**MASQUERADE:
MAKING IT AS A WOMAN JOURNALIST
IN FILM AND PRIMETIME TELEVISION**

By

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ABSTRACT

Masquerade: Making It As A Woman Journalist In Film And Primetime Television is an inquiry into the strategies used by four texts to maintain patriarchal hegemonic patterns. *His Girl Friday* (director, Howard Hawks, 1940), *Broadcast News* (director, James L. Brooks, 1987), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998) seeming represent progressive feminist values through independent career woman who reject domesticity. However, an examination of four female journalist characters - Hildy Johnson, Jane Craig, Mary Richards and Murphy Brown - reveals they adopt female trickery and masquerade strategies thereby subverting the normalcy of their choices. Journalism reinforces that abnormality because it is represented in popular culture as masculine and one that does not offer a normal life. Therefore, the texts devalue career women, reinforce and legitimize a patriarchal traditional social order that privileges domesticity over career.

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Janice Neil

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The prototypical journalism film for many professional journalists and journalism and film scholars is *The Front Page* (director, Lewis Milestone, 1931). Based on a 1928 theatre script by two former newspaper reporters, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, it's often referred to in journalism texts as "the best known critique and cliché of American journalism."¹ Set in a Chicago news bureau, the fun-loving, whiskey-stained, wild reporters instantly became the stock characters in film and have persisted for decades. Alex Barris, a former newspaper reporter-turned-screenwriter who documented some of the earliest newspaper films said:

(Hecht and MacArthur) may not have invented the movie newspaperman, but they were largely responsible for his proliferation and longevity....it was to become the yardstick by which virtually all newspaper movies for the next several decades would be measured.²

Director Lewis Milestone focused on the conflict between newspaper reporter Hildy Johnson (Pat O'Brien) and his editor, Walter Burns (Adolphe Menjou). As the film begins, Hildy tells Burns that he's decided to quit the newspaper business to move to New York for a job in advertising and to get married; in short, to become more respectable than his current occupation could accommodate. Burns wants to keep the talented writer and so lures him into the pressroom of the Criminal Courts building as the other reporters file stories in advance of the execution of an anarchist. Preying on Hildy's burning passion for journalism, Burns deceives Hildy into covering the story and jeopardizing his engagement.

The film and the original play script achieved comedic farce through wise-cracking dialogue and slapstick, tinged with melodramatic moral situations. The success of the play and the film (three Academy Award Nominations for Best Picture, Best Director and Best Actor) prompted Hollywood director Howard Hawks to look up the film a few years later while attending a dinner party at which the guests were doing a reading of *The Front Page*. Hawks remembered:

I was going to prove to somebody one night that *The Front Page* had the finest modern dialogue that had been written. (So) I asked a girl to read Hildy's part and I read the editor. I stopped and I said, "Hell, it's better between a girl and a man than between two men." I called Ben Hecht, and I said, "What would you think of changing it so that Hildy is a girl?" And he said, "I think it's a great idea," and he came out and we did it.³

What began then as a playful demonstration with apparently no intention to switch the gender of the main character became Hawk's 1940 film, *His Girl Friday* (director, Howard Hawks, 1940). Ernst Lubitsch called the act of transposing the gender of the central character "a stroke of genius." The male character that was the prototypical reporter (in *The Front Page*) transformed nine years later into a character widely seen as the new prototypical female reporter.⁴

This thesis is concerned with how *His Girl Friday* as well as one other film and two U.S. primetime situation comedies portray the character of a female journalist. My analysis focuses on the heroines of four comedic texts whose primary plots and sets involve the production of journalism in a newspaper news bureau, daily television news shows and a weekly investigative news show. These texts include two film comedies: *His Girl Friday* and *Broadcast News* (director, James L. Brooks, 1987); and, two primetime situation comedies: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977) and *Murphy Brown*

(CBS, 1988-1998). I examine how these heroines function in the journalistic environment that has been perceived by many journalism scholars as masculine (Ross, Mahtini, Zynda, Salzberg, et al.). As *women* characters employed and operating in a *man's* world the texts send mixed messages about feminine values and feminism. I deliberately chose two films and two television series that employ comedic strategies within the narratives: *His Girl Friday* is considered a screwball comedy; *Broadcast News* a romantic comedy; *Murphy Brown* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* solidly adhere to the conventions of television's primetime situation comedies.

As a female journalist, I initially admired these films and television programs for what I saw as their progressive portrayal of the heroines. However, I now argue that these texts are oppositional to a feminist reading because they diffuse the threatening aspects of the independent, career woman. The films and sitcoms suggest that for a woman journalist to operate in a masculinized workplace such as a newsroom, she employed the tactics of a female trickster either through hyper-femininity or by donning a masquerade. This allowed the texts to reinforce the status quo: the patriarchal notion that normal women desire to be relegated to the domestic and private sphere of society rather than the public sphere that includes the workplace. I argue that women journalists were easy targets; as tricksters they were 'not normal women' operating in journalism, which in and of itself is a world some journalism scholars have acknowledged is often represented as a world 'not for normal people'.⁵

A LONG ROMANCE WITH THE AMERICAN NEWSROOM

Hollywood has enjoyed a long romance with the American newsroom; it has been estimated that approximately 2,000 films with journalists as main and peripheral

characters have been produced in the U.S.⁴ One journalism scholar uncovered what may be the earliest film: *Delivering Newspapers* (director unknown) was produced in 1907 and was followed by as many as 43 more journalism films before the release of the archetype, *The Front Page*.⁵ Some journalism historians have argued the films embodied similar narratives that reinforced and criticized the values, beliefs and ideals about journalism, and therefore constituted a distinct genre of the “newspaper films” or “journalism films.”⁶

There was less research on the prevalence of journalist characters on primetime television. One rare study was conducted by Gerald Stone and John Lee of the 1987 spring and fall seasons. It found that journalists were the second most frequently depicted occupation among characters in primetime television shows, after police (but behind doctors and lawyers) and were present for 36% of primetime hours surveyed.⁷ (Neither of the two sitcoms included in my study were on the air in primetime during the 1987 study period and therefore were not included in the Stone and Lee study.)

Journalism has attracted such immense attention from Hollywood perhaps because many screenwriters ‘wrote what they knew’. Some screenwriters, such as Hecht and MacArthur began their careers as newspaper reporters while others, such as James L. Brooks (*Broadcast News*, 1987, and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, 1970-1977) worked in television newsrooms before turning to fictional settings. Writers, directors and producers have also realized journalists and their work offered vast narrative possibilities for fiction. Hollywood director Ron Howard recently wrote that Hollywood was drawn to journalism’s “rich, dramatic tensions...(and an) overwhelming sense of urgency.”⁸

The films have been identified by their stock settings - initially newspaper newsrooms, then television newsrooms (and only rarely radio newsrooms). Many of those

on-screen newsrooms were grimly neorealist: cold, windowless, smoky rooms with desks squeezed close together, surrounded by equipment such as clocks, news wire machines, telephones, typewriters, and television sets. Film scholar James Harvey called them “dismal places full of putzes and pensioners and assorted dim bulbs.”⁹ They offered great creative scope. After researching workplace television shows, Ella Taylor wrote, “the television workplace offers a terrain ripe for the free play of fantasy and imaginative reconstruction.”¹⁰

The characters found in newsrooms also offered a range of fictional options since journalists tended to be quirky, driven, passionate people who can become interesting characters and allow entry into any subject the scriptwriter imagined. Journalists constantly interact with new individuals with new problems and therefore offered limitless opportunities to writers to generate new plots and subplots requisite for weekly television. In the first book that documented newspaper films, author Alex Barris noted that the earliest films entertained millions of fans by creating an image of the newspaper reporter as embodying binary and oppositional traits, as both “a hero and a scoundrel, a lover and a fighter, a gossip and a sage... breezy, irreverent, hard-drinking newspaper reporters ...(who were the) gabbiest and most engaging heroes in the films.”¹¹ Barris identified what he saw as the rapid development of stock characters: the Reporter as Crime Buster, the Reporter as Scandal monger, the Reporter as Crusader, The Reporter Overseas, the Reporter as Human Being.¹² Other scholars identified other ‘types’ including the Big-City Editor, the News Hound, the Rural Press, etc.¹³

While there have been perhaps a dozen ‘types’ of journalists propagated within fictional work, journalism historian Matthew Ehrlich has detailed how the myth of the

journalist in fiction was drawn from 'outlaw mythology'. In his 2004 book, *Journalism in the Movies*, Ehrlich drew a portrait of the fictional journalist as a romantic individual, moving freely between the realms and strata of society, free of traditional bonds, living outside society's norms. It was portrayed in popular culture as an occupation that rebuffed the ideals of the American dream. One of Ehrlich's observations was particularly useful for my study: "the movies thus suggest that journalism is not for normal people."¹⁴ While his portrait captured a large palette of characters over a range of films, Hildy Johnson made the same argument in the original stage script for *The Front Page* with his rant against his occupation:

Journalists! Peeking through keyholes! Running after fire engines like a lot of coach dogs! Waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them what they think of Mussolini. Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. A lot of lousy, daffy, buttinskis, swelling around with holes in their pants, borrowing nickels from office boys! And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives' will know what's going on?

