of clothing that these women wear never negatively affect their capabilities as mothers.

At the same time, however, while mothers may not have to separate themselves from their sexual inclinations, this does not benefit the maternal image as much as it may seem. Heather Addison, Mary Kate Goodwin-Kelly, and Elaine Roth address this in their collection

about mothers in American films: “Even as they intersect, however, sexuality and maternity do not suggest increased freedom for mothers, but rather continued and perhaps even greater cultural and ideological scrutiny of their bodies” (2). Dressing these maternal figures in revealing clothing serves the purpose of appealing to an audience, rather than making a statement about a mother’s ability to express herself through her dress and/or sexuality. This representation is another way to make the show’s female characters conform to the ideal of beauty. Placing mothers in these styles of clothing also ignores the struggle that accompanies being a mom and trying to live up to these ideals. Tara never has to join a gym to lose her baby weight after giving birth to Thomas, and neither Gemma nor Wendy has to lie down on the bed to effectively button up her skin-tight jeans. The show also conceals the days when a mother is too busy simultaneously fighting a cold and caring for a cranky baby to change out of her sweats or even take a shower for that matter. Showing women wearing fitted clothes would not pose a problem if both sides of the situation were represented. Showing women only wearing revealing clothing, however, gives the audience a false sense of reality and makes them believe that mothers (and women in general) can and should dress this way all of the time.

The overt sexualization of Gemma, Tara, and Wendy is not only apparent in their dress, but also in the sexual situations in which the show places their bodies. *SOA* truly excels in portraying mothers as individuals who are not ashamed or shy about their sexuality. In multiple scenes throughout the series, all three women are shown having sex with their respective partners. In separate scenes Tara and Wendy are even shown masturbating, which helps to break away from the typical theory that women must rely on men for sexual pleasure. Even though Gemma is older than her fellow maternal characters, she is just as sexually active. In addition to

being a nurturing mother, “Gemma is a vivacious woman who desires sex—one episode even deals with her battling vaginal dryness after menopause (‘AK-51’)—but that isn’t treated as something that in any way compromises her maternal role” (Kolb 180). *SOA* does a fantastic job of exploring the sensual side of a maternal figure, but it also makes certain to show the differences between the sexual possibilities for the women and men of SAMCRO. The women are sexual beings, but only by themselves or with their husbands. It is clear from the first season of the show that the men of the MC are allowed to have extramarital affairs as long as they do so discreetly. This dynamic becomes apparent when one of Clay’s past sexual partners shows up to the clubhouse while Gemma is there, and it appears as though Gemma is more upset about being embarrassed in front of her friends than about her husband’s infidelity. She tells her friend and fellow old lady that “[w]hat happens on a run stays on a run. It does not show up and slap me in the goddamn face. That does not happen to me” (“AK-51”). There exists an understanding between husbands and wives in the club concerning fidelity, but as Fine points out, this is a one-sided arrangement: “The monogamy required of the woman reflects the change in the power structure of the couple. The man ‘owns’ and controls the woman’s sexuality, but she does not own or control his” (163). By revealing and emphasizing the sexuality of Gemma, Tara, and Wendy, *SOA* fulfills a culturally conditioned desire that wives’ sexual needs are subservient to their husbands’. Showing these women as sexual human beings would work well to complete a picture of a mother, but the show takes another step back by meeting viewer expectations of clearly established sexual roles for men and women.

Displays of Tattoos on a Mother's Body

In addition to sexualized bodies, the mothers of SAMCRO also adorn their bodies with tattoos, something that has become more accepted in today's society but is still not readily associated with the maternal body. Tattoos mark every member of SAMCRO, and in her article "My Skin, My Self: SAMCRO's Ink and Personal Identity," Charlene Elsby notes that viewers "recognize the *Sons of Anarchy* characters in part by their tattoos, which reflect their choices, values, and personal histories" (109). Most of the club members choose to permanently mark themselves with a tattoo of the club emblem, a reaper holding a rifle in one hand and a scythe in the other, which signifies the fact that each of these men "shares the same interests, goals, and beliefs as other members of the club who bear that tattoo and that his identity depends somehow on that of the community" (113). The MC plays such a tremendous role in the lives of these individuals that they feel compelled to permanently mark their bodies in a way that identifies their allegiance for everyone to recognize. While the tattoos of the actual SAMCRO members offer much more opportunity for analysis because there are simply a greater number to examine, the women who have reached old lady status also have several tattoos of their own. In an interview with *MORE* online magazine, the actress who plays the part of Gemma, Katy Segal, reveals that "[a]ll the women have a crow tattoo; Gemma has one above her left breast, a crow with a skull in the middle of it" (Sagal). As a right of passage, the women get this tattoo of a crow to signify their relationship to the club because it references the acronym SAMCRO. Tattoos are typically associated with masculinity, particularly ones as harsh as crows, so the fact that these characters imprint themselves with such images shows that *SOA* takes an active role in breaking through some of the traditional concepts of femininity.

Gemma's tattoo is usually visible since it is located on her chest and she regularly wears low-cut tops. Her crow is shown as part of the opening credits in every episode, so it is obviously a significant aspect of her identity. The placement suggests that she holds the club close to her heart, and she is proud to have it on display for everyone to see. Also displayed next to Gemma's tattoo is a sizeable scar in the middle of her chest that exists as a result of her genetic heart defect (the same one that caused her son's death). She does not choose this particular marking, so one cannot exactly categorize it with her tattoo, but she does elect to display it alongside her tattoo, and this is worth noting because society is not accustomed to viewing a mother's body as so durable. Fine argues that "[t]he scar, which is a visual reminder of Gemma's toughness, disrupts any association of her with the passive and constructs her as an active subject who fulfills feminine beauty standards and then redefines them too" (166). By constantly exhibiting these markings, *SOA* reminds viewers that this character cannot be confined to a socially accepted maternal role. Gemma's visible scar helps to prove her strength, but its placement also directs attention to her chest, further emphasizing her sexuality and femininity. The fact that Gemma is adorned with this scar shows that *SOA* takes a step toward presenting mothers as more than helpless girls in leather pants.

Wendy serves as the anomaly in this situation, because she has multiple tattoos on her body. The show never places any emphasis on what these markings reveal about her character, but they are typically visible because her revealing attire. The most apparent tattoos on Wendy's body are placed on the anterior sides of both of her forearms. One can only speculate about the significance of this placement since no character says why her tattoos are displayed here, but this location seems to not only demonstrate her toughness, but to also direct attention to the places on

her body where she injects drugs. Since she was married to Jax before the series began, she has the tattoo of the crow on her right forearm. Tara, on the other hand, possesses no markings other than the expansive crow tattoo on her lower back, which is normally covered. The audience only sees it once or twice throughout the entire series. According to Tara the significance of her tattoo has shifted over the years, as tattoos often do since they are “part of the skin of a living individual who is always undergoing change” (Elsby 112). When she originally chose her tattoo as a teenager, her intentions were most likely rooted in a rebellious phase aided by the mischief that accompanies first love, but as an adult she views her marking differently. When Gemma lifts the back of Tara’s scrub top to reveal the tattoo in the pilot episode to remind Tara that she can never erase her past, Tara retorts that, “People change. I’m not the same girl I was ten years ago [. . .] I leave it there so I remember all that shit’s behind me” (“Pilot”). College and medical school offer Tara time away from Jax and the life of the MC, and her tattoo serves as a reminder of her mistakes throughout her younger years. She claims in the beginning of the series that its location on her lower back represents that her days with the club have passed, but this certainly was not the case when she first chose it, and this must change once again when she and Jax rekindle their relationship shortly into the first season of the series.

Tara’s aggressive reaction to Gemma recalling her connection to the club serves as a way for *SOA* to immediately create an image of Tara as slightly averse to the club. The permanent marking proves that she does possess some sort of status within the club, but her rejection of this association conveys the message that she will never fully assimilate into that lifestyle. Tara tries to conceal her connection to the club, but when Gemma pulls up the back of Tara’s scrub top, she literally reveals her history. Theories of form and terministic screens reveal that by directing

attention to this tension in the pilot, *SOA* prepares viewers to expect this same tension to play a role in Tara's narrative later in the series. By showing these tattoos *SOA* displays mothers as individuals who possess the freedom to take control of their own bodies and ink them as they see fit. At the same time, however, they do so to show that these women belong to the club and more specifically to the male members of that club. As Elsby mentions in her article, "[t]he decision to be tattooed at all is only the beginning of a series of considerations that include what the image should be and where it should be displayed, all of which reflect something about the individual making those choices" (111). At no point does any character state that old ladies are forced to tattoo themselves, but all of the women do possess the marking. The club emblem tells others that these women belong to SAMCRO, and this serves as both a source of protection and pride for the women.

Each woman is free to choose where and how prominent she wants her tattoo to be, but she does not select the design or significance of her marking. Their ink serves as a sort of branding, admittedly voluntary as far as viewers understand, but still indicating ownership. A physical marking such as this reinforces the social concept of women as objects. Therefore, while these tattoos and Gemma's scar show that mothers have identities that are comprised of aspects other than their status as mothers, these additional traits still point toward relationships revolving around men. Gemma's willingness to show her scar may present a mother as attractive even with a typically masculine marking, but the tattoos of the old ladies give an audience the satisfaction of seeing a mother physically and permanently marked by/for her husband. By directing attention to these particular tattoos and scars, *SOA* creates images of women as possessions and suggests that their male viewers would also appreciate having such definitive

proof of his wife's allegiance and a permanently visible reminder for other individuals that his wife is committed.

