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INTRODUCTION

A DECADE AFTER SPICE: GIRL POWER MEDIA CULTURE IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

SHRINK-WRAPPING FEMININITY AND FEMINISM: THE GIRL OF GIRL POWER

In 2000, the WB network premiered *The Gilmore Girls*, a television dramedy about a single mother, Lorelai, and her teen daughter, Rory. In the first episode viewers learned that Lorelai, now the thirty-two-year-old manager of a New England inn, shocked her wealthy family when she left home at age sixteen with a baby in utero and a determination to support herself without financial assistance from her parents. The series revolves around the mother-daughter relationship casting it as primarily democratic, with Lorelai offering Rory dating advice and flavored lip balm, while still imposing the occasional discipline.

In an episode that first aired in the winter of 2001, Rory and Lorelai are joined by Dean, Rory's teen boyfriend, as they watch a repeat of the 1960s domestic sitcom, *The Donna Reed Show*. On the episode they watch, Donna is disappointed that her husband has not called to tell her that he will be home late from work even though she has spent hours preparing his dinner. At the end of the program Donna forgives her husband, teasingly claiming that after ten years of marriage she has finally learned to accept that he is not really late for dinner but rather early for breakfast. As they watch the show, Lorelai and Rory

create their own dialogue that mocks Donna Reed's complacency and submissiveness. Dean has a different perspective on Reed's role as a housewife: "I don't know—it all seems kind of nice to me... families hanging together. I mean, a wife cooking dinner for her husband. And look—she seems really happy." Dean recalls that his mother made dinner for his father before she started working and that she still prepares the family's weekend meals; defensively, he asks whether Rory would consider his mother an oppressed housewife. Rory explains to Dean that the difference between his mother and the women of the 1950s and 1960s, like Donna Reed, is choice. Dean's mother has a choice to cook or not, whereas Donna Reed was *expected* to thanklessly serve her family and look beautiful while doing it.

Later in the episode, sixteen-year-old Rory, who is house-sitting for her neighbor, invites Dean to keep her company. Wearing pearls and a vintage 1950s-style dress, Rory welcomes Dean and reveals that she has prepared a meat and potatoes dinner for him. As she serves dessert, Rory realizes that she forgot to make the dinner rolls. Mocking the perfection expected of the prefeminist wife, Rory jokes that she will have to turn in her pearls if the oversight is caught (presumably by the "good wife" police). Though Dean appreciates the meal, he lets Rory know that he does not expect her to be like a woman from the 1950s. Rory, known for being quite studious, then reveals that she has been researching Donna Reed and discovered that the actress "*did* do the whole milk and cookies wholesome big skirt thing, but aside from that, she was an uncredited producer and director on her television show, which made her one of the first women television executives. Which is actually pretty impressive." The script leaves a sense of ambiguity behind Rory's intentions; she never reveals whether the performance of the doting homemaker was to please Dean with the postwar wifely role he admired or if it was to teach him a lesson about female liberation by reminding him what the postfeminist Rory brings to the relationship.

The playful border crossings between girlishness and female empowerment, the offer of demureness and the demand for independence, and the ambiguity surrounding feminist intention, all depicted in this episode of the *Gilmore Girls*, are characteristic of girl power media, or media produced for girls and women after the late 1990s. Over the past nearly twenty years, girl power has represented