

The Matriarchs of Crime:
A Feminist Content Analysis of Mother-Son Relationships
in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*

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Abstract

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This thesis research examines the intertwining of domesticity and criminality in recent television series *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*. I argue that the series' key mothers, Smurf and Gemma, challenge familiar narratives and stereotypical gender roles while also participating in the reproduction of problematic tropes about womanhood, motherhood, mother-son dynamics, and relationships between women. Employing poststructural feminism and critical content analysis, my analytical chapters focus on three macro-concepts: "motherwork," "mother blame," and "violent glamour," with each consisting of a group of micro-concepts. I highlight the constant tension between progressive and regressive representations of mothers/motherhood in these series. The thesis is interpretative in nature, contributing to Television Studies, Motherhood Studies, and Women and Gender Studies. Ultimately, my thesis adds to feminist research by examining televisual representations of mothers entangled in both criminal and domestic spheres, shedding light on the complex gender dynamics of the families depicted in these diegetic worlds.

April 24, 2024

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SECTION ONE

Chapter One: INTRODUCTION

My background and past studies in literature continue to have a hold on me because words, whether they be printed on the pages of a novel or stacks of scripts, are the bones of stories that inspire the images in our minds or the moving pictures on our screens. Imagined narratives transport us to worlds where we can identify with situations similar to our own or escape to radically different realities. In this thesis, after years of closely reading stories in many forms, I explore television. I adore television's long format storytelling because it encourages the development of deep connections between audiences and characters. This connection holds true for "good guys" and "bad guys," and perhaps especially for those "guys" who straddle that blurry boundary between the two. In watching, I am invited to live vicariously through their storylines of beauty and tragedy.

My research offers a feminist content analysis of the first seasons of two television series: TNT's *Animal Kingdom* (2016-2022) and FX's *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014). They are both American television crime dramas that follow the familial relationships and lives of Californian criminal families. The Codys on *Animal Kingdom* are headed by a matriarch, Janine "Smurf" Cody (Ellen Barkin), who directs the criminal activities of her sons and grandson. In *Sons of Anarchy*, the Teller-Morrow Automotive Garage serves as a cover (plus income surplus) for the violent and illegal activities of the SOA biker club; Gemma Teller-Morrow (Katey Sagal) is the matriarch of her family and the club. Male characters are important, and, in some ways, dominate the two series, but I am drawn to the series' older women, the mothers: Smurf and Gemma.

Animal Kingdom begins with 17-year-old Joshua “J” Cody (Finn Cole), the main protagonist, moving in with his estranged grandmother, Smurf, after the accidental overdose of his mother, Julia Cody. At the time of his arrival, the house is populated by Smurf’s four sons (three biological and one adopted). J becomes a part of the family and adopts the lavish lifestyle their criminal enterprise affords. *Sons of Anarchy* revolves around the dealings and relationships of the SOA biker club. At the helm as SAMCRO’s President is Clarence “Clay” Morrow (Ron Perlman) and his wife (“old lady”), Gemma. Gemma has one son, Jackson “Jax” Teller (Charlie Hunnam), who is next in line to become the club’s President; he is SAMCRO’s current Vice-President, and the show’s main protagonist. At the start of the series, Jax is estranged from his pregnant wife, Wendy Case (Drea de Matteo), an addict who Gemma is not fond of. At the same time, Jax’s high school sweetheart, Dr. Tara Knowles (Maggie Siff) returns to town; Gemma does not like, or trust, her either. These are complicated relationships with long histories, and the drama unfolds as Gemma positions herself between her son and the women in his life.

I chose these two shows because of their portrayals of older women, who are not only mothers and grandmothers, but play important roles as matriarchs of male-dominated, criminal families. Both series are action-packed family dramas that take place in California. While the backdrop is grittier in *Sons of Anarchy* compared to the more opulent lives of the Codys, other distinctions include Gemma’s focus on one son coupled with her calculated interactions with the other two women in his life and the arrival of her first grandchild (appropriately, a grandson), whilst Smurf has multiple sons and their personalities to juggle, a strained relationship with her daughter-in-law, Catherine, and her young granddaughter, Lena, alongside the arrival of J in her life.

The (grand)mothers grace the screen with their beauty, their terrifyingly unapologetic, ruthless ways, their love for their child(ren), and their ability to provide excitement and fear for viewers through their thrilling storylines as they hold their own in the chaos of action and violence at the center of each series. My choice to focus this work on Smurf and Gemma has directed me to explore the discipline of Motherhood Studies. Motherhood is often conflated with womanhood, as both are seen as intrinsically connected to femininity, care, and nurturing. Negative and positive presumptions (burden/gift, strength/weakness) about what it is to be a woman (and a mother) in a patriarchal world is something I live with, as do characters, like Smurf and Gemma, and many of the viewers who watch their fictional lives unfold. Viewers may also be mothers (have mothered), and certainly they have mothers (have been mothered) or know mothers. The mothers in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* pique my interest because they do not conform to socially constructed proper norms of (white) maternity / motherhood and encourage a criminal lifestyle for their (white, male) children. Concomitantly, and in my reading, they oscillate between the “good mother” / “bad mother” trope—a mainstay in popular culture—where a tension resides in their refusal of the binary as they take on starring roles in their respective shows and households.

INTERROGATIONS / HOW I CAME TO THIS PROJECT

When I watched *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* as a casual viewer, I read Smurf and Gemma as feminist figures within the landscape of television and the specific diegetic worlds in which they live. I simply believed this to be true because they were strong leading women, who were not shunted into secondary roles despite the casts of their respective series’ being majoritarily men. I have rethought that first reading, by bringing a feminist analysis to my reading of these

characters. In this thesis, I ask if Smurf and Gemma challenge familiar narratives and stereotypical gender roles or if they participate in reproducing (complying with) problematic tropes about womanhood, motherhood, mother / son dynamics, and relationships between women. Moreover, I explore how Smurf and Gemma navigate a tension that lies at the core of their characters: a surface level reading of both texts suggests that they reject (break apart) notions of femininity and conventional forms of motherhood, however, just under the surface the two characters reiterate and reinforce troubling and familiar gendered tropes. Therefore, I argue, Smurf and Gemma consistently sit in tension between progressive and regressive representations of women and motherhood.¹

As characters in family dramas, and mothers at the helm of those families raising men with absent fathers, domesticity is an important component of Smurf and Gemma's daily lives and interactions. In what follows, I ask what it means to tell a story or build characters who live so fully at the intersection of (the "private" spaces of) the domestic and (the "public" spaces of) the criminal. How do Smurf and Gemma challenge the ways we think about domesticity and maternity in relation to criminality, their own and that of their offspring? The significant ways in which their identities as women and mothers are highlighted in these texts signals that they cannot ever truly (fully) leave the domestic; they are often represented as centered in the domestic space of the home and they are shown performing traditional domestic activities. Despite attempts to present Smurf and Gemma as "unconventional," I consider how the worlds of these characters are socially constructed / constrained by traditional gender relations and query what representations of hegemonic masculinity and femininity the texts offer. In sum, I ask what a feminist reading of

¹ I acknowledge that white cisheteronormativity plays a role here as well.

Animal Kingdom and *Sons of Anarchy* reveals about the intersections of motherhood, violence, gendered relations, criminality, and power, and what we learn from them.

In this thesis, I argue that Smurf and Gemma are represented as “aberrant mothers” and “antiheroines.” These (somewhat similar) identities emerge because the two series hold in tension their statuses of wife (Gemma only), mother, grandmother, and criminal matriarch. I argue that Smurf and Gemma want to build criminal empires, ones where surrounding communities fear yet respect their presence. The desire for power, reputation, and territory is kindred to indicative features of Deniz Kandiyoti’s “classic patriarchy” (1988) achieved through family, or more accurately, the relationships between mothers and sons (their kin). Smurf and Gemma’s manipulations of anyone who comes between them and their kin, and their desire to keep control of their adult offspring are means to selfish gains. The mothers want money, power, and glory, and through their sons’ outlaw / criminal activities in these televisual examples of patriarchal motherhood, build status and a legacy. Their aspirational desire for possessions and power is camouflaged by their claim that their actions are expressions of love for their offspring. Smurf and Gemma’s “brand of motherhood” is constructed as violently protective of not only their (now adult) child(ren), but of their status in the community. Smurf and Gemma as characters align with rather than disrupt many conventional cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles and norms: they control their male progeny, accept and encourage their criminality, and as matriarchs they refuse to share their power (or their men) with other women. In the subsequent pages, you will read the literature review, my chosen theoretical framework as well as my methodological process, followed by three analytical chapters accompanied by individual discussions, and the conclusion of the thesis.

Chapter Two: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is composed of three sections. Although my thesis examines television characters, television and “real life” inform one another, and discourses through which concepts like “mother” and “generational criminality” are constituted move between these sites. Television Studies is where I begin my discussion of the relevant literature, followed by an examination of Motherhood Studies, particularly work on mothers’ relationships with their children. The articles and books I examine here have helped me better understand the complicated relationship that mothers have with their identities as mother, their offspring, as well as various social constructions and expectations of motherhood. The final component of the literature review presents examples of investigations of televisual representations of mothers. I use the information presented here to unpack the nature of familial interactions, notably the mother-son relations in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*.

TELEVISION STUDIES

According to television historian Lynn Spigel, twenty-five years after its introduction in R. Buckminster Fuller’s famous Dymaxion House in 1927, “the television set had become a staple fixture in the American family home”; “by 1960, almost 90 percent of American households had at least one receiver, with the average person watching approximately five hours of television each day” (p.1). Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel’s *Television after TV: Essays on a medium in transition*

(2004), explores the rise and transformation of television and the growth of Television Studies during the second half of the twentieth century:

Television studies in the humanities has always been a hybrid, interdisciplinary venture, drawing on fields of inquiry that often are at odds with one another [...], it drew on at least five critical paradigms: the “mass society” critique [...]; the textual tradition [...]; the journalistic tradition [...]; the quantitative and qualitative mass communications research on audiences and content; and the cultural studies approaches to media and its audiences. (p.8)

Among the roots of Television Studies, Olsson and Spigel (2004) include British Cultural Studies, which developed in the late 1970s and focused “particularly on the ‘everyday’ aspects of television, especially soap operas, and many feminist critics were and continue to be interested in the [...] way television reinforces patriarchy while also providing women [...] with pleasurable ways to fantasize against the grain of patriarchy” (p.9). What was true decades ago continues to be true today; as I argue in my thesis, this tension resides in my chosen series.

In *Her Stories* (2020), Elana Levine presents *Portia Faces Life*'s transition from radio serial (1940-1953) to TV serial (1954). The series compellingly depicted a mother-heroine managing “home and family as well as a career” which catered to the housewife viewer and her audiovisual desire for stories about women’s struggles through a daily narrative structure (p.19-21). Daytime television melded the TV industry and funding advertisers interests in soaps, within “a culture guided by principles of patriarchy, that women could manage to be productive domestic workers and productive consumer-viewers” (p.19, 21). Levine (2020) writes that the 1960s to 1980s were boom years for soap operas and represented the most lucrative realm for broadcast network television (p.73). As a viewer who invests time in fictional characters, I appreciate Levine (2020) highlighting that “perhaps the most significant markers of the soaps’ broadened reach were

the growing place of serialized storytelling and expanded attention to character development across 1970s TV” (p.77). While the popularity of American soaps began to decline in the mid-1980s, their legacy lives on in “the adoption of soap features across more and more instances of television programming” (p.199). What this brings to my mind is the presence of melodrama in television today; *Sons of Anarchy* has been labelled a melodrama (Lotz, 2017) and *Animal Kingdom* could be labelled in this way, as well. Not only do soaps center family and community, they uphold “ideals of white patriarchal heteronormativity” as did other family melodramas in television and film of this earlier televisual era (p.11). Melodrama is arguably “best understood not as a *genre* but rather as a widespread narrative *mode* informing much of American cultural history,” which has shared space with the soap opera alongside “the feminine and the histrionic” (p.5, *emphasis in original*). *Her Stories* (2020) covers eight decades (late 1940s-2010s) of soap opera influence.

The journal, *Feminist Media Studies*, has produced an extensive breath of literature. The rollout of scholarly research in this field enables the successful publishing of eight issues every year. In the very first volume and first issue, Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter (2001), in the editor’s introduction, describe feminist media scholarship as, “emerging from a barely perceptible public presence to become a profound influence on the field of communications” (p.5). McLaughlin and Carter (2001) describe the launch of the journal in 2001 thus:

...its impetus was precisely the sense that, while feminist media studies had become a multifarious and multi-layered field of inquiry, there were no major international journals that were devoted to capturing the complexity and diversity of feminist media studies across the broad range of fields, disciplines, sites of analysis and political commitments that describe “feminist media studies” in its fullest sense. (p.5)

The growth of *Feminist Media Studies* is a testament to scholars' intellectual inquiry of "gender, along with race, nation, ethnicity, age and sexual preference, as key considerations in the analysis of mediated representational forms" (p.5). *Feminist Media Studies* has range, complexity, crosses boundaries, and its trans and interdisciplinarity are not failures of the field's definitional contours but an indication of its success as a field of study (p.5-6).

More recently, Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz (2019) asserted:

...keeping up with television has become hard work [...] not only are new *programs* constantly appearing, [...] but new *sources* for television and new *ways to watch* seem also to be proliferating at pace. Amidst this torrent [...], television studies has similarly been working hard to keep up, to adapt to the shifting televisual environments, and to make sense of them on the fly. (p.1, *emphases in original*)

Graeme Turner (2021) states that research generated literature would enlighten how "binge-viewing as a branding device for Netflix" (p.231) became a daily behaviour of consumption in many households (p.235). I broach this topic because *Sons of Anarchy* was available in its entirety (S1-7) on Netflix (now on Disney+) and *Animal Kingdom* is now available in its entirety (S1-6) on Netflix. Binge-watching creates a need for new series as the "gap between audience consumption and content" widens (Akass, 2015, p.751). Selling, buying, and providing television series is a business and so I ponder if rushed production cycles encourages the recycling of old tropes and representations or allows space for changes. Though I will not examine this aspect of spectatorship in terms of my own practice as a viewer, Turner (2021) and others like Akass (2015) provide overviews of the current television market and Television Studies' future needs.

MOTHERHOOD STUDIES

Since the 19th century, mothering has been a presumed primary identity for most adult women; almost universally, women are associated with mothering because women do most of its work (Arendell, 2000, p.1192). Definitions of mothering usually include, “the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children” through activity and relationship (p.1192).² In short, “womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities” (p.1192). At the start of the 21st century, Terry Arendell (2000) claimed that Motherhood Studies was growing as she offered a historical examination of the last decade of the 20th century focusing on two central streams of research: theorizations of mothering and motherhood, and empirical studies of the mothering experience (p.1192). Arendell (2000) notes that the focal point of earlier work (prior to the 1990s) was the quality of mothering and its’ supposed effects on children, but scholarship that began to emerge at the start of the new century, contemplated “mother’s activities, understandings, and experiences” and “focuses on the person who does the relational and logistical work of child rearing” (p.1192).

Tatjana Takševa (2018) offers a comprehensive overview of key moments and advancements in Motherhood Studies post-Arendell, as well as her hopes for its future. Takševa (2018) advocates for established Women, Gender, and Feminist Studies programs to include the varied experiences of motherhood in their curriculum (p.180, 192). Takševa (2018) uses themes related to the study of motherhood as her conceptual framework as she presents an overview of thinkers and writings on the subject (p.180). She argues that Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) planted seeds within second-wave feminist

² Also, motherhood and femininity are intertwined, mothering reinforces women’s gender identity, and presumptions about gender and roles are reoccurring (p.1192).

thought, bringing with it two distinct meanings of motherhood: the daily practice of mothering (not an inherently oppressive experience) and motherhood as a patriarchal institution (oppressive) (p.182, 187) in “the dominant white culture” (p.183). Takševa (2018) identifies how Andrea O’Reilly later adopted the terms, inspired by Rich’s subtitle of her ovarian work, “motherhood as institution” and “mothering as experience” to foster interrogation(s) of the maternal as a theoretical construct (p.187). O’Reilly also cemented the importance of this foundational work of Motherhood Studies through her book, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (2004). According to Takševa (2018), O’Reilly marks the beginnings of the discipline as 1997 with the establishment of the Association for Research in Mothering at York University as well as the launch of a publishing division of The Association for Research on Mothering, and the publication of O’Reilly’s *Rocking the Cradle* in 2005 (p.188-189).

In the same essay, Takševa (2018) highlights Ruddick’s attempt, in *Maternal Thinking* (1989), to articulate a philosophy of mothering that is not instinctual and separates mothering from the act of giving birth to broaden definitions of motherhood (p.188). In another essay, published the following year, Takševa (2019) underscores that there is no predetermined sex or gender for those who mother, but, rather, the performativity of the maternal role rests on one’s agency and commitment to care (p.29-30, 36). By stressing that motherhood was invented and created, Takševa (2019) acknowledges that mothers are made and not born and so argues that motherhood has become an institution, formed through fictional patriarchal conditions, practices, and landscapes, with oppressive (even pathological) ideologies (p.39-40).

Other key scholars in the field include Shari L. Thurer, who questions popular mother culture and dares to ask: “how important is mothering, anyway?” (2007, p.331). Thurer (2007) recounts how we are enamoured with the romantic notion and cultural ideal of a mother’s

unconditional love (p.332-333) and describes how good mothering is culturally derived with performative standards that are unattainable (p.334). Ruddick (2007) identifies “maternal thinking” as “a unity of reflection, judgment, and emotion” while acknowledging the varying social worlds of children (2007, p.97). Ruddick (2007) explores the demands of child rearing: preservation, growth, and acceptability, and maternal practice’s desire to satisfy these demands (p.98). As criminal mothers shaping their offspring into criminals, I examine how the mothers in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* participate in rearing “acceptable” children. Throughout my analyses, I think (c)overly about Ruddick’s three interests of maternal practice to theorize how Gemma and Smurf offer performances of “mothering” that range from morally reprehensible to beguiling nurturance. For Barbara Katz Rothman (2007), our cultural understanding of motherhood is filled with contradictions (p.390). Rothman (2007) questions how we can create a supportive fabric for these most intimate of relationships, beyond the limitations of the threads that weave the primary fabric of motherhood (p.401-02). To clarify, Rothman (2007) argues that American motherhood rests on three central threads which weaves the fabric of motherhood: “an ideology of patriarchy, an ideology of technology, and an ideology of motherhood” (p.390). Rothman (2007) explains that these threads are “deeply rooted ideologies that shape what we see and what we experience” (p.390). I take Rothman’s (2007) understanding of motherhood’s ideological contradictions to question whether Smurf and Gemma’s narratives foster these normative and idealistic / utopian ideas of motherhood and if their motherwork brings feminist complexity to their stories.

The core of my thesis is an analysis of Smurf and Gemma’s relationships with their sons. Mother-son relationships have been given significant attention in psychoanalytic works. Gertrude Schwartzman (2006) notes that much of the psychoanalytic literature is skewed on problems of

the adult son; her article, by contrast, focuses on the mother's (patient) distress due to her son's rejection (p.227). Feminist psychoanalyst Miriam M. Johnson (2007) explores infant-mother relationship assumptions and the contrasting hypotheses of "the fear and envy hypothesis and the tenuous masculine identity hypothesis" (p.209) to understand "what lies behind male misogyny and male dominance" (p.201). Johnson (2007) concludes, "if analysis goes no further than the mother-child relationship, we are left with the impression that women's mothering is the problem. This is hardly the case" (p.219). I am drawn to this work because the relationships the men in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* share with their mothers are bonded through blood and love, coupled with a desire to separate (because they experience a mother who is at times, too controlling and domineering) and become their own people (to individuate). I read the sons as having internal conflicts regarding a desire to truly separate themselves from their mother through her death, or in a less definitive / finite way, wanting to grow into autonomy / independence.

In this thesis, I focus on the mother-son relationship(s) but I am also aware of and look beyond this dyad. I read these familial relationships by acknowledging the surrounding (social) forces (categories) that affect them (e.g. sexism, misogyny, patriarchy). I, for example, examine social constructions of gender, and analyse common tropes, archetypes, and discourses through which this construction is affected. Therefore, when I assert that I look beyond the mother-son relationship, this means that these relationships may be the center of the world represented, and even of my thesis, but there is much to be articulated about how these mother-son relationships have been affected and informed by outside social roles and norms of their (white and cis-heteronormative) worlds to represent a layered and complicated portrait. With knowledge from the literature, a post-structural feminist framework, and a feminist content analysis alongside my

macro-concepts, I draw out my personal analytical reading of the wider social forces within which mother-son relationships are played out.

TELEVISION, WOMEN, AND MOTHERHOOD

At this point in the literature review, I would like to address some work that examines examples of female characters in recent television series. Margaret Tally (2016) discusses how the anti-heroine has become a typical feature on television (p.1), explaining that the rise of the anti-heroine coincided with the end of a period that featured a male anti-hero in most television genres, including Don Draper (*Mad Men*), Nucky Thompson (*Boardwalk Empire*), and Walter White (*Breaking Bad*) (p.5). Tally (2016), via Gary Susman (2015), draws attention to the male anti-hero's ability to not only be charismatic and admirable, but also persuade viewers to care about them regardless of their monstrous behaviour (p.5). Tally (2016) notes that anti-heroines are desirable because despite being morally bereft, they are relatable; while deeply flawed, they are sympathetic characters (p.8).

Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (2017) argue that Carmela Soprano (Edie Falco) navigates gendered divides at the heart of the “neo-liberal economic paradigm,” patriarchal worlds, and androcentric hierarchies (p.67-68). The authors believe Carmela is a “compelling antiheroine of the neo-liberal era,” because she carves out power while knowing there is no “*outside* of the Soprano marriage” (p.68-69, *emphasis in the original*). Gemma may not be a Mafia wife, but her partner is the biker club's President and she maneuvers within patriarchal power structures like Carmela does; although Smurf is single, she still lives in a man's world. Elisa Giomi (2017) reflects on *Weeds*' Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker), a mother-of-two with multiple lovers, who

transgresses both law and gender norms (p.107-108). Giomi investigates the series' representation of post-feminist feminine subjectivity and considers how Nancy's identities as lawbreaker and woman are the core of "the drama's representation politics and produces precise ideological implications" (p.108). She also explores the intertwining of sexuality and crime (p.116) as a "problematic intersection of gender, power, and sex" (p.117). Giomi analyses "the construction and staging of [Nancy's] gender / sexual deviance" as an exception, socially deviant, and non-normative (p.117). The protagonist's "transition from the chaste role of widow to that of sexual predator" (p.117), coupled with the aforementioned convergence, is a "problematic" tension when this is embodied in the character of a woman / mother. In some ways Nancy is the most akin to Gemma and Smurf; thanks to this kinship, Giomi's analysis is useful to my own.

Pam Cook's (2013) examination of Todd Hayne's adaptation of James M. Cain's (1941) *Mildred Pierce* addresses the representation of Mildred's questionable and manipulative attention to her daughter, which, to me, is reminiscent of Smurf's relationship with her son, Pope. Delphine Letort's (2016) narrative analysis of *Olive Kitteridge* sees the novel's adaptation as a challenge to "social and cultural constructs of gender and age" (p.86). Letort (2016) believes Olive would rather remain unseen in a society that determines women's worth based on youth and sexuality (p.92), writing that the miniseries refuses to portray ageing as a socially constructed decline to escape reductive stereotypes of the ageing woman and challenges negative images of ageing with humour and sympathy (p.92-93). These analyses offer relevant discussions which showcase televisual examples of representations of older women like Gemma and Smurf.

Kristyn Gorton's (2016) work on *Nurse Jackie* concludes that within social constructions of gender, women / mothers are expected to be saints. Jackie fails, both as a nurse and mother, but demonstrates that being a saint and a sinner do not have to be mutually exclusive. Suzanna Danuta

Walters and Laura Harrison (2014) present the trope of the aberrant mother and investigate the slew of mothers that emerge as contemporary figures that do not fit on either side of the good or bad mother binary (p.38); neither “saintly sacrificers” or “viperous spiders,” they stand against traditional forms of maternal identity, but cannot achieve feminist heroine status (p.39-40). These aberrant mothers may practice maternal delinquency and neglect, but if their children are threatened, their vengeful and animalistic instinct awakens (p.40-41). The authors recognize the double-edged sword of aberrant mothering, calling for more renegades and supporting a reading of the “bad” mother as the anti-hero we need (p.51). This text is invaluable because it introduced me to the concept of the “aberrant mother”; I use this work to help define Gemma and Smurf as the “aberrant mothers” of Charming and Oceanside.

Sarah Hagelin and Gillian Silverman (2017) argue that *Justified*'s Mags Bennett (Margo Martindale) steps in when the typical hypermasculine antihero is sidelined. Mags as antihero is offered as “an alternative order—one in which toxic masculinity gives way to matriarchal ascendance” (p.851, 853). I could not find mentions of Smurf in any scholarly works; mentions of Gemma are limited to the two I present here. Amanda D. Lotz's (2017), “Really bad mothers: Manipulative matriarchs in *Sons of Anarchy* and *Justified*,” reviews social constructions of womanhood, motherhood, transgression, and the bad mother and bad woman status Gemma and Mags occupy (p.127). Lotz writes that both women have a cool ambivalence, use their family as pawns, and perform maternal love (p.128). She contends that Gemma's non-traditional femininity lies in her outlaw identity, her involvement and complicity in the club, whilst her traditional femininity is her “self-construction as a matriarch whose *raison d'être* is care and maintenance of her family” (p.133). Lotz describes Gemma as the “none-too-subtle power behind the throne”

(p.134), suggesting that “Jax’s loyalty to the club is critical to Gemma because it ensures her continued access to the seat of power” (p.134).

Julia M. Mason’s (2019) “Mothers and antiheroes: Analyzing motherhood and representation in *Weeds*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and *Breaking Bad*,” deconstructs how these representations “reinforce normative definitions of motherhood and by extension patriarchy” (p.645-646). Mason emphasizes that television can showcase both misogynistic images by reinforcing traditional, hegemonic masculinity, and by placing women as objects of the male gaze, as well as be a site of empowerment where the antihero mother has power and agency (p.646). Mason underscores the lack of female support and friendship and the common depiction of antihero mothers losing everything and everyone if they brandish power. As their strength becomes their undoing, these representations reiterate the message that women cannot have it all (p.658). She concludes that these outlaw mothers are not ones to be emulated; asks feminists for more ways to theorize mothering (to enable a more “useful feminist practice of outlaw mothering” from these representations of mothering); proposes that we veer away from categorizing mothers as good or bad and simply call them “mom”; and requests continued expansion of popular representations to challenge ideologies of motherhood to accurately reflect women’s lived experiences, choices, and situations (p.659). Lotz and Mason’s texts offer examinations of one of the two women I study in my work and just like the other work highlighted in this literature review provide valuable examples of analysis.

Chapter Three: THEORY

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My main theoretical framework is post-structural feminism, and I position Feminist Media Studies and Motherhood Studies within post-structural feminism. Davies and Gannon (2005) in “Feminism/Poststructuralism” define feminist poststructuralist research as work that is “focused on the possibility of moving beyond what is already known and understood. Its task is not to document difference between men and women, but to multiply possibilities, to demassify ways of thinking about ‘male’ and ‘female’ – to play with the possibility of subjectivities that are both and neither – to understand power as discursively constructed” (p.319). Tong and Botts (2018) explain that “poststructural and postmodern feminists [...] claim woman’s otherness enables individual women to stand back and criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant male culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone, particularly those who live on its periphery. Thus, otherness [...] has its advantages” (p.8).

Post-structural feminism allowed me to dig into the core tension that lives in the characters of Smurf and Gemma. Their competence is threaded through in the violent and criminal male-dominated worlds they occupy as women and mothers; the series’ not only showcase them in their regressive environments but also offer them as progressive images of female power. This is a complicated tension and a post-structural framework enabled me to examine how Smurf and Gemma do not (exactly) always enact, nor obey, traditional / normative roles in their respective contemporary fictions. Gender, for example, and its portrayal on these shows is not a simple duality, and so, a post-structural framework granted me the ability to look at these characters as they are and, at the same time, look critically at the social constructions and patriarchal institutions

that have molded them (in and outside the text), and also to analyse how they are represented as using these constructions to their benefit (or detriment).

I engage Feminist Media Studies through a post-structural understanding of the real world translated through the medium of television, specifically in relation to television (melo)drama. Writing in 1991, Liesbet van Zoonen argued that media theory and feminist media theory differ from each other because feminist media theory has an “unconditional focus on analysing *gender* as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (p.33, *emphasis in original*). Zoonen’s thirty-year-old definition helps situate us within this history, but what is a contemporary definition of feminist media theory? What does it mean to do Feminist Media Studies now? For Harvey (2019), Feminist Media Studies today requires an intersectional approach because “media forms and practices continue to be deeply gendered, with our access, activities, representation, and participation in media production and engagement shaped not only by our gender but also by our race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, religion, and location in the world” (p.2). Harvey (2019) contends that (media studies with) feminist approaches, informed by poststructuralism, challenge gender essentialism “by understanding reality as given meaning through social forces, including language and institutions such as the family, school, and the media;” engaging in a feminist research practice is not only words and ideas but “also entails a commitment to action, transformation, and change” (p.3-4). Though all critical work does not require an intersectional theoretical framework, I believe that all feminist work should engage in an intersectional analysis in some capacity. I frame my project by consistently addressing the disadvantages and privileges at play, such as gender, class, whiteness, and ageism. Having said that, my work is not an intersectional analysis, yet I do observe how intersectional social locations are foundational for all television texts / characters / viewers. I recognize that there is a way in

which whiteness – along with cisheteronormativity – are assumed aspects of these texts, which in turn give shape to their stories. If the characters assumed different labels or took place in different communities, the stories, and the way we read the mothers and their criminal livelihoods, would be quite different. In what follows I make note of the matriarchs’ disadvantages and privileges, but a specific focus on these is beyond the scope of this project.