The physical appearances of Gemma, Tara, and Wendy do occasionally separate from the traditional ideas of what most people associate with maternal bodies. *SOA* presents mothers who do not have to divorce themselves from their visible representations of sexuality and strength. They can dress themselves in sensual clothing and mark their bodies with crow tattoos, but in doing this they also place more emphasis on their sexuality. Television has been gradually progressing toward showing more varied and complex characters, but “on prime time, diversity remains limited for women, as thin, young, and conventionally beautiful images predominate even as portrayals become sexually and racially diversified” (Press 148). This emphasis on female characters' sexuality remains a key part of television that holds women to impossibly high standards. Utilizing actresses who appear beautiful by society's guidelines does not alleviate the issue either. In conforming to these customary characteristics of female physical appearance, *SOA* generates and fulfills a desire within its audience for maternal characters who reflect dominant ideology.

CHAPTER II
**SPACES MATERNAL BODIES INHABIT: “YOU WANT TO BE AN OLD
LADY, THEN ACT LIKE ONE! DO WHAT YOU’RE TOLD!”**

When analyzing depictions of maternal bodies in *SOA*, another important feature to consider is in what spaces the show chooses to situate the bodies of Gemma, Tara, and Wendy. Since this particular series focuses primarily on the male characters, the female characters' actions most often revolve around their male counterparts. Therefore, when viewers see Gemma, Tara, and Wendy, the women are typically going somewhere or doing something that relates to fulfilling supposed maternal and wifely duties. *SOA* strategically reveals and conceals particular characteristics and actions concerning these women in order to portray them as physically and emotionally "strong and resourceful, [but] most of their identity, focus, and energy are devoted to the men of the MC" – including their sons and grandsons (Aarons 165). Since they spend much of their time and attention fulfilling their duties, viewers most often see the characters inhabiting traditionally feminine spaces. "This ancient idea that men and women inhabit different spheres based on their biological makeup is deeply rooted in Western culture," and the belief that women belong in a private rather than a public sphere is only heightened when considering mothers (Kolb 177). Women without children are a bit more expected to venture into the public sphere than they have been in the past, but mothers are still presumed to remain in more private spheres because they need to take care of their top priority: their children. This is also intensified by the fact that the culture of the MC is patriarchal. Therefore, when viewers watch *SOA* they automatically possess expectations that the maternal characters will inhabit predominantly private spaces. In order to fulfill these desires that are created by social standards and heightened by the television series, Gemma, Tara, and Wendy rarely step outside of the figurative or literal boundaries surrounding private spheres.

The Mother's Role in SAMCRO

Since the world of the MC is one so full of danger and stressful situations, it is imperative that male members have an old lady at home to serve as his support system. The dynamic between the men and women of the club is particularly curious because even though women play such a significant role in the lives of their partners, they are never actually members. Each woman's entire life revolves around SAMCRO, "though as a woman [each. . .] is not—and never will be—a member" (Aarons 166). Her place, instead, is somewhere in the background of her husband's business. This occasionally causes issues for the women, but overall *SOA* portrays this relationship as simply part of the lifestyle. Since Wendy is already separated from Jax at the beginning of the series, her role in the club as an old lady, a title assigned to women who reach wife or committed girlfriend status for club members, is practically nonexistent. However, she does become a more significant part of the equation in the seventh season after Tara has been murdered. Once Tara dies the audience experiences a desire to see someone assume the role as mother for Abel and Thomas, so Wendy steps into the role of mother to Jax's sons, and in that way she serves as a support for Jax. However, because she never officially reclaims her position as old lady, she is not even privy to any of the going ons of the club. Her role in the club is completely relegated to the private sphere, and this allows the audience to accept the fact that she will ultimately serve as the only suitable maternal figure in the show. Viewers do grow to care about members of SAMCRO over the course of the series, but, at the same time, the show constantly reminds the audience that the actions of these men and women (while entertaining) are destructive. No matter how much a viewer wants to root for these characters, he ultimately understands that in reality they are criminals. By situating Wendy utterly outside of club

business, *SOA* establishes a desire within the audience to view Wendy as a more appropriate mother.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies Gemma, who is the original old lady of the club. She “is Clay’s most trusted advisor and, quite frequently, she directs his actions and decisions” (Fine 164). Viewers constantly see Gemma and Clay lying in bed at the end of the day or sitting at opposite ends of the dining room table in the mornings, with Gemma acting as a sounding board for Clay about how he should handle club concerns. At the same time, however, she only does so from behind the curtains. She is aware of the majority of the club’s business, but the viewer usually sees this happen when Clay and Gemma are in their home. She listens to Clay complain about his problems with other gangs or SAMCRO members, and she offers her advice on the subject. She also supports him in the more traditionally nurturing sense “by giving him injections for his arthritic hands, thus allowing him to ride his motorcycle toward yet another violent encounter” (Kolb 176). Without Gemma’s help Clay could not retain his status as club president since members must be able to ride a motorcycle in order to serve in any position of power. In these ways Gemma serves the purpose of reminding the audience that women do play a chief role in the club.

The series makes a point of showing that Clay may not possess the mental strength to serve as a violent MC president without the support and advice of Gemma. But, as soon as *SOA* creates this impression, it immediately reminds viewers that women “may not violate the rigid and hierarchical gender structure governing sexuality that places women firmly at the bottom” (Fine 163). Gemma can offer Clay her opinion as often as he requests it, but what she cannot do is forget that she must never question Clay’s role as head of not only the club, but also their

household. One of the most striking instances of Gemma overstepping her boundaries occurs in the fourth season when Gemma suspects her husband of hiring someone to murder Tara. She approaches Clay in the T&M office with the intent to discover the truth:

Gemma: Why'd you take all of that money out of the safe?

Clay: What did I tell you about digging into club business?

Gemma: It's not club money.

Clay: That's right. That's my money, and as long as you've got enough to take care of the house and amuse yourself, you don't need to worry about it.

Gemma: Did you really just say that to me?

Clay: Maybe I should be saying shit like that to you more often, reminding you that you are not a member of this club. You're an old lady. And don't forget it.

("Hands")

After this scene both Gemma and Clay go back to their lives as if nothing happened, and the viewer is left slightly shocked but with the recognition that Gemma has in fact stepped over the line. Her role is to support her husband, and when she steps outside of the boundaries of this role, her husband is there to make certain it does not happen again. Until this point in the series, viewers see Gemma undermining the rules of the club by injecting herself and her opinions on the MC's business. By crossing boundaries that the viewers expect her to stay within, Gemma's actions arouse a desire in the audience to see her punished. Throughout the entire series Jax and Clay remind Gemma that she is not part of the club, but this particular scene clearly displays her position of subordination, satisfying the viewers' expectations.

In a similar scene Tara insists that she will join Jax and the club on their trip to Ireland to help find Abel after he has been kidnapped in the third season. In an argument with Jax, she expresses her need to accompany the rest of the family, but he immediately reminds her of her position: “You want to be an old lady, then act like one! Do what you’re told! Pack your shit and head back to Charming” (“Home”). Tara visibly shows how hurtful Jax’s reaction is, but she ends up returning home while the rest of the MC travels to Ireland without her. While this scene is relatively short in screen time, it plays a pivotal role in the overall form of Tara’s character. She is often situated as an outsider to the club, but during the third season the audience needs to feel as though Tara fits somewhat into the club’s structure. Since the audience is aware at this point in the season of Tara’s pregnancy, the fact that she concedes to Jax makes the viewer feel content by her upcoming maternity. By showing that Tara can fulfill her position of old lady, *SOA* primes the audience for her impending role. Of all the show’s maternal characters, Tara struggles with her restricted position as an old lady the most. She does not understand the conflicting image that goes along with it: a woman with power and reverence in the town of Charming and more specifically in the group of other women involved in the club, but who holds no power in relation to her husband. As with most aspects of club life, Gemma tries to help Tara adjust to her position. When the other women at the clubhouse insist on serving Tara coffee, she is shocked to be treated as a superior until Gemma reminds her that she does wield power: “They need to do that, show respect [. . .] Don’t just toss that off. You’ve earned that, sweetheart. You’re not just some crow eater. You’re Jax Teller’s old lady, and that means something in this clubhouse and in this town. People need to show you respect. And you don’t take shit from anyone” (“The Culling”).

What Gemma does not mention, however, is that even though most people respect Tara for being with Jax, she still falls below him on a scale of authority. Gemma tries to help Tara understand the fragile balance of her relationship with Jax, as well, by explaining that these relationships can only work if Jax and Tara have “total disclosure” (“Albification”). Gemma understands that even though women cannot be members of the club, they still need to serve as confidants to their husbands for both the sake of the husband and the wife. She reminds Tara that, “It’s the only way it works with you and him. You’re too smart, too neurotic to live in the vague. He needs to tell you everything” (“Albification”). Once Tara and Jax find this balance, “Tara grows into her role as an ‘old lady’ and accepts her rank among the women of SAMCRO” (Kolb 183). While she ultimately embraces her authority over other women, Tara never fully accepts her rank in relation to her husband. Representing Tara as a wife and mother who emotionally supports her husband from the private sphere helps to reinforce dominant ideology that expects mothers to inhabit this space. Her failure to remain solely in this sphere, however, makes the audience feel negatively about her character. All of these scenes from the earlier seasons of the show serve as indicators of Tara’s inability to comply with expectations. By displaying her in these situations, the show creates a desire within the audience to anticipate either an ultimate assimilation of Tara into the club or her ejection from it. The show fulfills this desire by killing Tara’s character later in the series, and these feelings within the audience suggest that our culture still considers a defiant mother displeasing.