Situating the journalist doing work that was not normal is only part of the portrait; the male journalists' passion, even obsession with work and 'the story' was positioned as a threat to their relationships and destroying marriages. Films with scenes in which wives or girlfriends were abandoned as their journalist husband/boyfriend chased a big story have not been unfamiliar. In *His Girl Friday*, Walter Burns (Cary Grant) rushed to the scene of a mine cave-in and stayed for two weeks to cover the unfolding tragedy when he was supposed to be on his honeymoon. Positioning journalistic ambition as oppositional to 'normal life' was a theme of *The Front Page* when Hildy tells his fellow reporters that his fiancé, Peggy, wants him to quit the newspaper business for an advertising job in New York so he can become "decent and live like a human being." It was that very script which

established that male journalists displayed, what feminist film scholar Maria DiBattista described as, 'breezily indifferent to, when it is not downright contemptuous of, the decorum that regulates a "halfway normal life"'.¹⁵ This is the monolithic type, the image, of the male journalist created through films that took on such truth and accuracy for audiences, that they became naturalized. It was a stereotype that was not altered when the gender of the character was female, not male.

SOB SISTERS?

In the fictional world, women have grasped notebooks and pencils, pursued criminals, celebrities, wars and social crusades and then wrote their stories for the next edition of the newspaper since the 19th century and the earliest of Hollywood films. Although a precise number would be impossible to determine, the female reporter/journalist has played a recurring role in films for as long as a century.¹⁶ Some of the leading actresses of the early days and golden era of Hollywood film took on those roles including Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, Lana Turner, Carole Lombard and Katharine Hepburn. They prompted film scholar Lori Landay to observe: "Taking a star turn as a reporter was almost a rite of passage for Hollywood actresses in the 1930s and 1940s."¹⁷

For all the plots that saw women use talent, skill and sheer moxie to secure 'the big story', the films often treated the professional aspects of the female journalist by positioning and comparing her to male reporters and then framing her performance through a lens informed by traditional patriarchal notions of a personal life.¹⁸ Journalism scholar Joe Saltzman, who founded the research centre 'The Image of the Journalist in

Popular Culture' at the University of Southern California, has written that these early films explained why the female journalist was labelled a "sob sister"¹⁹

She is considered an equal by doing a man's job, a career woman, drinking and arguing toe-to-toe with any male in the shop, holding her own against everyone and anything, yet often showing her soft side and crying long and hard when the man she loves treats her like a sister instead of a lover. By the end of the film, most sob sisters, no matter how tough or independent, would give up anything and everything for marriage, children, and a life at home...(t)hey simply have no choice.²⁰

However, it seems that the 'sob sister' image was limited to the earliest of films; that in screwball and romantic comedies including *His Girl Friday*, *Woman of the Year* (director: *George Stevens, 1942*) and *Broadcast News* the heroines were portrayed as intelligent and successful in their professional lives without the melodrama described by Saltzberg. They seemed to portray progressive attitudes towards female participation in the work force and the journalistic profession as journalism scholar Deac Rossell wrote:

Reduced to a symbol of power in the gangster films cycle, and to a symbol of civilization in the school teachers and reformers of the western genre, in the newspaper film a woman could take the lead, be an accomplisher, catch the crooks, save the day, scheme for power, find success.²¹

However, in the course of doing this study I changed my fan-based perception; I saw that rather than glamorizing female journalists the characters in my selected films and primetime television sitcoms were constructed and used as comedic scapegoats to represent ideologies that were ridiculed and dismissed. The texts reinforced and legitimized a traditional social order that privileged domesticity over career women. By choosing female journalists, the texts were able to access the image of the journalist that was summarized by Ehrlich as 'not normal'. These images can be labelled 'representative anecdotes,' enduring patterns across time and genre to allow a summation of the assumptions that shape the discourse. Scholar Phyllis Japp has argued that by identifying

a representative anecdote we can uncover basic similarities that undergird apparent differences. “These narrative forms reduce complex social situations into familiar patterns of behavior, defining the relationship of elements to each other and implying appropriate responses.”²²

While it seems valid to historically regard most workplaces as masculine – given that fewer women have participated in the paid workforce in the last two centuries than men (with the exception of WWII), I argue that newsrooms were inherently even more masculine and alien as workplaces to women. The technology and cold environment I described earlier of the newsroom told us they were part of a man’s world. Television studies scholar Serena Bathrick called newsrooms “a bastion where man-made machines send and receive man-made information.”²³ Various studies have described newsrooms’ “locker room mentality” filled with “systematic gender discrimination.”²⁴ Recent journalistic scholarship has found a “macho hegemony of the newsroom.”²⁵

The environment reflected and reinforced masculine values and interests of the values of the profession. Professional journalism is seen to reflect progressive liberalism, fairness, truth and objectivity. However, some have argued that those values were assigned by an ideology that was informed by masculinism (an ideology that reinforces and justifies continued male domination). Canadian geography scholar Minelle Mahtani, who has focused her research on gender issues, has argued how one value - objectivity – is oppositional to the subjectivity associated with women. Mahtani, who once worked as a television news producer, argued “non-rational or non-objective forms of feminine knowledge are relegated to the private sphere, as unimportant or as too uninteresting to be considered truly ‘newsworthy’.”²⁶ In my discussion in Chapter Three of the kind of

journalism valued by Mary Richards (*TMTMS*) with a focus on the personal, domestic and the home, I point out how Mary's friends ridicule her work, label it boring, and fall asleep while trying to watch. Mahtani suggested those kinds of 'soft news' stories were devalued in a culture of masculinized journalism because they have demonstrated women were unable to transcend their bodies or their personal involvement with others in a way that was proscribed by a professional practice searching for rationality.

By choosing women journalists as the 'kind' that make the choice to be 'career women,' the texts allowed the patriarchal hegemony to be maintained. They showed these were women choosing to work in an environment that was not gender neutral. And furthermore, the texts portray that journalists are not normal people. So, my journalism heroines were easy targets for film and television to criticize feminist aspirations such as accessibility to career equality and working 'outside the home'. That the heroines in my study adopted female trickery strategies such as the mask of masculinity was a valid tactic since masculine qualities are best suited to news because news is masculine.

MY APPROACH

As I indicated earlier, I was a dedicated and passionate viewer of each of these texts at various points in my life: I emerged into teenagehood (having already decided to pursue journalism as a career) watching *TMTMS* many Saturday nights; I followed *Murphy Brown* as it moved around the television schedule over ten years in which I was working as a television journalist as well; I saw *Broadcast News* within the first week of its release in December 1987; while working as a television news reporter and, showed excerpts from my VHS copy to my university journalism students; and, finally, have watched *His*

Girl Friday many, many times. I saw Hildy, Jane, Mary and Murphy as successful professional journalists, and used them as role models.

While I may be uncomfortable about inserting my personal infatuation for these texts, as an academic, I have been persuaded by feminist film critic Molly Haskell to reveal my motivation. She described in 1997 how she reconciled herself to this position:

We arrive at our political and aesthetic positions...via routes that lead back to our early lives and buried childhood emotions, fears, and yearnings that we can know only obliquely from the way they determine the present. ...(T)he voyeurism of the movie buff or critic is no doubt hard-wired into the core fantasy life from some primal experience, whose intensity we continue to seek in movie after movie.²⁷

As a female journalist my identification with these texts seemed to resonate on professional and ideological grounds. I concur with feminist film scholar Bonnie Dow's observation that I measured the progress of women by how well they had obtained access to men's work, what she referred to as "a liberal feminist emphasis on women in a man's world...(and) journalism is a masculine occupation."²⁸ However, Dow's caution - that if all that has been accomplished in the pursuit of women's advancement is measured against the standard, 'male' values - then feminism cannot claim victory. But some of the texts I have chosen to examine for my thesis were held up to be measured against those standards and proclaimed to be feminism-worthy. Rosalind Russell as the 'ace reporter', Hildy, in *His Girl Friday*, was admired by at least three prominent feminist film scholars: the author of *Popcorn Venus*, Marjorie Rosen, saw Hildy as an ideal professional woman who was ahead of her time, an image most relevant in the consciousness-raising era of the 1970s with a "marvellous sense of comic timing coupled with an almost incorrigible independence."²⁹ Molly Haskell called the film a "proto-feminist classic."³⁰ Susan Faludi included *His Girl Friday* in a body of WWII-era films that showed a "brief burst of

enthusiasm for strong and working women...some assertive women were able to make themselves heard (including) Rosalind Russell's single reporter."³¹ However, it was crucial that when I began research in film studies, I had to invoke a critical distance between my memory and experience of the texts and a position informed by feminist film criticism.