Positioning Feminist Media Studies and Motherhood Studies within post-structural feminism has offered a certain interpretative freedom in the ways in which I have been able to answer my thesis questions, and investigate my materials. Post-structural feminism as a general framework allowed me to accomplish certain objectives, yet because it is so broad, I focused specifically on the work of feminist post-structural scholars working in the fields of Feminist Media Studies and Motherhood Studies. I used the following quote from Davies and Gannon (2005) as a guide throughout this thesis: “*Neither the gendered subject who produces the texts to be read, nor the researcher, is the final arbiter of meanings* in any text being read. It is the task of those who work with poststructuralist theory to use and develop the concepts they find in gendered texts as a source of creative possibilities” (p.319-320, *emphasis in original*).

KEY CONCEPTS

The key concepts I use in my analysis are obtained from Motherhood Studies, Gender Studies, and Television Studies. Below, I offer definitions of those concepts, as I have used them in my work. Despite some of these being rooted in real life examples, when I put them into practice in my thesis, I am thinking about and looking at representation.

“Mother,” “mothering,” “motherwork:” my understanding of these three interrelated concepts is indebted to Motherhood Studies, which I discussed in depth in the previous chapter. Drawing particularly on the theoretical work of Ruddick, Reimer, and Sahagian, I define these three concepts as follows: first, I understand “mother” as an active and recurring choice of a role; second, “mothering” as the taking on of the responsibility of caring for a child as “a regular and substantial part of one’s working life” (Ruddick, 1995, p.17); and third, “motherwork,” which “theorizes motherhood as ‘work’ that can be done by anyone should they so choose” (p.14). These are intentionally inclusive definitions through which I understand “mother” as a label and “mothering” as its practice. These understandings do not privilege biological mothers (Reimer & Sahagian, 2015, p.4-5).

Other key theoretical concepts I take from Motherhood Studies, include:

- "Intensive mothering," which describes a type of motherhood that makes “the underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture by a single primary care-taker and that the mother is the best person for the job” (Hays, 2007, p.414).
- “Mother blame” derives from the “persistent assumption that mothers make monsters, and that the mother remains a pathogenic, convenient, and highly problematic means of explaining the actions of men [...] with [mothers] frequently blamed for the behaviour of their boys and the ills of society” (Wilson-Scott, 2017, p.193).
- The “aberrant mother” is “neither monster nor angel,” and she is “not quite a twenty-first-century feminist heroine but she does upend more traditional depictions of maternal identity” and she is “unabashedly sexual, idiosyncratic to a fault, and seriously deleterious in her caretaking skills” (Walters & Harrison, 2014, p.40). “Aberrant mothers” are “unapologetically non-normative in their maternal functioning” (p.38).

- “Maternal ambivalence” is a dynamic (not static) experience of “powerful negative and conflicting emotions” that fluctuates within a spectrum “felt by a mother at different times in a child’s development” (Parker, 1995, p.6; Takševa, 2017, p.152, 154). It is a simultaneous desire to nurture and reject a child and these are common feelings which result from conflicts between the mother and child, and their individual interests (LaChance Adams, 2014, p.4-5).

Here I define key Gender Studies (micro-)concepts that I use in relation to the third macro-concept, “violent glamour,” to root my work for the final analytical chapter:

- My theoretical understanding of “gender” follows Judith Lorber’s (2017) definition: it “encompasses the social construction of masculinities as well as femininities, the interrelations of women and men, the division of labor in the economy and in the family, and the structural power imbalances of modern Western societies” (p.508).
- “Masculinity” in this theorizing, is the “expression of maleness” (social, cultural, political), conjures up notions of power, legitimacy, and privilege as well as “seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family” where it represents “the power of inheritance [...] and the promise of social privilege” (Halberstam, 2018, p.1-2), while “femininity” describes a “social construct rather than a naturalized expression of the female body” (p.xiv) and “may be defined as a set of attributes ascribed to biologically sexed females, what exactly those attributes are, and the extent to which any given version of femininity is natural or cultural, have been debated” (Glover & Kaplan, 2009, p.26).
- I understand “sexuality” to refer to “someone’s sexual feelings or sexual preferences” (p.8). A sexual life or possessing sexuality means laying “claim to a distinctive form

of subjectivity” (p.8). Sex, gender, and sexuality is often linked and “women have always been defined by their bodies and their sexuality, and the body is a key site of patriarchal regulation and control” (Ritzenhoff & Hermes, 2009, p.57).

To finish, the following two definitions come from or are inspired by the work of scholars in the field of Television Studies:

- An “antiheroine” is understood as more than a strong female lead; she is a daring woman character that “[embodies] to an unprecedented extent the dark sides of human personality and behaviour,” she is capable of being and behaving badly (Buonanno, 2017, p.3). The “antiheroine” is “endowed with moral ambiguity, damaging flaws, enduring strength, unapologetic wickedness and the relatable qualities that work together to shape a conflicted and nuanced, despicable and admirable antiheroic figure” (p.3).
- A concept of my own imagining, “violent glamour,” embodies a double layered meaning for a conventionally beautiful woman with an outlaw status. On one hand, the woman seems like a passive sexual object but defies this passivity because of her glamour, which in this first case I understand in the archaic sense as a kind of enchantment that allows her to deceive others by underestimating her. The glamour acts as a lure she uses to her advantage which makes her an active sexual subject. On the other hand, she can be perceived as glamorous and even one to be emulated, if one does not know better, because of the way her criminal lifestyle and choices are presented and dramatized (almost romantically) to viewers. This bewitching lure and beguiling erotic “bad girl” encapsulates a rough-but-pretty glamour (Grimes, 2022).

Chapter Four: METHODOLOGY

DATA SET

For the purposes of this thesis, I only looked at the first season of both *Animal Kingdom* (10 episodes – 488 minutes / just over 8 hours) and *Sons of Anarchy* (13 episodes – 606 minutes / just over 10 hours). *Animal Kingdom* aired for six seasons (2016-2022) and *Sons of Anarchy* for seven seasons (2008-2014). Smurf was killed in the fourth season and Gemma was killed in the final season of their respective series. I divulge this information because the women have story arcs that are not only fascinating for entertainment purposes, but more meaningfully, seasons beyond the first provide more data for future analyses. In the following pages, I refer occasionally to moments that occur in later seasons to build an argument more fully. However, the primary scope of my investigation is limited to the first season because this predetermined block gives *ample* material to analyze (a) the way these texts represent / portray motherhood and criminality, and (b) how they evidence a tension at the characters' core around womanhood, motherhood, and domesticity. Just as the pilot episode of any series offers an introduction to a series' key settings and characters, the same can be said about the first season: it often establishes the primary themes with which a series will concern itself even if it continues to be produced for many years.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

While prior to my thesis work I had watched both series casually, and considered some of this material in assignments, this thesis involved, to some degree, setting aside that work to start

anew. I credit that earlier period as the beginning stage that solidified my desire to build a project that explores how Smurf and Gemma are represented as navigating the tension between their rejection of certain forms of conventional femininity and conventional forms of mothering, and asking if and how Smurf and Gemma challenge our thinking about domesticity and maternity in relation to criminality.

I began the data collection process by conceptually segmenting the concepts that underlined my primary interests at that time. In my notepad, by hand, I drafted a 3-columned layout grid where I identified my concepts which I later input into a Word Document.³ These were conceptualized as part of my pre-data collection and coding, which means that I was familiar enough with the series' storylines to identify three overarching, macro-concepts which were of particular interest to me for this work. I define a macro-concept as one that constitutes an ensemble of concepts. The macro-concepts, to some degree, are so complex that starting to look for them in the text is difficult because the work requires that I look for several concepts, which together constitute the macro-concept. I defined these concepts based on my general knowledge of the two texts, coupled with the readings and research I had done for the Literature Review and Theory chapters of this thesis. Each macro-concept is broad enough to congregate other concepts, but specific enough that it is distinct from the others. The macro-concepts that I centered for my data collection were: "motherwork," "mother blame," and "violent glamour."

The first macro-concept, which I call "motherwork," encompasses the following concepts: "mother," "mothering," "motherwork" trio, "domesticity," "generational criminality," and "maternal ambivalence." During the writing of the first draft of the chapter examining this macro-

³ See APPENDIX 1 (page 152) for the relevant grid and the visualisation I worked with.

concept I decided to move “intensive mothering” from the first macro-concept to the second, “mother blame.” I reflected, because of my textual examples and evidence, that this micro-concept was a better conceptual fit with that second macro-concept. Also, “community positioning” was removed as a micro-concept (in the first macro-concept) to allow space to focus on the other, more textually relevant, concepts. For the purposes of this work, it was no easy feat to simply label moments in the text “motherwork,” therefore, I tried to understand how “motherwork” as a macro-concept operated in the first season of each text by looking at textual examples. I, for example, looked conceptually in the text for instances of the practice of mothering, demonstrations of domesticity, and the ambivalence of the mother in / as practice. I used this approach for all three macro-concepts and their respective ensembles of constitutive concepts. The second macro-concept, “mother blame,” comprises “bad mother,” “mother-son relationship(s),” “triadic relationship(s),” “hierarchical family relationship(s),” “mother blame,” and “intensive mothering.” Within the bounds of my third macro-concept, “violent glamour,” there is my concept of the same name, as well as the concepts “aberrant mother,” “antiheroine,” “gender,” “femininity” / “masculinity,” and finally, “sexuality.”

I sat upon my designated viewing chair in the living room and watched the episodes of *Animal Kingdom* (Netflix) and *Sons of Anarchy* (Disney+). During my first viewing, I refreshed my memory and immersed myself in the experience of the drama. At the same time, I had a notebook, pen, mechanical pencil, highlighters, and sticky notes at my disposal. I used the pen to mark the episode number at the top of the page, but wrote in pencil. I had planned to take minimal notes, but instead I took a significant amount of detailed notes and copied out dialogue, averaging three pages per episode. I paid special attention to scenes that were of interest, seemed apt, and signaled those that required reviewing to determine if they belonged in my analysis. I began to

think (critically) about setting, present and alluded to characters in each scene, and such aspects of the text as the spoken and unspoken.

Between the first and second viewing, I had the intention to pause and reflect for a week. I wanted to allocate time to rest as well as brainstorm the narratives I had just become reacquainted with. The goal was to establish what belonged within my macro-concepts and overall, evaluate what I had missed (add) or should dismiss (drop). Instead, because I wanted to complete the four weeks of viewing in the month of June, I did four weeks of intensive, non-stop data collection to fulfill the first and second viewings.⁴ I considered differentiating between the three macro-concepts by a generated colour system, yet this never naturally occurred, nor did I find it necessary. Due to the nature of my topic, I anticipated overlap between macro-concepts and this was soon confirmed. It quickly became a continuous process of decision-making regarding which textual example was a better fit for what macro/micro-concept. As foreseen, I did the work manually during these first viewings because I found it easier to develop my ideas in this way.

At this point, I had a good grasp of the storylines and then performed a second viewing of each series. On my laptop, I created two new Word Documents, one for each series, called “episode notes.” I wanted to ensure that I transferred material from physical to electronic copy, and brought precision, cleanliness, and detail to the scenes I had made note of in the first round of viewing. I took copious, and even fuller notes, describing and transcribing the pertinent individual scenes, including attention to characters, conversational tone, dialogue, setting, and timestamp / scene length. I spent a significant amount of time pausing and replaying scenes to record relevant information, especially dialogue. I only used these two Word Documents to log a continuous flow

⁴ See APPENDIX 2 (page 154) for relevant timetable / viewing schedule.

of information (72 pages for *Animal Kingdom*, and 75 pages for *Sons of Anarchy*). I visually marked (for myself) scenes and dialogue with different font colours and size, text highlight colour, and bold text markings. My primary visual was capital letters, in red, and in brackets to highlight which micro-concepts would possibly match to bring me closer to an organized analysis. This was important work for my data coding because I faced an *extensive* amount of material. I did envisage, when moving through the contemplative and meditative work, building spreadsheets to gather the information to reach another level of comprehension (for myself), but I decided this would have been neither productive nor useful. When I was confidently aware of the data at my disposal to decipher what constituted my macro-concepts, I then proceeded with my analysis.

METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS - TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

When I reached the stage of data analysis, I used qualitative textual analysis, “a style of analysis developed in and across multiple disciplines for the purpose of studying various types of texts” (Gray and Lotz, 2015, p.27-28), to examine *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*. More explicitly, I used critical content analysis suited to a feminist reading of television text. Many people, Gray and Lotz (2015) assert, tune in to television daily as their key storyteller in the contemporary world (p.26). They argue that, as a key technique, critical analysis of text helps us “unpack what this world of images, messages, and representations mean” (p.27), attesting to the fact that to practice a “critical” study, it is not “the methodology but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text” (Beach et al. 2009, p.130).

My thesis, as discussed in the theory chapter of this document, uses post-structural feminism as its analytic lens; content analysis serves as my method to understanding “*what text is*

about” (Beach et al., 2009, p.130, *emphasis in original*). As an analytical tool, content analysis hovers “between a descriptive and an interpretative paradigm” (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.34). As a qualitative method, the data analysis focuses on context and subject while emphasizing variation, but also welcomes descriptive and manifest content accompanied by interpretative and latent content (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.29). Content analysis, as Stemler (2015) maintains, “is versatile enough to apply to textual, visual, and audio data” (p.1). I understand there to be a functional relationship between television texts as an object of study and content analysis as a method of study. Furthermore, I believe television series are deliberately constructed / planned, all the ideas and details are thoughtfully executed, even though their authors / producers cannot fully anticipate / control how these will be understood by viewers (like myself during my reading(s) of the text). According to Gray and Lotz (2015), undertaking the art of translating, from what one sees on the screen and rendering into an analysis, in this case from television to written word, shuns the proposition “that anything makes its way into a program ‘by accident’ and thus regards every sound, image, character, plot point, or choice as one worthy of analysis and potentially requiring of explanation” (p.31). The method of critical content analysis was a good fit for my project because fictional narratives are loaded with implicit and explicit meaning; critical content analysis was thus an appropriate method, complementing my theoretical framework.

I brought all the theoretical and methodological elements of my thesis together by paying special attention to my macro-concepts and I actively found instances and textual examples of their manifestation in the first seasons of *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*. While this is my first major scholarly research project on television, the approach is too not unlike how I navigated novels, short stories, and poems during my bachelor’s degree. As a master’s student of Women and Gender Studies, I further developed my skills related to critical thinking / reading and the

analysis of representations (and presentations) of gender and sexuality. In the process of analysing my thesis data, I took the texts as they were presented to me and then I proceeded with my analysis by providing arguments and supporting evidence for my readings. I understand that with television I am looking at much more than words on a page, but I still consider the basic components of storytelling texts to be the same. As you will read and discover, in this thesis, my feminist content analysis focused on the three macro-concepts discussed above and their component micro-concepts in an ordered manner by a division of three analytical chapters.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Feasey (2017) notes that “motherhood studies exists as a growing discipline but this field is dominated by research on the lived experience of mothers [...] [and] what this discipline tends to overlook is the ways in which representations of motherhood and motherwork are presented in the media environment” (p.4).⁵ My thesis contributes to scholarship on Television Studies, Motherhood Studies, post-structural feminism, through content analysis, as well as adding to a growing body of work on television representations of “antiheroines” and “aberrant mothers.” The limits of my analysis are that I confined myself to two television dramas; this work is not meant to be generalizable outside of these fictional narratives. By choosing this data set I accomplished one crucial goal: my desire to fill a gap in the literature about representations that have been missed. I would like my chosen television series, *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*, to get the

⁵ A glance at Feasey’s references in her work “Good, bad or just good enough” reveals she has other similar writings on the subject worth exploring, for example: “Absent, ineffectual and intoxicated mothers” (2012) and *Mothers on mothers: Maternal readings of popular television* (2016).

same kind of scholarly attention that others have. It is unclear to me why other series have gathered attention while others have not, particularly with similar subject matter. Other shows share common themes and characteristics, like criminality centering their (family) narratives, as well as the mother-son relationship(s) which could allow well-functioning comparisons and contrasts. There are other combinatory possibilities of series for analyses. I mention this because, from the start, I knew I wanted my thesis to share space: I did not want to focus on only one woman / mother in my work.

In light of my previous remarks about textual analysis, according to Fürsich (2009), since the development of Cultural Studies in the 1970s, “not only written material but every cultural practice or product can be analyzed as text. Analyzing media content was no longer understood as objectively examining or collecting data but as a ‘reading.’ This term highlighted the interpretive position of the researchers” (p.240). By using the term “reading” I understand that this grants the reader of the text the artistic freedom, as well as an independent (and) interpretative ability, to fathom (analyse) what they may from their reading of the texts given that they argue thoughtfully. In all, my choices about my data set, my data collection, and my data analysis, came together to offer a productive method of research and allowed space where my exegeses were / are valid yet, at the same time, encourage others to share their understandings of the communicated text because, arguably, there is no sure analysis which undoubtedly opens and welcomes the possibilities for future research, for myself again, or any other willing to take on the work.

SECTION TWO

INTRODUCTION TO ANALYTICAL CHAPTERS 5-6-7

The analytical chapters of this thesis are separated according to the three macro-concepts that I have previously identified: “motherwork,” “mother blame,” and “violent glamour.” The next chapter, which is chapter five, examines the macro-concept “motherwork.” This macro-concept is made up of a group of concepts, which I call micro-concepts or concepts interchangeably, that includes “mother,” “mothering,” “motherwork,” “domesticity,” “generational criminality,” and “maternal ambivalence.” As I have previously stated, scenes (textual examples) can belong to more than one micro- and macro-concept at the same time, because of the overlap between various (micro-)concepts. Further, micro-concepts within one macro-concept can also overlap, sometimes to such a degree that they appear almost the same. For instance, below, I examine the first three micro-concepts as an ensemble (“mother,” “mothering,” and “motherwork”), as I found it easier to discuss them together.

Of note to the reader, this is the organization of the subsequent chapters. In chapter six, for my analysis of “mother blame,” I look at six concepts: “bad mother,” “mother-son relationship(s),” “triadic relationship(s),” “hierarchical family relationship(s),” “mother blame,” and “intensive mothering.” I had originally seen “triadic relationships” as a separate micro-concept, however, as the thesis emerged, it became clear that the mother-son-girlfriend / wife triangle was actually, in many ways, part of the mother-son dynamic. When another woman is introduced (between / in addition to the mother and son), I read it as creating particular / peculiar conditions in the text. Nonetheless, during my analyses of the “mother-son relationship(s)” micro-concept, I focus on the

dyad; in the “triadic relationship(s)” micro-concept, I focus on the triad. Throughout my analyses I attempted to offer textual examples that belong more explicitly to one (micro-)concept than another (or others) in an attempt to reduce repetition or confusion. Throughout my writing process, I had to grasp a multitude of times how one concept engenders another, but for the sake of clarity, I separated and ordered them individually for the analysis. My final analytic macro-concept, “violent glamour,” is the focus of chapter seven. It comprises seven micro-concepts: “violent glamour,” “aberrant mother,” “antiheroine,” “gender,” as well as the “femininity” and “masculinity” duo, and to finish, “sexuality.” In this chapter, I merged “femininity” and “masculinity” into one discussion for ease of comprehension.

In the three analytical chapters that follow, I take each micro-concept by turn, offering textual examples from *Animal Kingdom*, first, and then *Sons of Anarchy*. Each chapter (5-6-7) includes a discussion to succinctly join my findings in order to draw out comparisons and contrasts between the two texts, their characters, and the micro and macro-concepts under investigation.

**Chapter Five: An exploration of the first Macro-Concept:
“MOTHERWORK”**

ANIMAL KINGDOM

In this chapter, I look at the “motherwork” macro-concept. In my process of data collection and analysis, I discovered that there are a plethora of examples available for all the relevant micro-concepts identified. To begin, I found it striking how much Smurf lives, embodies, and represents all the facets I established as comprising “motherwork.” I started with the concept “mother” and its paired concepts (“mothering” and “motherwork”) because I thought it was appropriate since the main focus of my thesis is the mother-son relationship. In my examination of (the first season of) *Animal Kingdom*, I explored Smurf’s position as a “mother,” her “mothering,” and her “motherwork” in relation to her biological children, her adoption of Baz, and opening her home for an estranged family member, J. The abundance of examples available for the micro-concept “domesticity” was astounding and overwhelming, aiding my argument that these fictional mothers live fully at the intersection of the domestic and the criminal. The discussion of “generational criminality” offers a quick presentation of the past to propel us to the series’ present, yet also acknowledges the steps Smurf takes to secure the family’s future. Finally, reading in “maternal ambivalence,” I was prepared as a fan of the series to discuss Pope and Smurf’s relationship as a perfect match for this micro-concept, but during my data collection I noticed another son (Craig) experienced the brunt of her ambivalence. As I will show in this section, time and time again Smurf offers both progressive and regressive representations of a female character living in a man’s world.

MOTHER, MOTHERING, AND MOTHERWORK

Janine ‘Smurf’ Cody has three biological sons, and one adopted son. Due to the passing of her daughter Julia from an overdose, at the start of the series she welcomes her grandson as the newest addition to her home.⁶ It is because my understanding that “mother,” “mothering,” and “motherwork” are inclusive concepts that do not privilege biological mothers (Reimer & Sahagian, 2015) that I see Smurf performing the practice of mothering to all five men in her life (mother = a label, mothering = its practice). Smurf is J’s (maternal) grandmother but because I denote mother as a verb and a noun, I also contend that she is represented as actively and recurringly choosing to mother him. Baz was adopted years ago and was welcomed as an equal member of the Cody family; despite the lack of biological bond, he is represented as no less worthy of Smurf being labelled his mother. She chose to mother him, took on the responsibility to care for him, and added the (mother)work of motherhood to him as well. Her biological sons (Pope, Craig, and Deran) have different fathers but all bear the Cody name; despite being estranged from her family, Julia also gave J the Cody surname. In short, in this criminal family drama, Smurf is the matriarch of the Cody family in the “kingdom” of Oceanside.⁷

Smurf embraces motherhood wholeheartedly and it is represented as a natural and fundamental part of who she is. Because the three micro-concepts belonging to the macro-concept of “motherwork” are interrelated, Smurf cannot “mother” (recurring choice / role), practice “mothering” (take the responsibility, care, and practice of mothering), and choose to do motherhood’s “motherwork,” without also engaging one or all three in relation to the other

⁶ And by the end of the first season, Smurf is the main caretaker of her granddaughter, Lena.

⁷ Notably, this family does not have a patriarch. Smurf does not care for her children alongside a man. Smurf has solely done the work of raising her offspring. Her boys do not have a (present) patriarchal figure in their lives.

concepts I examine within this chapter. Sometimes I signal this complexity when I discuss particular scenes, but the reader should note that it was sometimes difficult for me to separate Smurf from the way her choices, responsibilities, and work as a mother are represented, in my reading of all three of the macro-concepts. Thus, this is an opportune time to ask: what does it mean that Smurf is represented as being unable to detach herself from “motherwork” through the performance of the multiple, related micro-concepts I explore throughout this thesis? In what follows I suggest that she embraces this work to her advantage, and we might understand it as her superpower rather than her burden.

In episode five of the first season, Nicky (J’s girlfriend)’s father, Paul Belmont (C. Thomas Howell), goes to the Cody house to confront Smurf about (their) teenagers sleeping together. She works her charm to calm him down, justifies her oversight, and more importantly, offers the pretense that she is overwhelmed with J’s presence in her home:

Paul: Has Nicky been staying here with J?

Smurf: Yeah. She was here last night, and she has stayed here occasionally. But I never thought you didn’t know.

Paul: Of course I didn’t know. We’re not comfortable with our 16-year-old spending the night at her boyfriend’s house!

Smurf: I’m so sorry, Paul. I just - - With J’s mother passing, all of a sudden, I’m raising a teenager again.

Paul: What did she tell you? Did she say we were okay with this?

Smurf: No. Absolutely not. That’s - - That’s on me. I just assumed. You know what we need to do? We need to exchange phone numbers so we can stay in touch. Why don’t you and your family come to dinner tonight?

Smurf skillfully plays the innocent grandmother while also protecting Nicky. Smurf acts as if raising a new teenager is a lot to handle, but I would argue that this is actually a gift because she now has a new protégé she can train and depend on. In my reading, Smurf’s artful naïveté pacifies

Paul by showing a dotting and caring façade with dinner as a gesture of (friendly) forgiveness. In a short amount of time Smurf has Paul in the palm of her hand. As the matriarch of her home, Smurf plays on and utilises assumptions about traditional gender roles to gain the upper hand in this confrontation with Nicky’s father. And yet, this requires that she employ a familiar trope of older femininity to do so. Smurf uses her age to get what she desires by playing the role of the “nice old lady.” I read Smurf as confident and powerful when she embraces her maternal role by using society’s expectation of white (warm-hearted / devotional) motherhood as a mode of power.

I previously said that Smurf chooses to mother J; with my next example, I demonstrate that her tactics and orchestrated moves confirm her desire to make him her son. Before his mother’s funeral in the series pilot episode, J and Smurf share a moment:

Smurf: What?

J: My mom had a shirt just like that.

Smurf: She used to borrow this from me all the time. She must’ve gotten one for herself. I’m wearing it to feel closer to her today. [pause] Well, how do I look?

J: Good.

Smurf: Correct. Beautiful boy.

After she says this, Smurf licks her fingers and smooths down J’s hair, a classic move a mother would make. She is planting seeds to build a relationship with J and, in my reading, to replace his mother; she desires him to be her responsibility and to care for him. I should note that the top is gold and arguably inappropriate for a funeral and asking for a compliment confirms that her actions are selfish and ill-intentioned: she wants him for her own ends (and not for more altruistic reasons).

At the start of the episode, the audience sees Smurf searching for the gold shirt in her daughter’s drawers and hiding it in her purse. It is unclear why she would lie, but I deduce that we are supposed to understand her manipulation and lies at a crucial moment in his grief as a tactic to

draw him closer. Also, these two connected scenes instruct the audience; we are learning / being taught how to think about Smurf as a character. I chose these two examples because they represent Smurf as a woman in control: she can influence a stranger and an estranged family member to fulfill her personal wishes. In both scenes, she reinforces familiar gendered tropes as she personifies the maternal while at the same time deceiving Paul and J. The micro-concept “antiheroine” will be discussed in the final analytical chapter, but these textual examples demonstrate Smurf’s moral ambiguity: she wants to protect and grow her family, relatable and admirable qualities, however, these goals are pursued through an unapologetic wickedness (Buonanno, 2017).

DOMESTICITY (AND ITS FAILURE)

Another key (micro-) concept that falls within the broader conceptual grouping of “motherwork” is “domesticity” which includes the traditional roles, duties, and activities associated with mothers. In my data collection, I found that there were numerous occasions, at least one in every episode, where Smurf was seen cooking and / or cleaning. Smurf’s colourful and expressive meals represent her domestic devotion to her family. In the first episode, her boys ignore her note and she arrives home with J to burnt cupcakes. This does not deter her, however: “Dinner will be ready in an hour. Good thing I didn’t leave the roast in your hands. How about I whip up another batch of cupcakes? Chocolate or vanilla, J?” Later in the same episode, to celebrate Pope’s release from prison, Smurf declares, “I’m making you a meatloaf with a hard-boiled egg in it. Nice and spicy, just like you like it.” Both instances demonstrate Smurf enacting domestic duties and (mother)work to satisfy and welcome her eldest son and her estranged grandson home, and as central to her performance of (being a) “good mother.”

Not only a committed cook, we also often see Smurf cleaning, and even going as far as ironing underwear (S1, E2). On two occasions Smurf exchanges a domestic chore for a favour. In one scene, after Smurf finishes cleaning J's vomit from his bedroom floor (S1, E2), she uses the time as an opportunity to discuss family matters with him. Then after gathering his dirty clothes, she gives him a chore of his own. This transactional tactic is used again in a later episode, when Smurf walks into J's bedroom with a laundry basket: they talk a little and Smurf asks if he can pick up rent checks for her (S1, E5). I highlight these scenes as examples of "domesticity," but they also address how the concepts of "mother" (actively chooses to clean) and "mothering" (responsibility to care for J's space and wellbeing) are deployed in this text at a price. It seems like a give and take (*quid pro quo*) relationship: Smurf has cleaned *inside* his bedroom for him (performed domestic duties) and so he must do a favour (outings) for her *outside* of the home. It reiterates an old-fashioned male/outside, female/inside dichotomy.

I want to speak specifically about episode nine because this, for me, is the episode that most explicitly works the macro-concept "motherwork." Smurf executes (in an apron) various domestic duties to occupy her time while the boys (Baz, Craig, and Deran) are on the season's cumulative criminal job. Smurf gathers laundry, tidies up, and cleans a shower with a toothbrush. Later, whilst preparing a plate for Lena, Catherine makes conversation:

Catherine: Are you baking today?