The most beneficial part of Tara’s experience as an old lady is that it offers viewers an opportunity to witness the problematic version of women as relegated to the private sphere. Many television series do not take the time to show the effect that patriarchal hierarchy takes on

women who are part of it, so in this way *SOA* takes a step toward breaking with tradition. At the same time, however, nothing ever changes. The females of the show never directly influence their husbands or the club as a whole. This suggests that American viewers enjoy watching a show in which women have a designated place, and even if these women struggle with it, the audience realizes that this structure benefits men. They recognize that men need a partner and support system, as long as the woman remains in the background. Wendy's absence within the club's business highlights this tendency to expect women to exist in the private sphere. Gemma and Tara may not have central roles in the club, but they engage more with its affairs than Wendy.

The Maternal Body in the Workplace

Surprisingly, with such an emphasis on keeping women in their place as supporters of their husbands, *SOA* actually does explore the idea of maternal bodies in the workplace. Gemma helps take care of the administrative side of the T&M mechanic shop. Viewers often see her at the computer or going through filing cabinets in the shop office. However, these glimpses of Gemma in her job are brief. They usually only occur as the opening or closing of a scene involving other characters. People will stop by the office to talk to Gemma, so while the show may reveal Gemma as a working mother, the show actually conceals the specifics of what it entails and the significance of Gemma's role. It is also worth noting that Gemma's job is one traditionally associated with women (clerical/secretarial work), and her actual workplace still resides within the club's jurisdiction since the MC owns T&M Motors.

Similar to Gemma's character, Wendy also serves as a maternal figure whose body inhabits the workplace sphere but who has minimal emphasis placed on her career. When she

returns to the show in season four, she tells the other characters that she had been working in Boston as a substance abuse counselor. When she moves back to Charming she continues this career at an institution in town. However, the only time the audience actually sees her inhabiting that sphere is in the sixth season when Gemma visits her at work to discuss a familial problem. The scene does not involve her career in any way. Displaying Wendy in her workplace serves the purpose of conveying her progression toward becoming an accepted maternal figure. At this point in the series she has already improved her image by staying sober and obtaining a job, so the audience perceives her as a more responsible and functional adult. After Tara dies at the end of that season, Wendy no longer works outside of the home. Instead, she spends all of her remaining time on the series fulfilling her maternal duties; taking care of Abel and Thomas for Jax.

The audience can consent to the idea of Wendy as a mother because *SOA* has established the fact that she has become rehabilitated and can effectively raise Abel and Thomas. Gemma echoes many of the viewers' feelings when she tells Wendy, "You betrayed me, but you brought it back and you paid the price. And I know how much you love that boy" ("You Are My Sunshine"). In terms of Burke's notion of form, part of Wendy's redemption includes her ability to inhabit the private sphere. In order to sufficiently fulfill the viewers' expectations of Wendy's transformation, the show removes her from the public sphere of her career and relocates her into the private sphere of the home. When Wendy takes over as mother to Abel and Thomas, viewers only see her character performing some of the same duties that televised representations of mothers executed in shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. While Jax, Gemma, and the rest of the characters tend to club business, Wendy watches over Abel and

Thomas either at home or at the clubhouse. She dresses them in the mornings, drops Abel off at school and picks him up every day, puts both boys to bed at night, and folds laundry while Jax utilizes her as a sounding board for some of his club concerns. The fact that these traits fulfill viewer desires attests to the fact that there still exists some part of society that finds this depiction of motherhood satisfying.

Tara, on the other hand, serves as a more thoroughly explored example of a mother in the professional world on *SOA*, working as a neonatal surgeon in Charming's St. Thomas Hospital. By creating and delving into Tara as a successful career-driven mother, *SOA* opens the door for a way out of the dangerous lifestyle for Tara and her family. At one point, Tara expresses this to Jax, but he responds by claiming that he needs time to grapple with the idea of relying on his wife to support their family. While an increasing number of women are financially supporting their families in today's society, it is still the overwhelming norm for the man to at least be an equal earning partner if not the main supporter. *SOA* handles this custom in a surprisingly neutral manner considering the largely male audience. Jax never asks Tara to quit her job, and he seems to fully support her ambitions. At the same time, however, he cannot bring himself to rely solely on his wife's salary, telling her, "I don't have any skills, Tara. I'm an okay mechanic with a GED. The only thing I ever did well was outlaw. I just need time to make some bank, set myself up [. . .] I'm not going to live off my wife. I can't" ("Out"). In this manner, *SOA* makes a noble attempt to show a mother in a role of power, but it simultaneously conforms to and promotes the custom that "Jax is proudly resolute in his rejection of allowing his old lady to support him. It also seems natural and right in a male-dominated society that Tara, as a wife and

mother, should be the one to sacrifice for the good of the family, tolerating Jax's criminal activities to spare him the indignity of being supported by his wife" (Aarons 172).

This particular scene serves the purpose of conveying to the audience that she possesses the ability to move to a town away from the dangers of the MC, but she chooses to stay because of her husband's pride and love for his club. It is another instance of Tara feeling uncomfortable being part of the club, but the scene does not invoke the intense reaction from the audience that others do. It simply notifies the audience that this issue of separation from the club will continue to exist between Tara and Jax, but it does not yet require the viewer to side with or against Tara. When Tara suggests that she financially support her family, she does so in a rational, calm manner. She does not exhibit any anger toward Jax for keeping her family involved in a dangerous and illegal organization, and when he expresses his feelings of disgruntlement with her proposal, Tara is understanding and consents to waiting until Jax is ready. The screen that *SOA* creates by revealing Tara's malcontent with the club and her swift concession to Jax, both arouses a desire within the audience and fulfills another. This scene builds on the expectation that Tara's issues with the club will cause more problems later in the series, but it also satisfies the desire to see a mother sacrifice for her family. Jax's career, while illegal, has more importance than Tara's, which is a socially accepted norm that has dominated our culture in the past.

Not only does Tara passively accept Jax's relation to the MC (for the majority of the show), but she also actively risks her job multiple times for the benefit of the club. This misuse of her resources inevitably detracts from her positive portrayal of a working mother. In the beginning of the series, the hospital serves as the place in which Tara possesses power. When

Jax comes to the hospital to visit Abel soon after he is born, “Tara tells him to clean himself up—then he can see his son” (Kolb 176). Jax has recently left a meeting with another MC that turned violent, so he has blood splattered on his clothing and skin. In an attempt to shield Abel, Tara demands that Jax wash himself. “Tara, who gave Abel his heartbeat, is in control in this sphere,” and she utilizes that control to protect a child (Kolb 176). Viewers see from this instance that Tara’s career provides her with a certain amount of authority that she utilizes to protect others. However, as the show continues, Tara’s career becomes less and less important in relation to her husband’s club. The series continues to show Tara in her work sphere, but she is “seen more often patching bullet wounds at the clubhouse than saving newborns at St. Thomas Hospital” (Aarons 171). Her career becomes a means for Tara to help the club rather than an area of her own in which to pursue her profession.

The soundest example of this occurs in the fifth season when the club asks Tara to volunteer at the prison hospital in order to convince a convicted member of SAMCRO not to testify against the club. She risks her license and career for her husband, which relays the idea that her vocation does not hold the same level of importance as the club’s wellbeing. Rather than possessing a public space of her own, her life and career become so wrapped up with her husband’s that she loses sight of what was once her passion, telling one character, “I love Jax, my boys. I love being his wife. And I’ve embraced the club and the guys and I’m okay with the life [. . .] I used to love being a surgeon” (“To Thine Own Self”). Tara progressively shifts away from finding satisfaction in her career and toward risking that profession in order to fulfill her family’s needs and desires. Our culture generally expects mothers to place their families above all else. Admittedly this image of the sacrificial mother has altered over the years. While

mothers are not expected to choose children over a career anymore, remnants of this model still remain and are exhibited in the conversation surrounding mothers and work/life balance. In order to fulfill its viewers' desires to see a mother choose her family over her career, *SOA* slowly reveals Tara as less of a surgeon and more of a wife/mother. All of the instances when she risks her job for the club not only convey the idea that her desires fall below that of her family's, but they also signify to the viewer that Tara's personality is becoming more like that of Gemma. Burke's theories of terministic screens and form come together once again in this instance, as *SOA* introduces this scene in order to indicate a future moment when Tara takes even greater notice of the triviality of her career.

The series fulfills this expectation of Tara's moment of awareness that her careers falls beneath her husband's when she injures her right hand (a symbol of her surgical occupation) in yet another club related incident. Clay puts out a hit on Tara when he discovers she is planning to move away from Charming with her family. Jax rescues her, but her hand is severely damaged in the struggle with her intended captors when it is slammed in the sliding door of a moving van. When she realizes that "[t]he damage to her hand and arm is severe and she fears that she will no longer be able to continue as a surgeon—the center of stability and control in her life," she undergoes an eerie revelation (Donnelly 68). As Donnelly explains, "[i]n her hospital bed her entire worldview is shattered and she resigns herself to a life in Charming, with SAMCRO, as Jax's old lady—a far cry from the upper-middle-class life of civility they had been headed to days before" (68). This is revealed when, lying in her hospital bed, Tara finally expresses her opinion on the situation, telling Jax in a chillingly calm voice that,

This had to happen [. . .] We're supposed to be together, right? But you can't leave here [. . .] The club won't let you. Gemma won't let you. Charming won't let you [. . .] The only way I can be with you is if I lose my way out. I lost that today, baby. I have a dead hand. No one will want me now, and I'll never save a life again. I'll never fix a tiny heart. It's okay because now we can be together, you, me, Gemma, here in beautiful Charming, a happy family. Maybe I should smash my other hand, that way I can stay home, be a mom, raise your babies.

