

# Introduction to the Greek Sitcom: The Case of *I Tris Charites*/*The Three Graces*

Betty Kaklamanidou  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

## ABSTRACT

*The article focuses on one of the first Greek sitcoms, whose broadcast coincided with the new era of privatized television in the country, I Tris Charites/The Three Graces (1990-1992) MEGA. To this day, academic analysis on this show, and/or the other seminal shows of the first period of private television in Greece is scarce although there is recently an effort through conferences and publications to examine this neglected field. This article aims to be one of the first to acknowledge the cultural importance of The Three Graces and briefly put forward the main themes, the structure and its sociocultural resonance regarding gender politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sitcom television theory, content analysis, gender theory and Greek sociopolitical history are the main guides in this endeavor. Briefly examining the American paradigm's structure and placing the show in its proper sociopolitical context, aided by insight provided by one of the show's creators, I underline the sitcom's key position in Greek television regarding mainly gender issues.*

## KEYWORDS

gender  
Greek television  
intertextuality  
Mega Channel  
Reppas  
sitcom

## INTRODUCTION TO THE GREEK SITCOM: THE CASE OF *I TRIS CHARITES/THE THREE GRACES*

Almost 28 years after the advent of private television broadcasting in Greece, no studies have been published to examine the variety and richness of the drama and comedy series produced in the country at least until 2009, when the financial crisis reared its ugly head, ceasing almost completely domestic production and condemning thousands to unemployment<sup>1</sup>. In a further dramatic turn, in 2016 the government voted a law dictating only four licenses for nationwide broadcast private channels can be issued among six channels that have been operating from 1989 to 2016 under provisional licenses. However, soon after the license auction in September 2016, the Greek courts annulled the whole process, while the Council of State determined that “the auction process had been unconstitutional as it had not been supervised by the National Council for Radio and Television (ESR)” (Maltezou and Georgizas 2016). To this date, December 2017, all of the Greek channels continue to operate on their past temporary licenses while the four networks that won the bid at the auction are still waiting for their reimbursement. Nevertheless, this turbulent and distressing context that has already led to protests and strikes (see Chrysopoulos 2015), in a way signifying the end of an era and at the same time a new beginning in Greek television, provides us with the necessary historical distance – almost three decades – to begin a thorough and more detached examination of one of the most important moments of Greek television fiction in the private-channel epoch.

*I Tris Charites/The Three Graces* aired their first episode on February 8, 1990, ushering in a new era in Greek television. It was the first episode of a comedy show, broadcast two and a half months after the first transmission of Mega Channel (November 20, 1989), which, in its turn, was the first private channel to operate in Greece, soon followed by ANT1 (first transmission December 1989), and later by Star Channel (first transmission December 1993). *The Three Graces* was a phenomenal success for Mega with impressive ratings of up to 65% (Kokouvas 2016), and is today considered one of the best comedy shows in the history of Greek television. The show focuses on three sisters that are forced to cohabitate again after a period of years in their paternal house, now home of the youngest, and every episode features their comical everyday life adventures. This article mainly sheds light on the sitcom’s first season. I argue that *The Three Graces’* two novice

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the consequences of the financial crisis on Greek television fiction, see Aitaki (2015).

writers/showrunners, Michalis Reppas and Thanassis Papathanasiou<sup>2</sup> succeeded in creating the first Greek sitcom of private television<sup>3</sup> – adapted to Greek cultural reality and television industry parameters –, aided by a strong cast, their most intelligent script, and imbuing the narrative with a number of intertextual references and progressive gender politics.

