

# **‘What Am I Now If I’m not a Father?’: Fox Mulder’s Ageing Masculinity in *The X-Files***

Sara Martín

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona<sup>1</sup>

Long-running series, whether they are audiovisual or in print, must eventually face the issue of the protagonists’ ageing. Children may grow into young adults, as they do in J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) and its corresponding film adaptation (2001–2011). Adults may grow into elderly persons, as it is the case of detective John Rebus, the protagonist of the noir series by Scottish author Ian Rankin, started in 1987 when the character was 38 and now well-past the protagonist’s retirement age.<sup>1</sup> The TV series I explore here, *The X-Files* (1993–2002), the popular show created by Chris Carter for Fox TV, is a mixture of detective fiction, gothic, and science fiction, focused on two FBI agents, Fox Mulder (played by David Duchovny) and Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson). Both are professional law enforcers who should retire at age 57, as the agency’s regulations dictate (see FBI). This is the age that the male protagonist, supposedly born on 13 October 1961,<sup>2</sup> reaches in the last season, released in 2018; Scully, born on 23 February 1964, is a few years younger, but, even so, she is just three years away from retirement as an FBI agent (she is also a doctor) by the end of the series. This specific issue, however, and more generally the agents’ ageing, is never considered. Instead, Carter focuses the series finale, and thus the whole narrative arc of his two main characters, on the issue of Scully’s fertility and, in particular, on the question of who is the biological father of her son William.

The ending of season 8 (broadcast on 20 May 2001) had confirmed that Mulder is the boy’s father, in the scene of “Existence” (S8 E21) when Scully introduces baby

---

<sup>1</sup> This text is the pre-print version of the chapter published on 11 December 2025 in the volume *Masculinities in Contemporary Science-Fiction Television*, eds. Sara Martín and Michael Pitts, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 111-126, ISBN 9781350458437 (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/masculinities-in-contemporary-sciencefiction-television-9781350458437/>). The text is uploaded in UAB’s repository with Bloomsbury’s permission. For any doubt, contact the author, [Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat). Readers MAY NOT reproduce or circulate this text, which is protected by full copyright. The author invites readers to read and cite the original Bloomsbury volume.

William to her partner, after his return from a long period in hiding. However, the villain, the Cigarette-Smoking Man (Mulder's own biological father), claims in season 11, set in 2018, that he himself is William's father, a revelation which makes an anguished Mulder wonder in the last scene of the whole series "Who am I if I'm not a father?" ("My Struggle IV" S11 E10). This is surprising since, although Scully's identity is closely tied to motherhood along the series, Mulder is never presented as a fully committed father. Scully's double disclosure that although William, already 17 in Seasons 10 and 11, is her son but not Mulder's, and that she is in fact pregnant with a new baby, this time undoubtedly by her partner, pushes aside all the other key themes which the series has dealt with, including the threat of alien invasion, political conspiracy, and monstrosity. The focus falls instead very narrowly on Carter's main obsession—establishing who owns Scully's body—and on bolstering Mulder's manhood as the controller of her reproductive capacities.

I explore here, therefore, how the series' finale affects the reading of the whole *X-Files*, and especially the interpretation of the relationship between the protagonists. I argue that Carter's need to prove Mulder's manhood, at a point when his main male character is facing the end of his middle-age years, overcomes all other considerations in the narrative and reduces Scully's supporting role to that of a mere ancillary object in this rather preposterous test of manhood.

### **Ageing with *The X-Files*: Fans, Actors, Characters**

*The X-Files* was launched in 1993, lasting originally for nine seasons, until 2002, a period also including the release in 1998 of the film, *The X-Files: Fight the Future*. Carter's Ten Thirteen Productions and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox revived the franchise for a second film, the ill-conceived *The X-Files: I Want to Believe* (2008), which killed if not the fans' appetite at least the interest of the general audience. Carter's series, however, returned in 2016, with a six-episode run, and again in 2018, with ten more episodes. Despite the very moderate success of both seasons, Carter and Duchovny have manifested their willingness to eventually work on further seasons, while Anderson, who publicized her disappointment with the finale in a popular tweet,<sup>3</sup> is adamant that she will not play Scully again.<sup>4</sup>

When the series started, Mulder was a youthful 32-year-old man and Duchovny one year older, whereas Scully was 29 and Anderson just 25. Other series—particularly soap operas such as BBC's *EastEnders*, started in 1985 and still ongoing—may have

accompanied fans, actors, and characters for many decades, but even so it is not so habitual for them to stay in touch for 35 years without major gaps, as it is the case of *The X-Files*. David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, a gothic fantasy series with close ties with *The X-Files* as its most immediate predecessor, aired originally only for two seasons (1990, 1991), followed by a film, *Fire Walk with Me* (1992). When Lynch's series briefly returned in 2017, there was already a gap of 25 years between the film and the new season, whereas in the case of *The X-Files*, the gap was of only eight years. The ageing process of FBI Agent Dale Cooper (b. 1954) and the actor who plays him, Kyle MacLachlan (b. 1959), appeared to be, thus, much more sudden than the same process affecting Mulder and Duchovny.