("Hands")

As soon as it appears that she is finally going to have enough autonomy to help her family escape the life of an outlaw motorcycle club, Tara's opportunity is ruined because of the club. The fact that this happens does place Tara in a role that means she will have to depend on her husband, at least for the time being, but the fact that the writers include this scene to emphasize Tara's realization of this boosts awareness of the issue. They could have easily kept the scene where Tara injures her hand and have her quietly accept her fate, but instead she becomes angry over the situation and lashes out at her husband. The effect of this maneuver is that the viewer feels genuinely sorry for Tara.

SOA reveals this moment in order to draw attention to an instant where a maternal character does not distinctly fit with the socially constructed image of a woman supporting her husband. In this instance the show only partially fulfills the audience's desires. The show keeps with dominant ideology by having Tara injured so that she cannot leave Jax. At the same time, however, her injury causes her character so much physical and emotional pain that the audience becomes uncomfortable with the image of a mother/wife who is not content with her situation.

Once a mother on the show endeavors to survive without the help of her husband, she is completely shut down, and this mimics the dominant “patriarchal ideology [that] still defines women’s primary role as a family caregiver, even as access to professional achievement has been increased” (Mittell 330). *SOA*’s strength lies in its critique of this. The show highlights the fact that a mother does hold significance with regard to the household income by showing that Tara could have easily supported her family prior to her injury. By placing such emphasis on Tara’s loss in this scene, *SOA* reinforces the idea that Tara will never succeed in abandoning SAMCRO, and it prepares the audience for the sixth season when Tara is murdered as a result of her attempts to divorce the club.

Even though the show makes strides in showing a mother in a highly respected public sphere with regard to Tara, it simultaneously hides the struggle that accompanies balancing a career and a family. Since Gemma works for her husband’s business, she is often available to babysit Abel and Thomas while Tara works. Similarly, once Tara dies, Wendy no longer works outside of the home, so she takes care of the children herself. There are also a couple of nannies throughout the series who watch the children. In this manner, the show does make it apparent that women can successfully have a career and a family, but there are several parts of the equation that the series conceals. First, Gemma and the nannies always seem to telepathically communicate with Tara in order to know when and where she needs them to babysit. The show rarely displays the work required to arrange childcare. The lack of attention on these instances is understandable since they are admittedly not exciting aspects of life in comparison to high speed motorcycle chases or shootouts in warehouses, but it also allows viewers to continue viewing mothers as supermoms. Yes, Tara takes advantage of childcare, which allows her the

opportunity to manage a career, but she must spend time making these arrangements.

Organizing childcare requires enormous amounts of communication between parents and a caretaker, even if it is the children's grandmother, and *SOA* mutes this aspect. This leads into the second issue, which is that the show also directs attention away from the decision making process that goes along with opting to place a child in daycare. Most parents do not make this decision effortlessly. They tend to spend time weighing the benefits and disadvantages that factor into the ultimate decision, but Tara just seems to wake up one morning in the fifth season and tell Jax that she has decided Abel and Thomas will attend daycare at the hospital.

The only character who openly debates the situation is Gemma, who immediately confronts Jax when she learns of the decision, stating, "We don't let other people raise our children. It's selfish and lazy" ("Sovereign"). While her comment may appear to be a judgment about Tara's deficiencies as a mother, in reality her concern is more about not letting outsiders into their circle. When she takes up her concern with Tara, she mentions that women in the club "take care of [. . .their] own" ("Sovereign"). Gemma's comments do not appear to affect Tara's decision because she continues to keep her sons in daycare until she dies and Wendy assumes childcare duties. When Jax decides to go to war with a rival gang, the audience sees his careful reasoning, but *SOA* gives only a fraction of that attention to Tara's thought process regarding her children's care. It would be a stretch to claim that this is the intended effect of the show's focus, but the fact remains that a mother's choices are portrayed as less important (or less worthy of screen time) than a father's. In one way, this shows the audience that a mother can work outside of the home and still be considered a good mom, but it also neglects to address the incredible amounts of effort this requires. By setting up a screen that conceals a mother's motives, the

series directs the viewers' attention away from the significance of a mother's decisions, fulfilling the audience's desires to see a mother automatically care for her children.

Motorcycle Moms Who Meet with Traditional Ideals

While Tara serves as at least an attempt at a maternal character encroaching on a male dominated workforce, "in order to keep a character who is a working mother out of the 'bad mother' zone, television shows ma[ke] clear that her top priority is her family, even if she is a professional woman with a demanding career" (Hall & Bishop 10). In order to preserve Tara as a fan favorite, the show keeps her balanced by still presenting her as a traditional mother who spends time playing with her children and rocking them to sleep at night. Because she is a surgeon, viewers would expect her to work odd hours, but she only spends time at work during the day. When she is not working, she is usually at her always-clean home with her children and/or husband. The fact that *SOA* displays her in this way supports the idea that "conforming to traditional gender roles is central to the media construction of the good mother. Cooking and cleaning are embraced by good mothers, even those who work outside the home" (Kinnick 12). The show bends the norm that mothers belong in the home only to the extent that Tara has a career as a surgeon, but they keep her in a nurturing role. She is a successful surgeon, but she will always be found in the kitchen serving SAMCRO members coffee when they visit Jax. The audience knows that Tara is a surgeon, but they see more scenes where she acts as a wife than they do where she operates on patients. Burke's theories would suggest that in directing attention toward her instances of being a mother/wife and away from her identity as a surgeon, *SOA* fulfills the culturally created need within the viewer to see a mother inhabiting a private sphere. An even more noticeable example of this is in a scene during the fourth season where

Jax hands Thomas to Tara to change his dirty diaper rather than changing it himself. Tara still has to get two children dressed and take them to daycare, but this fact does not faze Jax, who hurries out the door to handle some sort of club business. *SOA* fulfills its viewers' desires of watching a maternal character place her responsibilities as a mother before her obligations as a professional, once again reinforcing dominant ideology.

Tara may leave the house long enough to work (during the day, of course), but Gemma “lives the ethic of care in a more traditionally domestic manner: she cooks big family meals, cleans up Jax’s house and his room at the clubhouse, and does whatever she must to protect and emotionally support her ‘boys’” (Kolb 183). Jax may be a thirty-something-year-old man, but viewers see his mother clean his house on multiple occasions. When Gemma is not cleaning or babysitting her grandchildren, she is shopping at the grocery store—in heels and immaculately styled hair—to prepare for all of the SAMCRO family dinners that she hosts at her home. Both Tara and Gemma thrive off of having their families with them in their homes, which situates them as any heterosexual man’s fantasy in regard to being competent caretakers. As a reflection (and as Burke’s theories would suggest a selection and deflection) of dominant ideology, “the men [of SAMCRO] live in a world of assault rifles, motorcycles, drugs, political alliances, and power plays. The women stay at home or in the clubhouse—raising children, healing, protecting, and feeding” (Kolb 177). This display tells the show’s audience that mothers belong and even flourish in the private sphere of the home. Of all the maternal characters, “[o]nly Tara [. . .] explicitly pursues a career [. . .] Although it is unsurprising that these men would couple with women of a similar socioeconomic status, such a preponderance of female characters without highly professionalized careers is unusual for contemporary television series” (Lotz 72).

With so many women choosing to enter the workforce, it appears that *SOA* goes out of its way to display mothers who would rather stay at home and care for their families. The fact that Gemma, Tara, and Wendy do all of this with a smile on their faces (most of the time) hides the amount of work all of this requires. Tara never seems too tired to serve coffee even though she has spent all day saving the lives of newborns, and Gemma does not mind that her adult son (with two children of his own) still needs his mother to clean his room. By reflecting this aspect of the maternal representation and deflecting the image of the mother's presence in a public sphere, *SOA* allows its viewers to remain ignorant of the true stresses that come with this work, and in directing attention in this way it reinforces the dominant ideology that maternal bodies flourish in private spheres where they are readily available to satisfy the wants and needs of male bodies.

CHAPTER III
MATERNAL BODIES IN RELATION TO VIOLENCE: “I GET IT NOW.
GOD WANTS ME TO BE A FIERCE MOTHER. THAT’S MY PATH.”

SOA may perpetuate gender stereotypes by dressing Gemma, Tara, and Wendy in traditionally female clothing and keeping them all mostly relegated to private spheres, but it also creates mothers who use their bodies and minds as tools to achieve the goal of protecting their families. Dominant views of motherhood do expect mothers to fight for their children but not usually in a physical manner. The job of physical protection most often falls on the father in television shows and in society as, according to Mittell, a “key trope in television’s representation of gender [is that] masculinity is seen as **active**, while femininity is seen as **passive**” (337, emphasis in original). *SOA*, however, does a commendable job of not evoking this trope by displaying women who go to extraordinary lengths to protect their families, most often their children and/or grandchildren. Stationing these mothers “with instrumental, masculine, aggression and with the role of the protector identifies them as heroic figures, reinscribing their performances of gender” (Fine 156). If these women excel at any aspect of the show it is the fact that they do not always rely on the men in their lives to save them from dangerous situations. This hostility that the maternal characters are constantly involved with, however, also brings with it violence toward Gemma, Tara, and Wendy. Viewers see all three of these characters subjected to physical abuse at some point in the course of the series. Therefore, while these women wield strength to some degree, they are not by any means immune to violence. *SOA* does reinscribe cultural notions of mothers as passive, and it also reinforces societal norms by punishing the maternal characters who perform violence and rewarding the one who eschews this violence.