My approach incorporates a textual analysis of the visual construction of the images of women in film and primetime sitcoms as well as an analysis of ideology and narrative to determine how they function in patriarchal society. In spite of a digenesis that distinguishes *His Girl Friday* from *Broadcast News*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*, when I took these women together as representative anecdotes, there were similarities: hints of women's masculinity or trickster tactics such as maleness and hyper-femininity strategies that allowed the characters to function as journalists in the 'men's world' of news. I drawn on a confluence of discourses including feminist film criticism (the strategies of Lori Landay's female trickster and Joan Riviere's masquerade) to examine how women are devalued in the process of cultural reproduction. I examine the social context of the periods covering the release of the films and the television broadcasts. Considering films alongside primetime television sitcoms may seem problematic but I argue that what was seen as Hildy's unconventionality (even rebelliousness) in *His Girl Friday* was similar to what drove early television.³² The films and sitcoms share similar styles: witty, faced-paced, literate dialogue. There are authorial linkages: James L. Brooks created *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, then, ten years after it went off the air in 1987, he directed the film, *Broadcast News*. As I discuss in Chapter Four, *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998) was seen as an updated version of *TMTMS*:

“nearly 20 years ago, she was the adorably spunky Mary Richards...now she’s Murphy Brown.”³³

Central to the plots of all four of the texts was the fact the main characters were women primarily portrayed in the public sphere - the workplace. This was seen as radical in and of itself because, as scholar Phyllis Japp explained, women in the workplace were once regarded as ‘contamination’. She described the superstitions that suggest women’s entrance would spark disasters if they worked on ships or in underground mines: “these superstitions are echoed in modern taboos about women’s behaviors in the workplace, wherein women are envisioned as impeding progress; defiling the order, reason, and logic of the male enclave with disorder and emotion; and impending the sacred rituals of progress.”³⁴ The heroines transgress the boundaries that classify the workplace or public sphere and the private sphere, or home, under patriarchy’s hierarchal ordering, as outlined by Bonnie Dow:

Traditional thought prescribes that women are suited for the private, personal realm, and men for the public, professional one. The stereotypical characteristics assigned to men and women reflect this division; men are aggressive, competitive breadwinners, and women are passive, nurturing homebodies.³⁵

Seeking to elaborate my understanding of the ‘private sphere’ where women have been relegated, I consulted historian Barbara Welter’s 1966 significant work, “The Cult of True Womanhood.” She identified women’s essential values as piety, purity and submissiveness, arguing these same values had informed society’s assignment of women from the mid-19th century onwards. Without those characteristics, she wrote, “no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes (for women); ...with them, she was permitted happiness and power.”³⁶

Tracing this ideology was useful for my consideration of how the career heroines in my texts negotiated their positions in a cultural that scholars such as Phyllis Japp have argued saw work is a “constitutive element of manhood” not womanhood.³⁷ So, if “woman” and “work” are oppositional in American cultural mythology, if they are combined one will change or ‘contaminate’ the other (for instance, if a woman is added to the workplace). The heroines of my texts succeed by adapting and succumbing to male expectations of the workplace. Mary Richards (*TMTMS*) and Jane Craig (*Broadcast News*) attempted to mediate this contradiction by fulfilling traditional female roles such as familial – mother, sister, daughter or wife-substitute. Hildy (*His Girl Friday*), Murphy and Jane, functioned as female journalists in a man’s world of news by donning the masquerade. Like other characters identified in Yvonne Tasker’s study of primetime women they are “presented as allowing female protagonists an opportunity and a freedom (of both physical movement and behavior) that they would not otherwise achieve.”³⁸ The masquerade points up the binary oppositions of feminine and feminism. As Maryanne Doane explored in her research in film noir, the masquerade has the effect of providing a cover for female’s ‘otherness’.

The use of comedy was essential in these films to ridicule an ideology or behavior that poses a threat to the patriarchal social order - such as women who seek success in the public sphere. My heroines’ behavior challenges the social order in that they were women who pursued careers in a ‘man’s world’. When that behavior conflicted with conventional social reality, the characters’ ideology that informed that behavior was also ridiculed and mocked providing the narrative comedy and reaffirming the status quo. In Chapter Two I discuss French philosopher Henri Bergson’s comedy of inversion as it

pertains to film, and in Chapter Three I probe Steve Neale's observation about how the inherent conservatism of the domestic comedy influences the comedic treatment of Mary Richards. Much of the humor in *His Girl Friday* and *Murphy Brown* was derived from Hildy and Murphy's failure to meet conventional expectations for women such as Murphy's ineptitude as a cook, as a wife and, as a nurturing female. As cultural historian Ella Taylor observed in her research about other television sitcoms with workplace situations "comedy, as seen in the domestic shows, is a potent vehicle for the expression of ambivalence and opposition because it can render its targets absurd, impotent, or idiotic as well as immoral or insane."³⁹

NOTES ON ORGANIZATION

My analysis focused on four female-centered texts (the narrative is constructed around the female protagonist regardless of whether the audience is predominantly female).⁴⁰ I begin in Chapter One with *His Girl Friday* (director, Howard Hawks, 1940). Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) and Walter Burns (Cary Grant) worked together in a hyper-competitive newsroom as well as getting married and then, divorced. Hildy is a heroine who invoked duality: she's an 'ace reporter' who is planning to quit her career to marry an insurance salesman and settle down for full-time domesticity. *His Girl Friday* is an important early film as it established the iconography of the female reporter character. Its subversion is represented by the inversion of Hildy's gender from that of a male Hildy in *The Front Page*. *His Girl Friday's* Hildy has been admired by many feminist critics and scholars for her independent, career-woman toughness. But I argue that she operated as a female trickster to escape the limited and limiting circumstances that would otherwise be offered a woman journalist in a newsroom of the 1940s.

I move into primetime television sitcoms in Chapter Three to discuss 'America's sweetheart' - Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS 1970-77). Mary was a thirty-year-old single woman working in a lowly editorial position in a local television newsroom. Debuting in 1970, in the midst of second-wave feminist activism, Mary was seen as one of the original new women. Extra-textually, she was a fictionalized doppelganger of women entering the workforce, wooing viewers into feminist consciousness.⁴¹ I provide an overview of the social context of the show and its significance within primetime network television and challenge the mythic construction of Mary as a 'proto-feminist'. I review the strategies to maintain the patriarchal hegemonic patterns that may be threatened by independent career woman who rebuke domesticity. I examine how the iconography of spinsterhood has been portrayed as domestic alternative for career women and how it was invoked in the discourse. Feminist Lauren Rosenthal asserted that spinsters were depicted as lonely, selfish and, eccentric which served to both propagate and allay fears that masses of women would abandon men and marriage altogether if they were economically independent. Feminist critic Bonnie Dow wryly observed that *TMTMS* was "a sitcom about a single, ambitious woman (that seemed) daring until you surround her with a recognizable husband/father figure and a group of 'children' to nurture. At that point, she becomes Donna Reed repackaged as a working woman."⁴² (She also argued that *TMTMS* would undoubtedly be installed in a canon of great television programs.⁴³)

In Chapter Four, I move to a decade after *TMTMS* went off the air, when two 'post-feminist' fictional journalists appeared: television's *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-98) and film's *Broadcast News* (director, James L. Brooks, 1987). Murphy (Candice Bergen)

is a forty-year-old successful investigative reporter and co-anchor on a weekly fictional television program not unlike CBS's long-running *60 Minutes*. She is single (she was divorced 25 years earlier after a week-long marriage) and deprived of a satisfying domestic life. I examine how the masquerade functions for Murphy, again, a woman trying to succeed in the masculinized world of investigative newsgathering. She is an emotional 'basket-case' as is Jane Craig (Holly Hunter), the single, thirty-something, intelligent and successful television news producer in *Broadcast News*. A memorable line of dialogue in the film has another single woman working in the news bureau, tell Jane: "except for socially, you're my role model."

As career woman who were informed by feminism and attempting to 'have it all', Murphy and Jane were disciplined. That situated both texts within a post-feminist backlash as identified by journalist Susan Faludi in her significant 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. She described what she saw as an anti-feminist reaction during the 1980s following a period when it was believed that women made headway toward autonomy. After reviewing stories published and broadcast in the news media, viewing fictional television programs, and popular films produced during the late 1980s (including *Broadcast News* and *Murphy Brown*), Faludi detected a pattern: a tidal wave of stories about women who suddenly discover they have condemned themselves to loveless lives - spinsterhood, divorce, and childlessness - because they had spent too much energy trying to advance their careers rather than their personal lives. Faludi fingered the media in particular: "Hollywood restated and reinforced the backlash thesis: American women were unhappy because they were too free, their liberation had denied them marriage and motherhood."⁴⁴ What Faludi described were the circumstances

of Murphy, Jane, Mary and Hildy. In an extra-textual aside, the actor who played Murphy (Candice Bergen) reflected in an interview an attitude similar to what was behind 'backlash.' Bergen pondered the 'toll' that Murphy's career was taking on her ability to have a satisfying domestic life:

It's really a high price to pay – not having a life. And yet if Murphy gets cut off from her work, she gets desperate...her work is her life. *She* is her work. There's something traditionally masculine in that.⁴⁵

The journalist heroines portrayed in my two films and primetime sitcoms were very specific kinds of women; they chose lifestyles that seemed to be aligned with feminism (although never identified or labelled as such) in which career opportunity and adventure was privileged over domesticity. By packaging feminism as such for audiences, they made individual or personal choices thereby suggesting that it was only a small subset of women who made such choices and other women (the majority) did not challenge the status quo about a women's place within a man's world. These actions were not seen as politically motivated by a desire to transform society. By employing tactics of the female trickster the characters of Murphy, Jane, Mary and Hildy, represented ambivalent attitudes towards women's progress and subverted the normalcy of their choices as women. Their portrayal of women journalists reinforced and supported that abnormality because journalism was represented as a masculine subculture and not consistent with a normal life. The texts posited the absurdity of career women by modeling the kind of women who make that choice; women journalists who are not 'normal people' anyway.

⁴⁵ Doug Fetherling, *The Five Lives of Ben Hecht* (Toronto: Lester and Orpen Ltd, 1977), 67-68.

² Alex Barris, *Stop the Presses! The newspaperman in American Films* (Cranbury, New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1976), 12-13.