Smurf: Of course I am. It's tradition. The boys expect it when they get back.

Catherine: God, I hate this part - - the waiting.

Smurf: Yeah, well... No news is good news.

Families typically have traditions. For the Cody's, Smurf bakes a homemade pie to welcome her boys after a job, another confirmation of this family's ability to (casually) intersect the criminal and the domestic. Smurf is depicted performing domestic responsibilities as she awaits her boys'

safe return and I argue this serves as a coping mechanism for her stress because the failure of the job in the first episode lingers and they are now on a riskier job. Later, the warm pie is on the kitchen island, a reward for successfully executing a criminal plan, and finally the boys arrive, share the good news and rush to plate the pie and ice cream.

While the series highlights Smurf's domestic devotions, I discovered through my analysis that Smurf's (usually accidental / unavoidable) acts of domestic negligence are not well-taken. In the final scene of the first season, the boys and J's now ex-girlfriend Nicky are in the backyard filling their plates from the table's significant display of food. The frustration is palpable when Deran says: "Smurf still sleeping in? She could've left us a note or something, Jesus" (S1, E10). He is angry because Smurf did not prepare breakfast as she usually does, like the hot meal of bacon and eggs we see, for example, in episode one. They must content themselves with bagels, fruit, cereal, and pastries. This is represented as a lack and even failure of domesticity by Smurf: the boys have grown accustomed to an environment of plentiful meals and are stunned when this is not provided. Something similar happens in the fourth episode: Pope does not understand how to use the coffee machine and Baz assists him when Deran energetically walks into the kitchen and is startled to see the bare island: "Where's breakfast?" Deran asks, visibly irritated. Within the "motherwork" macro-concept, these moments marked as domestic failure tell the audience that these adult men, who continue to live with their mother, expect to be catered to (by her). Given Deran's negative reactions, we are invited to understand that he and his brothers label Smurf a "bad mother" when she, in their view, neglects them by failing to accomplish her domestic duties.

GENERATIONAL CRIMINALITY

The head of the Cody family is the criminal mastermind matriarch who plans and greenlights the jobs of her kin, but as we enter the series the men wish to have more independence,

opportunity, and respect for the ideas they bring to the table (literally, for example, Baz in episode six). Flashbacks reveal that Smurf's mother committed small-time robberies until her death in a job gone wrong; despite this tragedy, Smurf followed in her footsteps. From one generation to the next, the Codys' crimes have become bigger and more complex which draws the audience's interest.

Episode eight serves as a culmination of multiple instances where “generational criminality” is spoken of, and offers the most illustrative examples of this micro-concept. Together, Pope, Baz, Deran, and Smurf ask J if he has a criminal record because they need him to enter the military base (Camp Pendleton) to set their next job in motion. Until his mother's death, J had no relationship with this part of his family; he had no trouble with the law and had not previously participated in any crime. The show presents him as a good and studious kid, but also suggests there are family “gifts” he shares with his uncles and grandmother. After J successfully completes his Camp Pendleton task, the family welcomes him with cheers in the kitchen. Smurf approaches, gives him a kiss and a hug, and says: “Oh, my man. Congratulations, baby.” Coming from his grandmother, his new maternal figure, her practice of “mothering” as she praises J beside Baz, Craig, and Deran demonstrates his formal acceptance into (t)his criminal family. Now that J has proven himself a useful addition, Craig wonders, “You coming back in with us tomorrow?” Smurf responds happily yet sternly, “Nope, J's done. He earned his cut.” Baz confirms, “Yeah, he has.” As a welcoming gesture, in the season finale, Smurf says with a slight smirk, “You got some brass balls, kid. You play your cards right, you can do well with us” and gifts him a gun. I quickly unveil this end-of-season scene because it foreshadows things to come in future seasons; the future of the show coincides with Smurf continuing to build her generational line of criminals through J.

The whole text centers the idea / question of generational criminality. In *Animal Kingdom* criminality is passed down generationally through the matriarch. The narratives provided in the text allow me to read that the traits of the mother have been passed down, but that the father is of no importance (for at least two generations). While it is something that Pope, Craig, and Deran were born into, Baz and J demonstrate that Smurf needs to welcome, “mother,” and teach her boys the skills they need to find (criminal) success. The series begins with Smurf bringing in the fourth generation of Cody criminals, inviting the audience to think about generational criminality, and the relationship between maternity and generational criminality, from the start. The intersection of domesticity and criminality lives and breathes in the Cody home, where Smurf and her many male children that all live together as a family unit and criminal enterprise.

In reading this text, I cannot help but wonder how the next generation will fare. On one hand, the text suggests criminality may be in J’s nature, as “criminal blood” runs through his veins. On the other hand, it also suggests, via Baz, that criminality develops through nurturance. In some ways, the audience is invited to see a tension that is being played out in the nature / nurture debate. J is represented as an outsider with a biological claim (loyalty) on the family, whereas Baz is represented as an equal member of the family through his continual demonstration of allegiance to Smurf and his brothers. Kinship only appears to be extended to male progeny. In season three her granddaughter, Lena, is adopted into another family. This, yet again confirms Smurf’s fraught relationships with other girls / women.

Rather than bring J into her home to protect him, Smurf throws him into her criminal enterprise. Smurf did not have to welcome him into her home after many years of estrangement, but I read her hospitality as not only a duty to her blood, but also as an opportunity to see what he is capable of. Smurf wants to know: can J be one of them and can he be her next prodigy / protégé?

On the one hand, if these men have “natural” criminal abilities, this removes Smurf’s agency and dismisses these relationships to a passive trait. In short, it is a matter of luck passed down through her genes (with unimportant irrelevant men as the fathers). This is nature. On the other hand, if these men have been taught the skills they need to execute criminal jobs by Smurf, she gains an active status. This validates her role as the criminal matriarch. This is nurture. With “generational criminality” being one of the main points of the series, it presents to audiences an oscillating divide between nature and nurture. A feminist reading (mine) might accord more weight to the nurture side of the nature / nurture debate, and would validate Smurf’s mastery, expertise, and training of her sons in the outlaw life. Again, I argue that the text never quite allows this unimpeded reading (positioning) as it continues to build the tension between these polarities.

MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE

For my examination of this next micro-concept, I have chosen to focus on two of Smurf’s sons: Pope and Craig. I see Smurf’s relationship with Pope as a clear example of maternal ambivalence, one that readers will recognize if they have previously viewed the show. But the ambivalence in Craig and Smurf’s relationship is something I only clearly discovered during my data collection. Differently troubled in their own ways, Smurf’s ambivalence is represented more subtly with one son, while the other is represented more forthrightly. The series sets up the relationship Pope and Smurf have early on, but the scenes between Smurf and Craig that I discuss below come later. The former relationship is introduced to allow the audience to quickly understand it as troubled and complicated, which made me ask if ambivalence is common in mothers’ relationships with their children.

Around the pilot episode’s midpoint, Pope returns home from prison, unannounced. Smurf stops short when she sees him and when Pope turns towards her, Smurf says, “Hey, baby,” with a

smile. She hugs him, but this is followed by a sigh and a troubled expression of concern crosses her face as she looks off into the distance. She closes her eyes and hugs him harder, but then worry floods her expression as her son continues to rest his head on her shoulder. Viewers do not yet know the history between these two but ambivalent verbal and non-verbal cues acquaint us with their relationship. Gathered in the living room, Smurf declares, “Six years for a bank robbery where no one gets hurt. Three you’ve done are crime enough, baby,” but again, she hides her expression. It seems like she does not believe her own words, and would have preferred him remain incarcerated longer. The audience is invited to grasp her uneasiness and to feel the awkward tension in the air onscreen.

Drawing on Roszika Parker’s book, *Torn in two: The experience of maternal ambivalence* (2005), Alison Stone (2011) argues that maternal ambivalence is not damaging to children nor is it undesirable for mothers:

Firstly, some level of maternal ambivalence [...] is unavoidable and entirely normal. Mothers cannot but be aware of the conflicts between their own needs and wishes and those of their children, and between their desires to be with their children and to pursue other activities and relationships. Indeed, ultimately mothers cannot avoid having conflicting emotions towards their children because ambivalence, the polar conjunction of love and hate, is the fundament of psychical life (for Parker, following Melanie Klein). Secondly, some level of maternal ambivalence is beneficial, not harmful, to children: its expression encourages children to become responsible, to learn that not all their demands can reasonably be met, to learn to show care and empathy for others, and to appreciate the mother’s independent existence as a real other with emotions of her own. (p. 11-12)

This quote helped inform my understanding of Smurf’s maternal ambivalence. Through my analysis and evaluation, I sought to comprehend her complexity as a character and by the same token, the complicated construction of her relationships with her sons. In my reading, the text is

itself ambivalent. It often positions us to judge Smurf,⁸ especially in moments when textual representations encourage the audience's sympathy to lie with one of her children. But then again, there are moments in the text that I read as positioning the audience to sympathize with Smurf. The first position (judgement) aligns with the Pope and Smurf scenes presented above; the second position (sympathy) aligns with the Craig and Smurf scenes that I discuss, below. Smurf's character oscillates between love and ambivalence and navigates the tension of the good and bad mother, refusing the unattainable ideal. Smurf's maternal ambivalence as well as the textual ambivalence allows us not to love or hate this character, nor to choose one "side."

In the first season, the text offers us two scenes between Smurf and her son Craig that convey her "maternal ambivalence." In the sixth episode, Smurf comes to Craig's rescue when he finds himself restrained and trapped with men who want revenge on their cousin's behalf because rather than save his casual lover from her overdose, Craig stole her money and drugs. When Smurf arrives, the men are stunned and one mockingly asks, "You called your mom?" Smurf enters looking mad and threatening as she surveys the men and location. She pauses and asks Craig, "What'd you do, Baby?" One of the men answers for him: "Ripped off our cousin and left her to die." Smurf looks for confirmation, asking, "Craig?" but he simply stares down at the floor. He cannot face his mother and looks like a child awaiting a scolding. This is corroboration enough; Smurf opens her purse and tosses the money at his captors. Craig whispers, "Thank you," yet she smacks him in the face. This mother offered softness by calling her son "Baby" moments ago, but her hardness is never far away or out of reach, and she uses corporal punishment to showcase her displeasure. This conjunction of the soft (love) and hard (hate), promptly moving from one to the other, is an example of Smurf's maternal ambivalence. This demonstrates that she continues to

⁸ Here "judge" (a colloquialism) is used purposefully for a negative connotation.

treat her adult sons like children: expressions of love / affection and scolding alternate. For the purposes of this analysis, I have labelled her hardness “hate” to evoke for the reader the opposition in her feelings and therefore, her ambivalence.

Eventually, one of the men asks Smurf, “So, we’re even?” She answers “No.” After a pause she takes Craig’s keys and gives them away to one of the captors. In his position, Craig can only retort: “That’s my Ducati. What are you doing? Don’t give him my bike,” but Smurf unapologetically reveals, “Misbehave, you lose your toys. Go get in the car,” again reinforcing her infantilization of her adult child. Craig walks out. Smurf gets close to one man and warns: “Don’t you mistake my generosity for weakness”; she bumps him on purpose on the way out. The men do not look happy, instead, they look confused and scared. Julia M. Mason in “Mothers and Antiheroes” quotes Nancy Botwin (*Weeds*) statement that “you can’t defeat a mother lion when you threaten her cubs” to argue that “outlaw mothers will do anything to protect their families” (2019, p. 648). Smurf could be characterized as a mother lion; after saving Craig from the situation, she attacks with the final word and leaves.

The subsequent scene explores the difficulty these two characters have in managing their dependence on and their independence from one another:

Smurf: First Pope, now you? You know I had hoped that someday you boys would know how to take care of yourselves.

Craig: You haven’t even heard my side.

Smurf: I know your side, Sweetie, by heart. I encouraged you to be wild, but there’s a line.

Craig: [Voice breaks] What do you expect? All you give me are the shit jobs.

Smurf: That’s not true.

Craig: You think I’m stupid? You don’t even *try* to hide it.

Smurf: I don’t think you’re stupid. I think you’ve got real gifts.

Craig: Yeah? What?

Smurf: You’re fearless. You’ve got what it takes to do things your other brothers won’t.

They can't. But the next time something like this happens, don't you call me, because I will not come.

Smurf wants the grown men that she cares for to find their independence but when and what exactly that means is determined by her (never clear) terms. In one fell swoop at the end, Smurf nurtures and rejects Craig before stepping out of the car and leaving him teary eyed in the passenger seat. It is because Smurf's "mothering" is ambivalent that she demonstrates a caring attitude by consoling her middle child with a compliment despite refusing any future rescuing. I would argue that the sons and their mother must reframe their expectations and the emotional demands to and from one another because they must learn to grow apart, yet still be attached.

Smurf's ambivalence towards Pope regarding his spontaneous return home is more secretive, while Craig's financial burden and request for comfort receive a more straightforward response. It seems that Smurf wants her boys to "grow up" but she continues to cater to them (laundry, food, etc.) because she knows that she needs to keep them close to continue their criminality as a family enterprise. I contend that there is a fine line between appreciating and rejecting her sons' needs for aid and attention as a mother offering representative examples of "maternal ambivalence." My reading of the series suggests that Smurf's ambivalence towards her children is another "tool" that allows her to maintain her power: consciously to manipulate them or subconsciously as a simple truth of a version / practice of motherhood. Smurf needs her family, her sons (and grandson) to live this criminal lifestyle. Smurf must ensure they know she has the power and can give it or take it away. If she lets them become fully independent (grow up), this may no longer be feasible. She would have no attachment to strangers and she would get rid of them (as she has done in her past as future seasons demonstrate). However, because these are her children, there is attachment as well as the negative and conflicting emotions of "maternal

ambivalence.” And with this, I conclude my discussion of Smurf’s visual and textual representations of “motherwork” in *Animal Kingdom*.

SONS OF ANARCHY

In the second half of this chapter, I turn to *Sons of Anarchy*. My analysis begins by offering textual examples of Gemma’s representation in relation to the concepts of “mother,” “mothering,” and “motherwork.” Next, I demonstrate that while Gemma does not engage with domestic work in the same way Smurf does, her “domesticity” is still frequently represented and can be read as a significant component of her character because, like Smurf, she is constrained by traditional gender relations and hegemonic representations of femininity. In my discussion of “generational criminality,” I use Deniz Kandiyoti’s (1988) “Bargaining with Patriarchy,” which provides valuable insight into how we might read these characters as functioning within their various entrapments and alignments with cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles. Finally, I admit that my analysis of “maternal ambivalence” of the Cody matriarch is stronger than what appears below, but just like Smurf, Gemma also demonstrates a mother’s ability to reject and nurture their child in a heartbeat. Gemma, like Smurf, is a mother often centered in the domestic space of the home and centering “motherwork” allows my exploration to challenge her representational location at the intersection of domesticity, maternity, and criminality.

MOTHER, MOTHERING, MOTHERWORK

The audience is first introduced to Gemma in the pilot episode. She is driving, smoking, and calling Jax on speakerphone to ask if he has checked their storage locker for baby equipment. When he answers the phone, Jax says, “Hey, Ma,” yet to conclude the conversation he declares, with a smile, “Thanks... Grandma.” Gemma responds with a smile herself, but before hanging up says, “Asshole.” This is the protagonist’s mother actively engaging in “mothering” by checking in on him, inviting him to dinner, and offering to stop by his house to get information on his pregnant ex-wife, Wendy. On the one hand, Gemma is established as a relatively traditional mother figure. On the other hand, her swearing suggests that the doting, respectable, and well-spoken “good mother” is (sometimes) pushed aside to welcome a woman with more character and edge. Later, when Gemma does visit her ex-daughter-in-law, she sees through a window that Wendy is on the floor. Wendy has overdosed, a spoon and syringe are also on the floor at the junction of the blood from her groin and melted ice cream. Gemma’s response to this sight is: “Stupid junkie bitch,” once again signaling Gemma’s temperament and disposition. I read Gemma’s character as rough around the edges and these representative examples exhibit the limitlessly vicious outlook she holds, which is why I am drawn to her character.

In the fourth episode, Gemma goes to Tara’s father’s house—where Tara⁹ is currently residing after his passing—under the pretense that she is passing by to return Tara’s car; however, Tara is not deceived: “Yeah. Why are you here, Gemma? [...] the Good Samaritan bit’s not really playing. What do you want?” Gemma questions why Tara would come back to Charming for a job at the subpar community hospital just to pack up her father’s house. More importantly, she worries

⁹ Tara is Jax’s high school sweetheart and she has just returned to town after years of absence, reigniting old feelings.

about Tara and Jax rekindling their relationship as high school lovers, and her influence upon him as an outsider. Of course, she issues a command:

Gemma: I'm not worried about you. Just the people you touch. Jax is in a real strange place. He doesn't need any outside voices in his head. Stay clear of him.

Tara: We're not 19 years old anymore. You can't dictate what he does, who he sees...

Gemma: I'm his mother, and until I am dead and cold, I am gonna do anything I have to do to protect him.

I wish to draw attention to Gemma signaling her title as Jax's mother and the inestimable lengths she will go to protect and defend her son. Her "mothering" and "motherwork" know no bounds when it comes to protecting her legacy, protégé, and the future "king of Charming."

Nearing the end of the season (episode eleven), the following dialogue truly works the concept "mother." In a hospital room, Tara and Gemma discuss Abel's (her grandson) improvement, imminent departure from the hospital, and his future:

Tara: Can I ask you a practical question? Who's gonna take care of him?

Gemma: I will. Who do you think?

Tara: Day and night? You ready for that?

Gemma: I think I can handle it. [...] 'Cause I don't mind playing Mommy for a while. But eventually, I'd like to just sit back, be Grandma.

Gemma says the final line with a smile while Tara looks at her with what is, by all appearances, a blank face. Gemma is undoubtedly aware of the work the men of the club do, traditional gender roles within families, and the responsibilities she must take on again based on her personal experiences as a mother affiliated to the club all these years. As a pediatric doctor, Tara shares her opinion about the hardships of parenting despite not being a mother and having never mothered anyone, and dismisses Gemma's capacity to "mother," practice "mothering," and do "motherwork," in a patronizing way. Gemma subscribes to an understanding of "mother,"

“mothering,” and “motherwork” that does not privilege biological mothers. As the grandmother, when she cares for her grandson, she “mothers” the child, and performs acts of “motherwork” and “mothering.” Gemma has been called to this duty because Wendy cannot and though she is willing to do this labour, she still makes an explicit mention to differentiate between “Mommy” and “Grandma.” These examples reveal Gemma’s makeup as Jax’s mother and Abel’s primary minder, and how the combining of the first three micro-concepts helps build the representations of her “motherwork.”

DOMESTICITY (THE DOMESTIC AS A SPACE AND COMMUNITY)

We are introduced to Gemma alongside her predisposition for the domestic: she calls Jax to enquire about baby supplies and a future dinner to which he enthusiastically confirms his attendance (S1, E1). At the outset, Gemma is positioned as straddling progressive and regressive representations of woman and motherhood: on the one hand, she sounds like a housewife whose focus is nurturing and feeding loved ones; on the other hand, Gemma is not calling from inside the home but from the road, signaling her independence. To me, this scene shows that Gemma is not secluded in her home, she is out and about, self-reliant, but at the same time, she is tied to “domesticity.” This is an ongoing tension. In this short example she reinforces and breaks apart conventional forms of motherhood and femininity.

In the next episode, when Gemma is grocery shopping, she witnesses Donna (the wife of a SAMCRO member) struggling to pay her bill (S1, E2). Outside, Gemma approaches and offers her a bag of groceries but Donna resists:

Donna: What’s this?

Gemma: The rest of your groceries.

Donna: Opie’s out now. We don’t need any more charity. Thanks.

Gemma: It was never charity, Donna. It’s what we do. You’re family.

Donna: I have my family back. I don't need yours.

Gemma: Look. I know what you went through. Been there. . . With two husbands. Lose your man. Kids lose their dad. You get pissed off. Want to blame the club. But SAMCRO is not the enemy. It's the glue. . . The one thing that will always be there to pull you through the ugly shit. Gotta stop fighting us, Donna. You need us.

Donna: I married Opie. I didn't marry the club. You have no idea what I need.

Gemma: Donna. We're having a little family dinner tonight. You and Ope should come. Bring the kids. You might actually have a good time. Don't say anything else. My Martha Stewart's wearing real thin. You know where we live.

There are several points I would like to address in relation to this scene. First, two women were practicing a domestic chore by going to the grocery store ("domesticity"). Second, Donna struggled for years to provide for herself and her children because Opie was in prison, which draws attention to the intersection of the domestic and the criminal in her life. The reader understands that Donna attempts to live a conventional life, despite her husband's association with SAMCRO. Donna is represented as a "plain Jane" because she is not involved in any form of criminality herself and does not encourage her husband's dealings with the club. In some ways, Donna's "plain Jane" character is constructed in visual opposition to the other women associated with SAMCRO (e.g., leather, black clothes, lace, and figure-hugging), who showcase and embody a kind of outlaw sexuality while Donna does not. Despite Opie's many years of club affiliation, Donna has not assimilated into the outlaw life; she holds herself apart. By way of contrast, within a season, Tara chameleons to "fit" into SAMCRO and its aesthetic culture.

Third, both women are performing "mothering" as a "substantial part of one's working life" (Ruddick, 1995, p.17). And fourth, Gemma reminds Donna of the life she leads by association, as well as their practice of domesticity and maternity in relation to criminality. Gemma desires to help a fellow mother with ties to the club, but her kindness has limits. Gemma illuminates Donna's hypocrisy. Donna wants to draw a line between herself and SAMCRO, but her domestic

life is rooted in her husband's role in the club and its success. This club provides them a livelihood. By naming Martha Stewart, a (popular) cultural domestic figure, she draws on familiar gendered tropes, but at the same time, using this as a warning disrupts her full abidance to conventional cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles.¹⁰ Again, in this exchange revolving around "domesticity," Gemma blurs the lines between her regressive and progressive representations of motherhood and women. The text implies that Donna and her family are irrevocably involved in the club. She has chosen this lifestyle by marrying Opie, even if she does not embrace it, even if she holds herself apart. Gemma wants Donna to understand SAMCRO's benefits include communal solidarity and sharing as well as domestic support.

At the end of the episode, Gemma smokes weed, prepares food with other club wives and girlfriends, and hosts the supper first mentioned in the series' opening minutes, the same dinner Donna was invited to. Gemma looks on very pleased at the dinner table surrounded by the outlaw community's men and women. This textual moment offers another example of one of the traditional roles of women within domestic space: the creation of community. This often happens around food. The text cements the way that the domestic and hospitality come together to build community, solidarity, and obligation. The narrative cuts to another scene where Donna, Opie, and

¹⁰ One crucial point of this thesis is thinking about older women at the intersection of domesticity and crime. Martha Stewart is a real-life representation of this. Stewart built her life (empire) through the performance of (upper-class) domestic femininity and later became associated with a criminal identity (prison). Stewart capitalized on the melding of the two for her most recent public persona. The writers' choice to include Stewart in the text at that time must have been intentional. Gemma's reference to Stewart can be read, on the one hand, as suggesting her performance of domestic "goddessness," but on the other hand, it can also suggest that her "Martha Stewart" "wearing thin," indicating succumbing to her criminality as well. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, but in short, it is ironic that Gemma names Stewart because, like her, Stewart is associated as much with the criminality as she is with the domestic. Additionally, Stewart is recognized as a domestic goddess, yet despite having a child of her own (daughter) she was not / never a mother figure, or marketed specifically the labour of her "motherwork."

their two children are having dinner at home in silence. Despite being summoned, Donna refuses to attend, and by extension, refusing to accept SAMCRO back into their family life after Opie's recent incarceration. To accept this dinner invitation, it is implied, is to enter a relationship of familial obligation to Gemma, and to SAMCRO. In the dialogue above, Gemma empathizes with Donna and she attempts to verbalize how similar they are, but Gemma holds much more power (as the President's wife). This strategy fails in this episode because Donna identifies Gemma's charade and knows that there is more obligation with (chosen) family, than with the "charity" mentioned above. By refusing the hospitality, Donna rejects a compliance to this criminal community (and shared extended familial relationship). Gemma strategically uses her domestic role to placate to this angry woman, Donna, who poses a risk to the club. (Gemma tries, yet she is not successful.) In my reading, Gemma's "charity" is not altruistic, but an exchange for Donna's loyalty (obligation) to SAMCRO and its community. Another reading of this would propound that Donna's rejection of Gemma's invitation isolates her family (and herself) from the joys of community and sociality through a self-imposed ostracization. The text does not celebrate Donna's choices, instead it leans towards supporting Gemma. The quiet and isolation of Donna's dinner table compared to the boisterous gathering of sociality and community solidarity in Gemma's home is obviously meant to draw a poor comparison, juxtaposition, and sad dichotomy.

Here we have an explicit presentation of the intersection of the domestic and the criminal; nonetheless, the joy, harmony, and innocence represented demonstrate that the characters are unfazed by, and live naturally within this diegetic world. As a woman and mother, I believe Gemma conforms to and reiterates regressive representations and roles because she contributes to the club in the ways that she can, or more tellingly, is allowed to. The character's abidance and participation is regressive on an individual / personal level because it is rooted in (ostracizing,

patriarchal) gender roles. Her performances of “domesticity” comply with and reproduce, rather than reject, troubling and familiar gendered tropes. To sum up, these explanatory examples regarding food and housework showcase Gemma’s construction of “motherwork” in this conceptual idea of “domesticity.”

GENERATIONAL CRIMINALITY

From the start, the series nicely sets up the centrality of generational themes and conflicts. In the pilot, the past, present, and future come together. In the vulnerability / safety of their bedroom, Clay is honest about his arthritis pain, and Gemma and Clay divulge to one another the troubles that have recently emerged since Jax “found a box of John’s stuff in storage.” Gemma reflects that the death of her other son, Thomas, changed John (“made him soft”) and worries that Jax is filled with the same guilt and remorse John once felt. Gemma comes close to Clay and orders, “You’ve gotta nail Jax down. You have to nail him down hard, Clay. Whatever it takes. I don’t want the ghost of John Teller poisoning him, ruining everything we’ve built.” Importantly, this scene is continuously played as part of the “previously on” paratext, which marks it as a crucial element for the characters and a key arc of the season. Gemma then drives the point harder: “They respect him. Jax is strong. And when you step down as Pres—” but he cuts her off, asserting, “Hey, hey! I’m not going anywhere” (S1, E1). Gemma shifts from firm to gentle; softly, she soothes and agrees with him, “I know, baby. I know. It’s just... When you can’t ride anymore, they’ll vote my son in as President. I just want to make sure he’s following in the right father’s footsteps. Okay [Kisses] Okay?” The threat of Clay’s demise looms large in Gemma’s mind. It is important that the incoming generation of club members, Jax particularly, align with the desires for SAMCRO Gemma and Clay share, rather than threaten their years of toil. Here I underscore the disparity the scene sets up between the two “fathers,” and the couple’s distress in considering that John’s

undesirable dispositions—rather than those of his stepfather—might repeat themselves in Jax. Ultimately, what is suggested is that the father figure Jax aligns with will propel the drama that shall unfold. ‘Drama’ for the viewers watching at home, but the ‘future’ for the characters within the diegesis.

Gemma periodically visits the family’s new addition: Jax’s child. A surface level reading of *Sons of Anarchy* might suggest Gemma is a loving grandmother, but a deeper analysis reveals that Gemma’s motives are not necessarily wholesome. I read Gemma’s work in building a close relationship with Abel as a practice that repeats the same narrative she creates with / for Jax. Through Gemma’s continuous visits to Abel at the hospital, she is attaching herself to her grandson, but also the promise of a future king, maintaining her grip tightly upon her control of her kin. For example, at the tail end of the eighth episode, there is a birdshot view of Abel in the hospital nursery wearing a blue Sons of Anarchy beanie. It denotes that Abel belongs to the club (already designated as its future President) and undoubtedly signals his community connections: the reaper upon his head, juxtaposed with his newborn innocence. I wondered if a baby girl would be given the same apparel, and I think not.

At the end of the tenth episode, Tara visits the cabin used by SAMCRO members to inspect an injury; when the men and women depart, she witnesses the comradery of the club. Soon after, Gemma stands uncomfortably close behind her, and Tara looks momentarily annoyed. This scene is striking because it allows us to see the similarities between Gemma and Tara. They are both white woman with a California tan, they have dark features and long brown hair, and their clothing is similar. Earlier in the episode, Gemma was wearing a plum V-neck top and now Tara is standing in the doorframe wearing a purple corduroy jacket. I cannot fathom how their matching purple attire in this episode could be a coincidence, rather than a strategic element of the production. I

also read purple as a colour associated with royalty; in this case, the status of the woman, “old lady,” in a relationship with the President of SAMCRO’s Charming, California charter. As Tara’s relationship evolves with Jax, Tara gradually mirrors his mother, the matriarch. Like Gemma, Tara is a female / feminine asset to the family because she accepts and participates in the motorcycle club life as both a medical professional and potential wife / mother / “old lady.” Later in the series, she becomes Abel’s stepmother, and by bringing forth a son in the series’ fourth season, she contributes to the hope of a continuation of the generational line of criminals.