The Maternal Body as a Vehicle for Aggression

Gemma's ferocity shines through as one of her key features from the first episode of the series. She discovers that Abel may not live because of Wendy's drug abuse, and she visits Wendy in the hospital for vengeance. After telling Wendy that Abel "will never [. . .] call her mommy," Gemma leaves a syringe of an unspecified drug with Wendy in the hopes that Wendy's guilt will trigger her addiction ("Pilot"). When Wendy does overdose on those drugs several episodes later, Tara confronts Gemma about the event. Gemma appears to have no regrets about her decision and responds by confidently stating, "Nothing gets in the way of me taking care of my family, especially my conscience" ("Fun Town"). The fact that Gemma attempts to take the life of another human being is sanctioned by the fact that she is doing so for the benefit of her family and because Wendy has endangered the life of a helpless child. As revealed in this scene, "Gemma, like so many male heroes before her, operates under the validation of justified violence" (Fine 158). The viewer may react with a bit of shock because mothers are not often so vicious, but he does not negatively judge Gemma for these actions because she does it for her family.

This scene affects the viewers in a couple of ways. First of all, the scene fulfills the desire within the audience to see Wendy punished for endangering the life of Abel. When *SOA* shows Wendy injecting her pregnant body, it creates an expectation within the show's audience for Wendy to ultimately be punished. When she overdoses on the drugs from Gemma, viewers experience a sense of relief and satisfaction rather than sadness or empathy. The scene also establishes the lengths to which Gemma will go in order to protect her family and prepares the audience for Gemma's future progression in viciousness. While such a violent scene involving a

mother would normally evoke feelings of dissonance within the viewer, this particular scene has the opposite effect since Gemma is enacting violence in order to protect a child. *SOA* effectively balances its viewers' desires here by utilizing a maternal representation in a new, unusually violent way while continuing to emphasize the traditional concept of a mother protecting her child. This poise helps viewers relate to and accept Gemma's character as violent.

In the third season when the club travels to Ireland to rescue Abel, Gemma pushes the boundaries of violence even more in an attempt to find her grandson. The club receives news that Abel has been placed in the care of an orphanage that illegally places newborns with adoptive parents. Gemma goes to the institution with several male SAMCRO members and, when the nuns refuse to reveal any information regarding the whereabouts of Abel, she takes matters into her own hands. She grabs one of the babies from a nun and holds a gun to her head, telling everyone, "You know the story of King Solomon [. . .] If I was that mother I'd rather have a half dead kid than watch someone else raise my flesh and blood. You understand where I'm going with this" ("Bainne"). The viewer never has the opportunity to discover if Gemma could actually bring herself to harm an innocent child because the nuns take the threat seriously and tell Gemma what she wants to hear. Even though the situation is resolved without further violence, the image of Gemma "as an unholy Madonna, cradling a child but simultaneously threatening to shoot it" sticks with the viewer (Fine 169). *SOA* presents this screen to illustrate the fact that Gemma, who constantly depicts herself as a familial protector, is beginning to blur the lines between protection and barbarity. After watching Gemma endanger the life of a child, the audience anticipates that her violent tendencies will most likely intensify in the future.

While holding a loaded gun to the head of a baby seems unfathomable, Gemma proves that her limits of violence truly do not exist in the season six finale when she commits one of the most brutal murders in the series. During this episode Gemma is misinformed by another character that Tara has made a deal with the police that will result in Jax's incarceration. In an attempt to save her son, Gemma immediately leaves to find Tara at Jax's house. When Tara walks into the kitchen, she sees Gemma and, immediately realizing why Gemma is there, tries to run out of the room. Gemma is too quick, however, and hits Tara in the side with a clothing iron. She then grabs Tara's head and strikes it on the edge of the sink, begins drowning Tara in the sink full of dirty dishwater, and stabs her in the head six times with a carving fork. In this moment the audience truly sees the violence a mother is capable of, particularly Gemma who, "ultimately, in that moment [. . . is] not really thinking anything except her base instinct, which is that she's a violent woman and that is the way she's lived her life for many years" ("Sons of Anarchy's Katey Sagal: The Truth About Gemma Teller"). The viciousness of this scene conveys the idea that men are not the only ones who possess physical strength, so in that way *SOA* presents a favorable image of a mother's abilities (as odd as that may seem considering the circumstances).

At the same time, however, the way that the show stages the scene makes the violence unmistakably feminine. In an interview about Tara's murder, Kurt Sutter, creator of *SOA*, explains his thoughts on the scene: "I really wanted it to be of Gemma's world and Tara's world, rather than of the club world. I knew I didn't want it to be a gun, I didn't want it to be a knife, so something as simple and as pedestrian as a sink full of dirty dishwater and a carving fork just felt not only simple, but just much more brutal and horrible" (Grecco). Gemma murders Tara in the

kitchen with items that are traditionally associated with women, which, as Sutter says, does make the scene horribly cruel. However, it also draws attention to and reinforces the fact that these women live in the private sphere and enact their power in that space. This particular instance is when the audience sees Gemma's ultimate moment of inhumaneness, and viewers immediately turn against her character. By this point in the series, the audience has created a bond with Tara's character. When Gemma murders Tara as the result of a tragic misunderstanding, viewers automatically feel animosity toward Gemma and anticipate some sort of punishment for her transgression.

In revealing a mother as violent, *SOA* shows that these women can, in fact, take care of themselves. In Tara's words, they "don't need a boy to handle [. . .their] shit" ("SO"). Tara may start out as the voice of reason who confronts Gemma about her morally questionable actions, but she too gradually transforms into the same fierce mother as Gemma, even telling her mother-in-law later in the series, "You've been my teacher, Gemma, my old lady coach since I came back to Charming" ("Huang Wu"). During the beginning seasons, viewers never see Tara as a violent mother; she even has a conversation with Gemma about how to handle other women hanging around Jax where she finds the idea of enacting physical violence appalling:

Gemma: You've got to educate. Set the bitch straight. Others see it, everyone knows.

Tara: What, like hit her?

Gemma: Kick, scratch, whatever.

Tara: I'm not eighteen years old anymore, Gemma. My catfighting days are behind me. ("Fix")

Showing a moment where Tara explicitly states her opposition to violence makes her transformation into a ferocious mother noticeable. Tara may have trouble understanding what she views as unnecessary violence in this scene, but it only takes a few more episodes before her view shifts drastically, and the show begins fulfilling the audience's desire to see Tara assimilate into the MC. When Tara hears that a hospital administrator is threatening to file a case against her for abusing her status as a surgeon to illegally help a SAMCRO member, Tara realizes that a suspension from her job could pose a threat to the wellbeing of her family. In response to the situation, Tara corners the administrator, Margaret, in a hospital office, punches her in the face, slams her against the wall, and proceeds to threaten her by saying,

I know where you live, where your kids go to school. SAMCRO has the cops on its payroll, this town in its pocket. You say a word about this to anyone; it'll be the biggest mistake of your little red life. Do you understand what I'm saying? And I suggest you drop this bogus claim against me. There are a lot of people who need my help. ("The Culling")

At this point in the series, the audience sees a true shift in Tara's character because she senses that her career is in jeopardy, and she is willing to do anything necessary to keep her family out of financial strains. This instance also marks a change in her way of thinking, as "after she punches Margaret, she shifts from someone who has a clear mind-body separation to someone willing to act physically out of emotion, a shift that makes her more like Gemma and the women of SAMCRO than an outsider" (Donnelly 134). *SOA* situates Tara as the outcast in the group of SAMCRO women for the majority of the series, but from the moment she assaults Margaret, Tara's violence serves as the one manner in which she assimilates completely. From

this point on, Tara never hesitates to threaten and/or attack any individual whom she views as a threat to her family, often utilizing the cast on her hand (from the attempted kidnapping) as a weapon to hit other women in the face. She does not hold the power to take out her aggression on the men in her life who caused her injury, but she can use her cast to enact violence on other women. She may not fully integrate into the club with regard to most aspects of her character, but as far as violence is concerned, she completely transforms to fit the audience's desires for a SAMCRO mother.

Like Gemma and Tara, Wendy undergoes a transformation throughout the length of the show. Her change, however, appears to be in the opposite direction. She becomes sober and basically steers clear of the trouble with the club in an effort to earn time with her son. As a result, she never enacts physical violence. She does, however, still become "explicitly vengeful when [. . .] she perceive[s] a threat or even minor slight to" her child (Walters and Harrison 41). The factor that separates Wendy's version of violence from that of Tara and Gemma is that she always threatens to take legal action rather than resort to physical violence. When she first returns, Wendy tells Gemma that she will not stand to remain exiled from Abel's life anymore, saying, "If you try to box me out Gemma, I swear to god I'll get a lawyer and make this shit loud and messy" ("Call of Duty"). After a season has passed and Wendy still rarely gets to see Abel, she threatens to take action once again. She has just learned of Abel's kidnapping and refuses to remain silent any longer, telling Jax and Tara, "This doesn't end with me just going home, Jax. You know, I wanted to do this the right way, sane and sober. But clearly whatever is going on around here is beyond sanity. And I've got the proof. Abel being kidnapped, the shit that happened to me today, I'm gonna report it. And then, I'm coming after my son" ("Darth").

While Wendy never follows through with her threats, she does make her potential for aggression known on any occasion where she feels that she is unfairly separated from her son. Eventually Wendy's approach is the only one that works in the long run, as both Tara and Gemma die, whereas Wendy ends up raising Abel and Thomas. Even though viewers are fond of Gemma and Tara, the violence that they represent is not in accordance with accepted maternal characteristics. The only maternal character on the show who is worthy of caring for children is Wendy, and *SOA* keeps her separate from enacting physical violence in order to satisfy the viewers' desires of a peaceful maternal figure. Viewers understand and accept the acts of violence that Gemma and Tara commit for the most part because these mothers are protecting their families. However, women who are capable of those levels of violence ultimately violate the traditional image of the nurturing mother. Therefore, Wendy serves as the only character truly qualified to care for Abel and Thomas.