³ James Harvey, *Romantic comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 432 attributed to a 1962 interview with Bogdanovich.

⁴ Up to that point, the stereotypical female reporter was a 'stunt' reporter or 'sob sister'. Many worked out of their homes, rather than the newsroom, writing 'women's' columns and articles. Those that worked in the newsroom were assigned to cover the human angle of stories, to "play up the any heart-tugging angles, any emotional aspects of the story." Joe Saltzman, *Sob Sisters: The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture*. 2003 Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, Annenberg, <http://www.ijpc.org/sobsessay.pdf>. Accessed March 21, 2007

⁵ Matthew Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 173

⁴ Richard R. Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman, A Journalism Filmography*, (Lanham, Md. : Scarecrow Press, 1997).

⁵ Hans J. Wulff, "Journalismus und Presse im Film: Eine Filmographie" *Medienwissenschaft / Hamburg: Berichte und Papiere* 19, 2003: Journalismus und Presse im Film.

⁶ Ehrlich 2004 and 1996, Barris 1976, Saltzman 2002. (For the purposes of my study, I accept the legitimacy of the genre, rather than argue its limitations, by accepting Altman's argument that genre is both a system and a process that is continually in flux and has a multitude of uses (Altman 1999).

⁷ Gerald Stone and John Lee, "Portrayal of Journalists on Prime Time Television" in *Journalism Quarterly*, Winter 1990), 829-838.

⁸ Ron Howard, director, *Fact or Fiction: Hollywood Looks at the News*, Newseum, Washington D.C.

⁹ Harvey, 433.

¹⁰ Ella Taylor, *Prime-time Families: Television Culture in Post-War America*. (Berkley: University of California Press, 1989), 111.

¹¹ Barris, 5-30

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ See: Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press*. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990). Larry Langman, *The Media in the Movies :A catalog of American Journalism Films, 1900-1996* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1998).

¹⁴ Ehrlich 2004 ,173.

¹⁵ Maria Di Battista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 271.

¹⁶ Wulff *ibid.*

¹⁷ Jean Marie Lutes, *Front Page Girl :Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction, 1880-1930*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 161.

¹⁸ Howard Good, the author of *Girl Reporter, Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (1998), considered this in his book (primarily concerned with Torchy Blaine, a crime-talking news reporter in nine Warner Brothers films produced between 1937 and 1939), observed that 'girl reporter' films often contained a narrative setting workplace against home, co-workers against family, freedom of the night versus middle-class domesticity. See: Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 30.

¹⁹ This contrasts with many journalism historians have originated the term "sob sisters" with the female reporters working for the U.S. yellow press of the 1920s who specialized in melodramatic stories.

²⁰ Joe Saltzman, "Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture: A Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media." A paper for The Association For Education For Journalism And Mass Communications (AEJMC) in San Antonio, Texas, (August 12, 2005), 39-40.

²¹ Deac Russell, "The Fourth Estate and the Seventh Art" in *Questioning Media Ethics*, ed. Bernard Rubin, (New York: Praeger, 1978), 244.

²² Phyllis M. Japp, Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc. in *Women's Studies in Communication* 14 (1991), 53.

²³ Serena Bathrick, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and Work," in *MTM: Quality Television*, ed. Jane Freuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 110.

²⁴ Ross, Karen. "Women in the boyzone." in *Journalism: Critical Issues*, ed. Stuart Allan. London: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2005. Mahtani, Minelle. "Gendered News Practices: The Experiences of Women Journalists in Different National Contexts." in *Journalism: Critical Issues*, ed. Stuart Allan. London: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2005 and Liesbet van Zoonen, "Professional Socialization of Feminist Journalists in the Netherlands," *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol.1(3), 1989) 1-25.

²⁵ Ross *ibid*, 287.

²⁶ Mahtani *ibid*, 301.

²⁷ Molly Haskell, *Holding My Own in No Man's Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13.

²⁸ Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 137.

²⁹ Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973), 199.

³⁰ Haskell 1997, 116.

³¹ Susan Faludi, Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. (New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1991), 114.

³² A point taken up as well by Maria DiBattistia 78-79.

³³ See: Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown, *Murphy Brown: Anatomy of a Sitcom*,; John J. O'Connor, *New York Times*; ³³ David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, *Prime Time Prime Movers* in Chapter Four in this thesis.

³⁴ Japp *ibid*.

³⁵ Bonnie J. Dow, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and the Mary Tyler Moore Show". *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7. (1990), 268.

³⁶ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1960," *American Quarterly* 18:162 (1966),152.

³⁷ Japp, 54.

³⁸ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 35.

³⁹ Ella Taylor, *Prime-time Families: Television Culture in Post-War America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 143.

⁴⁰ Amanda D. Lotz, *Television after the network era* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 30.

⁴¹ Anawalt, Sasha. *Mary Tyler Moore Tosses Her Hat Up Again*. (New York Times October 23, 1988, Section 2; Page 27).

⁴² Dow 1990, 269.

⁴³ Dow, 1996, 24.

⁴⁴ Faludi 1991, 113.

⁴⁵ Robert Alley and Irby B. Brown. *Murphy Brown: Anatomy of a Sitcom* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1990), 103.

CHAPTER TWO

HILDY JOHNSON AND *HIS GIRL FRIDAY*

Hildy Johnson began life as a “lusty, hoodlumesque, half-drunken caballero,”⁴⁶ created from the memories of their own days as newspaper reporters by playwrights Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. A little more than a decade later he was reincarnated, transformed into a female reporter who feminist film critic Molly Haskell called “the most exhilaratingly rambunctious and assertive heroines in cinema.”² The director of *His Girl Friday* (1940), Howard Hawks was Hildy’s gender-bender and a genre-bender, too. *The Front Page* (1931) was a comedy classic. With *His Girl Friday*, Hawks transported the film into a romantic and/screwball comedy which offered witty dialogue, a battle of the sexes, and, an ideology that helped audiences make sense of the world.³

Screwball comedies denote chaos; in *His Girl Friday* the rapid-fire pace of the dialogue and narrative pandemonium represented instability created by the explicit ‘gender-bending’ of Hildy. In re-making *The Front Page*, director Hawks created the unexpected. He complicated a structure that might otherwise have been quite predictable; he disrupted the audience’s comparisons to the original *The Front Page*. French philosopher Henri Bergson described how these “topsy-turvy” disruptions function to create comedy. He said audiences were amused by stereotypes and typical roles that were switched or inverted or, by characters who were snatched from their conventional positioning and turned upside down.⁴

Audiences enjoyed the witty banter and sparkling dialogue between the heroes and heroines, the exchanges standing in for sexual tensions after the imposition in 1934 of the Motion Picture Production Code that limited physical depictions of sexual attraction. Some film scholars credit screwball comedies as helping to redefine the institution of marriage, as it moved away from a social and economic institution to one based on sexual attraction.⁵ Often, screwball comedies saw the classic romance sequence: boy chases girl, inverted as strong, determined, 'fast-talking dames' chased their heroes rendering them incapable or unstable.⁶

His Girl Friday was likely the first screwball comedy to depart from the money-marriage-ego conflicts such as *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) as the love narrative sees the hero, Walter Burns (Cary Grant) chase the heroine, Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell). In the opening scene, Hildy strides into the main newsroom of the *Morning Post* newspaper to see the editor, Walter, who is also her ex-husband. It's their first face-to-face conversation in four months since they were granted a divorce. Walter's arrogance is presented as charm; he considers himself above all laws including the one that was the legal decree of their divorce. After the divorce, Walter has pursued Hildy for months telephoning her a dozen times a day and sending her telegrams. In the opening scene he's introduced as the heart-broken lover who tried to stop the divorce (which she initiated) by tying up the process in red tape, even hiring an airplane to fly a banner over the courthouse -- with a plea: "Hildy, don't be hasty. Remember my dimple. Walter."

Daring, even transgressive, heroines were central to screwball comedy, characterized by actresses such as Barbara Stanwyck, Jean Arthur, Claudette Colbert, Bette Davis and Rosalind Russell. Cultural studies scholar, Laurie Landay argued that

women in screwball were somewhat unconventional in that they engaged in the battle of the sexes as equals to men.⁷ Film critic Molly Haskell ventured that sexual energy limited by since the Production Code was diverted from the bedroom into the workplace, so that all the banter and repartee among colleagues connoted sexual readiness.⁸

The 1920s flapper – a spontaneous, vivacious, wage-earner – was reflected in screwball ‘working girl’ comedies as one who earned wages in traditionally feminine jobs such as waitresses, secretaries and sales clerks. Other screwball heroines in ‘career girl’ or ‘boss-lady’ comedies, worked as doctors, executives, or magazine editors.⁹ Hildy’s work as a reporter is neither ‘pink ghetto’ nor senior enough for ‘career girl’ films. However, Hildy’s work dominates the discourse and narrative. She is situated within workplace settings throughout *His Girl Friday* (except for two minor scenes). Most of her dialogue invokes work-related issues such as her skills, dedication, the tension between public sphere (work) and private sphere (home and personal life) and, her relationships with colleagues. To some, it seemed as though the aspiration of second-wave feminism, ‘equality in the workplace’, had already been obtained for Hildy. In fact, she was portrayed as a superior journalist - she is the only reporter who can get to the real story (via an exclusive interview with Earl Williams), the only one who can write it and get it on the front page.¹⁰

The appeal of *His Girl Friday* for many critics and scholars over seven decades is Rosalind Russell’s performance as Hildy. The author of one of the first scholarly books documenting women on Hollywood film, Marjorie Rosen, described how Russell “with her marvellous sense of comic timing, coupled with an almost incorruptible independence, was set up as an ideal professional woman in (seven other films).”¹¹ Still other feminist

critics, such as Haskell valorized Hildy's flexibility to blend traditional notions of beauty, feminine vulnerability as well as masculine personality traits such as toughness and competence.