Unlike what happens in print fiction, long-running TV series necessarily portray simultaneously how characters and actors age. Commenting on detective fiction serials, Harris notes that viewers who have "formed a strong attachment over a number of years (...) may normalize the ageing process, insisting on the characters' continuity despite wrinkles, white hair, and other physical signs of age" (16). She names women actors as part of this process (Joan Hickson in Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple*, 1984–1996, or Helen Mirren in *Prime Suspect*, 1991–2006), but the fact is that the process of ageing affects differently the men actors. *The X-Files* has a long, intense relationship with its fans, as its growth in popularity overlapped with the growth firstly of the Internet and, next, of the social networks. Thus, most critics agree that Carter, a staunch 'no-romo' who had always resisted turning the deep friendship of Mulder and Scully into romance, unwisely gave in to the (female) fan pressure of the 'shippers.' As Chin has observed, "unlike the rose-tinted picture painted in early fan studies of a democratic and nurturing fan culture, fandom is wrought with tension, where fans' status quo is often challenged, as relationships and allegiances shift" (98). When the fans saw the new seasons, not all were pleased. Bethan Jones, who ran a survey with 2,688 valid responses, reports a general displeasure, with "few fans" (27) approving of the subplot by which the Cigarette-Smoking Man turns out to be William's father.

More worrying, however, is the widespread misogynistic rejection, both in the media and among some fans, of Anderson's alleged use of Botox and plastic surgery, a rejection which Lyons reports in a study covering the new seasons of both *The X-Files* and *Twin Peaks*. Kyle MacLachlan, Lyons comments, "was praised for his appearance" but although "he was also suspected of having plastic surgery" these suspicions were voiced "without the same level of judgment leveled against Anderson" (32). Duchovny,

who escaped negative comment, was found to have aged well. As Lyons notes, “Arguably, for older fans, the aged appearance and continued sex appeal of these actors was important in not only reinforcing their fandom and reminding them of the original run of the series but in reassuring themselves” (41), since they had also aged. I am here speculating that the more misogynistic criticism may have come not necessarily from male fans who might dislike Anderson’s alleged use of artificial means to keep her good looks, but from female fans envious of her mature beauty. Contrarily, Duchovny’s attractive ageing body, displayed shirtless in some scenes of “Babylon” (S10 E5), may have pleased both mature male fans similarly fit and mature female heterosexual fans



rejoicing in the permanence of the star’s sex appeal.

**Figure 7.1: David Duchovny appears shirtless in a hallucinatory scene (“Babylon” S10 E5)**

Armengol warns that “not only is aging a central concern for men but also that their approaches to the subject may be more complex and varied than has been generally assumed” (363). Although this may be certainly the case, and the audiovisual media are now more open to showing ageing masculinities which acknowledge men’s vulnerabilities (see Oró-Piquer and Sako), Segal disputes that this newer view of mature masculinity has really brought in a different understanding of manhood:

(...) if the rush for Viagra is anything to go by, I fear much more will need to change in the still obdurate symbolic and social hierarchies of gender and ageing before such accounts of the ‘softening’ of older men’s activities can begin to undermine the phallus as the privileged marker of masculinity. (90)

Kornfield shows a similar scepticism when she notes that although 21<sup>st</sup>-century prime time crime dramas such as *Bones* (2005–2017), *Fringe* (2008–2013), *The Mentalist* (2008–2015), or *Castle* (2009–2016) avoid the macho image of, for instance, Tom

Selleck in *Magnum P.I.* (1980–1988), showing instead men “deeply invested in their families and characterized through the traditionally feminine trait of caring for children and the elderly” (117), their male protagonists “simultaneously perform traditionally masculine and feminine traits, without troubling the binary” (118). Mulder, absent from the screen between 2008 and 2016, roughly the period which these other series cover, does not even integrate any so-called feminine traits, having learned throughout his absence nothing about the ethics of care, and remaining as selfish as he was in the 1990s. Additionally, Duchovny, although a middle-aged rather than a senior man, benefits from the new Hollywood narrative by which US aged male actors born in the 1940s, such as Harrison Ford (b. 1941) or Robert de Niro (b. 1943), enjoy the advantages of “the default alignment of stars and hegemonic masculinity to unsettle any automatic links between retirement, ageing, and the narrative of decline” (Dolan 185). Since in *The X-Files* Mulder does not retire professionally and given that Duchovny is, currently at age 62, far from retiring, Carter focuses on the issue of the character's enduring virility, avoiding any notion of decline.<sup>5</sup>