Unfortunately, to this day and to the best of my knowledge, there is no systematic academic analysis of the wealth and plurality of genres Greek television offered viewers in the late 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, the very few journal articles and rare theses that exist today, as well as relevant conferences hopefully mark a long overdue academic interest in those cultural programmes. It is in this context of absence of studies on *The Three Graces* that this essay serves as an introduction, acknowledging the show's cultural importance and briefly putting forward the main themes, the structure and its sociocultural resonance regarding gender politics in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Sitcom television theory and content analysis will assist in showing how *The Three Graces* have adopted and/or revised the main traits of the American genre, while gender theory and Greek sociopolitical history will unpack the show's gender representation. In addition, applying the tool of 'primary sources' from The New Film History arsenal to television narratives, I am adding commentary from one of the showrunners, Michalis Reppas, who graciously accepted a Skype interview in July 2016, and whose comments and clarifications regarding the origins of the show, its production and themes are used at several points of the discussion below to clarify and highlight the relevant examined areas. I believe this analysis approach, first, avoids treating the sitcom as an "ahistorical and static" text – a methodology whose shortcomings are clearly apparent in Jason Mittell (2004: 4-5), and second offers multi-layered explanations of a cultural

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<sup>2</sup> I should note that Michalis Reppas and Thanassis Papathanasiou's debut TV show was quickly followed by numerous other television hits in the 1990s, films in the late 1990s and 2000s, as well as popular theatre plays. Reppas and Papathanasiou are 'responsible' for the revival of the Greek popular cinema of the late 1990s and early 2000s (*Safe Sex* [1999], *To klama vgike ap' ton Paradeiso/Crying... Silicon Tears* [2001]). In a way, I consider the duo as the continuation of Filipoimin Finos (the founder of Finos Film and the main force behind the majority of the classic Greek films of the Old Greek Cinema) and writers such as Alekos Sakellarios.

<sup>3</sup> Fictional comedy shows that share the main sitcom traits existed also in the pre-private era and were broadcast in the two national channels. For instance, *Ta kathimerina/Everyday Things* (1983-1984, 62 episodes) ERT and *Ta liontaria tou kyr Ilii/The Lion Cubs of Mister Ilias* (1985, 31 episodes) ERT, both directed and written by Giannis Dalianidis, one of the most significant directors of the Old Greek Cinema and the master of the musical genre, are half-hour comedies revolving around a specific number of characters in a specific setting. Yet, very few episodes exist today so that any effort to examine them will lead to incomplete observations.

product, such as a television show, which *a priori* exists at the crux of various influences.

### THE SITUATION COMEDY AKA SITCOM

The situation comedy/sitcom is among the most durable and popular television formats in the western world. They are ubiquitous in American as well as global televisions but as Mittell (2004: 5) observes any attempt to arrive at an “inherent meaning of a genre such as the sitcom,” with a life that spans over seven decades, is “automatically doomed to oversimplification and partiality.” After all, this article does not aim at providing a history of the genre or an evaluation of its cultural legacy. Instead, it is an attempt to briefly present the basic narrative structures and industrial parameters taken from the American paradigm and adopted to a Greek sociocultural landscape and gave birth to *The Three Graces*, ushering an era of similar female-driven narratives, such as *I filenades/Girlfriends* (1992-1993) ANT1, *Ke i tesseris itan yperoxes/The Fabulous Four* (1992-1994) MEGA, *Mana ine monomia/There's Only One Mother* (1993-1994) MEGA, *Dolce Vita* (1995-1997) MEGA and *Kare tis damas/Four Queens* (1997-2000) MEGA. A brief presentation of the American prototype is in order to clarify the construction and facilitate the ensuing analysis of *The Three Graces*.

The sitcom is a specific televisual structure (both narratively and technically) that originated in the US during the Golden Age of Radio of the 1920s<sup>4</sup> before establishing itself as a television staple on American television since its infancy (late 1940s and early 1950s). According to Gary Edgerton (2007: 130), “[t]he first television sitcom, *Mary Kay and Johnny*, premiered on November 18, 1947 [...] featuring the misadventures of two young, attractive newlyweds and their baby boy.” Among the pioneering sitcoms, Edgerton (ibid.) includes *The Goldbergs* (1949-1954) CBS, *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951-1953) NBC, *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) CBS and *The Honeymooners* (1955-1956) CBS. Although the genre is quite difficult to delineate, this paper adopts James Roman's definition, according to which, “[t]he situation comedy, or sitcom, is an enduring television programming genre that weaves a narrative of humor within the context of a perception of domestic routine” (2005: 93). Roman's definition has the advantage of being general enough to embrace a variety of different sitcoms and also points to the importance of humor in everyday life, the cornerstone of the genre. Apart from the centrality of comic events, the classical American sitcom – at least in the sense people have known it in the 1970s,