In most of these instances, mothers use their bodies to physically harm others whom they perceive as posing a threat to their families. Highlighting this characteristic in the mother not only keeps viewers interested in the drama that accompanies these actions because the violence complies with the show's conventions, but it also shows women taking care of their own problems. The fierce mother takes on an entirely new meaning in *SOA*, which works to show viewers that, if pushed to a limit, mothers are capable of enacting violence to protect their families. Fine argues that "[t]his combination of familial protection, outlawry, and instrumental aggression subverts the role of the outlaw hero by expanding it to include maternal protection, redefining that traditionally masculine power in a distinctly feminine way" (170). Fine's claim works without question in that *SOA* does avoid the feminine/masculine binary through these

examples of fierce mothers. Gemma and Tara use their bodies to prove their forcefulness nearly as often as the men of SAMCRO, with their “actions and reactions [. . .] typically as violent and immediate as many of the men’s” (Donnelly 135). Normally viewers would negatively react to women engaging in violent acts, but for the most part there exists an understanding that these women are acting as any mother would if faced with the same situation(s). As Hall and Bishop phrase it, this unfamiliar reaction “reveals a willingness to tolerate violence—despite our supposed cultural outrage regarding media images of violence—as long as the family unit is preserved. In other words, the fractured family is a much greater threat to our cultural wellbeing than that posed by violent imagery and behavior” (84). As long as Gemma, Tara, and Wendy are beating and murdering people who potentially endanger their families, then viewers can support them.

Choosing to place emphasis on women enacting violence only in order to take care of their families, however, also reinforces the lioness image of a mother. Most of the time Gemma and Tara act out of instinct because they sense a threat, and they lash out based on their emotional response to this. If Gemma had taken the time to discover the truth about whether or not Tara made a deal with the government, then she could have avoided murdering the mother of her grandsons. Mittell discusses the “air of gendered tropes [that] corresponds to the professional/domestic divide: masculinity is typically shown as being **rational**, while femininity is **emotional**” (334, emphasis in original). Whenever the men of SAMCRO make decisions about whether or not to kill someone, they usually ponder how it will happen and how it will affect the future relationships of the club. Showing Tara and Gemma as mothers who react emotionally with physical violence helps perpetuate the idea that men *act* deliberately, while

women *react* irrationally. These depictions of mothers who both clean and fight also fit into the socially accepted ideal that women should be able to play all roles at once: the nurturer who is soft spoken and the defender who feels comfortable drawing her gun if needed. Presenting this image creates a complex screen that both helps show women as strong and fulfills the viewers' culturally created dreams of a wife who can manage all of these tasks at once.

Representations of the Manipulative Mother

Not only do these women physically brawl to achieve their goals, but they also rely on manipulation to enact power that they do not otherwise possess. Just as in customary representations of motherhood, "[o]n *Sons of Anarchy* power is in the hands of the men. It's their votes that count in the clubhouse and the women must strategize from the outside looking in" (Aarons 165). Because SAMCRO epitomizes this societal hierarchy, Gemma and Tara must use a backdoor approach to participate in club and even family business. Wendy, as the representation of the transformed mother, rarely participates in the same amounts of manipulation in which Gemma and Tara engage.

Tara's acts of manipulation, on the other hand, begin in the first season of the series. An old boyfriend, Joshua Kohn, who also happens to be a federal law enforcement agent, is stalking her. As soon as Tara realizes that Kohn is in Charming, she begins asking Jax to drive her home from work in the hope that Jax's presence will be enough to deter Kohn. Unfortunately this does not faze Kohn, and he ends up breaking into Tara's house. When he attempts to rape her, Tara manages to grab his gun from the bedside table and shoot him in the stomach, allowing her an opportunity to call for help. Rather than dialing the number of the local police chief, whom she has known since childhood, she calls Jax because she knows that since he still cares for her he

will protect her. Her instincts are correct: when Kohn yells out that Tara is a “biker slut,” Jax shoots him in the head in a fit of rage (“The Pull”). By placing emphasis on Tara’s ability to influence Jax, *SOA* establishes the relationship between the two characters and prepares the viewers for the part that bond will play later in the series. Tara’s manipulation skills seem impressive from the beginning of the show—she does manage to have someone murdered—but they are nothing compared to her abilities after she has spent more time around SAMCRO. In the fifth season Tara discovers that Gemma has reached out to Wendy to use her in a plot to take Abel away. When Gemma and Tara are alone in the hospital hallway, Tara proves that she will not hesitate to use her manipulative abilities to protect her family:

Tara: Don’t ever try to hurt me or my family again.

Gemma: Or what, doctor? You gonna kill me?

Tara: No, but my husband might. (“Laying Pipe”)

During this scene Tara does not use physical violence to intimidate Gemma, but instead she utilizes the threat of her husband. This is even scarier than the alternative, because Gemma knows that Tara holds enough influence over Jax to potentially make this happen. During this scene Gemma (and the viewer) realizes that Tara has replaced Gemma as the woman who can manipulate Jax.

Tara’s ability to convince her husband to kill his own mother is frightening enough, but she takes her manipulation and lies to an unexpected level in the sixth season. Tara spends the majority of her character’s final season secretly formulating a plan to escape the dangerous life of the MC with her sons. She wants to keep her immediate family intact, so she fakes a pregnancy in order to ultimately blame her miscarriage on Gemma. When Tara is ready to

commence her plan, she lures Gemma into her office at St. Thomas and goads her into a heated argument:

Tara: What I do with my family is none of your business.

Gemma: They are my grandkids.

Tara: And I'm going to make sure they never suffer the same fate as their father.

These boys will not be raised in Charming. They will not know this life, and they will not know their angry and psychotic grandmother. ("Sweet and Vaded")

In response to Tara's threats, Gemma slaps her in the face and Tara, in turn, punches Gemma in the stomach. Gemma restrains herself, telling Tara, "You're lucky you're pregnant" ("Sweet and Vaded"). Without another word, Tara screams and slams her own body against the corner of her desk. As part of her plan, she has placed a bag of her own blood in her underwear, so when she throws herself against the desk, the bag bursts and it looks as though she is hemorrhaging from a miscarriage. When people run into the office, Tara claims that Gemma attacked her.

Later when Jax visits her in the hospital, Tara takes the opportunity to prey on Jax's emotions to convince him to exile his mother once and for all:

Tara: I lost our baby girl [. . .] I can't be around her anymore, Jax [. . .] She kicked me in the stomach. What kind of sick person does that?

Jax: Why?

Tara: She thinks I'm still trying to take the boys away from her. She's so violent, Jax. I don't even tell you half of the things that happen [. . .] I don't ever want her near our children again.

Jax: Alright.

Tara: Promise me.

Jax: I promise. (“Sweet and Vaded”)

Throughout the entire season, Tara is made to look like the duplicitous wife who is trying to go behind her husband’s back to steal his children from him. During this particular episode, Tara finalizes this image. Viewers are willing to look past much of the physical violence on the show, but this elaborate scheme that includes faking a pregnancy and miscarriage is an incident that makes most viewers react much the same way as Charming’s police chief who tells Tara in the next episode, “Breaks my heart that you had to become something so wrong to do what you thought was right” (“Los Fantasma”). Even though Tara ultimately fakes her own miscarriage because it “gives [. . .her] legal precedence to separate [. . .her] kids from Gemma and the club,” the act is so brutal that it causes her character to finally cross the line of acceptable violence by a mother (“Los Fantasma”). This scene directs attention to Tara’s violation of motherhood, which causes viewers to feel a weaker bond with Tara’s character. She no longer meets with the audience’s expectations of an appropriate mother because she abuses her position as mother by faking both a pregnancy and miscarriage, so viewers are situated to feel animosity toward her.

While Tara’s manipulative acts are frightening, they barely compare to Gemma’s expertise in the area. Gemma has spent much more time in the club atmosphere, having been the one who convinced John Teller to bring “the club to her hometown of Charming in the first place,” so she is basically an expert on the subject (Kolb 179). She, like Tara, moves away from Charming as a teenager. While away, she meets John, helps him form his motorcycle club, and persuades him to move the entire MC to her hometown. Later she falls in love with his best friend, Clay Morrow, and secretly convinces Clay to murder John. In the fourth season of the

series, Gemma wants revenge on Clay for having violently beaten her, so she makes up her mind that “Clay can’t be saved. He’s not going down by the law. He’s gonna die by the hand of the son” (“Hands”). At this point in the series, Tara has been hiding a collection of letters from John Teller, which explain his suspicions about Gemma and Clay planning to kill him, but she has kept them a secret because “[t]he things John wrote about would be very painful for Jax to read. The guilt would push him deeper into the club and [. . .she would] lose him” (“Kiss”). Gemma is behind the plan of keeping the letters a secret until she believes it is time for Clay to die, so she reveals to Jax that Clay killed his father by allowing Jax to read them. She also conveniently omits portions of the letters that divulge the fact that she played a part in the situation. She knows that this is the precise time to release this information to once again manipulate a man:

I know how dangerous secrets can be and it’s time we all knew the truth. Clay Morrow killed your father, stole that seat away from this family, gunned down your father’s best friend, and he tried to kill your wife. He’s a murderous traitor, and there’s only one thing to do now, Jackson – for your father, your family, and your club. It’s in you. It’s who you are. Clay has to die. Read them. See them in your father’s own hand. And then you kill him, Jax. You kill Clay before he’s on his feet and strikes first. And when it’s done, you take your place at the head of this table where a Teller belongs; where you belong. (“To Be, Act 1”)

Gemma understands that by invoking the memory of Jax’s father, she can rouse his anger enough that he will take it upon himself to murder Clay.