Only Darin Morgan, the brilliant writer of a number of key self-parodic episodes in *The X-Files*, raises the issue of professional obsolescence in “The Lost Art of Forehead Sweat” (S11 E4), when two young male FBI agents, annoyed because Mulder has failed to arrest an impostor, confront him and he completely loses his habitual cool to end up screaming:

AGENT (...) The legend that I've heard so much about would have already figured out who this guy was that you've been talking to, and why we were asked to find out why you are. But I guess that's how things go: you start out a rebel, but then you get fat. And the next thing you know, you're deep state. Sad.  
MULDER Do you know who I am? I'm Fox Mulder. I was fighting the power and breaking conspiracies before you saw your first chemtrail, you punks. I'm Fox freaking Mulder, you punks! I'm Fox Mulder! Fox Mulder!

In another indispensable scene of the same episode Mulder is approached by Dr. Thaddeus They, who insists on the agent's obsolescence, given his inability to establish the truth about the alien invasion conspiracy which he has been investigating already for 35 years:

DR THEY (...) when I became aware that you were finally aware of me, I felt a professional courtesy to meet with you and to tell you this in person: you're dead. [Mulder winces]. Oh, that came out wrong. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I meant your time, Agent Mulder, your time has passed.  
MULDER Okay. So, what is, or what was my time?  
DR THEY Well, it's a time when people of power thought that they could keep their secrets secret and were willing to do anything to keep it that way. Those days

are passed. Gone. We're now living in a post-cover-up, post-conspiracy age. (...) It'll make you wish you really were dead.

When Mulder still maintains that "There's still an objective truth, an objective reality," Dr. They replies quite annoyed "Well, believe what you want to believe. That's what everybody does nowadays anyway," subtly mocking Mulder's famous poster slogan "I want to believe."

Mulder's professional obsolescence does not lead, as I have noted, to a discussion of retirement nor, as it might be suitable in a narrative about sacrificial heroism, to his death, but to a regeneration of the character in terms, as I'm arguing, of a renewal of his manliness. A peculiar problem in that sense is that although Ageing (or Age) Studies have abundantly explored third- and fourth-age masculinity—roughly, the life stages between retirement around 65 and 80, and past 80—the focus on adulthood, or the second age, is very limited, possibly because no generally accepted subdivisions between the ages of 18 and 60 have been established. There is, therefore, scant bibliography about what is generally called middle age (approximately ages 45 to 60). In a chapter of *Middle Adulthood: A Lifespan Perspective*, the volume that inaugurated the scholarly study of this stage of life—quite another matter is fiction, which overflows with stories about middle-aged characters—Wahl observes that changes in the social approach to the third age, now seen as an active post-retirement period before declining senior citizens become dependent, have also altered the way in which middle age is understood. Instead of preparation for decline, middle age is seen today "as a period that offers substantial potentials for psychological growth" (26). What is questionable, though it is increasingly common, is that late middle age and early third age should be devoted to parenthood, since it is far more habitual to reach that stage of life when children, should they exist, are already adolescents, perhaps young adults, or even parents themselves. Parenthood, however, dominates the ending that Chris Carter imagined for his series and for the love story of his ageing hero and heroine. The finale eschews, thus, the more common process of natural ageing to foreground, as I am claiming, Carter's wish to reaffirm Mulder's virility and Scully's subordinated fertility.

### **Mulder, Scully and Parenthood: Men's Control of Female Reproduction**

Of the 224 episodes of *The X-Files*, about one third correspond to stand-alone cases, known as 'the monster of the week,' whereas the remaining third, known as the 'mytharc,' constitute a serial about the impending invasion of Earth by aliens supposed

to have been present in our planet already before the rise of Homo Sapiens. Since the invasion had been announced for 2012 (this is the truth revealed at the end of the original series, in May 2002), seasons 10 and 11 question the veracity of the conspiracy which Mulder has discovered and shift the narrative towards an oncoming pandemic somehow tied to the aliens (a scenario imagined before Covid-19). Although Mulder was initially motivated by the alien abduction of his younger sister Samantha to launch his crusade against the military, the darker corners of the US Government, and the shadowy pro-alien Syndicate, Carter did not create the series to deal primarily with extraterrestrials. The unexpected pregnancy of Gillian Anderson in the second season, and her temporary absence after the birth of her daughter, prompted Carter to characterize Scully as a victim herself of alien abduction and of experimentation linked to her reproductive capacities.