These textual examples of “generational criminality” offer insight into the past, present, and future of the narrative: the king and queen of Charming want Jax to abandon his biological father, and abide by his mother’s (and stepfather’s) hopes and ambitions; Gemma’s attachment to Abel signals the promise of another SAMCRO generation; and finally, Tara’s return and rekindled love with Jax aligns her with the club. For me, this “time traveling” offers pertinent representations of how “generational criminality” is articulated in the series. These examples offer representations of Kandiyoti’s (1988) “classic patriarchy” and the “patriarchal bargain.” As a woman, Gemma strategizes within the constraints of her gendered subjectivity (p.275). Kandiyoti (1988) explains that women have the potential for active (rejecting) or passive (reiterating) resistance towards their oppression (p.275) yet the aspiration for inheriting the authority of senior women “encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves” (279). Gemma (like Smurf) is invested in this narrative of succession because “sons are a woman’s most critical resource, ensuring their life-long loyalty is an enduring preoccupation” (p.279). Kandiyoti (1988) even adds that women attempt to suppress their sons’ romantic / conjugal love to maintain / claim the mother-son relationship as the primary allegiance (p.279). Again, I read these textual examples as moments in the text that evidence the tension around womanhood, motherhood, domesticity,

and criminality it articulates. This idea of producing and controlling their heirs is a way to live vicariously through their successes and to ensure some kind of legacy, always there, but on the sidelines negotiating their place as they break apart and reinforce troubling tropes repeatedly.

MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE

From the outset of the series, Gemma experiences conflicting emotions about Jax. Earlier, I described the way Gemma performs “domesticity” at her son’s house, however I did not divulge their full exchange. Jax urges Gemma to stop cleaning his home; she is displacing her emotions about Abel’s (vulnerable medical) state onto chores; it is one of her coping mechanisms which she justifies by telling herself (and them) that the house is unfit for a newborn. Gemma has a stronger relationship with Abel than Jax because she has visited him at the hospital consistently, while Jax refused to visit his newborn son. Jax does not believe that Abel will survive; because Gemma refuses to accept this outcome, she is furious and slaps him, followed by an immediate apology. Gemma rejects and nurtures her son, dismissing and then consoling him (LaChance Adams, 2014). When Jax insists he can’t visit Abel, Gemma replies: “Why? ‘Cause he’ll break your heart? It’s called being a father.” I read this as a moment where Gemma offers Jax hope. She is not only helping her boy become a man and face his responsibilities, she is also telling her son the truth about raising and loving a child. In the end, Gemma brings forward hope by noting that adversity is no challenge for the Teller family, Abel included.

The second scene that I present occurs at the midpoint of the season. Whilst Gemma cleans, Clay wants to talk about Jax’s relationship with Tara, and her inevitable influence on him:

Gemma: She’s getting under his skin. I can feel it. It’s bad for us.

Clay: I’m keeping an eye on him. Not gonna let anything turn Jax away from SAMCRO, especially pussy.

Gemma: Tara's not pussy. He loved her, probably still does.

This dialogue is important for two reasons. First, it shows that Gemma rationalizes her control of her adult offspring due to her (and Clay's) aspirations for the club. Second, it poignantly shows the intersection of the domestic and the criminal: Gemma performs traditional domestic activities at the same time as discussing their outlaw enterprise. Clay carelessly dismisses Jax and Tara's relationship as a sexual one, but Gemma does not share this naiveté. She recognizes the emotions at the core of their bond. Gemma's concerns about Tara cater to repeated narratives of mother's apprehensions, or even hatred of other women interfering / being present in their son's lives, thus, reproducing problematic tropes regarding relationships between women. Gemma lives within a masculine world, which in part she has created. However, this is not a world she founded with the intention of making room or space for (other) women (read as competition). Gemma is invested in normatively gendered power structures and dismisses whatever an egalitarian vision could be in this criminal space for the sake of her kin. The choice to use the term "pussy" tells the audience that a woman who is just pussy (a casual relationship) is not dangerous, but one that is more than that (feelings), is dangerous. Clearly, Gemma, as the mother, sees Tara as a threat that Clay, the father figure, does not. Tara is not a threat to Clay, but she is to Gemma. This is Gemma's personal problem and Clay does not grasp the snowball effect she might have and how this might endanger their future. Thus, Gemma's maternal understanding is represented as exceeding his homosocial understanding / comprehension (and perhaps his lack of parental / paternal knowledge).

Overall this micro-concept works in two ways. Gemma offers advice about the reality of raising children and the conflicting emotions that occur while simultaneously expressing those binary emotions herself. Additionally, the private discussion between the couple (Gemma and Clay) signals the arising conflict between the mother (Gemma) and her son (Jax) because their

individual interests are not matching. Jax's love for Tara is a distraction and an outsider influence that is not welcomed and so those "powerful negative and conflicting emotions" (Parker, 1995, p.6) that comprise "maternal ambivalence" are directed to her son and, willingly or not, her future daughter-in-law too.

A DISCUSSION: "MOTHERWORK"

Here, I summarize my reading of Smurf and Gemma's portrayal of the various micro-concepts encompassing the "motherwork" macro-concept and offer comparisons and contrasts if / when possible. Both women welcome grandsons into their lives in the pilot episode of their respective series, one a teenager and the other an infant, whom both hope will continue the family business. Smurf's performance of domestic roles, duties, and activities is so pervasive (arguably excessive), I deemed the moments of its absence "failure at domesticity." By contrast, Gemma's engagement with domestic work is less significant but still presented throughout the season. I argue that both characters reiterate and perform familiar gendered tropes, but their representations of "domesticity" also blur the lines of regressive and progressive representations of motherhood and women because each in her own way lives at a murky intersection of the domestic and the criminal; their choices as mothers are made for their children, but also for what will best serve the criminal family or the criminal club.

Within "generational criminality" Smurf and Gemma inhabit as well as navigate the tension between the regression and rejection of stereotypical representations of motherhood and women in societies where patriarchy reigns. On the one hand, Smurf and Gemma conform to feminine roles and engage in a common mother / woman placeholder narrative for the men in their

lives: Smurf waits at home in Oceanside while the men are out on jobs and Gemma waits for her son to become President of SAMCRO in Charming. On the other hand, as the matriarchs of the Cody family and of SAMCRO, Smurf and Gemma hold authority and decision-making power, and both wish to achieve and keep a desired notoriety through the family name. Ultimately, both mothers manipulate and seek control of their kin due to their attachments to their family businesses and the power that they have because of them.

As the matriarchs of the Cody and Teller-Morrow families, Smurf and Gemma are “mothers” that practice “mothering” and choose to do “motherwork.” This is shown through their devotion to “domesticity,” the blood bond or chosen families that form the basis of their “generational criminality,” as well as the “maternal ambivalence” displayed in the conflicted emotions they hold towards their sons. Smurf and Gemma are both represented as rejecting the conventional ideologies of the all-loving and devotional mother, which I have demonstrated through my discussion of “maternal ambivalence.” Before starting my analysis, I imagined “maternal ambivalence” as a stronger concept in *Animal Kingdom* because of Smurf and Pope’s relationship, nevertheless, Gemma and Jax offered an equally intriguing example. I now believe that future work could explore the other side of these relationships, or the concept for a child’s ambivalence toward their mother as it plays out in these series. During my data collection of *Sons of Anarchy*, I noticed that other mothers, such as Wendy and Mary (Opie’s mother), also offered examples of “maternal ambivalence,” but they were omitted to allow me to focus on Gemma. They could, however, provide interesting foci for future work.

Chapter Six: An exploration of the second Macro-Concept:

“MOTHER BLAME”

ANIMAL KINGDOM

In my analysis of “mother blame,” I look at six micro-concepts. For “bad mother,” I consider J’s estrangement from the family and the boys’ “play time” together to probe Smurf’s oscillation between the “good” and “bad” mother. In “mother-son relationships” I unpack two points: the allyship between brothers despite the cyclical competition for their mother’s partiality, as well as the incestuous element that lingers in this series between the mother and her sons. In “triadic relationship(s),” I present Smurf’s manipulations within the strained relational trio of Baz, Catherine, and Smurf with Lena, the (grand)daughter, as a point of contention. The “triadic relationship” emerges explicitly out of this particular dynamic: mother, son, and (other) woman. In my analysis of the “hierarchical family relationship,” I consider that Smurf holds much of the power, yet at the same time, the text offers us glimpses of a collapse of the matriarch’s power, a gap in which there is a potential for a patriarchal (male) takeover. The conceptual focus of “mother blame” is the bond between Smurf and her eldest son, as well as textual innuendos regarding incest. Finally, I examine Smurf’s “intensive mothering” of Pope through her selfish decision to secretly medicate him.

BAD MOTHER

The “bad mother” is a concept, an idea, a trope, and it stands in a negative binary position to the “good mother.” Amanda D. Lotz (2017) argues that “the bad mother occupies the status of the ultimate bad woman” (p.127). I argue that Smurf (and Gemma) oscillates between “good mother” / “bad mother” tropes but in this section, my focus is on her representation as the “bad mother.” In the pilot episode, J tells his girlfriend Nicky that since his mother died he’s living “with my grandma in the flats. [...] I don’t really know her. My mom and her weren’t close.” Some might classify J’s mother as a “bad mother” because of her substance abuse, and by extension read Smurf as a “good mother” for taking in her estranged grandson. In another part of this scene, the audience learns that Smurf is close to her sons. We might ask why her daughter was estranged, even though they continued to live in such close geographical proximity to one another? If Smurf, the mother, did not care for Julia (her daughter) the way she does for her male kin, this would position her to be read as a “bad mother.”

In the following episode “the boys” are playing rough in the pool. Smurf’s sons, a group of adult men, continue to engage in childish behaviour when they incorporate “play time” into their days. Over the years, this rough-housing has escalated to the point where blood is drawn; it appears that victory is based on this element of the game as well as scoring points. When Smurf approaches, Deran asks: “Who are you rooting for, Ma?” She crosses her arms, smiles proudly at Pope and Baz fighting in the pool, and in a softspoken voice confesses, “Both of them, baby. That’s the beauty of being a mother. You never have to pick sides” (S1, E2). Though it may be unclear why I would choose this example as evidence of Smurf’s portrayal as a “bad mother,” I would like to signal to the reader that my intention is to argue that, while the text often positions her as a “bad mother,” there is room for ambivalence in the reading and that is where my focus is, not on the

legitimacy of individual representations of Smurf as “good” or “bad.” I argue that Smurf (and Gemma) cannot be read as fully occupying either the position of “good” or “bad,” that she oscillates between the two, in tension with both tropes. The scene described above demonstrates Smurf’s love for her boys, but simultaneously (and selfishly) represents her need for all the men to be strong. By not picking sides, she aspires for all their strength to prosper and grow together, because ultimately, their strength is her strength. The text offers a representation of a woman / mother in a patriarchal world. Smurf’s desire for status in Oceanside is only possible if she shows love to all her sons, while at the same time, keeping tabs on who is her most powerful. Naturally, Smurf is aging and alert to name the next leader of her legacy. For her, coupled with other methods, winning this type of play is a demonstration of tenacity, will, and power. She pursues and emphasizes building their power through muscle and she continues to hold the place for “the brains” of the operation. There is also a belief that a “good mother” does not pick sides, and if she does, she is a “bad mother.” I read Smurf’s response to Deran as a covert lie because her deceit serves a purpose: to portray an equal love for all her sons. Yet her interest in the game as she watches over fondly, waiting for the winner to surface, speaks loudly of her investment in who will ultimately emerge as the most powerful.

This contest of brain versus brawn is encouraged by Smurf, and suggested as a regular occurrence. As she tries to hold on as long as possible to the leader position with the brains, she wants to augment her sons’ brawn. Since mothers are “frequently blamed for the behaviour of their boys and the ills of society” (Wilson-Scott, 2017, p.193), on a small-scale level, harm is made to the boys’ well-being and health, yet the definition also notes the bigger scale harm to society. I recognize that the mother can be blamed, the throughline of this chapter’s analysis, for the violent actions done in the privacy of their home, but the repercussions (ripple effect) that affect

community as well. I think there is a possible analysis here for the problematic display of masculinity motivated by this gendered dynamic. To return for a moment to J, we can read his prior lack of a relationship with his grandmother as being representative of problems in the mother-daughter relationship (which she does not appear to have with her sons). This, coupled with Smurf's lie about favouritism, enables the viewer to perceive Smurf's representational motherhood as, from her textual introduction, walking the tightrope of the "good" and "bad" mother binary.

MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP(S)

At the core of my thesis is a desire to unpack the familial interactions, and specifically the mother-son relationships that are represented in *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*. My exploration here focuses on the dyad of the youngest son and Smurf. In the third episode, Deran is threatened by J's new presence in the home and bullies him; Smurf protects and sides with J which upsets Deran further. In the fourth episode, Smurf tests the boys' loyalties, wanting to uncover the truth concerning the jobs they did without her knowledge. She threatens that no jobs will be executed until she is given answers / details about these unauthorized jobs. This (again) angers Deran. He decides to no longer respond to his family's messages and phone calls; essentially, he disappears. In the fifth episode, Baz pleads with his brother to return home ("this whole routine is getting a little old"), but Deran continues on with his old tactics ("I'm done. I'm sick of her shit. I-I can't take it anymore."). Baz and Craig explain to Pope that while he was incarcerated, Deran went to Belize and Smurf "nearly lost it." Smurf does not handle absences or silent treatments from her boys well.

Later, when Pope (the eldest) finds Deran (the youngest) at the beach, Pope approaches his brother with honest curiosity, and Deran confesses his desire to separate himself from his mother's control. Deran's rejection highlights Smurf's (hyper)dependence on her sons, and anticipates the

fractures in her leadership. The brothers reach a compromise: Deran trades in a violent favour (to hurt someone) from Pope for his return home. The text implies that the brothers are willing / able to mobilize in order to protect their mother by keeping their baby brother happy / in line, even if this means enacting violence, usually against others. At the same time, whoever accomplishes bringing Deran home “scores points” with their mother.

As we near the end of this episode, we see a car come to a screeching halt; Adrian (Spencer Treat Clark) runs towards Deran who is casually walking up the beach. Adrian blames Deran’s insistence on keeping their relationship secret on Smurf:

Adrian: Are you crazy? You sent one of your thug brothers after Dave?! He nearly died.

Deran: What happened?

Adrian: Is this how it’s gonna work? Every time I meet a guy, you send someone to almost kill him? Oh it’s sick, Smurf’s hold over you. You know that, right?

Deran: Look, this has nothing to do with Smurf.

Adrian: Bullshit. It has everything to do with her. What would Smurf do with a son who doesn’t want to screw her? That’s your biggest fear, isn’t it? Being out in the cold without Mommy’s love?

Deran: I’ll see you tonight.

There is an underlying, subtle yet potent, sentiment that Smurf has sensual, if not sexual relationships with her sons. This is not only because the close relationship that they share as a family; through tone and body language for example, the series showcases the mother and son relationship as too-close-for-comfort and quasi-incestuous. The physical intimacy between Smurf and her younger, male kin is an element that the audience can register, yet the characters cannot or refuse to see it. However, as an outsider, Adrian vocalizes the troubling mother-son attachments. In brief, Deran has a complicated relationship with his sexuality. He is queer, but not “out.” One reason why Deran hides his tumultuous relationship with Adrian from Smurf is because his sexuality ruins the illusion that he is heterosexual and interested in a relationship with his mother.

This is a facet of this series that is beyond the scope of this work, unfortunately, but it is important to note, nonetheless. Regardless of what Adrian says, Deran wants to mend his relationship with his mother. In the last minutes of the episode, Deran returns home and Smurf sees him by the pool. She approaches; Deran looks tired and maybe even defeated as he says, “Hi, Mama.” “Hey, baby,” she replies. Deran puts his head down in her lap to be caressed and she kisses him repeatedly, tenderly, and fondly.

For me this episode showcases not only Deran’s shift from self-imposed exile to conceding return, but also the brothers’ triumphant commitment to quench troubles between the(ir) mother and themselves. This story arc serves as an example of how the boys / family function as a unit(y); a missing piece (son) distracts from the harmony and the jobs they must / want to successfully execute. The boys’ desire for money and status is achieved through the relationship they have with their mother (and Smurf’s is achieved through the relationship she has with them), any disruption is a cause for concern. For this reason, the brothers rally to snap the lost piece (Deran) back in place. Thus, family and criminality is the core of the Cody identity. Smurf challenges familiar narratives about who helms the criminal family; however, she complies with patriarchal dominance by relying on men.

In my feminist reading of this text, I see Smurf’s representation as regressive because of her abidance to traditional performances of gender, although this is central to the ambivalently binary construction of the character, and the tension she embodies. There are two key points I would like to address in relation to this micro-concept. First, as a criminal family the brothers are allies; they also compete for their mother’s affection (and favouritism) but still band together when one veers off track to keep the unity. On the other hand, there is the inappropriate nature of the “bad mother” in these “mother-son relationships.” The (quasi) incestuous elements help explain

why other women are not welcome. I utilized Smurf's relationship with her youngest boy to discuss the dyads at work in this family. Smurf shares unique relationships with each son but this analysis, through a focus on Deran (the baby), enabled me to exemplify facets of Smurf's character and in turn, the representation of her engagement in "mother-son relationships." Smurf's authority and domination of her sons becomes taxing to them over time, and offers an excuse to run away and seek (vaguely) autonomous tranquility. The troubling quasi-incestual elements in the Cody family make these dyads, mother-son relationships, even more layered, complex, and complicated.

TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP(S)

The strained (triad) relationship between Baz, Smurf, and Catherine is set up in the pilot episode. Smurf and Catherine bicker about Lena going in the pool, and when Smurf overhears Catherine and Baz having a disagreement, she shakes her head disapprovingly. Viewers are encouraged to understand that Catherine is reticent about leaving Lena with her grandmother. In one scene, upon Catherine's arrival at the Cody house, she hears Lena splashing in the pool, panics, and removes her from the water. Smurf antagonizes Catherine by taking it upon herself to teach Lena to swim without floaties and they quarrel. These moments highlight the women's fraught relationship, especially concerning Smurf's relationship with her granddaughter. These examples, a small sample of many more that occur during the series' first season, showcase that this "triadic relationship" emerges out of a particular "mother-son relationship": it is Smurf's relationship with Baz that creates tension in her relationship with Catherine.

At the start of the seventh episode, Smurf is packing in her bedroom; Baz is in her doorway. With the job looming closer and J still a new addition in the family, Baz questions whether, "this [is] really the best time" for her weekend getaway. Smurf hands him envelopes and tells him to distribute them; he scoffs at the amount they have been given. This unleashes a revelatory

discussion between the two since Baz admits that he and Catherine have been discussing having another baby. Smurf, through her usual artful manipulation, ponders, “I’m just wondering if it’s the best time for you to knock up Catherine now.” Baz does not to be the babysitter while Smurf is out of town, and though he uses his brothers as the excuse for the unsatisfactory amount of bills given, he needs money for a hypothetical second child. Due to family responsibilities, he needs more money than his other siblings. Baz wants to be the leader (her successor, the patriarch), and not only when Smurf is unavailable. In this scene the viewer is meant to understand that he feels like the older brother babysitting his younger siblings because mommy will be going out. I read Smurf’s comment less about the money, but more connected to a desire to keep Baz’s attention and focus on her own (criminal) nuclear family. Just as he was perplexed about the timing of her trip, she mirrors the same sentiment by questioning his desire to add a baby to his already unsuccessful juggling of existing family, brothers, and the business. Smurf openly shares her concern (opinion) about Baz and Catherine’s private affairs. This meddling in the couple creates a triangular relationship, in which Baz tries to please both women. Why doesn’t Smurf want Catherine to get pregnant? Is it because this will keep Catherine tethered to the family, or because a new child would distract Baz from his responsibilities? Does Smurf believe that as Lena gets older she can push Catherine away and that a new baby will delay Catherine’s departure? As the “fabricator” of this (masculine) world, Smurf does not allow space for other women—nor men that are outsiders, even the fathers—because she wants to be the head of the family without competition. She loves and keeps her (grand)children close because they hold the promise of the generational continuation of the Cody family business / name. However, in another imagined future, if Smurf is unable to control Lena, the audience registers that she may disown her as she did her own daughter. Since I already know what happens in later seasons, I know this never comes

to pass. However, at this moment in season one, we can imagine a future in which Lena, Baz, and Smurf could have become another complicated triad.

When Baz arrives home, Catherine attempts to seduce him but he refuses her advances. Catherine knows this is because Smurf has said something to reverse his earlier enthusiasm for a baby. Baz cannot admit that Smurf's words worked because it would confirm both Smurf's influence in his private affairs and his primary allegiance to her. Smurf believes that she and Catherine must compete for Baz's time and affection. Smurf is the center of her household, as a single mother and the matriarch of the Cody family she appears to reject conventional forms of feminine domesticity, however, her manipulative and conniving character reinforces stereotypical gender (feminine) characteristics. The trope of the evil stepmother lurks in this text. Rather than two women competing for the love of the father—the classic triad of this kind is the daughter, father, and stepmother—Catherine and Smurf compete for the love and attention of a son instead. As the leader of the brothers, Baz is the pseudo-father figure, the closest approximation of patriarchal power. In sum, rather than pairing up, loving the same man, and becoming stronger together, the text takes an anti-feminist approach to Smurf's relationships with her sons' partners. The women do not share power, instead they vie for it.

HIERARCHICAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIP(S)

Through this micro-concept I want to present the undeniable ways that societies and micro-societies, like families, possess hierarchies. In the case of *Animal Kingdom*, Smurf reigns as the matriarch; she raised her criminal children, but the older the men get, the more power and status they want within the family. They desire to rule rather than abide and follow. In the “mother-son relationships” analysis above, I discussed Deran's child-like actions; he is the baby and punishes Smurf through absence and silence. Baz tries to sympathize, but this annoys Smurf (she is the only

one who consoles her boys, they are not meant to console one another), and she deflects by pointing Baz back to the family hierarchy: “What do you think it is about this that really bothers you, Baz? Deran or the fact that Pope’s taking care of it?” (S1, E5). Baz may be the matriarch’s right-hand man, but she still calls the shots. As the dominant brother, Smurf has often taken Baz into her confidence; they share history and a special bond. In the second episode, Smurf tells him: “We did things, baby, you and me, right? Things your brothers never had to do. When I first took you in, do you remember? You used to steal food from the kitchen, hide it all around the house. [Both chuckle] I think it took you about a year to believe I was gonna feed you regularly. God, your parents were shits. I don’t know how you survived.” She lovingly kisses him on the forehead (affection) and I contend that she likes to remind him that she saved him (manipulation). While Baz is an equal member of the family, Smurf reminds him that their relationship is, in fact, different. Moreover, while blood is strong as a trope / narrative force in *Animal Kingdom* (and *Sons of Anarchy*), so is the idea that she and Baz chose one another. Thus, Baz is the only child she chose and who chose her.

The intricacies of these characters’ past and present relationships is quickly presented in the pilot episode when the family discusses Smurf’s decision to take in J:

Deran: It’s insane. I mean, what makes you think that we can trust this kid? I mean, who knows what Julia put in his head? I mean - -

Smurf: She was too high to put anything in his head.

[...]

Craig: Don’t take stupid risks. That’s what you’re always saying. This isn’t stupid? Right before a job?

Baz: [Sighs] Yeah, look, I don’t know, Smurf. Kid seems okay, but it’s not a good time to have him around. It’s just not.

Smurf: Okay, stay on him tomorrow. Just suss him out.

Craig: What? Just take him to IHOP and - - and ask him if he’s gonna screw us?

Smurf: That’s all you can think of?

Deran: If he’s not wearing a wire, what, he’s just - - he’s a part of it all now?

Craig: W-W-We don't know this kid, shit!
 Smurf: Shut up! All of you.

Smurf then approaches and speaks to each one of them directly. To Deran she teases, “Now, what’s the matter, my baby boy? Are you afraid he’s gonna get more attention than you?” To Craig, she orders, “Suss him out. Are you too thick to figure that out?” And to Baz, she tests, “You want to be a leader? Make a decision. Don’t be a pussy and play both sides.” Finally, she addresses all of them: “The kid is in until I say he isn’t, and the next one of you to say a word will not get his share of this job. Not a penny. Test me. Go ahead.” In my reading, Smurf wants to instill within Baz a commanding and decisive role, but ultimately, as the matriarch, she has the final say. Literally, in this scene, the final word as well. Smurf demonstrates the tension between her identities as a powerful, criminal woman and a mother; she is the mastermind and rules over these boys, but at the same time, she wants her boys, Baz particularly, to be proactive and stalwart in their service to the Cody family.

Perhaps status in the community (a hierarchical aspiration) can only be achieved through a successful abidance to a hierarchy within the family. I would argue however that Smurf navigates a tightrope because if she gives too much power and endorsement / approbation to the men, she becomes increasingly less powerful and more easily replaceable. *Animal Kingdom* is a text where a matriarch (without a patriarch) has power, but as the boys get older, and less amenable, Smurf becomes weaker in this patriarchal world where (gendered) hierarchies want to be restored. By representing moments where she pushes them toward autonomy, the texts offers space for us to read Smurf as wanting to set up her sons for success before her passing, while refusing to allow them to exert their power until she is dead, and this includes welcoming another generation into the Cody family business. I attest that adding her grandson to the ensemble makes them more

intimidating and stronger in numbers, and Smurf is unequivocally curious about the skills J could bring to the table. Ultimately, their path, lifestyle, and criminal identities can be blamed on the mother that raised them, which I will discuss in the next micro-concept.

MOTHER BLAME

In the final episode of the first season, episode ten, there is a revelation. Pope and Smurf confront one another about the emotions that have been bubbling to the surface ever since Pope's release from prison in the pilot episode. As a reminder, ““mother blame” derives from the “persistent assumption that mothers make monsters, and that the mother remains a pathogenic, convenient, and highly problematic means of explaining the actions of men [...] with [mothers] frequently blamed for the behaviour of their boys and the ills of society” (Wilson-Scott, 2017, p.193). The bond that Pope, the eldest biological son, and Smurf share is often represented as strangely pathogenic. In my reading, this text engages in the representation of what I'd label as emotional or covert incest: there is no sexual abuse yet their closeness showcases an intimacy that can be read as inappropriate. The control Smurf has over Pope, as well as the too-close-for-comfort affection (intimacy) that they—a grown man and his mother—share is presented to make the audience uncomfortable. This intimacy is present, though less potently, in Smurf's relationships with her other (male) children. Regardless, it is commented on explicitly by other characters; in case the viewer misses it somehow, or through denial does not want to see it.

The scene I want to call attention to begins while Smurf is preparing food in the kitchen (“domesticity”); Pope enters with a determined gait. He is visibly flustered and Smurf's expression shifts from worried to a calming, albeit fake smile as she casually comments on her granddaughter sleeping in another room. Pope's guilt brings him to question if Catherine (his brother Baz's girlfriend, who he killed on Smurf's direct order in an earlier episode) was truly talking to the

cops; Smurf again lists the evidence stacked against Catherine. As they continue to argue, the tension mounts. Pope attempts to walk away, but Smurf continues:

Smurf: Oh, go ahead. Take it out on me, right? I'm your mother. I can handle it. That's my job. But really, Andrew, you hate yourself. You hate yourself because of the way you let her play you for years and years.

Pope: Oh, shut up. Shut up.

Smurf: And yes, I set up your Folsom buddy Vin to get us out of this jam. But you can't blame me for running your mouth in prison.

Pope: You shut up! God, you are so twisted and such a goddamn coward. If you had any balls at all, you would've told Baz the truth, but, no, you just told me. Do you know why? Because you were worried he'd choose her. And that's your biggest fear. That Baz would leave you - - Baz. [Voice breaks] But what about me? What about me, your real son? You use me. . . to do the dirty work like you always do. Yes, all the dark and terrible shit that you're too afraid to do yourself. And you call that being a mother? You're sicker than I'll ever be.

Here, we see that Pope *blames* his actions on his mother. Perhaps he is right to do so. I think Smurf shows traits of a narcissistic mother; and the textual evidence suggests that Smurf continuously criticized her first born as a means of exerting control. I believe she saw her eldest son as an extension of herself. Of course, she had twins, Julia and Pope, but I suggest, and one can imagine, that the fraught and difficult mother-daughter relationship was their reality and in place from the start. I contend Smurf wanted Pope to be her twin, the male version of her. Perhaps Smurf was jealous of the special sibling bond Pope and Julia shared. It is possible that Smurf wanted this unique link with Pope. Hence, jealousy of her daughter is plausible. Smurf ended this alliance when she kicked Julia out of the house as a teenager. This separation is another feature Pope can blame his mother for: losing / ostracizing his sister.

In the dialogue presented above, I read that Pope feels like he was never good enough for her, but in an attempt to become what she wanted, he did what she asked, no matter what. I argue

that she molded him into the violent criminal he is, but at the same time, I question why he abided so fully to his mother's choices. The audience also knows that Smurf commanded her son to burn down Catherine's parents' home years ago (S1, E6). Pope conveniently blames his mother for his actions and behaviours, for the person he has become (the choices he has made again and again). Pope's story suggests that he cannot grow up due to his continued insistence that Smurf "makes him" do certain tasks. This is another way of remaining her child; rather than taking responsibility for himself and stopping this cycle, he continues like a parentified child that takes care of business for his parent. Did Smurf truly breed this monster, or are they both to blame? When does nurture and one's individual nature take accountability/ responsibility? I think this dialogue between Pope and Smurf represents a televisual model of Wilson-Scott's (2017) definition of "mother blame." In fact, it exposes both "mother blame" as a micro-concept as well as the *idea* of blaming the mother to encompass the ensemble of six micro-concepts that form this macro-concept's chapter of the same name. As a familiar trope, it is a textual narrative that audiences easily follow and understand.