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<sup>4</sup> According to Jim Cox (2007: 2) the first radio situation comedy is the 15-minute *Sam 'n' Henry* that was broadcast in January 1926 on the WGN radio station in Chicago, before moving to another station and finally arriving at CBS and television with the new title *Amos 'n' Andy* in 1951.

1980s and 1990s – is accompanied by a number of fixed characteristics, both technical and narrative. Sitcom episodes are twenty to thirty-minute narratives, filmed primarily in a three or four-camera studio set up, usually in front of a live audience. The action takes place in “enclosed, repetitive places, with a strong sense of orientation” (Savorelli 2005: 23), the characters draw from stereotypical paradigms (such as the Fool, the Scoundrel or the Innocent)<sup>5</sup>, and the jokes’ punch lines are underlined by the use of the laughing track, which functions meta-comically to sanction “their effectiveness” and, teach the potential viewers how “to recognize the show’s comic style” (ibid.: 22).

The late 1990s and especially the 2000s re-introduced the use of the single-camera set-up – which was applied in the earlier days of American television – and opted to also film on location while dispensing with the laughing track. This led to the creation of a number of widely popular and acclaimed sitcoms, such as *The Office* (2005-2013) NBC, *30 Rock* (2006-2013) NBC, and *Modern Family* (2009-present) ABC, as well as the reinvigoration of the genre. However, the traits mentioned above still dominate a number of American sitcoms produced in the 2010s, such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) CBS, *2 Broke Girls* (2011-present) CBS, and *The Odd Couple* (2015-present) CBS. Yet, this chapter concentrates on the sitcom as structured by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the time of *The Three Graces*’ broadcast to discern similarities and differences and to perhaps argue for the existence of a Greek sitcom. *The Three Graces* were conceived, produced and aired at a time when among their popular counterparts one finds *Family Ties* (1982-1989) NBC, *Kate & Allie* (1984-1989) CBS, *Who’s the Boss* (1984-1992) ABC, *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) NBC, and *Full House* (1987-1995) ABC, shows that also aired on Greek television in syndication.

### THE PRIVATE TELEVISION ERA: THE GREEK SITCOM IS BORN

Reppas shared with me that *The Three Graces* was born when Papathanasiou and himself conceived of a TV script about three specific female actors of the *Elefthero Theatro/Free Theatre* – one of the most important theatre groups in Greece, which began its journey in the 1970s –, Anna Panayiotopoulou, Mina Adamaki and Mirka Papanakonstantinou. Although all three read, enjoyed and agreed to participate, Papanakonstantinou finally backed out, and Nena Menti took her place. Reppas added that it was actually producer Elvira Ralli who chose *The Three Graces*

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5 Based on David Grote’s tripartite categorization of comic characters, originating in antiquity, Richard Butsch (2005: 111) finds that it is the Fool that prevails in the sitcom, either as the protagonist (*I Love Lucy* [1951-1957] CBS, *All in the Family* [1971-1979] CBS), or as a supporting character (Raymond’s dad in *Everybody Loves Raymond* [1996-2005] CBS).

between the two proposals he and Papathanasiou brought to her, and underlined the instrumental role Ralli played in what was to become a phenomenal television success. Ralli's key role in the production – after all without her, the show might have never aired – also underscores a basic thesis of contemporary television theory, namely the significance of close examination of production practices which “inordinately affect the stories, images, and ideas that project into our homes” (Lotz 2007: 3).