Scully is rendered sterile as a result of the experiments, but she discovers in season 5 that her eggs have been used to gestate a hybrid child, six-year-old Emily, who tragically dies before Scully can claim her as her biological daughter (Mulder inadvertently hinders the adoption by disclosing to the judge that Emily is the result of clandestine alien experiments). Quite by miracle, and although spectators were not aware that Mulder and Scully were in a relationship, she announces at the end of season 7 in "Requiem" (E22) her pregnancy. Throughout seasons 8 and 9 Scully raises baby William alone, while Mulder becomes a runaway from both the aliens and the FBI, being eventually abducted by the former, killed, reborn, and finally expelled from the agency after allegedly murdering a man, who is actually an alien. In despair, Scully gives their boy away for adoption in "William" (S9 E6), choosing not to know who his adoptive parents are. Guided by strange visions, however, Scully discovers teen William's whereabouts in season 10, right before he apparently commits suicide (the boy, who has supernatural powers, is seemingly immortal).

Before I comment in more detail on William and the Cigarette-Smoking Man's claim that he is his father, I wish to consider the dynamics of the relationship between Mulder and Scully, and how they shape gender representation in *The X-Files*. Mooney rightly argues that from the very beginning Scully is victimized not because her narrative arc requires it but because in this way "Mulder can be presented as a tragic hero" (57). Handlen and Vanderweff note sneeringly that "Mulder (despite looking and sounding like David Duchovny) apparently can't find friends, much less lovers. He's so consumed by his quest to discover 'The Truth' that the thought of him having a serious

relationship or friendship is presented as laughable” (44). Inexplicably, Scully, who is equally attractive and clearly more intelligent and empathetic, devotes herself to his cause, despite the misgivings of her brother Bill and her sister Melissa, who berate Mulder for his selfishness. Whenever Scully, tired of Mulder's control of her life, engages in brief liaisons, or is about to be seduced, her choices always turn out to be dangerous men, from whom Mulder 'rescues' her. He never offers Scully romantic love, beyond a deep affection based on her generosity and loyalty toward him rather than on a genuine appreciation of her qualities.

The conservative views of Carter and his writers' team are apparent in “the unspoken assumption that Scully *wants* to be a mother” whereas “the show never fixates on Mulder's desire (or capacity) to become a father” (Mooney 117, original emphasis), at least until season 11. The script writers decided twice to deprive Scully of her babies for similar reasons: “There was a general perception that William's very existence curtailed Scully's involvement in plotting the ninth season” (Mooney 197), just as Emily would have hindered seasons six and after. Apparently, the decision to give William up for adoption was jointly taken by Carter, producer Frank Spotnitz and Duchovny, with no contribution from Anderson, who, despite being a mother, did not dispute the sexist idea that a single female FBI agent cannot be responsible for a baby.

In one of the most bizarre turns in the love story, “Per Manum” (S8 E13) reveals that Scully had undergone a failed attempt at insemination before gestating William. In season 2 the hybrid Kurt Crawford decides to preserve Scully's ovules, contravening the orders of both the aliens and their human partners, the Syndicate. Crawford passes a vial with these eggs to Mulder in season 4, and he eventually learns that they are not viable. Despite this discovery and even though nothing is said about where Mulder keeps the eggs, which should have been cryopreserved, he decides to tell Scully about them only after she survives a cancer. Astonishingly, she never questions his right to keep her eggs for years. Oddly, Scully's gynaecologist convinces her that the eggs are viable, and she asks Mulder to be her sperm donor, to which he agrees, feeling “absolutely flattered.” He stresses, nonetheless, that “this sounds really weird, I know, but I, I just wouldn't want this to come between us” (S8 E13); in short, he does not want to be her boyfriend and much less a committed father.

At some point in season 7 Mulder and Scully start having sex together as a couple, which leads to her 'miraculous' pregnancy. The end of season 9, with Mulder and Scully together in bed, fully dressed, trying to assimilate the truth of the oncoming

alien invasion after being expelled from the FBI, supposes that they will be together for long years. However, by the start of season 10 they are no longer a couple. Scully leaves Mulder, tired of his passivity in the face of an endogenous depression she herself diagnoses, though it is unclear whether the crisis that they face as a couple in the 2008 film leads to this breakup. Mulder and Scully remain friends in the years before season 10, during which she is employed as a surgeon at a hospital and he is apparently unemployed, perhaps living off the rents of his wealthy family. In 2016, after 14 years, both Mulder and Scully are readmitted in the FBI, unlikely as this is given the circumstances of their expulsion. Their sexual relationship resumes in "Plus One" (S11 E3), when a female psychopath taunts Scully: "What's he see in you, your handsome partner? (...) You're nothing but a hosebag. How old are you? 40s? Past your childbearing years. You're all dried up, not even half a woman." Shaken by these slurs, Scully asks Mulder to let her sleep chastely with him. In bed together, she starts a conversation about what might happen as they age, revealing her worries about his meeting a younger woman to start a family. When Mulder replies that she might have children with another man, Scully replies that this is not an option since, although she would like to be a mother again, "I'm at the end of that journey." The lines that follow offer no clue that Mulder wants to be a father again; actually, he even hints that she should use IVF:

MULDER At the risk of sounding insensitive, what's stopping you?  
SCULLY Besides the fact that the first time was a miracle? And besides the fact that I don't have anyone to have one with even if I could?  
MULDER You're a woman of science.

Unsurprisingly, the conversation ends up being the prelude to sex, which the agents enjoy again at the end of the episode despite Scully's initial reluctance. Some weeks later, in "Nothing Lasts Forever" (S11 E9), Scully starts another key conversation about miracles. Mulder is confused until she whispers some words to his ear, followed by her declaration that "That's my leap of faith forward. And I'd like to do it together," referring to pregnancy. Mulder, who had just told Scully he had often imagined that without him she'd be a "boss at the FBI" married "to some brain surgeon" and with "a bunch of kids that you wouldn't have to give up," wistfully replies "I've always wondered how this was gonna end."

Scully's "leap of faith" is double because she is both infertile and reaching menopause, a word never openly used by the mostly male writers of *The X-Files*. Diminishing fertility is not, in contrast, an issue for Mulder, much less so in a 21<sup>st</sup>-

century social context in which cases of male public figures becoming fathers at an advanced age are common (to name just two cases, Al Pacino has fathered a child at age 83, Bernie Ecclestone at 89). Mothers are, for obvious biological reasons, quite a different case, though this is changing thanks to IVF. Whereas the oldest mother to conceive naturally is still today Dawn Brookes, an Englishwoman who gave birth to a child in 1997 aged 59 (see Guinness World Records), Indian mother Erramatti Mangamma gave birth in 2019, aged 73, to twin girls through IVF; her husband, 83, was the donor (see Wikipedia "Pregnancy over Age 50"). Friese et al. noted already fifteen years ago that "Delayed childbearing is part of the profile of a new middle age" (2008); today, many women are having their first children past 40 and may try for one, as it can be seen, even past 70, regardless of the ethical issues involved. Scully is, then, not truly exceptional in her wish to give birth in her mid-fifties. What is preposterous is how her "leap of faith" closes a series in which either an alien invasion or an alien virus may soon destroy the world, and that the man she chooses to be her baby's father is playing a rather passive role.

Nothing indicates in *The X-Files* that the egocentric Mulder wants to be a father, but too many narrative elements insist that Scully's identity is incomplete without motherhood, at least until season 11, when it is proven that "At the root of all these episodes about reproduction is the question of paternity" (Geller 90). This is foregrounded not so much by Mulder's in-existent need to make up for the time lost with William, or by any intimations of his mortality, but by the startling revelations of the Cigarette-Smoking Man. Just as Luke Skywalker is horrified by Darth Vader's disclosure that he is his father in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Mulder carries the weight of knowing that the villain, and not Bill Mulder, the man who raised him, is his biological father. There is, therefore, nothing more humiliating for Mulder as a man than Scully's unexpected revelation of the bizarre fact that William is not his son but his father's, an admission that, besides, closely links the issue of rape with ageing fatherhood, as I discuss next.

### **Ageing Fathers: Proving Middle-Aged Manliness in *The X-Files***

There is a worrying recurrence of rape in *The X-Files*, as Linda Badley already warned before the end of the original series:

The alien abduction scenario central to *The X-Files* is a rape narrative. It echoes the countless stories in which women are abducted by sky gods with agendas. (...)

Subjected to experiments with superovulation and hybridization that render her infertile, Scully is represented as every woman exploited for her body by patriarchy and power. (6)

Fans and critics have noted that rape is, besides, often used in an extremely insensitive fashion in comic episodes such as “José Chung’s from Outer Space” (S3 E20), “Small Potatoes” (S4 E20), or “The Post-modern Prometheus” (S5 E5). This lack of empathy reaches a deplorable low in the narrative arc about the Cigarette-Smoking Man in season 11, when the villain reveals to Scully’s loyal FBI superior Skinner that William is part of Project Crossroads to create human-alien hybrids (Scully carries since her abduction alien chromosomes in her DNA, as she finds out in season 10).