She remains true to the two sides - feminine and professional- of her nature, and as such promises to exercise a healthy influence on the hard-boiled, all-male world of criminal reporting. It is as a newspaper reporter, rather than as wife and mother, that she discovers her true 'womanliness,' which is to say, simply, herself.¹²

That description was not complete as Haskell tread deeper to emphatically state that Hildy was not "an imitation male."¹³ Without full certainty of what Haskell intended to connote, I parse her words to mean that Rosalind Russell's Hildy negotiated and constructed a feminine position in the public domain of a workplace - an ultra-masculinized newspaper newsroom. This tactic of 'female tricksters', not unfamiliar to heroines in screwball comedies, would be a strategy to escape the limited and limiting circumstances that would otherwise be offered a woman journalist in a newsroom of the 1940s.

THE MASQUERADE and the FEMALE TRICKSTER

Recent feminist work on masquerade generally began with Joan Riviere's 1929 essay, "Womanliness as a Masquerade". She included an anecdote about an intelligent, successful, professional woman who flirted with her colleagues. Riviere described how the woman, her biotype, exaggerated aspects of her femininity, essentially to conceal her masculine attributes:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it - much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not the stolen goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My

suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.¹⁴

Riviere theorized that since masculinity meant 'possessing the phallus' and 'castrating the father figure,' her client compensated by coquetting and flirting in order to re-inscribe herself as feminine object of male attention. It's a reaction against the feminine-masculine which she embodied but concealed by a mask which can be worn or removed.

Film scholar Lori Landay's study, *Madcaps, Screwball and Cons*, seemed theoretically consanguine with Riviere's masquerade but reconstituted by Landay as a 'female trickster'. Landay originated the trickster persona in Native American myth, characters who used impersonation, deceit, theft or other criminal means to pursue largely self-serving goals to subvert existing social systems to widen their own sphere of power. They represented "liminality, duality, subversion and irony."¹⁵ Landay then drew a sketch of the 'female confidence trickster' in screwball comedy who employed deception by adopting alternative personae with impersonation, by donning a costume or makeup, or by altering her behavior by becoming inebriated, in short, a masquerade.¹⁶ Landay argued that trickery served as a useful way to manage personal relationships in the private sphere – for instance, as a strategy for screwball heroines to pursue the hero for a romantic union.

For the purposes of my study of women journalist characters in workplace comedies, female trickery allowed the characters to employ tactics to escape their limited circumstances and create new possibilities. The female trickster manipulated because that was the only way for women to achieve their desires in a world dominated by men.

In the real world during the era depicted in *His Girl Friday* the few women who worked in journalism were usually writing soft news features or domestic columns.

Reporting was neither encouraged, nor warmly welcomed. An employment handbook published in 1935 for women considering newspaper work, described the world they would find:

Let's set the record straight up top...the majority of reporters are men, many with military records and other distinguished accomplishments to back them up...but there is a place for the modern woman, if she is well-educated, properly bred...but if you imagine you'll be covering the presidential press conference, take a good deep breath and remember that you are a Susie. "Susie?" All the gang call the new female recruits 'Susie' until they do something outstanding and earn themselves another nickname.¹⁷

That brochure is but one example of the ideology that posits that male (journalists) represent the ideal or norm against which women are judged, rendering them as "the perpetual other."¹⁸

The social context that informed *His Girl Friday* included what Landay observed was the "discomfort of some Depression-era discourses of femininity" about women's independence and autonomy.¹⁹ So, a woman such as Hildy who aspired to work in the newspaper business would have had limited opportunities to exercise economic, political and intellectual power. By operating as a female trickster Hildy could embody masculine characteristics to wield covert power. Hildy's strategy employed many tactics such as double-dealing to emphasize the duality of the trickster. For the trickster to succeed as comedic she must operate in two worlds. But it really became one world that was 'betwixt and between' as a world of duality.

That *His Girl Friday* called attention to the trickster was acknowledged and was part of the digenesis. Usually, though, it was Walter who was identified as a source of trickery. Walter was described as a con-artist and manipulator, according to film critic James Hardy, Walter was a "comic scoundrel (and) triumphant amoralist."²⁰ Other writers

have been more critical: "Walter is, of course, the double-cross(er)."²¹ By presenting not one, but two, tricksters in the film, Hawks played with our notions of truth. By questioning who represents truth and demonstrating that the journalist characters were deceitful, *His Girl Friday* contributed to undermining society's trust in the ability of all journalists to 'bare the truth' - a value that forms the foundation of journalism.

Masquerade and trickery are first signalled in the film by the title with the abstract subject, "*His*." There was an assumption in the retrograde term that the masculine pronoun made a claim of exclusive rights, of possession. It was a claim that was made by Walter when he expresses fear that Hildy was leaving 'his' newspaper to work for another. Even though Walter was only an employee of the newspaper, not an owner, he warns Hildy with: "Go on, work for somebody else! That's the gratitude I get!" and "I'd kill you if you worked for anybody else." Walter consistently refers to Hildy as "his wife" even though they were divorced.

Some critics have assumed the "*His*" in the title was derived from Daniel Defoe's novel, "Robinson Crusoe", so that like the manservant Friday, Hildy is meant to be Walter's errand boy. A final interpretation and, one which would align with the ideology represented by the masquerade, is that the '*His*' referred to Hildy herself. Some scholars have recognized this, such as Maria DiBattista, who wrote: "Hildy...as a girl Friday, is definitely not a woman, as she herself recognizes, nor do her mannerisms suggest a conventional femininity."²²

Howard Hawks suggested the possibility of trickery by deceptive characters in his whimsical prologue to the film: "Once upon a time..." which suggested a fantastical fairy tale. That's followed by an ironic: "You will see in this picture no resemblance to the men

and women of the press today,” hinting that Hawks was distancing himself from the portrayals of his characters.

A RETURN HOME TO THE MORNING POST

After the prologue, Hawks immediately positions the audience with Hildy. She enters the *Morning Post* with a regnant procession through the newsroom. Everyone else in the newsroom seems almost pushed into the background as if lining a street to greet a returning monarch. Most of the characters are men: formally dressed in suits and scurrying around with notebooks. Hildy is fashionably dressed in a bold striped swing coat with a matching large brimmed hat. She stops for a brief warm, ‘girlish’ chat with two switchboard operators, then moves again, traveling through the newsroom. She stops for another breezy exchange with Beatrice, an older, grim-faced woman. She’s an advice-to-the-lovelorn columnist, who wants to relay some ‘domestic’ news to Hildy: her cat has had kittens again. Hildy keeps walking, but over her shoulder she tosses off a wisecrack, “Tis her own fault!” assigning blame for the litter to the female/mother. This allows Beatrice to represent duality: she may help others with their ‘affairs of the heart’, but she owns a *promiscuous* cat. This connotes a stereotype of a spinster, “a childless, frumpy, middle-aged woman...usually alone” with cats as their only companions.²³

Beatrice is the only female journalist we encounter in *His Girl Friday* other than Hildy. If there were other women in the newsroom, Hildy did not meet them after her long absence and, therefore, she was not aligned with them. Within the first two minutes of the film then, the representation of women is doubly-bound with domesticity: the ‘agony aunt’ columnist responsible for advising women and men about love unions; and the

unfortunate spinster who demonstrated that women who worked outside of the home were incapable of managing their own affairs in the domestic sphere. This represents what writer Elaine Tyler May observed about the domestic life of American women in the 20th century: “whether at work or at home, women were expected to behave according to the dictates of femininity: submissive not assertive, emotional not rational, nurturing not competitive, sexually attractive but not ‘loose’.”²⁴

Hildy’s performance as a female trickster was demonstrated in the opening scene when she enters the newsroom with her fiancé, Bruce Baldwin (Ralph Bellamy). She tells him to wait for just ten minutes. He coos, “even ten minutes is a long time to be away from you.” Although Hildy had already started walking away she stops and returns to tell him she liked hearing that expression of passion. “I like being spoiled,” she explains. “The man I’m going to see, did very little of it.” Hildy was introduced as a woman who idealized love and domestic security but also hinting at an abjuration of femininity.

Hildy was ostensibly making the visit to her ex-husband, Walter, to announce that she was getting married the next day to Bruce and quitting the journalism. The memorable and significant twelve-minute scene is filled with overlapping, rapid-fire dialogue amidst some silence and reflection. Although the scene provides narrative background about the history of the pair’s relationship, it seems unclear as to why - if Hildy was finished with Walter - she visited him in person. She could have simply informed him of her news in a less personal manner (phone call, mail or telegram).

Hildy’s visit to Walter’s office signals the duality of the performance punctuated by the stichomythic dialogue. Hildy invites a re-hashing of what were likely the most painful aspects of their marriage by asking Walter, “Now why did you promise not to fight

the divorce and then do everything you possibly could to gum up the whole works?"

While it could be suggested that Hildy, as a journalist, has an exigent desire to ask questions, the process also invites the possibility that she is signalling her ambiguity.