*The Three Graces* premiered in 1990 and concluded its run in 1992 after three seasons and 90 episodes. The first season comprises 22 episodes, the second 39 and the third 28 – not counting episode 76, which celebrates the show, including interviews with the cast, outtakes, and brief scenes from past episodes. The number of episodes for a typical 1980s American sitcom in the 1980s and 1990s varies between 22 to 26, covering nine months – from late September to May. The Greek show's inconsistent number of season episodes cannot be explained without information provided by the producers and/or Mega Channel. Mega, as Reppas shared with me wanted to capitalize on the success and kept requesting more episodes. We can safely hypothesize that the network's financial strategy betrays inexperience in long-term planning and/or television management as the insistence on more episodes that resulted in an arbitrary and uneven number of season episodes may have contributed to the writers' decision to end the show despite its impressive ratings.

*The Three Graces* abides by the American format in the following ways: each episode lasts from 25 to 27 minutes (despite being a little longer than the average 21 to 25 minute duration of the 1980s American sitcoms) in a 45-minute TV slot with two commercial breaks, the action takes place in specific enclosed spaces and filming uses the three-camera set up. There is no use of a laugh track in *The Three Graces* or the overwhelming majority of Greek sitcoms for that matter. Prolific director/producer/showrunner Nikos Mastorakis, who has worked in Greek television since its creation in 1966, incorporated this element in his sitcom *Kalinichta mama/Goodnight Mom* (1995-1996) ANT1, but the show was not successful and both viewers and critics did not take well to the use of the “canned laughter” – the laugh track as it is translated in Greek – (Makarenia 2016).

In the first episode, older sister Olga (Panagiotopoulou) asks her little sister Irini (Adamaki) to put her up for a couple of weeks while her apartment is being renovated. Irini agrees reluctantly as she is accustomed to living alone. Before the episode ends, middle sister Maria (Menti) discovers her husband is cheating on her and runs to her two sisters, who cannot but welcome her in the house for a period of

time. Of course, neither Olga nor Maria ever leaves – despite a couple of episodes in season 2 –, and their paternal house becomes the basic space in which their stories unfold. Olga, the eldest, is a widow who's been raising a young daughter – currently studying in the U.K. – while managing the antique store her husband left her. Maria, the middle sister, is an advertising executive, who divorces her husband in the first episode after she realizes he's having an affair. Finally, Irini, the youngest, is a single, civil servant at the court, and has been living in their family house alone since their parents died and her two sisters had left. Each character represents an entirely different type, although Grote's Scoundrel-Fool-Innocent categorization cannot successfully be applied here. Yet, each sister is easily recognizable through distinct personality traits. Olga is loud and domineering, Maria is energetic and sexual and Irini is reserved and romantic. They are all well educated, independent, hard working, sensitive and progressive regarding social issues, and a little snobbish. The sisters' similarities as well as their blood relation help them overcome the obstacles in their everyday lives while the exaggerated differences in their temperament – essential component of the comedy mode – provide the necessary narrative conflict as well as the base of the humorous situations.

Olga, Maria and Irini are supported by a number of recurring/secondary characters otherwise known as the B cast (Savorelli 2010: 46). There is the sisters' younger brother Andreas (played by Reppas himself), a student of agriculture, who usually visits his sisters when he is broke, hungry or in need of clean clothes. Bebeka (Anna Kyriakou) is their older aunt who acts as a reconciliatory force and a voice of reason during moments of tension among the three sisters. Her name actually means "little girl" in Greek and the character's youthfulness and *joie de vivre* despite her age provide many comic moments. Bebeka is married to Aristides, a man set in his ways who doesn't take her out or pay a lot of attention to her, thus resulting to Bebeka complaining and even contemplating divorce. Aristides is never actually seen on screen, following a sitcom tradition of unseen characters – which is adopted by a long tradition of invisible yet mentioned and/or referred to characters in novels and plays from the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – that nevertheless play a significant part in the general narrative, such as Vera in *Cheers* (1982-1993) NBC, Maris in *Frasier* (1993-2004) NBC, Stan in *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) NBC, and more recently Mrs. Wolowitz in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-present) CBS. Teti (Anna Kouri), Olga's daughter who in season one is studying art history in London, and Dina (Eleni Kastani), Olga's employee complete the B cast with intermittent appearances although Teti's role becomes more important in seasons two and three as she abandons her studies and settles in Athens.