This revelation links “My Struggle III” (S11 E1), written by Chris Carter himself, back to “En Ami” (S7 E15), written by William B. Davis, the elegant Canadian actor who plays the Cigarette-Smoking Man. Davis is not the only actor to have written scripts for *The X-Files*: Duchovny is credited in eight episodes, mostly co-written, Anderson is the author of one. What is exceptional is that the events which Davis imagined in the only episode he penned (though Carter intervened with some major rewrites) have taken on so much relevance. Davis has declared that “I took a different tack when assigned the role of the antagonist who was referred to by Chris Carter himself as ‘the Devil.’ I decided I was the hero and Mulder was the bad guy” (xi), yet he took inspiration for his script from the villainous Richard III in Shakespeare’s play, in particular his seduction of Lady Anne. “En Ami,” also inspired by Davis’s realization that he had never shared a scene alone with Gillian Anderson, explores a moment of weakness, he argues, and even of possible redemption for the villain: “Certainly as an actor and for the development of the character it was interesting to explore how that exposure to Scully actually changed him and how he allowed some humanity to develop” (in Peterman online). The moment is nonetheless fleeting; most infamously, the episode includes the controversial scene in which Scully, who has woken up naked in the villain’s house after having been drugged, accuses him of having sexually assaulted her, which he adamantly denies. A major problem with this episode is that “Scully needs to be a fool in order for the story to work at all” (Handlen & Vanderwerff 394). Even more objectionable is that “the episode seems to have no real understanding of just how predatory” both the villain and Davis’s plotline are (Handlen & Vanderwerff 395). To make matters even worse, Carter decided in season 10 to confirm Scully’s suspicions, having the Cigarette-Smoking Man reveal to Skinner that he did

inseminate her with his sperm that night, though he did not rape her with his own body. As he boasts before a deeply disgusted Skinner, he impregnated Scully with “Alien science. To create the first superhuman child” (“My Struggle IV” S11 E1).

As it often happens with the Cigarette-Smoking Man, whose real name is C.G.B. (Carl Gerard Busch) Spender, the thrill of horror which his actions cause is easier to understand than his motivations. Dunn and Foy argue that what makes him such a singular villain is that “he appears to perform what we call a transvaluation of power. (...) For him, power becomes not merely a means to an end but an end in itself” (151). In a key conversation between father and son in “My Struggle II” (S10 E6), Mulder criticises the villain's conception of power:

MULDER You think it's power, what you're doing, but it's not. It's sickness.

CSM It's sickness not doing it.

MULDER Spoken like a true psychopath.

CSM I didn't set out to destroy the world, Mulder. People did.



**Figure 7.2: The Cigarette-Smoking Man (William B. Davis) remains thoughtful after revealing what he did to Scully ('My Struggle IV' S11E1)**

In this classic justification scene, the aged patriarchal villain (he is about 80) claims that although the aliens predicted how humans would self-destroy, he has “changed the timetable” to accelerate the apocalypse, presumably because he is himself near death. In “My Struggle III” (S11 E1) the villain further justifies his role, against the background

of a collage of historical photos showing the turning points of history which he has manipulated: "It's been a humbling job, though I'm hardly known as a humble man," he declares. Thinking of Mulder and of his younger son, FBI Agent Jeffrey Spender, but not of William, he further declares, possibly with honesty, "I ask only for the years to show my sons and their sons I was right. What their father did had to be done."

Far from thinking of any personal greatness or his historical role, Mulder executes his father in cold blood in the last scene of the series, thus ending his patriarchal gerontocracy. The scene is confusing for Mulder, as he sees the villain kill William, when in fact the boy is using his supernatural powers to look like Mulder. When William (as Mulder) taunts the Cigarette-Smoking Man, claiming that he will not shoot dead his own son, the villain coolly replies: "I need you to know, Fox, when I gave you life, I never fathomed the moment would come when I would need to end it." The villain shoots then his youngest son, William, wrongly believing that he is Mulder, his first-born son. Appalled and without uttering a word, Mulder shoots his father for having killed his son, who, unknown to him, is actually his half-brother. Scully shows up then to clarify to a traumatized Mulder that William, whose body is lost in the waters of the harbour where the scene is set, is not his son but "an idea. Born in a laboratory," which logically disconcerts Mulder:

MULDER But you were his mother.

SCULLY No, I... I carried him. And I bore him. But I was never a mother to him. I wasn't. William... William was... For so long, I believed.

MULDER What *am* I now if I'm not a father?

SCULLY You *are* a father.

MULDER What are you talking about? [Scully puts his hand on her belly]. That's impossible.

SCULLY I know. I know it is. It's more than impossible.