This representation has conflicting influences on dominant ideology that surrounds the depiction of the mother as an entity and consequently on the show’s audience. The first issue that

arises from this account is the fact that, while Gemma and Tara usually achieve the outcome they wish for, they are still placed into the negative stereotypical role of a woman who lies and exploits others for her own benefit. If Tara and Gemma were committing these acts solely for the benefit of their families, then this would not be the case. However, much of the time these actions are for the benefit of themselves. As a result, “Gemma [and Tara], written as [. . .] stellar example[s] of female power throughout the season[s], [. . .]are] gradually written into the corner as [. . .] duplicitous, self-serving manipulator[s], perpetuating the image of the ‘powerful woman as back-stabbing bitch’ and undermining [. . .their] strength” as women (Donnelly 139). Another issue with this representation is the fact that *SOA* supports the social norm that the only place women hold power is in the private sphere of their homes and with close family and friends. Yes, *SOA* proves that women are smart enough to make (some) things happen, but “[w]ouldn’t it be nice, though, if Gemma [and Tara] could have a respected voice and identity of her own, so she wouldn’t need to employ her admittedly impressive skills as a schemer?” (Aarons 168). By showing instances where these maternal characters only wield power over their husbands in this manner, *SOA* perpetuates the typical image of the manipulative wife and also establishes a desire within the audience to see Gemma and Tara penalized for their behavior.

Physically Punishing Maternal Characters

One way *SOA* fulfills this desire is by often depicting physical violence enacted on the maternal characters. These women may “appropriate heroic character traits more generally assigned to male characters in western American culture, [but] they also display traits which could undermine their heroic powers” (Fine 153). The maternal characters may react violently to other women or manipulate the men in their lives, but they all remain at a disadvantage to men

when it comes to physical strength. Men are typically depicted as tougher than women, and *SOA* makes this apparent several times throughout the series. Tara probably faces the least amount of physical violence over the course of the show. She is abducted by a member of a rival motorcycle gang at one point in the third season and suffers some physical abuse during the course of her abduction, but Jax rescues her before she is subjected to any significant cruelty. Even though she is rescued by her husband in several instances, he remains the most frightening potential threat to her safety. In the sixth season after Jax discovers that Tara has lied about her miscarriage and her plot to leave him, Tara (and the show's audience) fears for her life. She knows that when anyone betrays the club she must deal with the severe consequences. In one of the most striking scenes of the series, Tara is at home awaiting her fate. The camera shows a close up of Tara rocking Thomas to sleep while singing him a soothing lullaby. When the camera pans down, viewers see a loaded revolver sitting on Tara's knee. The screen that results from the camera strategy in this scene is striking to the audience because it does not work with socially constructed expectations of a nurturing mother. The images of guns become more agreeable over the course of the series simply because they place such an imperative role in the storylines. However, even though the viewer is more accustomed to the image of a gun at this point in the series, he or she is still uncomfortable with a mother rocking with a baby and a gun on her lap at the same time. The show utilizes the audience's uneasiness to further separate them from Tara in preparation for her upcoming death. The juxtaposition of the sleeping baby with the loaded gun also forces the audience to see the reality that Tara is facing. Her husband could murder her at any moment, even though she is the mother of his children and supposed love of his life.

Jax ultimately forgives Tara for her attempts to abandon him, so she never has to face his violent side. Wendy, on the other hand, is not so lucky. When she threatens to call the authorities and tell them about the violence Jax and Tara are allowing around Abel and Thomas, Jax takes it upon himself to make sure she cannot follow through with her threat. He shows up at her apartment later that evening and convinces her to invite him inside with the false impression that he wants to discuss the day's events. As soon as Wendy closes the door behind him, however, he slams her body against the wall and holds her down where she cannot move. He pulls out a needle filled with cocaine and heroine and, while Wendy begs him not to inject her because she is finally clean, he ignores her pleas, saying, "Tomorrow I'm calling the rehab you work at to tell them you showed up at my kid's daycare out of your mind, babbling about him being kidnapped by the IRA; that you were held hostage. I'll tell them you were high as shit, and I'm afraid you are a danger to my child, and I demand a drug test. You don't ever threaten my family again" ("Darth"). He forces the needle into her arm with such strength that she is left with a bruise for days following the incident. The image of Jax leaving her crumpled on the floor crying causes the audience to feel not only shock but also sympathy for Wendy. By this point in the series viewers do not fully trust Wendy, but they do recognize that she is on the path to recovery. Placing her in a situation where she is abused makes the audience more accepting of her character overall and prepares them to view her later as a pleasing maternal representation.

SOA does a commendable job creating these scenes so that the audience feels compassion for the women of the show who appear helpless when up against the men (specifically Jax in these instances). While showing that inflicting violence on women is morally wrong, it also reinforces the idea of the woman as helpless. Also, the storylines that surround several of these

examples are written to show that the men who are enacting this violence are somewhat justified in their reactions. If Tara had not betrayed Jax to take his children, she would have never had to worry about him killing her. Similarly, if Wendy had not been disloyal to Jax by planning to report him to the police, then Jax would have not been forced to find a way to keep her disconnected from his son. These plot lines seem to subconsciously say that women's lack of loyalty ultimately forces men to punish them. Certainly the writers of *SOA* did not create these stories in order to intentionally promote this concept, but it is part of the underlying effect.

In much the same way as Tara and Wendy, Gemma is also subjected to physical violence by men. Even though she is part of a vicious scene where Clay beats her for betraying him, her character is involved in an even more shocking scene where she is gang raped by several men from another club. In the first episode of the second season, Gemma is driving home at night when she is approached at a stop sign by a woman frantically begging for help because her baby is choking. Gemma, always willing to help a child, immediately jumps out of her car and runs to the woman's van. When she leans in to help the baby, the woman hits her over the head with an unidentified object, and Gemma wakes up in a warehouse handcuffed to a fence. The scene shows several of the men raping her before the episode ends. This scene and those following it create several different effects on viewers. Gemma is raped because the rival gang wants her to tell SAMCRO to "stop selling guns to color" ("Balm"). They know that raping Gemma will convince the club to comply with their demands because she, as the mother figure for the entire MC, is the heart of SAMCRO. However, their plan backfires because Gemma refuses to tell the men. She calls Unser (a police officer and friend) and Tara to take her to the hospital and insists that they claim she was in a car accident, saying, "This wasn't about me [. . .] What those

animals did was the hurt Clay; Jax. Anyone finds out, they win. I can't let that happen" ("Small Tears"). She knows that the men of the club would immediately retaliate if they knew what happened, and she does not want them to involve themselves in any type of trouble. As Donnelly explains, "Gemma is not a damsel in distress after the rape. She is tortured mentally, damaged physically, and traumatized in general, but she handles it remarkably well, seeking the appropriate health care she needs (right down to a snippet of her getting an HIV test and the necessary follow-up test) and opening up to Tara about her fears and feelings" (138). She goes about her life as she normally would, and this definitely makes a statement about the strength women possess.

As the storyline progresses Gemma does eventually tell Jax and Clay about her rape. Rather than confiding in them because she needs support, however, she does so because she understands that the knowledge of her rape will bring her son and husband back together. They have a falling out over the course of the season about club business, and this leads to Jax leaving the club. When Gemma discovers that Jax is planning to abandon the club, she calls a meeting at her kitchen table with Clay, Jax, and Tara. As everyone looks at her in anticipation, she steadily begins by saying, "The night of Bobby's party I didn't get into an accident driving home. I was attacked" ("Balm"). Confused looks cross the faces of Jax and Clay, and "[a]s Gemma explains the assault [. . .] Patty Griffin's song 'Mary' plays softly in the background, conjuring the image of that archetypical suffering mother" (Kolb 179). Gemma gains a bit of control by deciding when and how to break the news of her rape to her family, but the show positions her in an expected role as a sacrificial mother in doing this. By directing the audience's attention toward the sacrificial side of Gemma in this series of scenes, *SOA* establishes Gemma's character as one

who will risk her own safety for that of a child. This trait of sacrifice plays varying degrees of importance in relation to Gemma throughout the series, culminating with Gemma sacrificing her life in the final season for the well-being of her son.

Yet another issue that arises in this plotline is the fact that “the use of rape as a narrative trope unnecessarily brings attention to what the world typically sees as a threat to women, a weakness they cannot control” (Donnelly 138). If *SOA* wanted to convey the fact that Gemma (and other women involved with SAMCRO) is constantly at risk for danger, the show could have put her in a different type of vulnerability just as they do by having Tara kidnapped. Drawing attention to a version of violence typically associated with women preserves the image of specifically female vulnerability. The fact that these men rape Gemma as a message for SAMCRO also “objectifies her, making her a tool for one group of men and a possession of another” (Donnelly 137). In this way, the scene dehumanizes her and treats her as a pawn in the game between the two clubs. The fact that Gemma becomes desperately concerned that her husband will not want her after he finds out she was raped further promotes the image of the woman as an object. She tells Tara that, even though Clay loves her, “men need to own their pussy. His has been violated. He’ll find another. It’s what they do” (“Service”). Clay does not leave Gemma, but her comment proves that even she is aware of her position as an object.