Each sitcom episode usually follows certain guidelines. A hands-on approach is offered by author and professor of art history, Noah Charney in the 2014 December issue of *The Atlantic*:

Every sitcom episode has a main plot (story A), as well as one or two subplots (stories B and C), three main acts, divided by two commercial breaks [...] with 3-5 scenes per act [and] the main protagonist(s) barely change from one episode to the next, let alone from season to season.

Indeed, the viewing of a random number of popular sitcoms' episodes, confirms Charney's rules. Episode 1x03 of *Kate & Allie* (1984), episodes 3x03 and 7x02 of *Friends* ([1994-2004] NBC) (1996 and 2000), and even the finale of *2 Broke Girls*' season five (5x22, 2016) share the same number of scenes (from 11 to 13), not to mention the same space(s), A, B and/or C plot points as well as the maintenance of the personality traits of the central character(s).

Each of the 22 episodes of *The Three Graces*' first season does indeed contain 12-13 scenes. The first season acquaints the viewers with each sister while focusing on specific thematic areas. The difficulty of cohabitating with relatives, inheritance issues, common fears and everyday mishaps are among the main A plot points around which each episode revolves. Yet not all episodes contain a B plot. For instance episode 4 of the first season is entirely focused on Olga's daughter Teti and the fact that the boyfriend she brings back from London is Japanese, the plot of episode 15 of the same season focuses on Maria's ex-husband impending nuptials and her reaction, while episode 35 from season 2 is a long dinner the sisters prepare for two old friends.

This observation differentiates *The Three Graces* from its contemporary American counterpart. This also results in the episodes' creating the impression of being 'slower' – if one also takes the show's editing into account – when paralleled with a contemporary American sitcom or when viewed today. Another ingredient missing from the Greek show is the pre-credit brief scene, "called a teaser or a humper" (Linda Aronson 2000: 15) just before the sitcom's theme song, which resembles "a comedy sketch" (ibid.), and is usually irrelevant to the episode's plot. This cold open which is defined as the "sudden start of the episode with an introductory sequence before the opening theme" is "a typical element" of the sitcom genre and "is also used by several non-comic shows as 'bait,' to prevent the audience from fleeing after the opening credits" (Savorelli 2005: 140).

Aesthetically, *The Three Graces* proposed a more sophisticated version of the Greek home. The three sister's house is beautiful and spacious, decorated with gusto and elegance, avoiding many traditional objects and furniture of the era that were to be gradually replaced in the 1990s but still much in use in the 1980s. The upright piano in the main living room, the Yannis Tsarouchis painting above it as well as the Yannis Moralis painting next to main entrance – the paintings changed in subsequent seasons – are clear indications of refinement and class. Reppas underlined the contribution of set designer Dinos Petratos in the final look of the house. He also stressed the importance of introducing or further familiarizing viewers with major Greek painters, as well as another 'image' of what a Greek home could be, thus acknowledging implicitly the vital cultural character and power of his work.

Another factor that underlines the show's cultural significance and 'educating' potential is the great number of intertextual references that abound in the dialogue – not to mention each title episode – apart, of course, from the obvious reference of the show's title which leads directly to both Anton Chekhov's classical play *Three Sisters* (1900), Greek Mythology (the Three Graces, Aglaia, Euphrosyne and Thalia, were "goddesses of beauty and charm," and "the personification of joy and well being" [Daly 2002: 61]), and Sandro Botticelli's renaissance painting 'Primavera', which is evident in the postures and setting of the three sisters during the opening credits. These references – that could and should be examined in depth in a future study – vary from allusions to Greece's shared cultural capital (from popular film to song titles) to more obscure mentions of history and art.