INTENSIVE MOTHERING

The most illustrative example of this last micro-concept is demonstrated through the story arc of Pope and his medication in episode six. At the start, Pope is (re)incarcerated because he failed his drug test due to prescription pills (not "street" drugs/ not "hard" drugs) being found in his system. Neither the parole officer or Pope know that Smurf is secretly drugging her eldest son without his knowledge. When Smurf and Pope exit the jail, she says it must be a mistake, still not divulging that she has been putting crushed pills in his meals. Nearing the end of the episode, Smurf chooses honesty when she approaches Pope doing work in the garage, and places the pill bottle on the workstation:

Smurf: I've been putting these in your food because you need them and you never would've listened to me, not in the state you were in.

Pope: So I should thank you.

Smurf: The instructions are on the labels.

Pope: You know you could've gotten me sent back to prison.

Smurf: Before your next piss test, you tell your parole officer you're back on your meds.

Pope: And what makes you think I'm gonna keep taking 'em?

Smurf: Because you know you need them.

Pope: You don't like me unless I'm on these pills? Is that it? Or I could just flush 'em. Take 'em or flush 'em. So many choices.

Unfortunately, I cannot say what the medication is or what it is used for because the text never reveals this information. It does not give tangible clues, only vague allusions. These may be worldbuilding errors, yet this narrative helps us understand why Pope is not Smurf's confidant the way Baz is. The writers have framed Pope in an ableist way to justify why his mother intervenes with medication. Despite being the oldest biological son, Baz is higher in the hierarchy. Smurf approaches her son calmly, using a soft voice, her anger only shows on her last line of this scene. I argue that she does not want a confrontation, instead, she wants to create a space where they can reach a mutual understanding. Pope carries on with his work and Smurf stares at him with a downcast and despondent expression. Though her actions were deemed wrong by her son, made evident by his facial expressions, and by voicing his opinion in multiple scenes, I understand that she believes she was choosing the best for him as his "single primary caretaker" (Hays, 2017, p.414). The motherhood she chose to partake in made "the underlying assumption that the child absolutely requires consistent nurture" (p.414); for Smurf, this nurturing was provided through medications that she perceived as necessary upon his return home among the family. I read this as another example of Smurf straddling the "good" and "bad" mother binary. Despite being an adult, Smurf's engagement with "intensive mothering" is represented through her belief (shown through

actions and words) that her eldest son, Pope, still needs consistent nurturing with the clearest example being her morally ambiguous decision to medicate him (Hays, 2007).

Pope questions whether his family members like him better while he is taking medication. The short answer is yes. Pope does not take responsibility for his behaviour; he blames others for not accepting him as he is. The audience never knows what medications he takes, and whether he has ever had an actual diagnosis. It is noteworthy, after all, that Smurf steals these drugs from a stranger in episode two. This showcases the layers of cunning Smurf is capable of. Pope represents the sick child (maybe challenged by some form of mental health issue or neurodivergence), and Smurf represents the mother yearning to fix this, through any means, including illegal. The audience sees her engaged in a criminal activity, but this reminds them that she has skills, just like her sons: she taught and raised them. On the one hand, she is a “good mother” trying to help her child, but on the other hand, she is a “bad mother” with a pathological desire to fix her child and indeed, control his behaviours through this (illegal) medication. In my reading, Smurf had to give the medication unbeknownst to him for some time in order to teach him that he is better once he takes his pills. He had to live and learn, the before and after, himself. Though there are some storytelling failures here, I do not think Smurf represents a portrayal of Munchausen-by-proxy despite the attention and control she seeks as a caregiver.¹¹ Nevertheless, it is possible that this is offered as a possible reading for viewers, despite it not being elaborated. In my reading, Pope’s “sickness” seems real, yet there are storytelling failures. There are no answers regarding a definite diagnosis, a prescription for pills, or why Smurf takes matters into her own hands and does not

¹¹ “Munchausen by proxy is a psychological disorder marked by attention-seeking behaviour by a caregiver through those who are in their care.” – Definition from WebMD.com. “Munchausen syndrome by proxy is a mental illness and a form of child abuse. The caretaker of a child, most often a mother, either makes up fake symptoms or causes real symptoms to make it look like the child is sick.” – Definition from MedlinePlus.gov.

take him to a doctor, and why Baz agrees to medicate his brother. Hence, once Pope is released from prison and back in her arms, Smurf thinks it is her duty to nurture her child. This scene is important because Smurf attempts to be honest and loving, but once again she is at odds with her son and it demonstrates that her “intensive mothering” is a failure.

SONS OF ANARCHY

I begin my exploration of the “mother blame” macro-concept by discussing Gemma’s representation as the “bad mother.” Gemma’s complicity with the club propels her presence by Abel’s side as well as her manipulations of Wendy and Tara. Controlling them inevitably leads to controlling her son, the one who shall ascend the biker club’s throne. Through my analysis of the “mother-son relationship,” I extract from the text examples of Gemma’s unwavering desire to protect her son despite the passing years and Jax’s plea for this mother to outgrow past grudges. In “triadic relationship,” I consider the problematic nature of mother-daughter-in-law relationships in the series. Rather than seeing Jax’s coupling as the potential for a powerful union, such as she herself has with Clay, Gemma views another woman as competition / distraction. In “hierarchical family relationship,” I discuss the way Gemma uses violence to protect Jax. Gemma may love her son, but the club is an important part of *her* identity. Indeed, she was an “old lady” before becoming a mother. Gemma protects her relationship with Clay while knowing that her son will one day share the same kind of relationship with his “old lady.” I could find no satisfactory textual example of “mother blame” in the first season, as per its definition in my Theory chapter above, yet I find that there is a way in which I, by reading of the series’ characters and stories, can perceive how

Gemma interpellates fault (blame) when we step back to see the broader positionality of the text. The way she talks about the ones she has lost (husband, son) and how she conspires against women and influences club choices, for example. I do discuss how “intensive mothering” is exemplified in the exasperating ways Gemma worries about her son’s safety and shamelessly gives hope to Wendy (an addict) because she is the lesser of two evils. Gemma, like Smurf, represents at her core a tension between progressive and regressive representations of women and motherhood.

BAD MOTHER

Near the end of the first season, when Wendy returns after her stay in rehab, Gemma, the “bad mother,” sees Jax, Wendy, and Abel together in a hospital room. It appears, from Gemma’s perspective, that they are attending closely to one another and bonding (S1, E11). Jax exits the room and is struck by the sight of his mother waiting in the hallway:

Gemma: Little family reunion?

Jax: How long you been watching?

Gemma: Since 1978.

Jax: She just wants to hold her kid. You of all people should get that.

Gemma: You think she has a right to hold that baby?

Jax: As much of a right as I do. Look, Mom, I wasn’t shooting crank, but I bailed on that kid too. I’m making up for that now. She just wants the same chance.

Gemma: Is she clean?

Jax: Yeah. Checking into a halfway house next week. Staying at the Ramada till then.

Gemma: Her bags are at your house. She might as well stay there.

Jax: Really?

Gemma: Well, you said she’s trying to make up for her mistake. I’m all about second chances.

Jax: No, you’re not. [Laughs]

Jax rejects his mother's charade. He mocks her because she is, contrary to what she says, unforgiving. I read this scene as an illustrative example of Gemma's construction as a "bad mother": a more pacific person (a "good mother") would forgive people's mistakes, and grant second chances. Gemma, by contrast, never forgets. Instead, this performance of hers is more akin to normative motherhood. Her forgiveness is represented as conditional on getting her way, if it serves her purpose, and if she benefits more than the other.

In this scene, Gemma is apprehensive about Wendy and feels that she must protect her grandson. Gemma's determination to shelter Abel from his biological mother, who is an addict, seems to position Gemma as a "good mother." The reader is invited to understand that it is only Gemma's strained relationship with Tara that pushes Gemma to root for Wendy: she is the lesser evil. If Gemma allows Wendy to live at the house, Gemma has access to and can thus influence her feelings (false hope) about Jax in ways that she cannot with the stronger Tara. If Wendy thinks she has a chance, she will pursue Jax and with luck on Gemma's side, Jax will choose this woman. Gemma prefers Wendy over Tara as an "old lady" because she can control and manipulate her more easily. If Wendy is in Jax's house, getting Jax to choose her is facilitated, allowing Gemma to have power despite the torch being passed to the next generation.

Earlier, in the ninth episode, Tara and Gemma talk in the clubhouse kitchen; Tara is grabbing coffee after sleeping over, which signals her rekindled relationship with Jax. Gemma tells Tara that she must break things off, but, to Gemma's dismay, Tara refuses.¹² This is why Gemma lets Wendy stay close. Meddling in her son's affairs positions her as a "bad mother." Naturally, she would refuse this designation because she would see herself as doing good by

¹² She tells Jax: "Your mom says that I have to end this" (S1, E10).

protecting him from other women, women who, ironically, she is afraid could manipulate him just as she does. Rather than allow his choices and happiness, Gemma interferes with his relationships with both women in order to control him. I ask: does the “bad mother” ever see herself as one, is she capable of offering—within the narrative and its text—some moments of self-recrimination, or is this a label ascribed by others? I would argue that the character, the mother, is not self-reflective, nor will she ever see herself as a “bad mother”; that is, she is represented as resolute in her belief of being a “good mother,” which she defines as faithful in her decision to protect her son and family, no matter who gets hurt. A tension resides in these two texts: they suggest that on some level these are “good” mothers, yet at the same time, by another standard, they are “bad” mothers too. Despite this, the focus here is to assign Gemma as a “bad mother” and present an analysis through examples that represent this. It is quite the complicated notion to determine what a “bad” mother is, and what a “good” mother is. And so while I offer textual examples here to discuss the idea of the “bad mother” for this micro-concept (within the “mother blame” macro-concept), I still exist within a bind where I ponder what standards we evoke for this kind of decision. I do not abide to a definition, but more to the idea, the concept, or the trope of the “bad mother” which is relative and a personal ascription based on the reader and viewer.

Åström’s (2015) exploration of *Single Father* analyses how the storytelling choices and tactics are used in that text to vilify the mother so the children can detach themselves from her. This brings me a step closer to comprehend the villanization of Gemma (and Smurf) and categorizing her as “bad.” We vilify these mothers due to their protective, imposing, and overbearing ways in their performance of the maternal role. As Takševa (2019) asserts, the performativity of the maternal role rests on one’s agency and commitment to care. They are and become “good” and “bad” mothers at the same time. It is because they care that they are “good,”

but the great lengths they will go to makes them “bad.” Åström (2015) argues that the mother of that text failed cultural patriarchal expectations and so I discern that Gemma (and Smurf) could be given this status as well, especially in this micro-concept discussion. Both mothers have continued connections and relationships with their (dependent) adult children and the text makes it clear to the viewer that they find it empowering to see their sons navigate these violent, criminal worlds which they have constructed and live within. As I mooted in the Introduction of this thesis, being a mother brings on negative and positive presumptions (burden/gift, strength/weakness); therefore, with this in mind, the institution of motherhood is on one hand, normative and an inescapable patriarchal failure, yet on the other hand, the experience of mothering is potentially empowering and blissful. Both can be true: two ends of the spectrum sometimes coincidentally joining and clashing in the middle. Again, in the following example, Gemma leans to the “bad” side.

In the middle of the twelfth episode, Wendy confronts Tara about her relationship with Jax. Wendy warns Tara: “She’ll never let you be with him. Gemma hates you. She’ll do whatever she can to keep you guys apart. You may as well quit while you’re still ahead, or alive, for that matter.” She says this in anger, but still there is truth to this claim and Tara knows it. Later, Tara challenges Gemma at the moment of Abel’s departure from the hospital. Gemma holds her grandson as they walk the hallway to meet Jax and Wendy:

Tara: This might be your most insidious move yet.

Gemma: [Scoffs] You have to be more specific.

Tara: Convincing Wendy she might actually have a shot of winning back Jax and her family. That’s a lot of false hope to lay on a recovering addict.

Gemma: I don’t know where you’re going with this, but I was trying to help Wendy, encourage her efforts to change.

Tara: Yes, you are the embodiment of encouragement.

Jax: Hey. Hey, little man. We’re busting you out of this place. [...] Thanks, Doc.

Wendy: Yeah. Appreciate it.

Gemma: All right. Let's get this family home.

Gemma is not fond of Tara because she is hardheaded, and because her lack of fear of the matriarch allows her to directly speak her mind. Gemma comedically asks Tara to be more specific, which signals that Gemma recognizes (and perhaps celebrates) that she often behaves in a surreptitious manner. Gemma does want Wendy to be well because she hopes she and Jax will reunite as a family with their son; her main driver is the desire to push Tara away. When Gemma says, "let's get this family home" this gibe is directed at Tara: it signals that she (Tara) is outside of the family. Tara is simply a doctor on duty, not part of this family, as we see her watching them depart. Gemma's choices position her to be read as a "bad mother" because she is selfish, even though she suggests what she wants is to protect her son (and grandson).

MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP(S)

The focus in this section is the relationship between Gemma and Jax: a mother and her one living son. The dyad. Gemma is so invested and protective (controlling) of Jax because she has already lost a child (another older son meant for the metaphorical crown of SAMCRO) and now only one remains. Narratively, we can understand why Gemma and Jax's relationship takes precedence over others, and in turn, becomes a focus of the series and this thesis. In the eighth episode, when Jax enters the hospital room where Abel rests in the NICU, Gemma exaggerates a sad pouty face due to the argument they had the previous night:

Jax: I'm sorry. I didn't mean to go off on you last night.

Gemma: I'm sorry too. It was a crazy day. [Pause] Strange time, Jax. So much shit is changing. I just worry. . . About you, about him.

Jax: About Tara. What happened between me and Tara. . . is ancient history, Mom.

Gemma: She hurt this family. Tried to pull you away.

Jax: I didn't leave, did I?

Gemma: But she did. Broke your heart.

Jax: I guess.

Gemma: You guess? She crushed you, Jax.

Jax: I was 19. It was first love bullshit. I grew up. I got over it. It's time you got over it too.

Gemma: Somebody hurts your baby, you never get over it. [Pause and smile]

In this open-hearted and honest conversation between mother and son, both of their perspectives are presented, allowing the audience to empathize with both. On the one hand, Gemma is living in the past, holding on to grudges which she frames as a desire to protect her child from any emotional turmoil and pain. On the other hand, Jax wants his mother to understand that he has let go of that past, and they all should have grown (up) considerably since then. But, as I explained earlier, Gemma does not forget and more than a decade later she is still holding Tara accountable for her actions, continues to blame her, rather than Jax, and holds an exaggerated grudge against the one who hurt her child. Gemma does not trust Tara, she does not forget, no matter what Jax says / feels.

In the next episode, after one of the club's allies is wounded, Tara and Gemma team up to save his life. Afterwards, Jax asks how the man is and Tara announces that he should be fine, she stopped the bleeding. Seemingly reticent to ask while nodding towards his mother, Jax questions, "How was she?" Tara sighs and responds: "Can't stop that bleeding. She still wants me dead. You know that right?" Jax counters, "I'll handle my mother." This scene conveys a promise of a more positive future, but somehow it does not seem like enough. Despite the conversation that Jax and Gemma shared in the hospital, Gemma has not warmed to the idea of welcoming Tara into her son's life, or the club's family. Tara may be used for her medical skills, but for now they must exist and abide in this triangular relationship. The turn of phrase Tara uses to describe the tension between the two ("she wants me dead") could be an exaggeration, but Gemma's ruthlessness allows this statement to be read as a possibility. The audience is meant to wonder how Jax and Tara will fare if Gemma keeps meddling in her son's affairs.

I argue that Gemma's behaviour makes her a "bad mother" in this "mother-son relationship" because her selfish desires are at the forefront: his happiness is at the mercy of her acceptance. These illustrative representations enable the audience to witness how Gemma reiterates and reinforces troubling gendered tropes: through the blame attributed to another woman (internalized misogyny), inability to forgive the past, and the desire to remove this person from her son's life. These examples showcase regressive and stereotypical representations of relationships between women as well as the mother and daughter-in-law narrative which carries on in the next micro-concept. Gemma's dominant relationship is with Jax. She prioritizes this relationship over all others, including the one with her husband, Clay, who is holding the (Teller) space in the line of succession after John Teller's death (murder). Gemma's relationship with Jax is the center of this story. Her first husband and son are gone; her son Jax remains. He is her only chance at continuity and she is represented as willing to go to any lengths to save him including meddling in all of Jax's relationships.

TRIADIC RELATIONSHIP(S)

As one of the core components of my thesis, there is a panoply of examples for "triadic relationships" in this text. To start, Gemma's colourful language expresses her sentiments towards the women in Jax's life, for instance, "crank whore," "murderous junkie mom," "pathetic whore," and "that stupid bitch." Gemma admits to Clay that she does not trust Tara by stating: "Didn't trust her then. Don't trust her now." Gemma also enlists her best friend LuAnn to uncover information about Tara's time in Chicago. As Gemma ponders the findings, LuAnn can tell that Gemma does not trust "this bitch." Thus, insults and trust issues help portray Gemma's aversion to any woman with whom Jax might want to have a romantic relationship.

A two-part example from episode seven demonstrates how Jax attempts to navigate his relationship with his mother and the return of Tara to his town (and heart). Gemma is smoking and alone in the dark in Abel's room when Jax enters. Finally alone together, Gemma asks Jax about his budding relationship with Tara, which he denies. Gemma rebukes, "I don't believe that. I've seen the two of you together, see how you act around her. She's still got ties in you." Jax, frustrated, exclaims, "You know what? I don't give a shit what you think. What I do, what Tara does, it's not your business." Jax leaves, displeased. Ironically, his mother's questioning does the opposite of what she had intended, and we see Jax waiting on Tara's doorstep in the following scene. When Tara arrives, they argue about her reasons for her return to Charming. At the critical moment in this scene, Tara says to him: "I... I didn't know you'd even still be here. That doesn't sound like you, Jax. Sounds like your mother." Just like Jax does not want Gemma to try to control him and his life by intervening, Tara is accusing Jax of doing the same to her: assuming that she cannot manage herself and attempting to intervene in her relationships. Tara claims she did not know Jax would still be present in Charming but this is a naïve excuse or a lie because she knows that the motorcycle club is a notable part of his life and identity. Perhaps she wished he had grown and changed, but I suggest that she recognizes that he is still in many ways the nineteen-year-old she left behind and the reasons that made him stay. Additionally, after Tara accuses Jax of uttering words that are not his own, he is smart and respectful enough to not deny it and so he simply nods. When Jax leaves there is not much resolved, but there is a better understanding between the two that they are navigating a complicated relationship that others will try and intrude upon, namely his mother, and that they must rebuff if they have a chance of finding love again. I would argue that the last thing Gemma would have wanted was to send Jax into Tara's arms, yet she has also successfully made him doubt Tara's intentions.

For me, the following dialogue from episode twelve serves as a confirmation of Gemma's unabashed justification and shameless commitment to hindering Jax's relationships with women in a triangular, or even rectangular way. Of note, this is a discussion of "triadic relationships" but in this case, Jax almost fully disappears. The core of this conversation is Jax and SAMCRO, yet it becomes about the women: Gemma's relationship with the women in Jax's life. Thus, the triadic nature of these relationships emerges from the dyadic relationship. A confrontation ensues after Wendy sees Jax and Tara kiss at the hospital. Wendy storms out and goes back to the house:

Gemma: Where you been? Here. Take the other end.

Wendy: I know what you're doing.

Gemma: Hanging a banner?

Wendy: With me and Tara.

Gemma: [Looks over with a smile] What am I doing?

Wendy: Using me to hurt her and Jax. Asking me if I still love him, do I want my family together. That was all about pushing her out of the picture.

Gemma: [Laughs] It didn't change anything. I still meant everything I said. What do you care what my motives are? You still get the thing you want the most. So do I.

Wendy: I was okay with you slipping me enough crank to kill a horse. Because of what I did to Abel, I deserved that. But I am not the same person I was two months ago. I can't be a part of this. You're playing with people's lives, Gemma.

Gemma: I'm protecting the innocent. If I step on a few toes in the meanwhile, so be it.

Wendy: Jesus. You really believe that, don't you?

Gemma: So what? Putting that needle down for a few weeks somehow gives you the right to judge me? You better take a good long look, sweetheart, 'cause you are burning a hole through the very thing you can't wait to become. Maybe that's why you hate yourself so much.

(S1, E12)

Gemma gets caught, yet she is unphased. Gemma's forthrightness is appreciated because she validates Wendy's suspicions. Gemma is the "old lady" Wendy desires to be and Gemma advises against harming this relationship. More, Gemma can hurt Wendy once again. Gemma's aloofness is coupled with a lack of regret for her actions, or their outcomes. Though Wendy survived her

overdose, it serves as a continuous threat. If Gemma and Wendy are to have intertwined lives, and Gemma is steadfast in her conviction to scheme in her son's personal life, Wendy will also be a threat / threatened.

Altogether, these examples of “triadic relationships” demonstrate how Gemma manipulates the women in Jax's life to control her adult offspring indirectly through them. In the previous discussion of the “mother-son relationship,” I put my emphasis on the dyad, yet the analysis shows that the dyad is always interrupted by these incursions. The dyad is always on the verge, or always attempting to become, a triad. As I noted at the top of this thesis, the micro-concepts are not always and completely autonomous, and in this case, there are other forces (people) adding themselves to dyadic relationships. Ironically, even when Jax tries to make the triads work, the women do not. These televisual examples of patriarchal motherhood showcase the selfish gains Gemma wishes to achieve through her son's status in the club but she believes this is only possible without distractions and outside influences (women). Gemma is violently protective of the Teller-Morrow status in the community. She reiterates rather than disrupts cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles and norms: she wants to control her progeny, accept and encourage his criminality, and as the matriarch she refuses to share her power or her son with other women, enabling an anti-feminist narrative.

HIERARCHICAL FAMILY RELATIONSHIP(S)

In episode seven, after a building project unearths bodies, old secrets surface and club members must face their pasts. Lowell, a garage mechanic affiliated to but not part of the club, learns that his father's body was found. The truth regarding the events surrounding his death remain unclear, despite Jax digging for answers. Lowell is troubled with grief and substance abuse

problems; Clay contemplates delivering the same (deadly) fate to the son as he did to the father, but he shows mercy. Before bedtime, Clay and Gemma discuss this:

Gemma: How'd it go baby?

Clay: [Sighs]

Gemma: Where is he?

Clay: SAMCRO rehab. [Sighs]

Gemma: What did you tell Jax? About the bodies.

Clay: Some of the truth.

Gemma: And Lowell?

Clay: A little more.

Gemma: The rest stays buried.

Clay: Yeah. [Sighs] Rest in peace.

When Gemma musters the courage to ask, she is asking for Lowell's burial location yet she only seems moderately relieved when Clay informs her of Lowell's second chance. Gemma knows so much as the President's wife and despite the love she has for her son, she protects her husband and their secrets. I reason that in this text, we are to understand that the hierarchy (power structures) of the club takes precedence over the mother-son relationship. For this couple, in the privacy of their home, lies reign. I do not mean secrets *from* each other; I mean the secret that they share *with* each other. There is a heaviness in the air from all the secrets they know and keep from others, for months and years. Gemma benefits from siding with her husband because she cannot allow Jax, who is emotionally vulnerable, to find more reasons to distance himself from the club.

Jax's alliance to SAMCRO, particularly to the President because of Clay's actions and choices impacting the "brothers' bond," waivers even more in the last episode because he discovers another secret. Jax's best friend Opie's wife, Donna, is murdered in a case of mistaken identity—Tigs and Clay had decided to kill Opie without the club's knowledge, and had accidentally shot Donna instead. There are echoes here of their previous decision to keep Lowell Sr.'s murder a

secret from the rest of the club. Even if Jax is destined to become SAMCRO's President, it is Clay and Gemma's desire to keep secrets from him, forever. Two things are implied in the text: John was killed¹³ because he did not agree with how the club was evolving: beyond a brotherhood and into a criminal enterprise; Gemma sees inklings of John's disposition in Jax. As a new father himself, Jax is possibly more sensitive, more sensible, and more willing to align with a vision of SAMCRO as a communal club (community), rather than criminal gang. As the female lead, the audience is meant to understand Gemma as a progressive character because she is "one of the boys," but I find her construction also engages the trope of the visible yet silent housewife. Despite knowing her husband's secrets, Gemma must abide by her husband's wishes and stay quiet (regressive) to perform that loyalty and commitment to the club. In the fourth episode, Cherry, a woman seeking to become an "old lady" herself, observes, "good old ladies make or break a club." In Cherry's case, this means being well-behaved and supportive as well as keeping quiet, but inevitably submissive to her man and his wishes. While Gemma is represented as self-possessed, smart, and opinionated, she must also know her place within the club. This insight from a secondary character cements the truth of the two scenes presented above: as the highest standing "old lady," she lives and breathes her role to carry and protect the club and her husband's secrets.

In the ninth episode when club tensions have risen and Jax is nowhere to be found, Gemma's worry urges her to be an active resource rather than a passive damsel. When she heads for the door, Tigs tries to stop her:

Tigs: Gemma? Gemma, where you going?

Gemma: To find Jax and Tara.

Tigs: No, no, no. You heard what. . . You heard what Clay said. Family stays put.

Gemma: You got two choices, Tigger, tackle me or tag along.

¹³ Throughout the seasons of *Sons of Anarchy* the audience learns that Clay and Gemma plotted John Teller's murder.

Tigs: Now, look. I got nothing but adoration for you. Why you gotta give me such a hard time for?

Gemma: It's my nature. I'm a giver.

Gemma shoves him aside and Tigs reluctantly follows to obey Clay's order to protect her. This scene illustrates the hierarchy at play in this relationship. Tigs holds a high standing in the club as the Sergeant-at-Arms, but as the President's "old lady," Gemma has more status. Tigs holds her in high esteem and refuses to use physical force. Tigs' kinship and "adoration" causes his compromise for the "queen of bikers" in this comedic scene. To conclude, by holding secrets with her husband, Gemma challenges familiar narratives of the unknowing and uninformed housewife. Of course, they are not equals, but there is a partnership that viewers witness. More, stereotypical gender roles are repeated because she must be protected (regressive), yet her status brings her power (progressive). In sum, these examples reveal the tension Gemma holds as a character that rejects and reiterates gendered tropes as a woman, wife, and mother.

MOTHER BLAME

While selecting my evidence to outline this analysis, I had to come to terms with the unbalanced distribution of examples in the micro-concepts again. For instance, there was an abundance to discuss in "triadic relationships," but I was challenged by "mother blame." The latter was void of textual examples because I could not find any scenes in the first season that matched my chosen definition for this micro-concept. During the planning and writing of the proposal, I labelled this chapter / macro-concept "mother blame." I approached each macro-concept title as an idea; therefore, this did not require the individual micro-concepts to abide to the definition of the concept that inspired its label. Consequently, when I pondered the micro-concepts that form the basis of this chapter, I realized that blame could be attributed to the mother: whether this is

being a bad mother, the relationship between the mother and son(s), the triadic relationships they navigate, hierarchy in the family (and club), and the intensity of mothering. This would then contribute to making the mother the “bad guy” which is a label I brought attention to in the first chapter (Introduction). That being said, to my dismay, I was unable to find a scene or dialogue in the first season of *Sons of Anarchy* aligning with Wilson-Scott’s (2017) definition of “mother blame” for Gemma, but I do believe future seasons have supportive text.

I may have been too literal in my search to match one perfect example with the definition of the concept I am using. However, whether “mother blame” is a conceptual *idea* that inspired the labeling of my macro-concept, or a term with a specific definition I wished to abide to in order to find a textual match, I read blaming the mother as a throughline in this series (as it is in *Animal Kingdom*). The mother, Gemma, is and can be blamed for much of the pain and violence that her son, Jax, has endured. The meta-textual examples include: her devotion to the club rather than leaving to protect her surviving son; hurting other women; and continuously manipulating Jax for her own ends (i.e. power). Below, I take this space to bend how I think about my micro- and macro-concepts of “mother-blame” and to expand the compliance I have set for myself.

Again, on the level of the micro-concept, I found “mother-blame” to be absent. There is no explicit textual example that I could point to. However, at a more meta-textual level, it is present. There is “mother-blame” in *Sons of Anarchy*, it just does not get articulated in the same kind of specific way that lends itself to textual analysis the way that it does in *Animal Kingdom*. I can read the text as offering the suggestions that a lot of the things that happen to Jax and other characters are (at least partly) Gemma’s fault. She is blamed. And importantly, viewers are led to believe so too. Due to the nature of their relationship, Jax simply cannot say this to Gemma. Jax is presented as hyper-dependent (no autonomy) and enmeshed with his mother. There is much weight on him

as the successor to the SAMCRO “throne.” Arguably worth noting, Jax’s good looks distract from the poignancy of his cut-throat choices and deeds. He is a glorified “monster” (violent criminal) posing as a motorcycle enthusiast ascribed to a lifestyle and right to power (succession) much encouraged by Gemma for years. This is akin to Wilson-Scott’s (2017) verbalization of the concept where the assumption rests “that mothers make monsters.” And although he cannot always see it, the women in his life (Wendy and Tara) can and do. Because this is a television text, a medium where stories develop over multiple episodes and seasons, one will not always find the examples so literally in a single scene. Instead, they are more subtly articulated over long arcs. Sometimes there is a perfect illustrative example, and at other times one must look at the broader arc of the narrative to understand the nuances, and complexities, of a concept’s articulation. In this case, despite the lack of so-called proof that I seek, “mother blame” *is* visible: the text conveniently positions Gemma to take the blame for a lot of what happens, such as her son’s behaviours and actions, as the matriarch of her family with close ties to the club (Wilson-Scott, 2017).