The ultimate act of violence toward a mother occurs in the final season of the series when Jax murders his own mother. She knows Jax has discovered that she murdered Tara, and she realizes that he will kill her for revenge. In a touching scene, she stands outside of her childhood home and reflects on her life, telling her current boyfriend, “I couldn’t wait to be a mom. I wanted a dozen sons. That didn’t happen. After Thomas, John didn’t want to take the risk. But

I never quit on Jax, not for a minute. Everything in my life, pretty much torched. I hated school, wasn't a very good wife, but I was a good mother. I did everything I was supposed to do" ("Suits of Woe"). She accepts the fact that she has always done what she thought was the right thing, and it is time for her to answer for her indiscretions. When Jax finally catches up to her in the next episode, Gemma explains that murdering Tara was a misunderstanding, but she recognizes that Jax still has to kill her. She asks to walk through the rose garden behind her childhood home, and Jax agrees. He follows her outside and aims his gun at the back of her head as she smells some of the roses. Jax hesitates to pull his trigger, and Gemma must resume her role of nurturing mother for a final time, reassuring her son: "I love you, Jackson, from the deepest, purest part of my heart. You have to do this. It's who we are, sweetheart. It's okay, my baby boy. It's time. I'm ready" ("Red Rose"). Without another thought, Jax kills his mother with a single shot through the back of her head.

Watching a son murder his own mother definitely does not offer viewers a sense of comfort because it breaches all current, past, and probably future cultural expectations. At the same time, however, *SOA* created a feeling of anger toward Gemma within the audience at the end of the previous season when she murdered Tara. When Jax finally discovers the truth about the situation, the viewer automatically feels relief and a new sense of anticipation for Jax's retaliation. Gemma's death by her son, while brutal and tragic, also fulfills the viewer's expectations and is satisfying in that sense. More than any other scene in the series, this final one between Gemma and Jax evokes the most complex reaction from viewers. On one level, the audience experiences a feeling of satisfaction because the scene fulfills the expectation of Gemma's punishment for murdering Tara. On the other hand, the scene also causes discomfort

within the audience because it defies what culture deems acceptable for violence between a mother and son. Viewers have been socially conditioned to feel respect for mothers, and hoping for the murder of a maternal character defies this typical response. At the same time, however, the audience experiences a desire to see a mother punished for blatantly stepping outside of her boundaries. It is in this area of discomfort that we most clearly see how *SOA* is simultaneously keeping with and breaking from conventions with regard to its maternal representations.

SOA displays maternal characters who never hesitate to place their bodies in harms way to protect their families. One would expect that a show that surrounds such a masculine subculture would focus on the strength of the male characters, but in a culture as dangerous as illegal gun and drug trade, women must wield just as much strength. Their lives and the lives of the ones they love are constantly in danger, and they do not have the luxury of waiting around for the men in their lives to rescue them. In bestowing maternal characters with power, *SOA* makes a statement that maternal bodies can be used both as weapons (as long as they are used to protect children) and as sites of creation, and “the interaction of these traditional masculine and feminine gender markers subverts gender performance the constructed male/female gender binary” (Fine 152). The problem still exists, however, that the show also chooses to display Gemma, Tara, and Wendy subjected to violence by male characters as a type of punishment. Both Gemma and Tara are murdered by the end of the series, and Wendy is left raising Abel and Thomas on her own. According to Hall and Bishop, “[t]he good mother, the noble mother-saint, makes her family her highest priority, continually sacrifices her own interests for the good of her family, and conforms to expected gender roles of femininity” (9). Wendy is only granted the privilege of motherhood once she meets these requirements by undergoing a transformation

where she abstains from drugs, quits her career, and caters to Jax's every whim. By the end of the series, viewers are left with overall images of maternal characters whose violent outbursts result in their own undoing and the ultimate separation from their children.

CONCLUSION: “JUST BE A GOOD MOM. SAVE OUR BOYS, PLEASE.”

Gemma's death at the hand of her son serves as the ultimate fulfillment of desires within *SOA*'s audience. Hoping to watch a son murder his mother is definitely unusual because it goes against the social norm of holding reverence for mothers. However, the satisfaction that Gemma's death creates is ordinary for viewers of *SOA*. Throughout the course of this particular television series, viewers have developed a hope for Gemma's punishment because of the strategic revealing and concealing of Gemma's personality and actions. Gemma's overall story arc is overly dramatic because of the nature of this television show, but the show's presentation of Gemma (as well as Wendy and Tara) and the audience's interaction with it can still relate in some ways to our less dramatic society. The conflicting feelings of discomfort and satisfaction that the audience experiences during Gemma's demise reflects the confusion that surrounds the ever-changing ideas of what motherhood means in contemporary American society. As Buchanan posits, “motherhood is contextually defined, contingent and changeable, its associations forever in flux rather than fixed” (xix). The representations of motherhood on *SOA* and the viewers' interactions with these characters echo the constant tension that this fluctuating ideal creates.

As a whole *SOA* makes relatively impressive strides toward presenting mothers in innovative and more realistic manners despite its Old-West-like society. The setting of the show presents an unusual case for study because

the rules of separate domain of the motorcycle club, justifies the depiction of a world dominated by sexism, at times brutal misogyny, homophobia, and casual racism. This circumscribes the characterization and dramatic function of the

female and other ‘marginal’ figures and rationalizes the fact that the primary focus is on the actions and the ‘psyches’ of its straight (white) male characters.

(Harris 450)

The fact that *SOA* is set in an openly misogynistic culture often causes viewers to simply brush off the depictions of female characters on the show. It makes the audience discount the idea that these issues could possibly be prevalent in American society today. However, the series is still set in the present, so it is necessary to keep in mind that the depictions still reflect current views on the roles of women and particularly mothers in society. Taking a critical look at these depictions “is crucial, not [only] because such representations are accurate reflections of reality but because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations, define sexual norms and provide ‘common sense’ understandings about motherhood and maternal behaviour for the contemporary audience” (Feasey 9). The show may be set in an unfamiliar subculture, but it still holds the same type of potential influence as any other product of popular culture.

Gemma, Tara, and Wendy push the typical boundaries of motherhood and femininity through their expressions of sexuality, their ability to occasionally have lives outside of their maternal duties, and the ways in which “they use their power in the private sphere to influence the public sphere and effect great change, albeit with little public recognition for their efforts” (Kolb 178). In these manners, *SOA* takes a step toward showing multidimensional characters who are not easily compartmentalized. Even with these positive aspects, the show often undermines its own efforts to present maternal characters who challenge stereotypes by hiding the amount of work that accompanies motherhood and by punishing female characters who cross

the lines that define a good mother. Even a show that represents a masculine subculture “play[s] a profoundly important role in constructing societal norms and expectations for women” (Kinnick 2). This depends on the fact that “television shows us what ‘can’ be seen, and leaves out what should ‘not’ be seen. Inclusion and exclusion are by far two of the most powerful tools of persuasion in mediated fictions, fictions that, merely through repetition, have an effect on mainstream culture and thus on consumers” (Donnelly 158). *SOA* does show that women can be multidimensional, but by ignoring the work this requires and the ramifications that come with keeping women in stereotypical roles, it allows society to expect women to be all of these things at all times. This is especially evident in the way that the show depends on viewers to become entangled in these representations.

With such a substantial amount of new and more complex television series on the air lately, it is imperative that people use intricate theories to analyze the representations that these series present. Kenneth Burke’s theories of terministic screens and form serve as one possible means if this version of analysis. Much of current media studies concerning television looks at how a show’s representations could potentially affect the values of viewers. Burke’s concept of terministic screens offers us a way to sufficiently analyze the rhetorical effects of television productions. When we add Burke’s theory of form to our analysis, however, we are able to extend traditional forms of analysis to what is usually overlooked: the audience’s participation in television’s presentations. An analysis of form allows us to see how terministic screens work in relation to not only each other but also the expectations of the audience in order to produce a representation of current American society and ideology.

Popular culture, and specifically television, shows what society currently views as important. It also has the ability to alter these images because of its accessibility and the way it relies on bodies and display to convey its messages. Characters, like individuals, “are neither devoid of embodiment nor free of the linguistic/cultural contexts in which they circulate,” and television possesses the power to use these bodies to alter cultural perceptions of motherhood (Crowley 177). Whatever ways a series displays the images of motherhood will “necessarily direct [. . .] The attention into some channels rather than others,” and the show utilizes these terministic screens in order to show what is and is not deemed important (Burke 45). What we see in *SOA*’s chosen displays of motherhood is that society is obviously moving toward a better understanding of mothers as complex individuals, but it is also having a difficult time completely separating from traditionally accepted attributes. According to Walters and Harrison, “the discordant images are a sign of our continued cultural confusion over motherhood and family but the fact that they can no longer be so narrowly typified, so reined in under a singular rubric, is also a sign of progress” (51). Mothers can be many different things rather than simply good, bad, sacrificial, manipulative, or nurturing. They can be any combination of characteristics. As Press posits, “with a culture that remains decidedly ambivalent about feminism for women, the most successful cultural products will reflect this ambivalence, which can be read as the celebration of diversity that characterizes what has come to be known as third-wave feminism” (148). Part of *SOA*’s success should be attributed to its ability to display maternal characters with such diversity. At the same time, however, one way to further enhance this progression is to show all sides of motherhood instead of focusing only on the aspects that benefit men. Yes, motherhood is a goal of many women because of the prestige that comes with it, but all of the

respect that accompanies it comes at a price. There do exist difficulties, and ignoring these only does a disservice to mothers. *SOA* takes a bit of a step toward this improved representation, but it, like any other current television show, obviously has many more steps to take.

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