For instance, in the fourth episode of season 1, Olga's daughter, Teti, is visiting from London and is bringing her friend John. The three sisters initially fantasize John having a royal title and them sipping tea in his castle only to find out that John is Japanese and his actual name is Ugetsu Monogatari. In our discussion, Reppas revealed that both he and Papathanasiou knew that the reference to Kenji Mizoguchi's 1953 masterpiece would go unnoticed by the majority of viewers. He added that before actually agreeing to include the name, they joked that only director/actor Stamatis Fasoulis – one of the most important theatre people in Greece – would get the reference but they decided that this was more than enough. The Ugetsu reference is indeed difficult to decode but numerous other references to classical composers (Chopin, Mozart), Nobel laureates (Odysseas Elytis and Giorgos Seferis), philosophers (Jean-Paul Sartre), operas (Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*) and art films (Luis Buñuel's *Belle du jour*) are certainly easier to recognize and may even energize a viewer's curiosity.

The *mise-en-scène* emphasizes the dialogue and the editing is simple and unobtrusive. There is usually camera movement in the establishing shot of each scene, accompanied occasionally by a zoom out to orient the viewer and show the space. For instance, a scene in episode 1x08 opens with a close-up of the kitchen table only for the camera to zoom out and move to the left to reveal the three sisters having lunch in the kitchen or a scene that opens with a window and shows the three sisters and aunt Bebekka sitting in the living room in episode 1x12. Medium shots abound and the dialogue between the three sisters is either structured with a two-shot followed by the third sister on the same type of shot and the *champ-contrechamp* technique when two sisters are talking. The aesthetic result would certainly seem prosaic to viewers today but one should take into consideration that Greek private television was in its infancy at the end of the 1980s and that until the 2000s, television did not have “pretensions toward high aesthetic value” as Mittell notes (2004, xiii). On the other hand, taking into consideration the nascent television industry, the lack of organization structure and finance of, let’s say, its American counterpart, and acknowledging the prevalent sociopolitical trends of Greek culture in the late 1980s, the people behind *The Three Graces* did try to achieve an aesthetically superior result. The visual look of the show, from the protagonists’ wardrobe by well-known designers to the paintings, the furniture, and the various *objets d’art*, is certainly impressive for its time. As Reppas told me, the creators soon realized – as the sitcom became widely popular – that all these artistic decisions such as having a Tsarouchis painting staring at the viewers week after week, had the potential of informing – I would add educate – thousands of Greeks through a mass medium the way the school system of that era could not. In this way, *The Three Graces* realized one of television’s functions, namely its impact on culture.

## FEMINISM AND GENDER POLITICS

*The Three Graces* is the first show on Greek television with three main female characters, three women who despite their faults and mistakes, stand strong and deal with whatever comes their way. In this sense, *The Three Graces* follows a television tradition of strong female heroines that began with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) CBS and continued in the 1980s with *Kate & Allie*, *The Golden Girls* and *Designing Women* (1986-1993) CBS.

According to Bonnie J. Dow (1990: 263-264), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show’s* “character of Mary Richards as an independent career woman [...] challenged a television tradition that had stereotyped women as ‘goodwives,’ ‘bitches,’ ‘victims,’ and ‘courtesans’” and “was undoubtedly influenced by the developing women’s liberation movement.” For, as Lauren Rabinovitz observes (2002: 145), it is the television sitcom that is the “genre most consistently associated with feminist

heroines and with advocating progressive politics of liberal feminism,” constructing “powerful everyday knowledge about political and cultural feminism.”