(original ellipses and emphasis)

*The X-Files* ends (again) with Mulder and Scully tenderly embraced, this time watched from afar by William, whose supernatural powers have allowed him to survive the villain's bullet and drowning. Carter possibly uses this disquieting image as a clue about how the series should continue, perhaps with William becoming a true heir of his villainous father and threatening to spoil Mulder and Scully's newly-found, middle-aged happiness with their baby, his half-sibling. Carter erases the bad father from Mulder's life, and even the bad son, for William is a truly obnoxious character,<sup>6</sup> to suddenly transform the ageing Mulder from the father he never was into the father he did not know he wanted to be, all to prove his manliness to Scully and the audience. As for the impending destruction of all human life on Earth, this seems to be inevitable, a

situation in total contradiction with the couple's happy ending, and with any plans they might have for a serene third age.



**Figure 7.3: Scully reassures Mulder that he is indeed a father, announcing her pregnancy (“My Struggle IV” S11 E10).**

### **Conclusion**

As I have argued here, in the more recent seasons of *The X-Files*, the natural process of ageing of the main actors, David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson, has consequences for the narrative arcs of the characters they play, respectively FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully, particularly as regards the gender issues present in their professional relationship, friendship, and love story. The close contact between fans and producers conditioned the transformation of the agents' bonding, which did not include sex, into a romance resulting in the birth of William, presented as Mulder's child (unlike Emily, the child born from Scully's eggs but without her participation). Because of the conflicted relationship between Duchovny and Fox TV, however, the absence of the actor and thus of his character Mulder from most episodes of seasons 8 and 9 meant that Scully became in practice a single mother who decided to give up William in adoption, being allegedly unable to protect him from their alien and human enemies. This means that Mulder is hardly ever in touch with William, a situation that does not change in the 2016 and 2018 seasons.

Whereas the burden of proving her fertility falls mainly on Scully until the very end of the series in season 11, the issue of how fatherhood affects Mulder's appreciation of his own masculinity and manhood, is introduced only in the series finale, when it is revealed that the Cigarette-Smoking Man (Mulder's father) is William's actual biological father. This, as I have explained, creates a seriously mismanaged narrative tension, since acting out of character Scully immediately rejects William to focus instead on the baby she has 'miraculously' conceived with Mulder. Before he has time to bond with the aloof, abnormal William, then, Mulder needs to process that the boy is actually his half-brother and that he is to be finally a father. All this is done is just the final scene, when spectators learn for the first time, that fatherhood is for Mulder an essential aspect of his identity. Chris Carter, the series creator and the author of the script, reframes thus with Mulder's question "What am I if I am not a father?" the whole meaning of the series, normalizing Scully's deviant fertility and placing her together with Mulder in a normative heterosexual relationship which confirms the agent's virility. Mulder and Scully's on-and-off romance, in short, is rekindled in middle age and tied to her very late pregnancy—when the pair should be preparing to enjoy retirement or, as the series' narrative requires, to save the world from total destruction—only for the purpose of proving Mulder's manliness and to erase, if that is possible, the long shadow that the Cigarette-Smoking Man has always projected over the couple.

### Notes

1. A crucial problem in Rebus's case (see Martín 2011, 2020) is that whereas the detectives employed in police forces must retire at age 60 (at least in Scotland, where he works), the criminals are even further empowered with age, as Rankin shows with the villain Big 'Ger' Cafferty, and, indeed, Carter with the Cigarette-Smoking Man.
2. The dates appear throughout the series and are confirmed in the corresponding Wikis.
3. The tweet (23 March 2018) shows her support of the fans who also disliked the finale. The text "Oh boy oh boy do I ever hear you" is accompanied by a GIF of an embarrassed Scully facepalming (see <https://twitter.com/GillianA/status/977221356893941760>).
4. Director Ryan Coogler, known for *Black Panther* (2018), announced in March 2023 that Disney, which now owns 20th Century Fox TV, will produce a reboot of *The X-Files*, with a more diverse cast. Presumably, neither Duchovny nor Anderson will lead it.
5. Except for a few touches which actually result in Scully's reassuring Mulder that he is fine: in *This* (S11 E2), Mulder is visibly tired after chasing a much younger man, whereas in *Nothing Lasts for Ever* (S11 E9) he puts on sheepishly his new prescription glasses to read.
6. I lack room here to discuss William, but far from showing empathy for his mother, or for Mulder, the egocentric, callous boy avoids them, and even considers killing Mulder when he finally discloses that he is his father ("My Struggle IV" S11, E10).