The quarrelling between Hildy and Walter is a performance, a ritual that seems familiar to the pair - in fact, it defines the couple. Without a fight there would be no performance. The arguments are frivolous, demonstrating that Hildy and Walter share an ironic yet sophisticated outlook and, an ability to trick. Hildy demonstrates her ability to be verbally manipulative when she cons Bruce to wait for her as she pursues the story. (Walter cons almost everyone including the prison officials, politicians, Bruce, his staff, and Hildy.)

In a study of comedy, scholar James Harvey noted that many characters in Hawks's screwball films fortified their ability to engage in verbal arguments by impersonating 'themselves' during their knockout fights.²⁵ This suggests that the tricksters could be twins, a tactic film scholar Elizabeth Kendall proposed in her discussion of another screwball comedy, *The Awful Truth* (director, Leo McCarey, 1937). The film's heroine, Lucy (Irene Dunne) and hero, Jerry (Cary Grant) matched wits in their verbal sparring. Kendall argued they were *so* evenly matched that it was as if Jerry "had set himself the exercise of creating a female character with the same privileges, the same firm sense of self, as a man, and then engaged her in battle with her 'twin'." ²⁶ Rather than the classical screwball comedy pairing which saw the powerful female in contest with the destabilized man, this couple has been made equable when each adopted masculine traits. Perhaps Hildy and Walter's sharing of values and competing just for mere scraps of difference suggested their 'twin-like' relationship.

The office scene establishes a bifurcation - while Bruce waits, Hildy toys with Walter, signifying a duality and her trickery. The dialogue between Hildy and Walter is charged with nostalgia about the past. They recall the highlights of their professional relationship and marriage: the fondness conflicts with the bitterness, bolstering a discourse of duality through their two sets of lives. After Hildy enters Walter's office, he offers her a chair and pats his knee to issue an invitation: "There's a lamp burning in the window for you. Here." Without warming to the allurement, Hildy fires a rebuff: "Oh, I jumped out that window a long time ago, Walter." But Hildy's animosity does not persist; throughout the scene she vacillates between warding off his flirtations and allowing them. The couple divorced - at *her* instigation - yet, she agrees when he offers that they "had something between (us) that nothing can change". Hildy nods: "I am fond of you, you know," then quickly adds, "I often wish you weren't such a stinker." A few minutes later, she offers a bifurcated compliment: "You're wonderful, in a loathsome sort of way". Hildy's movement throughout the scene is push-pull; she flies close to the 'flame' (an old one) then just before burning herself, she noisily flaps her wings and flies away.

We are compelled to watch Hildy and Walter primp throughout the scene. The constant grooming suggests a gradual elimination of sexual difference. We meet Walter as he sits at his desk, shaving, while one of his editors holds a mirror. The scene serves to render the mirror as masculine rather than as an artifice for feminine vanity. A few minutes later in the midst of an argument, Hildy picks up the mirror to check her makeup. That links it to the characters and suggests a flexibility about sexual difference. Later, in another scene with the mirror, both characters simultaneously preen while they conduct other business. Walter shaves and talks on the phone to con a politician. At the same time,

Hildy applies her lipstick, powders her nose and recounts the stunts they pulled as reporters when they were married. The mirror reinforces the notion that trickery is all about appearance and performance. It parodies feminine performance and makes the artifice of femininity visible. As well, by aligning it with male behavior it allows for a smooth transition between masculinity and femininity.

The dialogue between Hildy and Walter is often a trope within a trope: throughout the first half of the office scene, Walter acts indignant because he thinks Hildy is about to leave 'his newspaper' to work for the competition. He accuses her of ingratitude since he 'made' her career. He rhetorically asks: "what were you five years ago when you came here, some little college girl from a school of journalism...I took a doll-faced hick....." Hildy interrupts his self-serving rant to answer "You wouldn't have taken me if I wasn't doll-faced!" Walter suggests Hildy 'tricked him' into a relationship by performing as a feminized ingénue back then.

The discourse during the office scene increasingly invokes acts of trickery: Walter suggests that trickery was at play when he proposed marriage to Hildy. He accuses her of seducing him for two years until he "broke down". As he is retelling their courtship story, he pitches his voice high parroting a 'feminine' voice: "Oh Walter!" However, his performance of an ultra-feminine act doesn't acknowledge that we see a less-feminine Hildy. Walter continues to accuse Hildy of seducing and luring him into marriage. He complains that in his drunken stupor he had performed as a man acting as if he wanted to get married: "I STILL claim I was tight the night I proposed to you!" He then adds, "And if you'd been a gentleman, you'd have forgotten it. But not you!" Walter blames Hildy for not displaying the etiquette expected in male-to-male interactions. He assumes she

possesses a masculine knowledge, awareness or consciousness. This scene is critical as Walter references Hildy as masculine. He mocks the kind of man - one that is gentle and can see beyond the performance of the marriage proposal – as opposed to the kind of man that he is: deceitful.

Hildy reacts to the charges that she harassed Walter into marriage by angrily swinging her massive handbag – which resembles a business or attaché case - at Walter. By physically reacting to his charge, Hildy demonstrates her instinct for aggressive, masculine behavior. Walter receives the hit and returns with an insult, telling Hildy she missed: “You’re losing your eye. You used to be able to pitch better than that!” Fighting and sports seemed familiar to each of them and served trope throughout this scene. Hildy meets Walter in his office, face-to-face, even though she knows it will lead to a drag ‘em out fight so bloody she doesn’t want any witnesses, especially her fiancé, Bruce. But like a boxer down for the count, she struggles up again and again to lay another punch on Walter, demonstrating they are made of ‘the same stuff’. Physicality and even the suggestion of violence is linked to Hildy throughout *His Girl Friday*. Hildy kicks Walter under a restaurant table in one scene, and in another, pounds a table and threatens, “I’m going to walk right up to you and hammer on that monkey skull of yours until it rings like a Chinese gong.”

THE LURE OF THE STORY

The *mise-en-scene* of trickery hangs in the air throughout the office scene. Hildy brushes herself off and continues applying lipstick and listening to Walter’s phony telephone call with his city editor, Duffy. Walter is concocting a lie that a reporter,

Sweeney, suddenly can't cover the story of Earl Williams execution because his wife is having a baby. (That also reinforces the ideology that the practice of journalism interferes with the private sphere and domesticity.) Suddenly, Walter pretends to have an epiphany: Hildy could cover the story! But she wants nothing of it. She snaps the lid of her compact shut, shoves it into her bag and barks at Walter, "Scram Svengali." The makeup - a tool constructed as feminine - is put away, signalling that Hildy is dispensing with the domestic represented by the artefact. The act of dispensing with the trappings of the masquerade signals the opposite: from that point on through the rest of the opening scene, the linkages to Hildy are masculine.

The final minutes of the opening scene contain a series of negotiations between Walter and Hildy to establish how Hildy transgresses the boundaries of femininity to accumulate the multiple layers of gender inversion in *His Girl Friday*. Hildy's transgressions are demonstrated in her ambivalence or resistance to the cultural stereotypes that limited women's experience to the domestic sphere. Walter schemes to lure Hildy into remaining at the newspaper long enough to cover the Earl Williams story assignment. Hildy can't be seduced by Walter's appeal to her private sphere about how covering the story would bring the two of them back together, "just the way it used to be." He then tries to appeal to the sphere where she has already demonstrated her ability: the public sphere of the workplace. Walter pitches her on the 'masculine world of commerce' by offering her money to cover the story. He uses an appeal involving other masculine traits: ambition and a dedication to work. Finally, Hildy tells Walter why his appeals won't work: she can't cover the story because she's quitting the newspaper business. Rather than switching tactics, Walter raises the stakes, telling Hildy that she can't quit:

“You’re a newspaperman” and if she did quit, “it would kill you!” By linking a passion for work with life itself, Walter is ascribing masculine traits to Hildy.

Hildy is seemingly deaf to Walter’s appeals to return to work because she claims she is ambitious now only for herself: “I want to go someplace where I can be a woman.” Hildy maintains she has to leave the public sphere of the news business to relocate to the private sphere of marriage and family to regain her true womanhood. Hildy’s plan to retreat to the private/domestic sphere to evolve into a ‘true woman’ surfaces the contradictions inherent in traditional and limiting roles for women. She claims to want an identification that is found in the cultural construction of womanhood since 1820, as identified by historian Barbara Welter called, “The Cult of True Womanhood”. Welter argued the ideology of the cult meant women would maintain their purity by remaining in the home and away from economic and political institutions and the workplace, as they were the domain of men.²⁷ Hildy’s claim to desire domesticity is an ultra-feminine performance as a tactic of the trickster.

Hildy’s ultra-feminine performance actually points out her lack of feminine presence. This is perhaps more obvious in the absence of sexual energy in *His Girl Friday* between Walter and Hildy. Although most film scholars have viewed their verbal repartee as an acceptable on-screen replacement for sex, the flirtatious nature of their relationship produces no eroticism. Hildy’s presence does not produce a promise of sexual energy even when she is in a room full of leering men - such as in the pressroom of the Criminal Court building. However, their gaze is not for Hildy as a desirable female but for a Hildy who is a successful journalist, for her skills and command of the news story.