The Greek sitcom, however, did not follow its American past paradigms (after all Reppas told me that before the show, he didn't even own a television set and the only television person he knew and admired was Lucille Ball), but rather the political changes that Greece experienced in the 1980s. The decade constitutes a great shift in the country's sociopolitical life as the 1981 elections brought the socialist party PASOK, led by Andreas Papandreou, to power with an impressive “majority of 172 out of 300 seats in parliament” (Spyropoulos 2008: 571). In 1982, the parliament voted law 1250/82, which “legalized civil marriage, abolished (in theory) the dowry system, eased the process for obtaining a divorce, and decriminalized adultery” (Gallant 2013: 79), altering gender politics, and the way traditional roles for women were viewed thereafter.<sup>6</sup> Although traditional gender paradigms still exist in the country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – which is also the case in a number of western countries – the decade undoubtedly helped advance gender equality. *The Three Graces* is among the cultural products of the period that consolidated specific female representations, such as the working mother, while promoting representations that were not accepted in the past and/or viewed with great skepticism if not downright hostility – as is the case of the divorcee who enjoys her sex life. Perhaps it is this progressive representation of women contained in the script that led to a number of rejections for showrunners Reppas and Papathanasiou before being finally accepted by Mega, the only channel that decided to green light their project (Dimitriou 2014).

Thematically, the show foregrounds everyday life and does not insist on the three sister's need of a man to find happiness and/or fulfillment. In fact, only five out of the 22 episodes of season one (22.7 percent) contain the sisters' love life as their A plot. Unlike their US past counterparts (*The Golden Girls*, *Designing Women* [1986-1993] CBS) or even contemporary shows (*The Mindy Project* [2012-2015] Fox; [2016-present] Hulu), where finding the right one, or a right one for now is the main narrative goal of at least one female protagonist, Olga, Maria and Irini seem quite content living their life without men.

More importantly, these episodes (6, 7, 8, 9 and 11) highlight how the sociopolitical climate of the 1980s had empowered women to own their sexuality and watches the sisters behave in a manner that would have been unprecedented 20 years before. For instance, in episode 6, Olga and Maria take their shy and conservative little sister Irini out in a bar so that they can meet men. Inexperienced Irini sees two men

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6 For more on the Family Bill of 1982, see Hart (1990) and Clogg (2013).

looking at their table and believes she is the center of their attention. When she realizes the two men are interested in her sisters, she frowns but accepts it. Olga and Maria invite them over to dance and continue drinking. As they start to talk, however, they both reminisce over their unfortunate luck in the love department (Olga's husband died young while Maria's was an adulterer) and they start crying pushing back their two guests. After their drunken sentimentalism ends their night abruptly, Olga and Maria find out their two suitors are married. However, they feel no anxiety and/or sadness at this discovery. Maria sums up their state of mind perfectly at the end of the episode when she tells her sister "My Olga, the important thing is that we are doing great; after all, bars open every night in Athens." Olga and Maria are two emancipated, working women in the late 1980s and despite being single, they do not consider their unlucky encounter as a decisive event and/or try to dissect the reasons the two men lied to them, as was the case, for instance, in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) HBO, the show that is considered a radical narrative regarding women's sexuality. However provocative and liberating regarding female sexuality, *Sex and the City* insisted many times on scrutinizing the four girls' failed affairs.<sup>7</sup> In the case of *The Three Graces*, however, the writers opt for a more empowering reaction, and have the sisters firmly acknowledge the men's hypocrisy and discard them without having to even momentarily be upset, thus commenting on their autonomy and strength.

This female empowerment continues in episodes 7 and 8, where Maria begins and ends a sexual relationship with a young man in his early twenties. Both Olga and Irini oppose the affair either stressing that it is 'dangerous' because of the generation gap or noting the young man must be psychologically troubled. Only aunt Bebeka congratulates Maria upon seeing her lover's photo. She tells her that she now regrets having been with only one man, and that she is reminded by the French play *Quarante Carats* (1967) by Pierre Barillet et Jean-Pierre Grédy – whose theme is a similar central relationship – and finds the whole thing really exciting. On the other hand, Andreas seems to be indifferent to his sister's new 'adventure' and when asked by Olga if he has ever slept with an older woman, he retorts: "You are old, but so is Jacqueline Bisset," underlining that beauty is his major concern and not