### Works Cited

- Armengol, Josep M. "Aging as Emasculation? Rethinking Aging Masculinities in Contemporary U.S. Fiction." *Critique* 59.3 (2018): 355–367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2017.1386157>.
- Badley, Linda. "Scully Hits the Glass Ceiling: Postmodernism, Postfeminism, Posthumanism, and *The X-Files*." *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, Elyce Rae Helford (ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. 61–90.
- Chin, Bertha. "The Fan-Media Producer Collaboration: How Fan Relationships Are Managed in a Post-Series X-Files Fandom." *Science Fiction Film and Television* 6.1 (2013): 87–99. <https://doi.org/10.3828/sfftv.2013.8>.
- Davis, William B. "Foreword". *The Philosophy of The X-Files*, Dean A. Kowalski (ed.). UP of Kentucky, 2007. vi–xii.
- Dolan, Josephine. "Stars and Protagonists in the Hollywood Conglomerate: Performativities of Hegemonic Masculinity and the Third-Age Imaginary." *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film*, Sarah Falcus et al. (eds.). Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 179–190.
- Dunn, Timothy and Joseph J. Foy. "Moral Musings on a Cigarette Smoking Man." *The Philosophy of The X-Files*, Dean A. Kowalski (ed.). UP of Kentucky, 2007. 142–158.
- FBI. "Special Agent FAQ – FBI Job." 1-5, [https://fbijobs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/Special\\_Agent\\_FAQ.pdf](https://fbijobs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-03/Special_Agent_FAQ.pdf). Accessed November 2023.
- Friese, Carrie; Gay Becker and Robert D. Nachtigall "Older Motherhood and the Changing Life Course in the Era of Assisted Reproductive Technologies." *Journal of Aging Studies* 22.1 (January 2008): 65-73, doi: 10.1016/j.jaging.2007.05.009.
- Geller, Theresa L. *The X-Files*. Wayne State UP, 2016.
- Guinness World Records. "Oldest Mother to Conceive Naturally," <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/oldest-mother-to-conceive-naturally->
- Handlen, Zack & Emily Todd Vanderwerff. *Monsters of the Week: The Complete Critical Companion to the X-files*. Abrams, 2019.
- Harris, Marla. "Ageing in Crime and Detective Fiction, Film, and Television: Subversion and Protest". *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film*, Sarah Falcus, Heike Hartung, and Raquel Medina (eds.). Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 115–124.
- Jones, Bethan. "Reopening *The X-Files*: Generational Fandom, Gender, and Bodily Autonomy." *Fandom, the Next Generation*, Bridget Kies and Megan Connor (eds.). University of Iowa Press, 2022. 20–32.
- Kornfield, Sarah. "Detecting Fatherhood: The "New" Masculinity in Primetime Crime Dramas". *Deconstructing Dads: Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture*, Laura Tropp and Janice Kelly (eds.). Lexington Books, 2015. 117–142.
- Lyons, Siobhan. "Missing Time: *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, and the Rise of Aging Fans." *Fandom, the Next Generation*, Bridget Kies and Megan Connor (eds.). University of Iowa Press, 2022. 33–42.
- Martín, Sara. *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in the British Novel: From Hitler to Voldemort*. Routledge, 2020.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Aging in F(r)iendship: 'Big Ger' Cafferty and John Rebus." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 29.2 (2011): 73–82.

- Mooney, Darren. *Opening the X-Files: A Critical History of the Original Series*. McFarland, 2017.
- Oró-Piqueras, Maricel and Katsura Sako. "A Few Good Old Men: Revising Ageing Masculinities in *Last Tango in Halifax*." *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture: In Search of Good Men*, Sara Martín and M. Isabel Santaulària (eds.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 251–266.
- Peterman, Mindy. "The Morton Report: Q & A with William B. Davis, *The X-Files* Cigarette Smoking Man." *Eat the Corn*, 11 February 2012, <http://www.eatthecorn.com/?itw=the-morton-report>
- Rutsky, R.L. "The Scene of Truth in *The X-Files*." *Strategies* 12.1 (May 1999): 61–70.
- Segal, Lynne. *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing*. Verso, 2013.
- Silbergleid, Robin. "'The Truth We Both Know': Readerly Desire and Heteronarrative in *The X-Files*." *Studies in Popular Culture* 25.3 (April 2003): 49–62.
- The X-Files*. Created by Chris Carter, Ten Thirteen Productions and Fox TV. USA. 1993–2002, 2016, 2018.
- Wahl, Hans-Werner. "Historical Perspectives of Middle Age Within the Life Span". *Middle Adulthood: A Lifespan Perspective*, Sherry L. Willis and Mike Martin (eds.). SAGE, 2005. 3–34
- Wikipedia. "Pregnancy over Age 50," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pregnancy\\_over\\_age\\_50](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pregnancy_over_age_50). Accessed November 2023.
- Wills, Emily Regan. "Fannish Discourse Communities and the Construction of Gender in *The X-Files*." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 14 (2013), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/410/404>.