INTENSIVE MOTHERING

In the fourth episode, there is an ensemble of (four) scenes that demonstrate the way the series envisions Gemma’s “intensive mothering.” First, when Gemma arrives at the garage, she learns that Jax is going to Nevada and she questions if he is going by himself and if Clay knows. Jax responds, “Relax, mom. I’m gonna be fine,” before giving her a kiss and walking away. Second, soon after, Gemma confronts Clay:

Gemma: You sent him into Nevada?

Clay: It was his idea. It’s club business.

Gemma: He has a 10-day-old kid. He is distracted. You have to protect him.

Clay: Protect him? From what?

Gemma: Himself.

Clay: He's fine. Relax.

Clay dismisses Gemma's concerns, a recurring pattern I will address in the next chapter, but for now, the mother's hypervigilance is not welcome. Gemma is unable to follow Jax on this out-of-state business and so she asks her husband to cancel it. Clay is dumbfounded by this request. The audience is invited to understand that Clay believes in Jax's capabilities as an adult who has been groomed for years to eventually take his place as club leader, even if Jax's mother still sees him as a "cub."

Third, after some narrative developments, Clay and other club members must also venture to Nevada. Gemma follows Clay to his bike when he is preparing to leave and says: "Call me. Let me know he's okay." Clay looks at her, exasperated. Gemma continues, "Look, you know I'll drive out there. How embarrassing would that shit be?" Clay knows this threat is a possibility and so upon their goodbye he surrenders and appeases her by saying, "I'll call. I'll call." He then motions for a kiss. Finally, at the end of the episode, upon his return from Nevada, Jax enters the hospital room and his mother asks, "You okay?" Jax, seemingly irked, responds that he is fine. Without yielding, Gemma complains, "Think somebody could've called." Jax, mirroring the start of the episode, silences her with a kiss. Note that both men use a kiss to quiet her. Despite their exasperation, both Jax and Clay see her "intensive mothering" as a sign of love because it is suggested that she has taught them to read her this way; it is a practice that they are familiar with. As a character that can be read as condoning the grime and violent environment in which she and her family live, Gemma's "intensive mothering" is framed for the viewer by the narration of her experience of loss. These four scenes show Gemma's belief that her child requires consistent nurturing (Hays, 2007), despite his age and responsibilities, and that she is the best person to care

for him. The matriarch's "intensive mothering" extends to her grandchild as well; as noted previously, Gemma consistently visits Abel, and acts as his primary caretaker.

In the eleventh episode, Wendy has returned from rehab and is attempting to prepare the home with necessities when Gemma walks in. Gemma artfully draws a confession from Wendy:

Gemma: [Sighs] You still love Jax?

Wendy: Oh. Sure, I guess.

Gemma: No. It's not a guess. He's still your husband. The father of your child. Do you love him?

Wendy: Yeah.

Gemma: You want this family back together?

Wendy: I – I don't – I don't know if I'm ready for that.

Gemma: When you're ready, you want this family back?

Wendy: It's the only thing I want.

Gemma: Abel needs his mom. Jax needs his wife. You stay clean, pull your shit together, I will do whatever I can to help make that happen. Get some sleep. [...] Night, baby.

Gemma kisses Wendy's lips, which I read as infantilizing, even patronizing, rather than loving because this act is a reminder of Gemma's superior status. And after she exits, Wendy looks shocked (and suspicious) by this development. Gemma seems to sincerely desire the family's reunion, but I argue that her ulterior motives are hidden beneath the surface. Gemma's cunning coupled with Wendy's naïveté enables her to unlock a dangerous hope within Wendy. It is hard to believe that Gemma would encourage a relationship between Jax and Wendy because Gemma attempted to remove Wendy from their lives. Since Wendy has survived and is seeking sobriety, Gemma is facing her choices as she navigates a new reality. Gemma plays with the possibility of Jax choosing to be romantically involved with Wendy again and considers how she will benefit from her son's choice of a woman who she can make cower, a woman who will allow Gemma's reign to continue. Gemma invades personal lives, gives false hope, and is not altruistic. Gemma

trusts Wendy more as an “old lady” than Tara, and together, Jax, Wendy, and Abel are a stronger nuclear family. Wendy is emotionally vulnerable and Gemma utilizes this weakness to her advantage to support her choice as the future “queen” (her replacement) of Charming.

Gemma’s influence in this “triadic relationship” benefits her selfish aspirations; she views Wendy as easier to control than Tara. Perhaps her expressed desire to keep their biological family together is an expression of love, but it reads more as a convenient pretense and a strategy Gemma uses that may be meaningful to Wendy. Gemma remarks: “Abel needs his mom. Jax needs his wife.” My inclusive definitions for “mother,” “mothering,” and “motherwork” do not privilege biological mothers, or fathers, yet this is Gemma’s core argument with Wendy. It coincidentally fits her preference for Wendy over Tara. This is my reading, yet I understand that the text and its diegetic world is represented as different: more conventional. Gemma sounds caring and kind when she speaks these words, like she just may believe them, but the viewer recognizes that Gemma will think that with her presence, Jax and Abel do not need anyone else. Gemma knows this is what Wendy wants to hear at this moment because she loves Jax. This brings a sense of relief during her recovery and as she seeks continued sobriety. I must note a contradiction. As you will recall, Gemma wants Jax to follow his stepfather’s ideologies, and so the father-figure takes precedence over the biological father. In Wendy’s case, biology is romanticized, and in Jax’s case, it is not the desired route. Thus, Gemma’s alliances and values lie in whatever advances her yearnings for her family and the club, including a conventional way of thinking about mothers and fathers.

To conclude, I chose these textual examples from the fourth and eleventh episode because I argue that Gemma operates her motherhood under the assumption that the mother is the best person to consistently nurture (and mend in the affairs of) the child. In the first example, I wanted

the reader to understand that Gemma finds ways around caring for Jax. If she cannot be there, she will instruct another, whom she trusts, to do the work of “intensive mothering.” She wants to be there, and close by, but this out-of-town mission upsets her impulse to be Jax’s primary care-taker. Even as an adult man. In the second example, she seeks to consistently nurture her son by meddling in his love life. It is indirect again, by going through another individual, but she will grasp every tool, or person, in her arsenal to perform this “intensive” motherhood. To conclude, the analysis of the micro-concept “intensive mothering” comes to an end and closes the individual concept discussions of this chapter, yet it also naturally recalled multiple micro-concepts, tying together the work I desired to present. In the following pages, I offer a global review of the matriarchs’ representations of the second macro-concept.

A DISCUSSION: “MOTHER BLAME”

Smurf and Gemma both oscillate between tropes of the “good” and “bad” mother and they often blur that line. Smurf and Gemma’s bad mothering is represented through scenes of them encouraging / engaging in competition between sons or for their son, respectively. The matriarchs have strained relationships with women: on the one hand, Smurf has kept her sons close yet shunned her daughter, on the other hand, Gemma creates rivalry between women for a place by Jax’s side. Smurf and Gemma also straddle the “good” and “bad” mother divide because they are looking to draw something from their children for their own benefit. In the examples I offered in this chapter, Smurf does this by refusing to not pick sides, while Gemma practices conditional forgiveness.

The sections on “mother-son relationships” and “triadic relationships” delve into representations of the mothers’ controlling natures in these texts. Smurf’s entrapment provokes Deran’s temporary self-exile and advances the inappropriate sexual undertones between Smurf and her sons. Gemma’s protective side demonstrates unwavering memory, misogynistic blame, and shunning love interests. Smurf’s interference in Baz and Catherine’s relationship even infiltrates private matters of procreation. Like Smurf, Gemma shows a willingness to unabashedly manipulate the women in her kin’s lives. In *Animal Kingdom* the triangular relationship of interest is between Smurf, Baz, and Catherine with complications due to Lena’s presence in their lives. In *Sons of Anarchy* however, especially in the first season, it is more of a rectangle due to the continuous involvement of four people: Gemma, Jax, Tara, and Wendy. In short, women become tangled and swept up into triangular relationships of control, ostracization, and manipulation. To repeat, I shall advise my readers that the “triadic relationship” is a disruption of the mother-son dyad. The concepts seem separate, but actually, when doing the work, I could see how one (mother-son) fashions the other (triadic). The triad problem is a direct result of the mother’s attachment and desire to control her son.

Smurf and Gemma are both women who mother in the absence of the (biological) fathers of their children. They are matriarchs without patriarchs in patriarchal worlds. Smurf and Gemma’s “hierarchical family relationships” are different. In *Animal Kingdom*, the top spot is increasingly contested and the Cody boys attempt to fracture the existing hierarchy as they simultaneously aspire to rule alongside Smurf but also hope to replace her. Gemma’s hierarchical role as a woman and the President’s wife in the club is more prescribed and she abides (fully) to her role as the “old lady,” even if this status and her relationship with Clay must sometimes take precedence over her son. Earlier I wrote that Gemma’s relationship with Jax is the dominant one, yet this does not mean

that she must completely quench her commitment to her son in order to be a good “old lady.” She can do, and have, both; to be a fixture in the club, through her current (and former) husband, and later, through her son (when Jax takes the throne).

During my data collection and coding I found an explicit representation of “mother blame” in *Animal Kingdom* but I was stumped when no textual example in *Sons of Anarchy* fit my chosen definition, especially since the conceptual theme of this chapter is based on the idea of blaming the mother. Now seemingly a one-sided concept, it is unfathomable to me to remove this micro-concept and not share with the reader the scene between Pope and Smurf in the finale where the characters reached a pinnacle moment. In my discussion of *Sons of Anarchy*, I pondered if I hindered my analyses by abiding too literally to the definitions attached to the concepts. Indeed, blame permeates / pervades the text, regardless of my ability to find specific textual examples of it in the first season.

Finally, representations of “intensive mothering” in which both characters engage are different but present the motherhood these characters engage in. Smurf’s nurturing of her (arguably troubled) eldest son is a stealthy medicalization, which nicely enveloped multiple micro-concepts like “bad mother,” “mother-son relationship(s),” and “mother blame.” Gemma’s nurturing of her adult child includes prying into club business and his romantic relationships. Additionally, their intensity has a criminal angle: Smurf medicates her son to minimize his liability in the family business with viewers unsure of how to read his never-named, ambiguous diagnosis; and Gemma encourages her son’s affiliation to the club despite the danger, yet feels the need to enlist protection (Clay) anyway, and she seeks, in her opinion, the best partner that knows the lifestyle (Wendy) to complement Jax’s work as the future President.

All in all, I read Smurf and Gemma as being framed primarily as “bad mothers” in these representations of “mother-son relationships” because they meddle in their sons’ affairs, creating (problematic) “triadic relationships,” and the all-encompassing (fighting) goal of kinship (highest position) in these “hierarchical family relationships” villainizes and encourages a portrayal of the mother as the “bad guy.” This condemnation is often attributed to the mother through “mother blame” since Smurf and Gemma engage in a significant “intensive mothering” with their sons. Altogether, these textual examples help me understand how these texts write mothers through explicit and implicit attributing of blame to the mother.

**Chapter Seven: An exploration of the third Macro-Concept:
“VIOLENT GLAMOUR”**

ANIMAL KINGDOM

In my discussion of the micro-concept “violent glamour,” I present how characters become entangled by Smurf: Nicky (infatuation), Lila (seduction), and Isaiah (revenge). As the untraditional and unapologetic mother she is, for “aberrant mother” I show how Smurf’s promiscuity not only serves as an alibi for revenge, but it also reveals the aloofness and jealousy of her youngest son. To put “antiheroine” in dialogue with the text I showcase Smurf’s relatable helping qualities as well as her artful manipulation. You’ll see Pope effortlessly rebuke her advice, but remain silent when Smurf wickedly offers her grandson as a way for Pope to regain leadership of the Cody family. Smurf and J’s clash in the fourth episode is the most representative example of “gender” as I understand it in the context of this macro-concept, because I read J’s non-compliance (unconcern) with Smurf’s authority (boundaries) as an attempt to restore the “right” gender to power.

In my discussion of “femininity” / “masculinity,” I broaden the discussion to incorporate the pertinence of toxic masculinity for my reading of the series. I also highlight how the domestic figure of the series gifting a gun to her grandson not only casually intersects the domestic and the criminal, but also cements her abidance to hegemonic ideas of “masculinity.” For the final analysis, I first highlight the visual and outward display of Smurf’s “sexuality” through her clothing / apparel, and then I explore Smurf’s navigation and openness with her sons about sexuality, promiscuity, and pleasure. As I have done in the previous analytical chapters, here I examine the

textual rejections, reconfigurations, and reiterations of cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles at the intersection of the domestic and the criminal.

VIOLENT GLAMOUR

Here I establish how multiple characters encounter Smurf's "violent glamour" in the series' first season. One criterion of the definition of "violent glamour" (a concept I developed for this thesis) is trickery: the lifestyle of the woman who personifies this concept is perceived as glamorous, yet from a moral standpoint those who see them should not desire to emulate them (even if they are objects of envy). For the viewer, unless also tricked by this glamour / enchantment, the text allows them to see the manipulation(s) as a cautionary tale in some way—a heuristic. I see a tension in the way that Nicky, J's girlfriend, valorizes (and is enchanted by) Smurf as a mother and envies her lifestyle. As an impressionable and naïve young woman, Nicky is not only drawn to the Cody house as a way to rebel against her father's discipline (a typical narrative), but also to be close to the alluring matriarch. Nicky admires Smurf's "domesticity," particularly its abundance, level of skill, and appearance of effortlessness: "God, do you always cook like this?" (S1, E2). By recognizing this, Nicky suggests it is unusual; Smurf is not a regular mother, but a superlative mother. Nicky glamourizes Smurf's domestic commitment to her boys because of the absence of "motherwork" in her own home. As an outsider, Nicky yearns to mimic Smurf, to be an erotic "bad girl" herself one day. In this case, Nicky's perception of Smurf as erotic is meant in the sense of her desirability, as a future self she wishes to attain. We could even label this teenager's understanding under a new label since Nicky's lens finds Smurf's performance in the home qualifying as, I propose, "bad girl domesticity."

Nicky's reading of the Codys is childlike, with an immature lens, and her perception is not fully realized. The care Smurf takes of her sons (laundry, parties, food, sex is not taboo) is attractive, exciting, and fun, especially coming from a conservative, strait-laced family as she does. Nicky's idea of a "good mother" is skewed due to her own experience and so she looks admiringly upon Smurf because she performs traditionally ascribed female duties (domestic dedication) at the same time as she remains polished and attractive, with a hint of sexy. Though Smurf has progressive qualities that may make her seem like someone to aspire to be like, she also embodies regressive stereotypes of womanhood / motherhood. This is the analysis that I have consistently extracted from the text as I am unable to view her as a figure with only feminist qualities. Arguably, Smurf moves with antifeminist intentions too. Could any television character be read as singularly choosing one side? I would think not, or I would anticipate this to be extremely difficult to write and perform, and then later draw out that analysis. This "perfect" representation of feminism is unattainable. As a reader, I see a tension between these two different things: Smurf's rejection (progressive) and reiteration (regressive) of familiar gendered tropes. At the beginning of Smurf and Nicky's relationship, Nicky sees Smurf as a "bad ass" ("Smurf is seriously bad ass. That woman gets shit done" (S1, E5)) and the text positions us to read her that way as well. Nicky has glamourized Smurf as a mentor because of what Nicky perceives and views as good qualities. But eventually when Nicky realizes that Smurf is not the ideal mother she thought she was, her awakening will be quite violent. Then again, a feminist mentor may not be Nicky's desire, but perhaps a woman that can command respect, power, and influence, despite her shortcomings.

Part of my definition of "violent glamour" suggests that we do not emulate the women that embody this concept. Yet sometimes, the language I use puts me back into the same kind of dichotomies I am critiquing. There are progressive (good) qualities and regressive (bad) qualities

that make Smurf someone you may, or may not, want to look up to. This is true for most people because we are a mix of both. We are positioned to read Smurf, to some degree, between this dichotomous tension of the “good” and “bad,” but that is in and of itself false, and part of highly gendered, conventional ways of thinking. Smurf has made (selfish and selfless) choices that might be seen as problematic, but if you strip these away, you cannot deny that she provides for her family. Smurf has raised four boys on her own as a single mother (now a fifth), and she runs a business, even if it is a criminal one, to put a gorgeous roof over their head, all while lavishly feeding them and protecting them from outsiders. Smurf did this without any help or support from men or other family, in a world that makes this very hard for women. Smurf unabashedly made choices to live the life that brings her as close as possible to the American dream. Thus, even if Smurf’s livelihood is questionable with dubious role model attributes worth imitating or not, she is a survivor; in troubling and beautiful ways she *is* “violent glamour.”

The other criteria of embodied “violent glamour” is the woman’s glamour, a kind of enchantment, which deceives others into underestimating her. Smurf’s ability to perform domestic labour in abundance (she is a “domestic goddess”) deceives Nicky’s parents. Smurf bewitched them: a criminal outlaw masquerading as a good old lady. In the aftermath of a family dinner, an enthused Nicky confirms that Smurf pulled the wool over her parents’ eyes (“All the way home, my parents were going on about what a strong single mother Smurf is” (S1, E5)). But Smurf’s behaviour also involves pulling the wool over Nicky’s eyes, to a point. Nicky glamourizes the family’s “bad boy behaviour,” yet she has not seen the planning and grit of the jobs they perform, nor the blood, pain, and truth of the violence it involves. As mentioned in the “motherwork” chapter, Paul confronted Smurf for letting Nicky sleep over without their knowledge, but now,

after the beautiful dinner, because Smurf is so impressive (a good influence), Nicky's parents forget that they were mad at her.

One of the things we find out about Smurf in the first season is that her mother was murdered during a convenience store robbery that she committed with her (then) boyfriend, Isaiah. As her mother bled on the floor, the boyfriend escaped the scene, taking their car and leaving Smurf an orphan. Smurf wants revenge on this man, her former father-figure. In the first season we see her navigate a seduction of this same man in order to deliver his fate, his death, at her hands.

But getting there is not so simple. In this first season story arc Smurf uses one person (Lila) to get access to another (Isaiah). In the fifth episode, after finding an art exhibition pamphlet while doing J's laundry, Smurf seems drawn to a man in one of the portraits. She visits the photographer, Lila Cole (Anne Ramsay), and introduces herself as Diane. Smurf begins a calculated seduction, and after acquiring enough intel about the man, she and Diane have sex. The representation of sexual intimacy between these two women is representative of "violent glamour" because Smurf is seen as an active sexual subject and underestimated as a threat; this is what allows Lila to be lured in and deceived. Smurf actively uses sex as a tool to gain things she wants / needs. Despite not being represented as queer, Smurf still seduces and sleeps with Lila *after* getting the information she wants about the man in the photograph because Smurf was continuing to use sex as a part of her arsenal to get her way.¹⁴ Smurf's sexuality is never explicitly explored (contrary to Gemma's), yet the viewer can note the fluidity of her character. Smurf's enchantment destabilized

¹⁴ It is interesting that both women are represented as bisexual or sexually fluid, given their ages. A narrative that comes and goes. More research could explore (the portrayals of) motherhood, criminality, sexuality, and age(ism).

the woman to the point that she submitted and went against her own rules about protecting anonymity. I read that as the violence of this exchange.

In the seventh episode Smurf visits a hangar in Las Vegas and calls herself Rachel while feigning interest in the purchase of a vintage car from a man named Isaiah. They have dinner together and Isaiah finally admits that he is the man in Lila's photograph. While Smurf engages her bewitching lure, the man never suspects that she is anything more than a potential customer. The scene then cuts to a flashback of a man and a woman in a car. Smurf excuses herself to the washroom, and whilst visibly shaken, there is another glimpse of her past: Smurf as a young girl is screaming, a younger Isaiah drives away, and blood is pooling from her mother on a convenience store floor. Smurf regains her composure, checks her gun, and the audience understands: this is the man upon who she wants revenge.

When they return to the hangar, Smurf guides Isaiah to the same vehicle from the flashback, and when she is sitting inside, Smurf skillfully gets the man to confide about his memories of her mother and herself as a child: "She was funny and smart and sweet. Sort of took care of us both. She loved to swim. [Chuckles] She'd stay in the water till she turned blue. I called her "Smurf." Isaiah goes to his office for paperwork, and after sitting alone for a moment, Smurf runs away. The origin of her moniker is finally unveiled! This story may represent another lifetime for the man, but this memory is still emotionally taxing for Smurf. The man did not kill her mother, but he, her pseudo-parent, abandoned her as a child and she holds him responsible for both of these things. In the season finale, Smurf shoots Isaiah in his driveway. Before pulling the trigger a second time, she divulges, "People call me Smurf now." This killing is retribution / revenge but also perhaps a fantasy of resolving her childhood trauma.

Smurf's tumultuous past helps explain her present family life. Smurf "supersized" the lifestyle her mother led as an amateur criminal. It even seems like she inherited her mother's "violent glamour." Now, with watchful eyes of an even younger generation, Smurf's "violent glamour" infatuates a teenage girl and if Nicky was a more prominent character, there could be a fascinating analysis of her future and the influence Smurf might have on her. The concept of "violent glamour" is not only articulated through violence, as it is here. It can be seen in moments where Nicky and her parents are portrayed as besotted with, and fooled by Smurf, as well as through the narratives of her planned seductions of Isaiah and Lila. These stories of seduction help viewers understand one of the reasons why Smurf is the way she is with her own family. This loss, coupled with her sense of abandonment, explains why she desires to keep her sons so close. She also sees abandonment as punishable, even years later. Her sons live in that precarious place as well: if they leave her, that is the worst thing that they can do.

ABERRANT MOTHER

The following examples demonstrate how Smurf embodies / enacts the concept of the "aberrant mother," by examining how she "[stands] against traditional forms of maternal identity, but cannot achieve feminist heroine status," and "[upends] more traditional depictions of maternal identity" (Walters & Harrison, 2014, p.39-40). At the start of the seventh episode, Smurf packs her bags and readies herself for a night away. The boys believe she is going to Las Vegas with Toby for "some French circus shit." Deran adds, "I think Toby's gonna be our new dad." As Smurf approaches and hears this she teases, "Don't be jealous, baby. It's not a good look." Before leaving, Smurf instructs her sons to be alert and complete a minor task, a step towards the cumulative job of the season. She gives them a burner phone, slaps money on the table, and remarks, "Here's \$1,000. Have fun. See you tomorrow." As she walks away, Deran yells, "Hey, bring a rubber.

Toby gets around.” Deran and Craig snicker. It is beyond the scope of my thesis to provide a comprehensive psychoanalytic reading; I see potential for such a reading in this scene (and others throughout the season / series). The joking from her youngest son recalls Freudian jealousy. He comedically compensates for an unconscious feeling of abandonment due to her time spent away from the home (with an outsider / adult man), and this quip from the baby of the family denotes once again the (Oedipus-)complex “mother-son relationships” they share. Because of the open display and discussions of sex and sexuality in this family, the boys do not question her out-of-town excursion with a man with whom she is having a casual relationship. I do not think these children remember ever experiencing a home with a father figure or “dad.” Thus, I do not believe they can even imagine a world where there is a man / patriarch in the(ir) household. We understand that Smurf has always been and will continue to be an aberrant single mother.

Smurf opposes more traditional ideas of maternal identity, for example, the pure and demure, almost asexual housewife. Smurf is not a wife, and she carries on multiple casual relationships within the first season. She practices this maternal delinquency, part of the definition of the “aberrant mother,” by sharing her sexual escapades with her sons. What is aberrant is not the frank mentions of sex or even her promiscuity, it is the idea that her youngest son, Deran, might be jealous. I read in this structuring of the text a subconscious cliché about incestuously inclined mother-son relationships. The language implies that Deran is not necessarily jealous that she is having sex, but that her attention is not on him, her baby. There is a joking tone to these exchanges about sex that are absent of taboo or shame. What I have mostly seen on television between parents and children and their discussions about sex, is a clunky and awkward exchange that both want to end. In this family, we are at the complete opposite end of the spectrum.

There are numerous examples of recreational drug use in the family which match Walters and Harrison's (2014) discussion of the aberrant mother's delinquency. In the pilot, Smurf hosts a rowdy house party at the Cody home, during which Craig snorts cocaine and Deran smokes weed; in the fourth episode, Nicky casually speaks with Smurf about her weed dealer, and later Smurf is seen rolling a joint in the kitchen for herself and her lover; in the ninth episode, Deran casually smokes from a bong in the background while Smurf is on the phone, and after the success of the cumulative job of the season, Craig informs Deran that he will "fire up some monster bud." According to Walters and Harrison (2014), "aberrant mothers" are "unapologetically non-normative in their maternal functioning" (p.38). Smurf is depicted as cool and confident, with no shame for the lifestyle she and her sons enjoy. She does not owe anyone explanations, whether for her sexuality or recreational drug use.

Altogether, I believe these select examples help me argue that Smurf meets the benchmarks required to be read as an "aberrant mother." Though these examples may not be shocking or out of order for some viewers, for the audience that is more conservative, these textual moments may be uncomfortable, marking her as an aberrant parent. As Gorton (2016) writes, the aberrant mother does not sit on either side of the good or bad mother binary, and what I am trying to convey to the reader is that Smurf does not either. She is neither fully "good" or fully "bad." At the same time, she is constantly faltering, teeter-tottering, from one or the other. Smurf is never clearly, always questionably, on one opposing side, but when she reaches those moments of arguably portraying a "bad" mother, Smurf is representing the anti-hero we need (Walters and Harrison, 2014).

ANTIHEROINE

I develop this micro-concept from Buonanno's (2017) definition: an "antiheroine" is more than a strong female lead; she is a daring woman character that "[embodies] [...] the dark sides of

human personality and behaviour,” she is capable of being and behaving badly (p.3). The most illustrative example of Smurf’s embodiment of the “antiheroine” is found in the scene where Smurf is determined to feed Pope because his medication is hidden in the food. He, of course, does not know this. This act, which is deceitful and therefore, “behaving badly” in my reading, is an example of Smurf being a textual example of an “antiheroine.” Pope does not desire to eat because the pills are giving him unpleasant side effects. She then coos that sleep would be beneficial, another piece of advice he rejects. Finally, Smurf queries:

Smurf: Hey. You know, J hasn’t been around as much since Baz went to Mexico, huh?
You haven’t noticed?

Pope: I don’t care.

Smurf: I’m not sure that’s the smartest position to take. You know, you’ve been gone a long time, baby. Life went on out here. Your brothers did a lot with Baz calling the shots. You’re gonna have to work your way back in there. But J - - J is new. J is up for grabs.

(S1, E3)

Pope simply stares at her and the scene ends. I think it is of note that he refuses her care (food and sleep), yet he seems silent and contemplative at this moment. Instead of rebuking her, he is at a standstill and considers her observation. I reason that Smurf sprinkles doubt (information) and her kin usually fail to escape her words and deceptive ways. She desires to plant a seed which will in turn bestow her with an advantage. I view Smurf as the leading lady of her house and of the show, one who, in a quite daring way, behaves badly when she secretly medicates her eldest son, Pope, and suggests that he can use J to further his possible ascension to the role of successor.

This scene enables me to match Smurf to Buonanno’s (2017) definition: the “antiheroine” is “endowed with moral ambiguity, damaging flaws, enduring strength, unapologetic wickedness and the relatable qualities that work together to shape a conflicted and nuanced, despicable and

admirable antiheroic figure” (p.3). The viewer witnesses Smurf offering food to medicate her son, a choice that is morally ambiguous (Buonanno, 2017), and soon after, maneuvering an explicit manipulation as a deceitfully simple exchange of words. From the oldest family member (Smurf), to the eldest son (Pope), to the grandson (J), this scene demonstrates an intriguing hierarchical connection and dysfunction of mother-son relationships in this series. As I stated earlier in this thesis, Mason’s (2019) “Mothers and antiheroes” helped me understand how representations can “reinforce normative definitions of motherhood and by extension patriarchy” (p.645-646). Mason (2019) reminds us that television can be a site of empowerment where the antihero mother has power and agency (p.646). As a woman in a man’s world, and as the matriarch of the family and household, Smurf manipulates her environment and its inhabitants, and her sons are the pawns at her disposal. Faltering her “good mother” image, appropriately in the domestic space of the kitchen, this dialogue between Smurf and Pope offers a representation of the micro-concept of the “antiheroine” efficiently and in a representative way.