The masculine/feminine duality that Hildy plays with is exploited in the final act of the opening scene as Walter invites himself to lunch with Hildy and Bruce. Hildy, in her ultra-feminine persona, complains to Walter about his lack of manners compared with Bruce who values etiquette and chivalry. As if to prove his point, Walter leaves Hildy in the office as he bolts through the newsroom to the reception where Bruce is waiting – for Hildy. He darts through a half-gate door between the newsroom and reception. The gate symbolizes a separation between work – represented by the office and newsroom – and domesticity – represented by Bruce in the reception. Hildy is stuck behind in the world of work. But her feminine performance requires her to complain that she wants to be with Bruce in the domestic sphere:

I'm gonna be a woman, not a news getting machine. I'm gonna have babies and take care of them and give 'em cod liver oil and watch their teeth grow and, and — oh dear, if I ever see one of 'em look at a newspaper again, I'm gonna brain 'em.

Hildy's desire for a "normal life" underscores her ultra-femininity to establish the masquerade. Lori Landay argued that the masquerade requires that "women have to stay in their 'place' and perform feminine roles submissively."²⁸ Hildy's previous attempt to be contained in the domestic realm was a failure. Her married life with Walter was filled with disappointments: their honeymoon was replaced by a reporting assignment covering a disaster in a coal mine. Hildy chastised Walter after their divorce: "That isn't what I got married for." Hildy complained that Walter never delivered on the promise of a home. She described how her marriage was a failure and her fantasy about how it could be perfect with Bruce:

He forgets the office when he's with me. He doesn't treat me like an errand boy, but like a woman...He's kind, sweet and considerate. He wants a home and children." Hildy also performed, or role-played, as Bruce's fiancé, "the traditional, middle-class version of nurturing and respectable femininity."²⁹

Hildy's ambitions for the domestic demonstrated an over-action, a flaunting of femininity to hold it at a distance. Hildy rhapsodized about domestic life. She belied her 'natural instincts' as a hard-news reporter by seeing only fantastical images in the domestic life with none of the drudgery. Her pressroom colleagues - all male - mock Hildy's ability to run a home, predicting, "She'll tire of beating rugs." Hildy imagines: "I'll not beat any rugs!" Hildy's abdication of rug cleaning temporarily relocates her to screwball comedies populated by upper-class characters who shirked responsibility - a value that conflicted with American work ethic.

Domesticity is consistently repudiated throughout *His Girl Friday*. It is presented as exclusively feminine and femininity is renounced. Hildy claims she wants to be a mother, which evokes derisive laughter from her colleagues in the pressroom: "Can you picture Hildy singing lullabies and hanging out diapers?" The iconic representation of mother is negatively portrayed: Mrs. Baldwin, Bruce's mother, is presented as overbearing. She and Bruce are locked in an Oedipal attachment, as they plan to have his mother on their honeymoon and live with Hildy and Bruce afterwards. Bruce's relationship with his mother seems to have more intimacy than with Hildy: after Mrs. Baldwin becomes an obstruction (to Walter and Hildy getting the Earl Williams story) she is removed by Walter. But she escapes, returns and falls into Bruce's arms, as he cries, "Mother!" Mrs. Baldwin could be Hildy's double as she penetrated the male press room at the Criminal Courts Building (where Hildy was filing her story on Earl Williams after she

landed exclusive access to his jail cell). Like a reporter, Mrs. Baldwin has uncovered information (where Earl Williams is hiding) which leads to his recapture. While the male press corps report on the recapture, they don't cite their source. Mrs. Baldwin is referred to as an "anonymous source" and a "mysterious phone call." Therefore, her true identity is obscured just as Hildy's feminine identity is masked.

Mrs. Baldwin's son, Bruce, is also treated as an outsider. He's a slow-talking, simple-minded, overly-trusting man in contrast to the smart, sophisticated aspects of Hildy and Walter. Bruce represents stability, which is mocked, ridiculed and repudiated as a characteristic.

HILDY JOHNSON: STAR REPORTER

Journalists! Peeking through keyholes! Running after fire engines like a lot of coach dogs! Waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them what they think of Mussolini. Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. A lot of lousy, daffy, buttinskis, swelling around with holes in their pants, borrowing nickels from office boys! And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives' will know what's going on?

Hildy delivers her damning rant to the male reporters in the midst of the frenetic and energetic press room, without any of them interrupting her in contrast to the stichomythia that shapes the dialogue in the rest of the script. Written by Hecht and MacArthur for their 1928 play (*The Front Page*), the monologue attacked reporters who practiced irresponsible, sensationalistic, 'yellow' journalism and contributed to developing American cultural mythology about journalism. The derisive perspective of journalism did not change even when Hildy's gender was transposed for *His Girl Friday*. The legendary film critic for the New York Times, Pauline Kael, reviewed the release of the film in 1940

and assessed the portrayal of reporters as a “vanished race of brittle, cynical, childish people (who) rush around on corrupt errands.”³⁰

The ideology that sees the news business and journalists as vile informed the discourse of *His Girl Friday*. Reporters are portrayed as ruthless, exploitative, devoid of social consciousness and preferring their own constructions of truth rather than abstract notions of objectivity. The girlfriend of Earl Williams, Mollie Molloy, pleads with reporters covering his execution to get the story straight. But there is no ‘straight’ story; truth is represented by an accumulation of fictions. As reporters phone in the details of Williams’ arrest, we hear each of them fabricating different details as they produce conflicting and varying versions of the event. In fact, none of them had witnessed the news event itself.

Journalists – all but Hildy are male – are ascribed attributes that are oppositional to the values of a ‘True Woman’ described by historian Barbara Welter as: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”³¹ Therefore, female journalists are inmates in a double bind: as women who journey outside of the domestic sphere to earn wages they are seen in Welter’s analysis as failures: “no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth (from the career), all was ashes.”³² At the same time, they are tainted because they are practitioners of a craft that is contemptible. Therefore, the discourse is that it is unimaginable that women work as journalists. That iniquity is represented when Walter associates Hildy’s goal to seek the domestic life with the most grievous of crimes:

Hildy: I want to go where I can be a woman.

Walter: you mean a traitor!

Hildy: Traitor to what?

Walter: To journalism. You’re a journalist!

In this way, then, journalism was rendered as masculine. The discourse of *His Girl Friday* dictated that reporters are male, or embody the masculine as Hildy (and, in the next chapters, Murphy Brown, Mary Tyler Moore and Jane Craig). Without the distraction of the feminine, it was unproblematic for Hildy to be portrayed as a superb journalist, as a “born newspaperman” according to her colleagues who admired and respected Hildy. At times, they seemed in awe of her talents including the story she filed on Earl Williams. One reporter commented, “I say anybody who can write like that won’t give it up to sew socks.” Hildy has a natural reflex for news; when she hears the alarm ringing from the jail she was the first to fly out of the pressroom. Hildy’s colleagues are ostensibly her competitive rivals but they don’t seem threatened by her competence. Hildy scores a major ‘scoop’ with the exclusive interview with Earl William. But it was obtained by her use of trickery. It surfaces evidence of the masquerade: when Hildy interviews Williams, she lights a cigarette, inhales, then passes it to him through the bars on his cell. She notices that a trace of lipstick stuck to the filter paper and apologizes. Hildy is embarrassed that signs of femininity are revealed. Hildy – to earn the respect of her colleagues – had to be masculine because their activities (work) were meaningful whereas the domestic were not: One of her colleagues asks another, “Can you picture Hildy singin’ lullabies and hanging out diapers?” “And swapping lies over the back fence?”

Two scenes towards the end of the film remind us that Hildy is a trickster. Hildy is apologizing to Bruce for getting caught up in reporting the Williams story rather than departing with him for their wedding. She’s also defending her actions by telling Bruce

that covering the story was “the biggest thing in my life.” Her trickery and masquerade are clearly revealed when she insists: “If you want me Bruce, you’ve got to take me as I am instead of trying to change me into something else...I’m a newspaper man.” Bruce finally recognizes the female trickster and tells her she probably never intended to marry him to “be decent and live like a human”.

Their relationship is disintegrating and Bruce leaves, which allows Hildy to file her story on Williams. Then, she cries. Some critics are shocked at the tears, sensing a weakness that is inconsistent with the hard-scrabble image of Hildy. But others, such as feminist critic such Molly Haskell argue her tears are a sign of many emotions of “the anomaly of the woman professional(helplessness, frustration, anger) and ...confusion a woman feels when her two natures, feminine and professional, collide.”³³ Another film critic, Marty Roth condemns the move as an accommodation in a process to disempower Hildy: “the transformation of a sparkling, active character in a ‘woman’ to an ‘infant’, crying, whimpering, pleading.”³⁴ I argue this is a performance of hyper-femininity to reveal the existence of the gap between a woman seeking a role in the public sphere and the necessity for a female journalist to adopt a masculine masquerade.

Hildy’s strident claims to desire domesticity were part of her ultra-feminine performance to do it ‘right’ this time by quitting work and marrying Bruce. (The purpose of the early office scene between Hildy and Walter was to demonstrate her unhappiness in her marriage to Walter. The ideology of the ‘True Woman’ would observe that of course she was unhappy - she was, in fact, occupying two jobs – a reporter and a wife.) Hildy’s demand for domesticity also demonstrated her performance as a female trickster attempting to avoid what writer Susan Faludi has described as a ‘post-feminism

'backlash. She has described a discourse in the media in the 1980s – following the second-wave feminism movement – that rebuked women who had challenged containment in the domestic sphere, who escaped, a move that threatened the status quo. Faludi chronicled tales of career women who chased success only to be filled with regret about their choices: “women who were too free, too liberated, (who) chose to remain in the workplace and resist domesticity...(eventually) paying a price for their ‘recalcitrance.’”³⁵ (In Chapter Four, I discuss how Faludi’s backlash analysis may have informed the production of *His Girl Friday* as well as *Broadcast News* and *Murphy Brown*.)