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7 For instance, in episode four of season six entitled "Pick-A-Little, Talk-A-Little" (2004), Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) recounts her date to Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her boyfriend Burger (Ron Livingston). The two women talk about how many times he kissed her goodnight, hypothesize about why he did not come up to Miranda's apartment despite her asking and concluded that he would definitely call and that the date had been a success. Even though *Sex and the City* did celebrate a woman's right to own her sexuality and to have multiple sexual partners, the scene mentioned above (and similar ones that are spread in the six seasons of the show) did reveal the heroines' insecurities and their disappointment over male rejection.

a woman's years. In other words, as long as he finds a woman attractive, he does not take into account anything else. Despite everything, Maria seems genuinely attracted to younger Stavros (Andreas Andreopoulos) and enjoys her days with him. The two-episode narrative arc is concluded when Stavros is sent to do his – still obligatory in Greece – military service. He asks her not to wait for him and they break up. Yet, once again the episode opts for optimism as the ending, which takes place a few weeks later, shows Maria about to leave the house on a date with a younger colleague.

This two-episode arc is also interesting as Reppas shared that the ending took him and Papathanasiou ten days to write as this reverse May-December scenario became an ideological conflict for them and they did not want to treat it as another failed romance because the woman was older than the man. The writers' unwillingness to end the relationship as a result of the age difference even resulted in their contemplating adding Andreopoulos to their B cast. Finally, however, they solved their conundrum by sending Stavros away for his military service but by also showing Maria on a date with a younger man, underlining that female age is not a factor in a sexual relationship.

## EPILOGUE

Television has been considered a “culture's primary storyteller and definer of cultural patterns by providing information and entertainment for an enormous and heterogeneous mass public” (Tueth, 2005: 27). In addition, television genres are not only industry products but also cultural ones that engage in a ‘silent’ – at least during the pre-Internet era – conversation with the viewers. The most popular television shows of an era can have the power to influence their audience, make them question their views regarding specific social issues and/or even change their minds. In this article, I combined a targeted interpretative examination of *The Three Graces* with historical information and the co-creator's insights to reveal not only how the show's gender politics stemmed from a specific ideological aspect of the 1980s but also its cultural relevance.

Whether featuring in lists and/or articles of the best television comedies (n.a. 2012; Savvidis and Kiorri 2015; Daponte 2015) or discussed on daytime shows (zappit team 2016), *The Three Graces* continue to be part of the shared cultural capital of Greeks in the 2010s, especially thanks to the Internet age that allowed the younger generations to watch the show. *The Three Graces'* continuing popularity is proved through the reunion of the three ‘sisters’ in a series of TV commercials commissioned by a prominent Greek coffee company in early 2017. The three videos combined, written and directed by the original creators (Marketing Week

2017), have already had more than one million views on the company's official YouTube channel, without counting numerous other uploads or shares on social media.

The above also underline the relevance of *The Three Graces* today, despite the decades that separate their finale from our time. I would argue that the show has reached the status of a 'classic' text, in that its structure and thematic narrative preoccupations transcend style, aesthetics and resonate throughout diverse sociocultural periods. In a way, *The Three Graces* and several other highly popular shows (both dramas and comedies) can stand alongside the classical films of the Greek Old Cinema tradition that are still enjoyed by thousands of viewers whenever they are broadcast. After all, it is television of the 1980s and 1990s, as Thomas Elsaesser (2005: 25) claims, that "took over the social function of addressing its audiences as the nation" from cinema due to the decline of national cinematographies in Europe – and especially in Greece. It is therefore time to finally address academically the rich production of televised fiction in Greece since the beginning of privatized television in 1989. The absence of similar academic studies, indicative of a past trend that insisted on demonizing popular culture and excluding it from academia, is hopefully nearing its end. A canon of past and contemporary TV fiction in Greece is long overdue and it befalls to my generation of academics to construct it, study it, teach it and finally pass it on as the first scientific step for future analyses, additions, and/or revisions by the new scholars of the future.

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