GENDER

I remind you that, according to van Zoonen (1991) feminist media theory has an “unconditional focus on analysing *gender* as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (p.33, *emphasis in original*). Gender is not represented as a simple duality (binary) in this series, but as a complex subject position. To think through this, I chose a scene between Smurf and J, which complexly works the micro-concept of “gender.” In the fourth episode, J comes home and sees that Nicky is in his bed, sleeping. Smurf sits at the table and she calls out to him:

Smurf: Aren’t you gonna come kiss me good night?

J: Nicky stayed over.

Smurf: I told her she could. You don't mind, do you? Come.

[J approaches and sits]

Smurf: I made something for you.

[Smurf places a cupcake with a single unlit candle upon the table]

Smurf: You know, this morning, you told me the boys didn't do anything behind my back. That isn't true, is it? [Chuckles] You're a good liar, kiddo. I didn't expect that. But you are your mother's son, huh? You know the mistake I made with her? I gave her too many chances.

Smurf gets up and stands above J. She moves his hair back and caresses his face and neck, slowly. Making no effort to disguise the threat, she warns before walking away, "Don't ever lie to me again." Alongside her affection and despite her sweet tone, she is undeniably earnest. J does not say anything but his facial expression conveys the opposite of defeat. As J sits in the dark, there is no furrowed brow or worried expressed. He looks more satisfied than scared, even suspiciously triumphant. J's reaction clashes with how we often see his uncles respond to her threats. As a viewer who has now watched the first season multiple times and viewed the whole series, I know what Smurf is capable of; however, J does not know her well enough (yet) to know that she is a true menace. Perhaps J, misreading her domestic performance and maternal care and not acknowledging her ruthless side, thinks her threats are empty. Another possibility is that J is not fully connected to the family and so he may be more willing to leave and "push her buttons" before going, doing so in honour of his mother. Regardless of my contemplations, the grandson and grandmother are navigating a new relationship and boundaries as well as consequences are being drawn. J is not forgiven, but further deceit might repeat history: he will be thrown to the streets like his mother. Her daughter was disposable, but despite Smurf's threats, how many chances will she grant to a (grand)son? It is hard to believe that her sons have not pushed her rules and boundaries passed the breaking point many times, yet they (mostly) still operate as a bound together criminal family unit. Just like our world, "gender" has structured this diegetic world in

which these characters live (van Zoonen, 1991). Thus, an analysis of “gender” as a micro-concept is available here because of the interplay and subtleties at my disposal as a viewer. The main examples include the tone of this exchange as well as the characters’ body language and facial expressions that match the overall text of the season (and series), which help to exude the gender power struggle time and time again.

Earlier that night Smurf did not allow her sons to stay over and told them to sleep at their own places as punishment for lying to her. Smurf is merciful towards J because he does not have another space to escape to, and his girlfriend is in his bed. The viewer does not witness how this happens but it is conceivable that Smurf places Nicky as a token gesture / bribe. Usually, caretakers discourage these sleepovers at their age, but here Smurf is offering J’s girlfriend as a conditional reward. It suggests: if he is bad, he is out; and if he is good, good things happen. The episode ends as J lights the candle on the cupcake and simply stares at it. As the series’ protagonist, we know that J is unlikely to die or be imminently expelled from the family because the series opens with his inclusion in the Cody family, and the question at the center of the text is: will he survive and thrive there or be ignored and forgotten again like his mother? Indeed, the death of his mother and sharing living quarters within the Cody home were a catalyst for the start of the series. Nevertheless, J is “testing the waters,” and the tension between grandmother and grandson is pertinent for the series’ future.

Davies and Gannon (2005) write that “it is the task of those who work with poststructuralist theory to use and develop the concepts they find in gendered texts as a source of creative possibilities” (p.319-320). Moreover, my theoretical understanding of “gender” “encompasses the social construction of masculinities as well as femininities, the interrelations of women and men, the division of labor in the economy and in the family, and the structural power imbalances of

modern Western societies” (Lorber, 2017, p.508). I assert then that the roles Smurf and J should occupy are easy to set up and divide, but my thesis has sought to explore how Smurf is represented as rejecting many forms of conventional femininity. As the reigning matriarch of this family, she accomplishes that; however, my intent has also been to convey how Smurf reinforces troubling, gendered tropes. I believe that some characters (continuously) move between stereotypical representations of “gender” as well as choose to break its boundaries (breaking of stereotypes) and these tensions within the text are continuously represented.¹⁵

Thus, J’s facial expressions, in response to Smurf’s threat and display of power, demonstrate his confidence and his sense of his superiority. J’s attitude pushes back at Smurf’s construction as the commanding and influential leader; we might read this as his attempt to restore power imbalances and traditional gendered divisions. The male characters, J and his uncles, seem very gender normative. However, Smurf’s character is not entirely normative because she eludes conventional femininity and its tropes through her actions, not by her aesthetics. I contend that this scene is an illustrative example of how we connect and disconnect “gender” within the macro-concept of “violent glamour.” Smurf is stern and intimidating but J seems unphased and amused by her threats. I wonder why Smurf stands for this defiance, yet she does. I propose that even though she insists on her own dominance, I do not think that Smurf would hold space (or even connect) with a (grand)son who lacked dominant traits. In fact, she wants him (all her boys) to be tough with everyone but her. This recalls the scene of her sons fighting violently in the pool (i.e., Cody version of water polo which I discussed in chapter six). Indeed, she is displaying dominance here, but J is rebuking ever so slightly and effortlessly. Unlike his uncles, who continue to be

¹⁵ Because this is not the focus of this thesis, I have not executed thorough analyses, yet I shall argue that the men’s behaviour and actions in the show do not break stereotypical masculine norms. Without a deep reading of the text, I would say that they tend to be hyper masculine and “macho.”

infantilized by their mother, the text informs us that J had to mature quickly due to his inherently dysfunctional relationship with his mother, an addict. He does not recognize Smurf as a woman in charge; his smug expression tells the viewer that Smurf is in danger of a recalcitrant grandson. I read this moment between Smurf and J as one she uses to test and in turn, (attempt to) mold him. “Gender,” its normative lines, its liminality, and playing with its boundaries structures this fictional world and its characters. This textual example between the grandson and grandmother is in some ways unconceivable but understandable all at once because she encourages these so-called binaries in the next micro-concept’s exemplar scene as well.

FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

The *Animal Kingdom* characters’ lives (and choices) are entrenched in their performances of “masculinity” and “femininity”; whether consciously or unconsciously, they are represented as seeking to meet normative, binary gender roles and identities. Moreover, both *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* are full of representations of toxic masculinity. While this is not one of my identified concepts for this thesis, it is still pertinent to this discussion. According to Gerard Casey (2020), “Kirby Fenwick describes [toxic masculinity] as consisting of male dominance, emotional repression and self-reliance” (p.122). Macho qualities such as “competitiveness, aggression, strength, ambition and risk-taking” are present in the construction of the male characters on both series (Williams, 2017, p.157). Joanna Williams (2017) writes that “today’s panic is not directed at all men but rather at stereotypical masculine behaviour or ‘toxic masculinity.’ The word ‘toxic’ reveals the sense in which masculinity is seen as poisonous, not just detrimental to women but dangerous to men too” (p.158).

Here I want to remind you that “masculinity,” the “expression of maleness,” conjures up notions of power, legitimacy, and privilege. It “extend[s] outward into patriarchy and inward into

the family” where it represents “the power of inheritance [...] and the promise of social privilege” (Halberstam, 2018, p.1-2). I affirm that J experiences a coming of age during the first season; he came to the family somewhat a “fragile fawn” (pilot) and grew into a “stag” (finale). This simile is inspired by the scene where the brothers and Smurf recount how each son’s different father is assigned an animal (S1, E3). J’s boyhood ended when he entered the Cody house (despite not having had a sheltered upbringing as a child of an addict parent). In my discussion of the first macro-concept (chapter five), I briefly described a scene from the season finale where Smurf gifts J a gun as a sign of “generational criminality” after telling him that he could have a prosperous future with the family, reasoning: “A man should have a gun.” J’s story arc from boy to man within a season is officiated through Smurf’s symbolic gesture and declaration. Once again, the text offers evidence of the matriarch’s alignment with cis-heteropatriarchal gender roles and encourages a boy-now-turned-man grandchild to embrace criminality and violence as his inheritance.

Viewers cannot know how much Smurf in- or excluded her daughter because the series’ story catapults by enacting the killing of the daughter in the first scene. We only get flashbacks (a mainstream convention used to offer pieces of information for character developments) in the final season to an earlier time when Julia participated in crimes with her brothers when she was a teenager. This is information the text previously withheld. Throughout the series, it is hypothesized by various characters whether Baz might be J’s father, but J’s paternity is an ongoing mystery. Julia and Baz’s relationship is another factor that precipitated Julia’s expulsion from the family; Smurf wanted them to behave like siblings, but they did not abide by her rules. Julia was expelled, but not Baz. Smurf chose Baz over Julia. While Smurf is an unreliable narrator of the events that transpired between herself and her daughter, we do know that Smurf has always manipulated her

sons to take her side. Smurf will do the same with J and this is visible to the viewer, but not the character living within the walls of his diegetic world.

The viewer is not offered much textual space in which to develop an understanding of Smurf and Julia's mother-daughter relationship or the particularities of the familial bond until the later seasons of the series. In the first, we cannot yet speculate and the text forecloses many possibilities. In the world of *Animal Kingdom* (and *Sons of Anarchy*) Smurf only really exists in relation to men. Generally speaking, there is no female solidarity. I read Smurf as a confident woman, meaning that she is unafraid of losing her position until she chooses to give up her "throne." And so I question why, from the perspective as a first season viewer, she would not want a daughter "mini-me," another to continue the matriarchal line of criminal savvy and growth. Despite Smurf aligning with many normative aspects of "femininity," she also refutes them and embraces traits of "masculinity." I do not think she believes in a gendered separation of spheres despite her daily abidance to traditional roles and duties which suggest the contrary. She is a prideful, confusing, and contradictory character. In sum, the audience cannot know what is never shown. This new relationship with her kin is an addition to the Cody legacy (social privilege) in Oceanside (criminal empire), and this reiterative representation of "masculinity" again reinforces gendered tropes as well as hegemonic masculinity, adding an important component to the "violent glamour" macro-concept.

SEXUALITY

Smurf's sexuality is represented primarily through her wardrobe and her appearance; as well as by the casual display of nudity and mentions of the family member's sex lives. The pilot episode exaggerates her (sexualized) appearance yet this wanes by the second and subsequent episodes. I think there are two possible ways to read this change. The pilot is meant to grab people's

attention and selling sex is a tired but true exercise; or it is possible that between the pilot and further filming, they decided to rethink the wardrobe choices. In the opening minutes of the series, we see Smurf walking up the stairs in fuchsia pink high heels (S1, E1). Smurf is wearing a low-cut V-neck camisole with a fitted and cropped denim jacket and skinny jeans. Later, in the same episode, Smurf is preparing breakfast in a push-up bikini top accompanied by an open silk coverup. In short, her clothing is form-fitting and shows off her “physical attributes.” Is her bosom inadvertently an expression of her fertility? Is it a display of her maternity / motherhood? Some viewers may find her wardrobe inappropriate for her age, and it is true that Smurf dresses similarly to the younger women who come and go in the series. I propose that there is an unease that was aimed for and achieved by pairing sex(uality) and age (ageism). As mentioned above, these sartorial choices seem like tools that were used to shock the audience in the first episode, but eased afterwards. The clothing is still form-fitting, but not as excessively sensual / sexual as the season and series continues. Clothing choices are a visual aid that act as an expression of the character. I mention these details about Smurf because they were striking to me as a viewer and I read them as an outward element of her personality.

The other component of Smurf’s “sexuality” is represented by her promiscuity, which I discussed earlier in this thesis. In the Cody household, sex is not a taboo subject, and sexual activities are not hidden. In the first episode, Craig crawls out of bed from between two naked girls, and walks through the house naked. J looks uncomfortable yet his brothers are unfazed because I deduce that they have not been raised to be prudish. Smurf jokes, “Will your friends be joining us for breakfast?” Later, in the fifth episode, Craig and Smurf once again remark on the numerous girls that casually come and go in Craig’s (sex) life. Smurf vicariously participates in her children’s sexual escapades. She affirms their sexual prowess because that is her sexual

prowess by extension. Then again, perhaps Smurf vaguely chastises her adult male children because these women can never live up to her own sexual being. These temporary encounters will always be lesser than their relationship with her. These moments help confirm the casual sex that family members engage in and its acceptance, and how it is even used as comical exchanges that break up the dramatic tensions in the series. This is also reminiscent of the discussion of the micro-concept “maternal ambivalence” in chapter five where I examined Gemma’s use of the word “pussy” to describe how sexual relationships are not a threat if they are casual.

In this scene, Smurf’s comfort with her sexuality extends into her practices of “mothering.” Smurf, to J’s discomfort, explicitly asks about his relationship with Nicky and she does not shy away from specifically engaging in a discussion with her grandson about sex and pleasure. J comes home after spending the night at Nicky’s and Smurf catches him in the hallway. Smurf unexpectedly begins to question J:

Smurf: Hey, so, um, you and Nicky are having sex?

J: Uh...

Smurf: You don’t have to be embarrassed. She’s a beautiful girl. Does she know what you like?

J: What? (perplexed)

Smurf: Does she satisfy you? (matter-of-factly)

J: Yeah, I think so.

Smurf: Just make sure she knows what you need. You know, there are some girls that like to be told what to do. I can’t tell you the number of times my boys have gotten laid because some little girl was trying to piss off her daddy. [Chuckles]
(S1, E3)

The implication through this discussion is not only about her sexuality, but also the way Smurf thinks about sex and sexuality, and how it encompasses the familial space in a broader way. By asking, “Does she satisfy you?” this textual moment centers a broader question of J, sex, and

“mothering.” She does not task one of the uncles to speak with J about sex, instead she takes that role. The text shows how unabashedly Smurf wants to talk to her grandson about sex. Ruddick (2007) enumerates preservation, growth, and acceptability as the demands of child rearing. Smurf again engages in “mothering” (Ruddick, 1995) because she takes on the responsibility of caring for J. Based off my personal assumption, I propose that Ruddick did not have, as a child rearing task, caretakers encouraging their offspring’s sexual satisfaction, including conversations between (grand)mothers and (grand)children. The audience, from a social position that inhibits frank conversations about sex, is meant to feel J’s malaise. Caring and nurturing children can include sexual education, yet as the reader of the text I would argue that it is not what Smurf does, but the way she does it. This textual example offers another facet of Smurf’s representation of “sexuality.”

Glover and Kaplan (2009) understand “sexuality” as pertaining to someone’s sexual preferences. I acknowledge this as not only their choice in a sexual partner, likes and dislikes, but also as Smurf inquires and cements, seeking satisfaction as well. Again, her grandson’s experiences are indirectly hers as well. By extension, J needs to be a good and satisfied lover. On the surface this is an awkward interaction between a grandmother and her grandson about sex. Underneath this, discomfort lies here because Smurf’s sexuality is more on display than we first perceive. Culturally, we might think that it is inappropriate for a woman, of her age, and not just a mother but grandmother, to speak about sexual encounters and pleasure. The audience may not be at ease as the text rejects notions of conventional forms of motherhood, and leans more on the whore, rather than the Madonna. To conclude, I sought to underscore wardrobe and upbringing, the sons’ array / panoply of one-night engagements, as well as J’s brusque interaction with his grandmother where the reader can feel the textual discomfort in the dialogue, to present *Animal*

Kingdom's matriarchs' representations of "sexuality" as an important conceptual component of this chapter's analysis.

SONS OF ANARCHY

I begin my final analysis of *Sons of Anarchy*'s matriarch by underlining her ability to lure and deceive an antagonist because she embraces her "violent glamour," a tool utilized to her advantage as the conventionally beautiful woman she is. Below, I argue that Gemma is both an "aberrant mother," and an "antiheroine." For the analysis of "gender," I argue that Gemma skillfully uses her femininity, as well as her statuses of wife and mother to gain information for the club's benefit. In "femininity" / "masculinity," I highlight the innerworkings of the club, gendered allowances, and conflicts of power and freedom. I stress how Gemma confuses and intertwines "gender," "masculinity," and "femininity" in a scene in which she tells Agent Stahl to "unscrew" her phantom appendage. In my final analysis, I understand Gemma, like Smurf, to have a confident relationship with sex. Yet Clay's infidelity, which coincides with Gemma's menopause causes this self-assurance to wane. Throughout, I continue to use illustrative textual moments to offer my reading of the ways Gemma challenges stereotypical gender roles, even as her character reproduces problematic tropes about womanhood, motherhood, mother-son dynamics, and relationships between women.

VIOLENT GLAMOUR

I agree with Gray and Lotz's (2015) perspective that audiences tune in to television as their key storyteller in the contemporary world (p.26). I am one of those vicarious participants of fictional stories. Critical analysis is a tool I use to "unpack what this world of images, messages, and representations mean" (p.27). As the analytical chapters of my thesis come to an end, I hope that my critical writing, and post-structural feminist framework, have demonstrated my desire "to think within, through, and beyond the text" (Beach et al. 2009, p.130). In this section, I connect Gemma to the various micro-concepts that together compose the macro-concept "violent glamour." I begin by discussing a scene between Gemma and one of the club's adversaries, Darby (Ernest "Ernie" Darby played by Mitch Pileggi), as the most representative example of Gemma's portrayal of the concept "violent glamour."

Gemma is smoking outside the hospital; when she sees Darby walk out she exclaims, "shit" and activates her "bewitching lure." When she calls to him he smiles and answers: "How's the beautiful queen of bikers?" They chit-chat and he flirts, "You look real good, Gemma. Clay must be keeping you happy." With a comical aloofness paired with a smirk she responds, "Does the best he can" (S1, E3). I contend that Gemma presents herself as "a passive sexual object" to attract Darby's attention, but she is calculated and understands that her beauty and her glamour, as per my definition, is a kind of enchantment that artfully deceives others into underestimating her. But Gemma's "violent glamour" is something she engages and uses to her advantage, which makes her an active sexual subject. At the end of this exemplary scene, Gemma leaves when she hears the rumble of the approaching motorcycles, Darby tells Clay: "Your old lady's still a handful." Clay replies, appreciatively, "That she is." Gemma is the partner he desires: a combination of beauty and outlaw status. At the same time, Gemma is primarily an ally to the club, not a true

member; she may contribute in an impactful manner to the criminal work the men do, yet as soon as they arrive, she disappears. Like Smurf, Gemma's roles always exist within the tension of rejecting and reproducing common gendered and narrative tropes.

ABERRANT MOTHER

In her paper on *Nurse Jackie*, Gorton (2016) critically articulates the saintly stature women are expected to reach, but argues that being a saint and sinner do not have to be mutually exclusive (p.161). I understand Smurf and Gemma as offering innovative portrayals of "aberrant mothers." I admit the micro-concepts "aberrant mother" and "antiheroine" are closely related, but the former is dedicated to deconstructing traditional depictions of maternal functioning and identity, coupled with the failure to embody the qualities of the feminine heroine (Walters & Harrison, 2014, p.39-40). Not all antiheroines are mothers and so the "aberrant mother" concept includes antiheroine qualities as well as adding the status of the mother to the construction of a character. Here I wish to focus on "aberrant mothers'" practice of both maternal delinquency and neglect, and, if their child is threatened, engagement in "explicitly vengeful" behaviour (p.40-41). This is illustrated in an arc that shows the viewer Gemma's violent instinct to protect Jax and her grandson. At the end of the pilot episode, Gemma visits a distraught Wendy, who proclaims that she has recovered from her addiction because she now has "[Her] baby to live for." Gemma retorts: "That's where you're wrong. You have no baby. You lost that privilege." She strangles Wendy and threatens, "And you so much as cast a shadow on that kid, try to turn some legal screw and get custody, I will finish this job. He will never call you "Mommy."'" The audience learns this is not a threat, but a promise.

In episode three, while she recovers from the overdose that Gemma facilitated, Wendy gets an unexpected visitor, Gemma (again):

Wendy [sighing]: What the hell are you doing here?

Gemma [offering the flowers]: Something to brighten up your room. . . . I understand you and the old girlfriend have become buddies. [Wendy pushes the assistance button on her hospital bed] It's a little late for the panic button.

Wendy: I didn't say anything to anyone.

Gemma: That's smart. No one would believe you anyhow. . . . That whole junkie thing. All I did was give you an option, sweetheart. You're the one who took the coward's way out. Couldn't even do that right.

Wendy: We all can't be rocks like you, Mother Gemma. I don't know how you do it.

Gemma: What's that?

Wendy: Keep all the lies straight, all the dirty little secrets buried. [Scoffs] God, your conscience must be locked up real tight.

Gemma: Nothing gets in the way of me taking care of my family, especially my conscience. But then you obviously can't grasp that, being a baby killer and all.

As explored previously in my discussion of the "triadic relationship," Gemma inserts herself into the relationships Jax has with other women. Helpless with her ex-mother-in-law in her room, Wendy concedes to entertaining whatever Gemma has to say. This simile (rocks) addresses Gemma's strength but it is also a comparison to an inanimate object that lacks feelings and emotions. From her actions and her words, we are instructed that there is no deed Gemma will not do in order to protect her family. This includes ruthlessly "gifting" Wendy with a syringe full of drugs to encourage Wendy to overdose. Mother Teresa is recognized as a good and charitable (and chaste) woman; Wendy, in calling her "Mother Gemma," invokes Mother Teresa's opposite.

Gorton (2016) may contend that "aberrant mothers" like Gemma sit on neither side of the good or bad mother binary (p.38), but Gemma's limitless viciousness and the understanding that her "raison d'être is care and maintenance of her family" (Lotz 2017, p.133) create, in Gemma, the "bad" mother as the anti-hero we need (Walters and Harrison 2014, p.51). Gemma's non-traditional femininity lies in her outlaw identity (a rejection of traditional norms) whilst her traditional femininity is her devotion to her family (a reiteration of traditional norms) (Lotz, 2017,

p.133). The scene described above constructs Gemma as an “aberrant mother.” This scene represents on a small scale, the series’ large scale work to hold Gemma’s statuses of wife, mother, grandmother, and criminal matriarch in tension. Wendy is a problem Gemma needs to rectify to ensure power, glory, status, and legacy. Her refusal to share her son and newborn grandson with another woman, is familiar, even if this particular tale of (generational) outlaws and patriarchal motherhood offers it new twists. Gemma’s “saintly” protection and “sinful” actions demonstrate the tension within my argument that Gemma shows progressive and regressive representations of woman and motherhood.

ANTIHEROINE

One of the main goals of my thesis has been to present how and why Smurf and Gemma are “antiheroines.” For me, one illustrative example of Gemma working this concept is found in a short but poignant scene between herself and Tara. I remind you that Tara is Jax’s high school lover and she has recently returned to Charming. As I have argued throughout these analyses, *Sons of Anarchy* reproduces problematic tropes about relationships between women. In the scene I want to highlight, Tara approaches Gemma and her best friend LuAnn at the hospital and informs them that Abel’s first surgery went well and that they will proceed with the next surgery. Gemma gives a curt, “Thanks”; they begin to walk away, but Tara calls to her:

Tara: Can we talk?

Gemma: What is it?

Tara: Wendy’s in really bad shape. She’s still detoxing. Can’t stop crying.

Gemma: And?

Tara: I was hoping maybe you could talk to her. Just let her know she’s not all alone.

Gemma: Trust me. Nothing I’m gonna say to that crank whore is gonna make her feel loved.

Tara: Forgot just how forthright you can be.

Gemma: You forgot a lot of things, sweetheart.

Tara: [frowns] If you have a problem with me assisting on Abel's case, just say so.

Gemma: You a good doctor?

Tara: Yes.

Gemma: Then I don't have a problem.

Tara: Good. You know, people change. I'm not the same girl I was ten years ago.

Gemma: I am.

I wish to note that Gemma says this with pride. It appears that she is exactly who she wants to be, and so growth is not one of her life pursuits. She has no remorse about staying in the same town for all these years, contrary to Tara who left (escaped) for school.

The scene, however, is not finished. Tara rolls her eyes and begins to walk away but Gemma lunges and lifts Tara's scrubs to reveal a lower back tattoo. Gemma, commenting on the permanence of the ink, mocks, "I guess there's some things you can't change." Without pause or showing any uncertainty, Tara declares, "I leave it there so I remember all that shit's behind me." "Forgot just how clever you can be," Gemma rebukes. I think there are multiple meanings that can be drawn / extracted from Gemma's reply. This relationship has layers due to the past and there is a possibility of Tara once again encroaching on the Teller family's relations. I believe one possible analysis is noting Tara's educational aspirations and successes, which no one else in the series appears to share. A stronger possibility is that Gemma is making light of the problematic ways Tara defies her, a behaviour which is a rarely seen on the series. Tara's witty remark also attempts to mark a separation between her old and new selves, yet Gemma maintains that while she may be a doctor she is still that "same girl" as well. And perhaps just like in the past, both are swept into a catty conversation with provocations coming from both directions. At the end of this scene, Gemma turns and Tara simply stands with an expression that I am not sure how to read; Gemma successfully has the final word and expresses her disgust of this interaction with an audible scoff, and as she walks away, she declares "bitch."

My reading of how this micro-concept works in this show is demonstrated in this scene because Gemma personifies Buonanno's (2017) definition of the "antiheroine," specifically by calling attention to the antiheroine figure as a daring woman that "[embodies] to an unprecedented extent the dark sides of human personality and behaviour," accompanied with her "unapologetic wickedness" (p.3). Alongside this, Gemma also depicts conflicting personality traits that are pertinent to both antiheroes and antiheroines, as villains that the audience roots for despite their antics and choices. As a prideful woman, Gemma is a character that lives fully at the intersections of motherhood, violence, gendered relationships, criminality, and power. My reading of the progressive/regressive tension the character inhabits and reveals in this exchange is due to Tara's renewed presence in town which unleashes Gemma's (antiheroic) motivation to manipulate individuals, especially a woman who comes close to her kin, in order to secure Charming as her criminal empire, coupled with the thirst for both respect and fear.

GENDER

Through the "gender" micro-concept, I investigate the tension that characters like Smurf and Gemma showcase through the reiteration of familiar narratives and stereotypical gender roles, or their rejection through engagement in behaviours that are typically defined as male / masculine. You will recall, as I presented in relation to the micro-concept "generational criminality," in the first episode Gemma informs Clay that Jax's late father is influencing him and making him stray from the club. She orders Clay to "nail him down hard" because she cannot allow "the ghost of John Teller [...] ruining everything we've built." The plural is important here because Gemma sees her romantic partnership with Clay as teamwork. However, she cannot engage in the work herself as a woman and mother and so she needs to go through her husband Clay, the President. Nevertheless, it is her perception that pinpoints the problem and she is the one who can foresee the

steps that need to be taken. Her words, orders, insight, and influence allow Clay to make and keep order in the club. Again, this illustrative example presents the binary tension of regression and progression that Gemma lives constantly within. Being on the outside, a woman in a male dominated world, allows her to witness and grasp subtleties the men miss because they are wrapped up in their criminal businesses. As a woman she can be dismissed but she knows how to demand respect in her home with her husband and the information she can transmit due to their intimacy. Because of this intimate access to him (the leader) in the home, she is able to exert her influence, a subtle but still substantial form of power. In sum, Gemma is constrained by the social constructs within which (her) gender is produced within the series, but at the same time, she is represented as straining against and often breaking those boundaries. Her gender is liminal in a world where gender is not, in a world where most men and women know their place.

This next example illustrates how Gemma uses her “gender” to get information. In episode three, Elliot Oswald ropes SAMCRO into avenging the sexual assault of his daughter (Tristen Oswald) at Fun Town, a travelling carnival. Neither the police or SAMCRO are able to get the necessary information about the person who assaulted this teenage girl, because Tristen does not trust either group enough to tell them who the person is. Gemma uses her ability to persuade by evoking her positionality (feminine, motherly, wifely) to do what the men in the club and the police cannot. After overhearing Jax and Oswald speak about the lack of leads, Gemma decides to act and find the answers herself. Gemma’s status as a mother and wife is presented as a safe space for Tristen. The text utilises gendered ideas of the woman’s gut instinct and “mother knows best” since the men could not grasp the lies and subtleties played out by the victim’s family, but Gemma did and could. Overall, Gemma’s participation in the SAMCRO world does not conform to socially constructed proper norms because she refuses to stay in her “gender lane.” She defied the gendered

boundaries and complicated the thresholds available to the women involved with men in the club. However, this story's conclusion would not have been reached without Gemma knowing how to use her "gender" to get results. Gemma is both overstepping and staying in her "gendered lane": she is engaging in club business without permission, but doing it in a gender appropriate way (she gets the information and shares it) and playing the appropriate female role. Conversely, the hypermasculine presence of the club showcases that SAMCRO protects the community. More importantly, Gemma's actions allowed progress and respite for the young girl. By using a performance of normative femininity, Gemma performed solicitous womanhood / motherhood solidarity as a means to an end.

As a woman in a man's world, Gemma knows the dangers (men, assault) and she understood why the young girl pretended she had no memory and could not remember who the man was when in fact, she did. Thus, as a protective mother herself, Gemma could not allow Tristen's parents to control her narrative and be silenced as many other girls are on the topic of the truth of their abuse, which is a strong message that I am unsure the writers of the show meant to do or simply my feminist reading, but that is why this is the best example. In sum, these scenes submit how Gemma consistently reinforces and rejects her abidance to gender roles as a woman participating in this SAMCRO world. In other words, she negotiates a more expansive understanding of "gender."

FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY

As expressed in my analysis of "femininity" and "masculinity" in *Animal Kingdom*, "masculinity" is theorized as the "expression of maleness" which conjures up not only notions of power, legitimacy, and privilege, but also extends outwards into patriarchy with "the promise of social privilege" (Halberstam, 2018, p.1-2); meanwhile, "femininity" is described as a "social

construct rather than a naturalized expression of the female body” (p.xiv). Glover and Kaplan (2009) do not offer a true definition of “femininity” but reason that it ““may be defined as a set of attributes ascribed to biologically sexed females,” and they ponder openly “what exactly those attributes are, and the extent to which any given version of femininity is natural or cultural” (p.26). With this in mind, the most illustrative example of how I read Gemma’s connection to this conceptual dyad happens in a scene between herself and Agent June Stahl in the tenth episode. Agent Stahl is a recurring character serving as an antagonist because she is an ATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives) agent investigating the club and its members.

Once again Gemma is performing “domesticity”; we see her in a store grabbing groceries. Cherry approaches the queen of bikers for guidance, but is apprehended by officers. Gemma tells Stahl, “That little tart doesn’t know anything.” The agent then informs her that they also have the porn star in custody, Gemma’s best friend, LuAnn. Soon Gemma confides, “picking off the ones that have the most to lose. Smart. That’s how I’d do it.” Gemma knows exactly how the interpersonal relationships of the men of the club and the women connected to them work. There is an underlying assumption and “confession” made here that women have more to lose because they care, nurture, and provide for their families. For the women / mothers with attachments to the club, there is a mutual understanding that men may be incarcerated, it is a burden they live with and even anticipate, but mothers cannot (and should not have to) abandon their child(ren) because of the club’s (alleged) crimes, which would complicate familial relationships; for instance, social services could take the children away. The inner and outer workings of gender are presented consistently throughout the series; for example, one subplot in the first season is Opie’s return home after years in prison and his wife Donna’s open vocalization of her struggles as a single mother during his absence.

In my chosen excerpt from the text for this micro-concept, while walking around the store, Stahl confirms Gemma's status and knowledge as the President's "old lady." Stahl inquires, "what was she doing? Asking for the queen's advice? What lies to tell?" while delicately replacing a strand of Gemma's hair. Stahl continues to hypothesize, "I'll bet that there's enough secrets in that pretty head of yours to bury an empire." Gemma smirks and cleverly states, "I'm just a wife and mother, darlin'. You know, you might want to unscrew that penis sometimes. It's fun being a girl. And if you want me, you know where I live." Gemma says this inches away from Stahl's face and as Gemma walks away, Stahl nods with satisfaction. There is an undertone of flirtation as Gemma entices, "if you want me" but Gemma is also signaling her knowledge that as a woman with strong links to the club, she is a target for police investigation. Agent Stahl is in a position of power, yet still a woman, in a career where less women work, one in which she must "act as a man." Gemma recognizes that the detective is performing a version of masculinity that resonates with her job in law enforcement; therefore, Gemma tells her to remove her phantom appendage and this performative masculine energy.

When I think of the performance of gender, Judith Butler comes to mind, along with Halberstam, and Glover and Kaplan's ideas of expression, privilege, social constructs, and attributes. I would argue here that Gemma mistakenly equates primary sexual characteristics with Stahl's "expression of maleness" and her "masculinity" taking over her feminine attributes like it can be turned on and off, or as she names, the removal of the (metaphorical) phallic member.¹⁶ I recognize that this scene would have also been pertinent in the "gender" discussion, but I embrace

¹⁶ It also seems like Gemma is represented as thinking of male power and this appendage as a literal equation.

the definitions here that helped me analyze this conceptual duo and how each of these characters, Gemma and Stahl, embrace their own “femininity” or reject it to grasp “masculinity.”

SEXUALITY

Let me begin this discussion by enumerating some instances where Gemma is represented as a sexual woman: Gemma performs oral sex (S1, E1) and makes comic remarks about hand jobs, sexual acts, and orgasms (S1, E3); next, one of the club’s prospects claims that “Clay’s old lady gave [him] a serious MILF chubby” (S1, E4). This is because her beauty and sexual attractiveness is not impervious to nor wasted upon others’ eyes, recalling Giomi’s (2017) analysis of the MILF trope as a “problematic intersection of gender, power, and sex” (p.117). Every now and again Gemma can be quite vulgar; she is not prudish about sex, which this next exchange helps show. Gemma shares a scene with an Irish fugitive in the cabin where they discuss family and the act of praying. He proposes, “a few acts of contrition can make you feel good too, love.” After a pause and smile, Gemma replies with conviction, “there’s only one way these beads could make me feel good, love. And it involves a whole different act” (S1, E10). Gemma’s cheeky response is another occasion that illustrates her (positive) affinity to sex as an adult woman and mother.

Episode six offers the most pertinent examples of Gemma’s sexuality. In a secondary storyline, Gemma must confront Clay’s infidelity with a younger woman which exacerbates her insecurities about aging and menopause. In a previous episode, viewers come to understand that there is an unwritten rule between the men of the motorcycle club and their partners: affairs are allowed on the road. At the beginning of the episode, Clay and Gemma have difficulty experiencing satisfying sexual intercourse because she is not lubricating due to her bodily changes. As an aging woman, Gemma faces the brunt of the series’ misogyny, as well as ageism; internalized patriarchal ideologies emerge and suffocate her confidence and appeal. Ritzenhoff and

Hermes (2009) write that sex, gender, and sexuality is often linked and “women have always been defined by their bodies and their sexuality, and the body is a key site of patriarchal regulation and control” (p.57). Hence, she blames herself, believes that things will continue to change between herself and Clay, and has a creeping fear that she will be replaced by a younger woman.

Near the end of the episode, when she tells Clay that she is “going through menopause” he affirms that “things are changing” but he utters, just like a promise, that the love he has for her will not change; both characters become emotional. Despite his infidelity and her worries with respect to the natural ageing processes of the cycle of life, the two of them come together again because the love between the President and his “old lady” cannot be tamed and by the credits, they have mended fences. This romantic partnership within the bigger criminal family, the couple literally discuss with jail cell bars separating them, will continue to reign in Charming. In essence, this narrative nicely marked the tension between the rejection and regression of problematic storytelling because it pushed against familiar tropes, yet nevertheless still reiterated (temporarily) familiar gendered ideas to produce entertainment.

A DISCUSSION: “VIOLENT GLAMOUR”

One of the differences between Smurf and Gemma is that in the world Gemma lives in, she cannot operate autonomously from men. The only way she can be part of SAMCRO is by being an “old lady.” For Smurf, by contrast, if she lets a man stay, he may want to take over; she will no longer be the “boss.” The micro-concepts of this chapter as well as the previous ones have allowed me to comprehend how Smurf and Gemma both live and operate from the center of their lives, yet also abide by rules imposed by bigger social forces (e.g. gender and heteronormativity). Here, I

put the micro-concepts of the third and final macro-concept in dialogue with one another and consider if both series in their first seasons complement or differ from each other. To begin, the first micro-concept, “violent glamour,” inspired the name of this chapter because it encompassed the broader thematic understanding I was searching for. Both mothers articulate this alluring presence. “Violent glamour” is not flagrant, but it exudes from them in such a seductive way that even I become wrapped up in it, signaling my shameless bias and an unwavering feminist curiosity.

In the discussions of the micro-concept “aberrant mother” I had to navigate the fine line between this concept and the next: “antiheroine.” I illustrated how Smurf and Gemma’s choices as mothers cement their “aberrantness”: Smurf, by showcasing her promiscuity and the untraditional recreational activities of the Cody family; and Gemma, through her alignment with Walters and Harrison’s (2014) definition of being “neither monster nor angel.” Since the aberrant mother cannot achieve “heroine status,” her representation as the despicable “bad mother” allows her to be labelled an “antiheroine.” For both mothers, in their most representative portrayals of “antiheroine” there is no resolve but increasing tensions in these relationships of duplicity.

I am intrigued by the “gender” analysis I uncovered when deciphering the late-night scene between Smurf and J. The new addition, the young blood, seems to wish to replace his grandmother. The once a shy recluse, now a confident (bordering on cocky) young man, wants the seat of power in his (until recently estranged) family. Gemma’s position in the club as the highest-ranking “old lady” produces a rejection (progressive) and reiteration (regressive) of gender stereotypes in her heteronormative romantic relationship; it allows her to use her “gender” to achieve a desired outcome, which the men cannot. In sum, both characters are at the mercy of their gender, as it appears to be conventionally understood by both the series’ writers (extratextual) and the characters themselves (diegetically). During both first seasons, Gemma and Smurf face the

possibility of being replaced, in both their partners and children's lives, and experience challenges to their power / position that they can only hold at bay for so long. I found it imperative to signal the undercurrent of toxic masculinity in these texts. The matriarchs are represented as having traditional ways of thinking, imagining, and desiring "femininity" and "masculinity" from their kin. Smurf believes a gun is a natural accessory for her barely adult grandson; for Gemma, gendered social cues as well as conflating the performativity of "gender" and a phantom penis announces her belief that men and women have binaries they should abide to: Agent Stahl plays against archetypes, meanwhile Gemma plays within.

To finish, "sexuality" probes how both characters are not prudish nor do they lack confidence in their "sexuality"; however, each character reaches a crossroads in her narrative arc in the first season of the series in which she appears. For Smurf, not only does she showcase an overt display of sexuality through her clothing choices (Gemma does this too), but I also contend that she encourages and uses her (grand)sons' sexual prowess (and satisfaction) as an extension of her own. Gemma's relationship with sex is more tongue-in-cheek. I am impressed that the series touched on menopause and I think it is important that Clay does not "run off" with a younger woman. Despite his infidelity, Clay and Gemma grow closer because she is vulnerable about her age-related changes. Though completely different, Smurf and Gemma still experience their "sexuality" in a parallel manner.

Smurf and Gemma's "violent glamour" (the macro-concept) is connected to all these facets (micro-concepts). I read the "aberrant mother" and the "antiheroine" as having a close conceptual relationship because one cannot be a heroine if aberrant, and one cannot be an "antiheroine" without aberrance. The micro-concepts "gender," "femininity," and "masculinity" are closely linked, and even tangled, but their nuances allow space for separate discussions / analyses. Yet

somehow the last micro-concept justifiably does not stand alone because “sexuality” runs throughout all these micro-concepts. Though it may end on this micro-concept it sends us right back up to “violent glamour” because one of the undertones of that definition is sexuality and the subject versus object dichotomy. In sum, these micro-concepts mesh and pull from each other to create a thrilling closing feminist analysis of the matriarchs of Oceanside and Charming.

SECTION THREE

Chapter Eight: CONCLUSION

The focus of my thesis is the matriarchs of *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy*. Through my analysis of Smurf Cody and Gemma Teller-Morrow I studied not only the regressive environments and actions these mothers are represented as living and participating in and the progressive boundary breaking they are represented as engaging in, but more crucially, I found that they are represented as having the capacity to do both alternately and even simultaneously. I wanted this project to, on the one hand, identify how Smurf and Gemma are offered as characters who are not to be emulated (Mason, 2019; Grimes, 2022). On the other hand, I also set out to discover how their portrayals might offer exemplary representations of aspirational and positive qualities we (women) should strive for. We learn from them that not only women, but mothers, are complicated and nuanced characters.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Smurf and Gemma confuse the gender binary despite living and functioning within patriarchal institutions. I have presented my arguments through discussions of three macro-concepts: “motherwork,” “mother blame,” and “violent glamour.” The three macro-concepts were each made up of a series of micro-concepts, whose analysis enabled a structured discussion of Smurf and Gemma’s fictional portrayals in relation to concepts drawn from the literature and theory chapters presented earlier in this thesis.

While writing this thesis, I confronted the difficult task of properly articulating the complexity of not only the (micro-)concepts but also choosing the most representative examples

from each text to pair them with. I learned early in the process that there were many points of intersection and overlap between them. There are both too many examples, and no perfect ones. Indeed, it is peculiar (ironic) that I label moments from the text as related to a specific concept in order to enable a categorization and an organized discussion, yet my work itself seeks to break down the boundaries of what is traditionally ascribed. Of course, as Davies and Gannon (2005) remind us, working with poststructuralist theory allows for creative possibilities to emerge, and therefore my interpretations (and classifications) occurred in a space where this was encouraged.

McNamara (2013) informs her readers that, generally speaking, for centuries the fate of female characters “included two endings, either in marriage or death” (in Tally 2016, p.4). Now you will recall that I have divulged that Smurf and Gemma die in their series, highlighting the trope of the dead mother (a topic I would like to explore in the future). Nonetheless, during multiple seasons they both embodied antiheroine qualities, like living by their own rules and engaging in reckless behaviour, making them, according to Tally, unlikeable. However, I do not agree with the assessment that these characters are inherently unlikable. Rather, I think the characters are more aptly there so viewers can “love to hate them.” Or something along those lines. Maybe a new concept or verbiage is needed. Perhaps, appropriately, as this thesis has taught me, these characters are likely to evoke ambivalence. I do like Tally’s argument that female lead characters have been constructed as antiheroines in recent years. She reasons that “[S]ome exhibited qualities of excessive masculinity while others could be described as offering a kind of excessive femininity. An important feature they all shared, however, was that they were more complex, multi-layered and morally flawed than “traditional” female characters of past shows” (p.1). This analytical definition from Tally helps me understand my feminist attraction and academic willfulness to study Smurf and Gemma’s qualities and faults.

WHAT I SET OUT TO DO

As I divulged in the initial pages of this thesis, I began by thinking of Smurf and Gemma as feminist figures on television, yet I soon saw that this was a premature / underdeveloped reading of the characters. This realization catapulted this research and my investigation. Despite seeming “strong” and “independent,” which are typical, reductive labels attached to women in texts we are meant to read as complimentary and feminist, these mother figures are equally produced by other tropes that work their way into the text, like the “good” and “bad” mother. This tension and oscillating space between binaries has been at the core of my research, culminating with the central argument that Smurf and Gemma, time and time again, are represented as rejecting / progressing and reiterating / reinforcing representations of stereotypical roles and familiar gendered tropes of women and motherhood, including mother / son dynamics, and relationships between women.

These are fictional characters; therefore, I looked at the representations of mother-son relationships inside their diegetic worlds. I focused on the representation of motherhood and criminality in these series which suture together white femininity, crime, and domesticity / motherhood in particular ways. There are intersections other than these that I wanted to look at but were beyond the scope of this thesis. For example, these include, femininity and age(ism), femininity and whiteness (race), criminality and whiteness (race), class and criminality, class and whiteness (race), women and subjectivity, gender and privilege, and deepen my analysis of women and sexuality. As a viewer of these texts, I cannot help but note the problematic nature of, for example, the way that race is deployed. I see it; therefore, I think it is important to name it, despite being unable to make it a focus of this thesis. I hope that another researcher will revisit these texts and the ways that racism circulates as a key discursive formation within them. Even if I do speak

subtly, albeit not overtly, about the centrality of the whiteness of these criminal mothers, I know there is more work to be done.

As I worked on this thesis, and by irregularly discussing it with my peers, it brought on a bigger recognition and understanding that my lens as a white, cisgender, and heterosexual woman is quite similar to the writers' lens (white, cis, hetero, man). I concede that there may be limits to what white writers can do and accomplish in their narratives. Consequently, they have blind spots. I hope that my work shines some light on the repeated narratives, tropes, and archetypes that create not only their female characters, but male ones as well. I believe one cannot seek change for one without advocating for the other as well. Though white men sit more comfortably in their fictional portrayals on television, because the narratives are more glorious / positive and women linger more in misogynistic / negative perspectives, change must be brought to the ensemble. Television show runners, networks, and writers are telling stories, but they are (also) creating culture. My words here are not meant to act as a call for action, but a simple enunciation of a desire to change to be brought to narratives where women (and men) do not sit (un)comfortably in stereotypical gender roles and spaces. Given these considerations, the same scale and size of scholarly work / literature is not afforded to women / mothers / antiheroines, as it is to men / antiheroes. With this work, I wanted to fill that gap in the literature ever so slightly. Further, during the years of thesis building and writing, I have found no published scholarly texts discussing Smurf's character and I was eager to bring academic attention / awareness to her.

CONTRIBUTIONS

In writing this thesis, I wanted to find out more about these portrayals of criminal mothers and their kin and what a feminist reading could extract from the texts in which they so centrally appear. I believe my work broadened my own perspective about the immensity of Motherhood Studies, its possibilities and how it can be applied to various fields and questions. I submit that an inquisitive playing field was opened in combining Television Studies and Motherhood Studies, which is still relatively uncommon in either field.

Letort's (2016) analysis of age and gender in the *Olive Kitteridge* series acted as a foundational resource to open my understandings of the reductive stereotypes (ageing) women face in media. At the same time, the way characters like Smurf, Gemma, and Olive dismantle and challenge these stereotypes are breaths of fresh air and offer new stories and perspectives. Nonetheless, I find women characters are in a cyclical bind of improving ever so slightly, while never fully escaping existing gendered and ageist tropes. My analysis of Smurf and Gemma demonstrates that they are caught in televisual worlds that showcase images of misogyny and empowerment, a reading which is supported by Mason (2019), who speaks of a desire that we move away from the binary of "good" or "bad." That was my hope as well: to refuse to label Smurf and Gemma on either side of the binary, but instead to examine their consistent motion between these two opposites. I hope with this thesis I have answered Mason's (2019) call for more feminist theorizing of motherhood. That being said, my purpose was not to look for, or define feminist mothering in the two texts. That was described and discussed sufficiently within the Motherhood Studies literature above. Rather, my focus was on feminist theorizing of representations of motherhood. These are not the same thing. I used a feminist lens to look at the representations of motherhood in popular culture, which is a relatively under-studied and under-theorized area. Thus, a gap in the literature concerning this

topic and these specific texts. Again, just because I offered a feminist reading does not mean I looked for feminist mothering or looked to read these texts as feminist representations of mothering. That is a different project. I do wish for a broadening of popular representations that we casually view on television. I ask for more writers to bend and break what has been traditionally ascribed, and thus, developed, produced, and put on our screens. Additionally, I ask other researchers to uncover characters who resemble Smurf and Gemma, but also those that surpass how they reject reductive stereotypes and narratives.

My thesis work here contributes to Television Studies, Motherhood Studies, as well as Women and Gender Studies. This was an interdisciplinary work and gender was used as my lens as well as a critical tool in order to interact with the two texts and draw out the possibilities of analyses. As I have previously noted, I do not have definitive answers and I have not explicated the only analyses that can be drawn from the texts. That was never my goal. I chose content analysis because it allows descriptive and interpretative possibilities for myself and other researchers' readings. Perceptions, perspectives, and biases that inhabit us all will alter our readings at any given time. I recognize that and I hope that my reader does as well. My aim was to present a thoughtfully argued content analysis using poststructural feminism. My thesis adds to a growing body of inherently feminist research which contributes to investigations of televisual representations of mothers intertwining the domestic and the criminal.

This thesis research contributes to studies of matriarchs in criminal male-dominated worlds. I focused on the "private" and domestic as well as criminal spaces Smurf and Gemma move through, and especially highlighted the intricacies of these mother-son relationships through various micro-concepts. These two series portray narratives of kin and succession throughout the years and multiple seasons of storytelling. Well beyond the first season which was the scope of my analysis.

I was and continue to be fascinated by the matriarchs and their desire to keep and exert control upon their sons, coupled with manipulative and violent attempts to banish / repulse other women from their family life to behold sole (female) power and influence of / in their sons' lives.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Here I wish to contemplate and consider what future work in this area might do. I propose reworking the idealization of motherhood, or conversely, the opposite of the spectrum as well, which is the villanization of mothers (i.e. the “good” vs “bad” mother). The important impact and presence of visual media brings viewers to identify with sketched subjects, significantly impacting their perceptions, subjectivity, and identity (Du Preez, 2009). Thus, this kind of social learning guides how some people assimilate and construct their systems of norms and values. Spectators, in general, base their identity through images and imagery and so it is important to recognize that if individual viewers base their identity on representations, then these characterizations must represent a just, and as true as possible portrayal / image. I might argue that too much fantasy (fiction) creates expectations and that is when creators / writers / producers fall into recycling tired tropes and stereotypes as well as “fetishized” characterizations and archetypes.

For some, it may be quite banal, but this medium carries significant weight to viewers and their perspectives, learning, and biases. I remind you that Gray and Lotz (2015) posit that “television is still arguably the key storyteller in the contemporary industrialized world” and “a great deal of us are tuning in, downloading, or pressing “play” on a daily basis” (p.26). Of course, now there is the ease of streaming services and the undeniable growth of paid subscriptions. These options are churning out quality productions and content by veering away from (the rules and / or expectations

of) 'regular' or - ascribed as - 'traditional' television and cable. Therefore, I mention that quotation again to reaffirm how I believe we are constantly, explicitly, or subconsciously, taking (in) and learning from media messages. Thus, I want future research to keep exploring varying, growing content, or even comment on (analyse) the continued stagnant representations of motherhood (and women) on television.

In like manner, Mary Kosut (2012) argues that media scholars have highlighted how, at the start of the 21st century, sexist images and stereotypes resurged "in the alleged age of postfeminism" which Susan J Douglas (2010) dubbed "new" sexism or "enlightened sexism" (p.330). With this, it would seem that there is safety that networks and media adhere to in order to not "rock the boat." Reproduced and repeated narratives are convenient and easy to deliver to audiences to appease their recreational time, viewership, and entertainment. However, as a feminist viewer I wish to broaden and to challenge; I want change through more complicated, layered, and divergent stories as well as characters. I do not believe that Smurf and Gemma accomplished this *fully*, but there are inklings of this because they go beyond and shake up, as Tally (2016) names, more "traditional" characters. I do sustain that the portrayals of these matriarchs veered the norm. I wonder about texts that depict incarcerated mothers, or mothers who are in law enforcement or in the criminal justice system. This is beyond the scope of the thesis, but worth mentioning here, as spaces where we see not only more representations of motherhood / criminality, but also motherhood / violence. To continue, there are gendered archetypes and binaries in media, exposing audiences to not only predefined, but also expected gendered roles in society (Kosut, 2012). As it concerns feminine stereotypes, narratives created through portrayals often represent the battle between traditional femininity (sentimental, nurturing, maternal) and contemporary femininity (liberal, sexualized, object of desire) (Kosut, 2012).

With this in mind, I want my reader to understand that I am interested in and focused on Smurf and Gemma because, in my opinion and as I have argued, they manage to portray both sides of this while at the same time, oscillating between these binary options consistently and constantly. Whether that is something one noticed in their first viewing or like me, noticed their progressive and regressive intricacies during the second viewing due to turning on an attentive eye and ear to analysis(es). With that said, I hope future work can study seasons beyond the first of *Animal Kingdom* and *Sons of Anarchy* as well as find other female characters who transgress traditional stereotypes and break down and take apart gendered and archetypal characterized (even caricatured) expectations.

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¹⁷ Honourable mention here goes to Andrea O’Reilly and Abby Palko’s edited book *Monstrous Mothers: Troubling Tropes* published in August 2021 that I would like to read one day.

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APPENDICES

1. MACRO-CONCEPTS GRID

“MOTHERWORK”	“MOTHER BLAME”	“VIOLENT GLAMOUR”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mother, mothering, and motherwork • Domesticity • Generational criminality • Maternal ambivalence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bad mother • Mother-son relationship(s) • Triadic relationship(s) • Hierarchical family relationship(s) • Mother blame • Intensive Mothering 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violent glamour • Aberrant mother • Antiheroine • Gender • Femininity and Masculinity • Sexuality

2. DATA COLLECTION VIEWING SCHEDULE – JUNE 2022

THE PLANNED VIEWING SCHEDULE (discarded break included)

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
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WEEK ONE - *Animal Kingdom* episodes

JUNE 5	JUNE 6	JUNE 7	JUNE 8	JUNE 9	JUNE 10	JUNE 11
X	EPI. 1-2	EPI. 3-4	EPI. 5-6	EPI. 7-8	EPI 9-10	X

WEEK TWO - *Sons of Anarchy* episodes

JUNE 12	JUNE 13	JUNE 14	JUNE 15	JUNE 16	JUNE 17	JUNE 18
X	EPI. 1-2-3	EPI. 4-5-6	EPI. 7-8-9	EPI. 10-11	EPI. 12-13	X

WEEK THREE - *Animal Kingdom* episodes

JUNE 19	JUNE 20	JUNE 21	JUNE 22	JUNE 23	JUNE 24	JUNE 25
X	EPI. 1-2	EPI. 3-4	EPI. 5-6	EPI. 7-8	EPI 9-10	X

WEEK FOUR - *Sons of Anarchy* episodes

JUNE 26	JUNE 27	JUNE 28	JUNE 29	JUNE 30	JULY 1	JULY 2
X	EPI. 1-2-3	EPI. 4-5-6	EPI. 7-8-9	EPI. 10-11	EPI. 12-13	X

THE EXECUTED VIEWING SCHEDULE

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
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WEEK ONE - *Animal Kingdom* episodes

JUNE 5	JUNE 6	JUNE 7	JUNE 8	JUNE 9	JUNE 10	JUNE 11
X	EPI. 1-2	EPI. 3-4	EPI. 5-6	EPI. 7-8	EPI 9-10	X

WEEK TWO - *Sons of Anarchy* episodes

JUNE 12	JUNE 13	JUNE 14	JUNE 15	JUNE 16	JUNE 17	JUNE 18
X	EPI. 1-2-3	EPI. 4-5-6	EPI. 7-8-9	EPI. 10-11-12	EPI. 13	X

WEEK THREE - *Animal Kingdom* episodes

JUNE 19	JUNE 20	JUNE 21	JUNE 22	JUNE 23	JUNE 24	JUNE 25
X	EPI. 1-2	EPI. 3-4-5	EPI. 6-7-8	EPI. 9-10	----	X

WEEK FOUR - *Sons of Anarchy* episodes

JUNE 26	JUNE 27	JUNE 28	JUNE 29	JUNE 30	JULY 1	JULY 2
X	EPI. 1-2-3	EPI. 4-5-6	EPI. 7-8-9	EPI. 10-11	EPI. 12-13	X

3. SERIES SEASON ONE EPISODE DESCRIPTIONS

ANIMAL KINGDOM - Netflix

SEASON #	EPISODE #	TIME	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
1	1		Pilot	Grieving teen Joshua “J” Cody reconnects with his late mother’s estranged family and their life of deception, thievery and disturbing relationships.
1	2		We Don’t Hurt People	Smurf orders the boys to cover their tracks after the botched getaway and shootout, while tensions mount between J and Pope.
1	3		Stay Close, Stick Together	Pope involves J and a jealous Deran in a side job without Smurf’s permission, while Baz is furious when Craig smuggles drugs across the border.
1	4		Dead to Me	Smurf becomes suspicious that her boys haven’t been adhering to the rules, while the family attempts with mixed success to celebrate Pope’s birthday.
1	5		Flesh is Weak	J attends a photography exhibit with his teacher Alexa, Smurf recognizes a familiar face, and Deran refuses to come home until Pope does him a favor.

1	6		Child Care	J faces a moral dilemma after he discerns Baz's grand plan, Pope tests positive for drugs, and Alexa is pushed to turn informant.
1	7		Goddamn Animals	Smurf travels to Las Vegas seeking revenge, while Craig and Deran throw a party, Alexa spills a secret, and Baz speeds up his big plan's timetable.
1	8		Man In	As the Codys prepare for Baz's intricate military base heist, Detective Yates reveals a shocking secret to Catherine, and Nicky bonds with Craig.
1	9		Judas Kiss	The Codys execute the first stage of the big score, but Catherine triggers Smurf's alarm bells when she steals some cash. J is pressured by the cops.
1	10		What Have You Done?	As a frantic Baz looks for Catherine, Pope and Smurf take steps to hide the truth from him. Paul gets greedy, and J leads the cops to the Codys.

SONS OF ANARCHY – Disney+

SEASON #	EPISODE #	TIME	TITLE	DESCRIPTION
1	1	58	Pilot	SAMCRO gets justice against a rival gang who steals their guns.
1	2	47	Seeds	The Deputy Chief of Police poses a new threat to SAMCRO's hold on Charming.
1	3	48	Fun Town	SAMCRO races the authorities to capture the assailant of a young girl.
1	4	44	Patch Over	A "patch-over" with a brother club happens. Agent Kohn investigates SAMCRO.
1	5	42	Giving Back	The man responsible for Opie's arrest comes back during Gemma's fundraiser.
1	6	43	AK-51	A small favor for Piney's old war buddy turns into a big problem for SAMCRO.
1	7	44	Old Bones	Clay has to deal with secrets he buried long ago when bones are found.

1	8	45	The Pull	SAMCRO needs cash and rivals grow stronger. Jax faces his own troubles.
1	9	46	Hell Followed	SAMCRO plans retaliation. Three members plan to put an end to the gun debt.
1	10	44	Better Half	The club tries to deal with Stahl while Cherry gives information to Gemma.
1	11	43	Capbara	Jax must choose between friendship and the club.
1	12	48	The Sleep of Babies	Clay leaves SAMCRO in a vulnerable position. Abel's homecoming is ruined.
1	13	63	Revelator	Club members must reevaluate their bonds of brotherhood in the wake of a great tragedy.