The ending of *His Girl Friday* is not without confusion. It is clear that Bruce leaves Hildy, Walter toys with Hildy so that she almost begs him to reconcile (a reversal from the opening scenes when he begged her) until he unilaterally decides they will remarry. As they are making plans for a real honeymoon this time, the shiny object of news suddenly catches Walter’s eye. He shifts plans so they can travel to Albany (where Hildy was to live with Bruce) to cover a labor strike rather than honeymoon in Niagara Falls. Therefore, many film critics and scholars such as Stanley Cavell render the film into a “comedy of remarriage” subgenre. It is suggested that a transformation in the antagonist has occurred reaffirming culture’s belief in social conformity and providing a resolution (happy ending).³⁶ So, *His Girl Friday* is usually read as Hildy transforming to the conventions of remarriage, accompanying Walter on an assignment and romantic reunion. Molly Haskell observes Hildy’s transformation as discovering her true womanliness:

In the course of the film, she learns not that she has to be more of a man – indeed her significant contribution to the hard-bitten world of reporters is to inject a healthy dose of ‘female’ consideration, conscience, and humanity – but that she has to expand her definition of what it means to be a woman.³⁷

However, my analysis argues that another transformation occurred at the end of *His Girl Friday*: Hildy's masculinity. Hildy operated as a female trickster wearing a masculine masquerade and embody masculine characteristics to wield covert power. A woman such as Hildy who aspired to work in the newspaper business in the 1940s would have had limited opportunities, little intellectual power. Hildy's character - a woman choosing career over domesticity - would disrupt the patriarchal hegemony. Therefore, her character of a female journalist was ridiculed throughout the film and rendered absurd both as a woman seeking liberation from the domestic sphere and as a worker in a profession held in disdain. As the proto-typical female journalist in 20th century popular culture, Hildy Johnson then participated in the ideology that position women journalists as not normal people.

⁴⁶ Christopher Hanson, "Where have all the heroes gone?", *Columbia Journalism Review* (July 1995).

² Haskell, Molly. *Holding My Own in No Man's Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113-114.

³ Wes D. Gehring, *Screwball Comedy: A Genre of Madcap Romance*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

⁴ Henri Bergson, "Laughter" in *Comedy*, ed. Willie Sypher (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 121.

⁵ Tina Olsin Lent, "Romantic Love and Friendship: The Redefinition of Gender Relations in Screwball Comedy" in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick, Henry Jenkins. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 320

⁶ Gehring *ibid.* 3-6.

⁷ Landay, Lori. *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: the female trickster in American culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 103.

⁸ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 124.

⁹ Glitre (2006), Walsh (1984) and Harvey (1998) label them as "career girl" comedies, while other scholars (Sennett 1973) prefer 'boss-lady' films, taken from the character of a magazine fashion editor, played by Ginger Rogers in *Lady in the Dark*. Kathrina Glitre, *Hollywood romantic comedy : states of the union, 1934-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2006), 29-30

¹⁰ *His Girl Friday* and *Woman of the Year* (1942) are the only two screwball comedies whose heroines remained in the paid workforce once they were married; most 'screwball' heroines worked while they were single, but quit once they married or even engaged. This supported the dominant societal ideology that careers could not supersede marriage and motherhood as life goals.

¹¹ Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973), 199.

¹² Molly Haskell, 1974, 135.

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as Masquerade," in *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan. (London and New York: Methuen, 1986), 35.

¹⁵ Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: the female trickster in American culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁶ Landay, 136.

¹⁷ Betsy Israel, *Bachelor girl: the secret history of single women in the twentieth century*. (Morrow, 2002), 153.

¹⁸ Frances Elaine Donalson as quoted by Lauzen, Dozier, Horan, 201.

¹⁹ Landay, 119.

²⁰ James Harvey, *Romantic comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York : Knopf, 1987), 442.

²¹ Marty Roth "Slap-Happiness: The Erotic Contract of His Girl Friday." *Screen 30* (Winter/Spring 1989), 184.

²² Maria Di Battista, *Fast-Talking Dames*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 277.

²³ Mustard, Deborah "Spinster: An Evolving Stereotype Revealed Through Film" ". *Journal of Media Psychology* 4 (Winter 2000).

²⁴ May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward bound : American families in the Cold War era* New York : Basic Books, 1999, 71.

²⁵ Harvey, 436.

²⁶ Kendall, 202.

²⁷ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1960," *American Quarterly* 18:162, 1966, 152

²⁸ Landay 142.

²⁹ Lent ,323.

³⁰ Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies*, (1991), 335.

³¹ Welter, 152.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Haskell 1974, 133.

³⁴ Roth, 175.

³⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. (New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1991), 128.

³⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981.

³⁷ Molly Haskell, *Holding My Own in No Man's Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 116.

CHAPTER THREE

“You Might Just Make It After All” - *THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW*

The Mary Tyler Moore Show (TMTMS) was the first primetime situation comedy influenced by a discourse of second-wave feminism. It offered a vision of what life could be like for independent, career women in a world of equal opportunity, liberation and sexual freedom. Reviewers, critics and scholars described the lead character, Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore), as believable and lucid, one of the most “loveable portrayals of the single woman in American society of the seventies.”⁴⁷ *TMTMS* (CBS 1970-77) went off the air thirty-one years ago, but fans still maintain websites devoted to the show and the *Boston Globe* called the show’s iconic opening (with Mary throwing her knitted beret into the air), “the most memorable single image from any series opening ever.”⁴⁸ The pilot episode aired on September 19, 1970, and after a slow start, it gained a regular, prime spot at 9:30 p.m. Saturdays. It quickly became one of the network’s standout programs; consistently one of the most-watched programs during its seven years on the air and it garnered twenty-nine ‘Emmy’ awards from Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.⁴⁹ For many, its appeal was its innovation; how *TMTMS* was informed by social liberalism and how Mary Richards represented the ‘New Woman’. Scholars saw her as “a socially positive heroine,” a doppelganger for women in the workforce.⁵⁰ Television historiographies maintained that *TMTMS* “set the standard for a new sub-genre of situation comedy: the working woman sitcom.”⁵¹

In this chapter, I offer a divergent reading to that of the many fans and scholars who saw Mary Richards as a progressive female operating in the masculinized world of journalism. I argue that a number of strategies were employed within the narrative structure to devalue career women and demonstrate a hostility toward women journalists. There were many mixed messages about Mary Richards as a feminist symbol and about femininity. *TMTMS* was pioneering for its portrayal of a self-sufficient and self-determined single, career woman, who built a family out of her circle of her colleagues and neighbors. But it was also historically regressive, as her role was confining, and conformed to patriarchal norms. Her character operated as a female trickster as drawn by feminist scholar Lori Landay: she employed a masquerade as an “ultra feminine” sweet, single, ‘girl’-next-door to ‘make visible’ the gap between the social construction of ‘normal femininity’ and the traits of a ‘spunky’ woman working in a man’s world.⁵² Her female trickster character, then, operates in two settings that are hostile to a female journalist: one, because the world of journalism that is constructed as masculinized and (as journalism historian Matthew Ehrlich has observed) that is not for “not normal people.”⁵³

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF *THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW*

The growth of primetime television sitcoms is intrinsically linked to preserving the ideology of the tradition of the nuclear family, evoking post-WWII nurturing when the world needed women’s gentle mothering after all it had been through. The earliest of shows focused on ‘family togetherness’ with narratives and plots centred around images supporting the industrial, patriarchal family structure. Women were confined to the domestic sphere and expected to be warm and attentive to the needs of others within the

nuclear family, while men were expected to be tough, resilient, cunning and aggressive.⁵⁴ These values were exemplified best by *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966). Each week, on a set recreated to look like the real interior of the Nelsons' home and in storylines taken from the Nelsons' real life, the family showed how the American Dream could be fulfilled within roles which supported a traditional social order. In her made-for-TV life, Harriet was a homemaker upholding what historian Barbara Welter identified in 1966, as "The Cult of True Womanhood" which argued that the essence of femininity necessitated women staying pure by maintaining and remaining in, the home, and separate from men's place in the workplace, economic and political institutions (in real life Harriet Nelson was working as hard as her husband, and two sons on their show).

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, television evoked and propagated nostalgia; women characters were fragile and were responsible for maintaining the nuclear family unit. Single women appeared as widows on *The Lucy Show* (CBS, 1962-1968), or plain, sarcastic, career-girls such as Rose Marie as Sally Rogers on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-1966) and Eve Arden as Connie Brooks on *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS, 1948-1957) or the perennially-engaged Marlo Thomas as Ann Marie on *That Girl* (ABC 1966-1971). The author of a study examining how single women have been portrayed, historically, in media, sums up this period: they were "a quasi-perversion."⁵⁵ On television in the 1950s and 1960s, it was assumed that women would only participate in the workforce until they married and then assume the roles society expected of females: mother and homemaker.

The social upheaval of the 1960s prompted by the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, sexual freedom, the generation gap, drug use, and women's liberation

was only slowly and gradually explored in weekly, episodic television. The civil rights movement was reflected as racial tension between blacks, ethnics minorities and whites and contained within heavily-sentimentalized family shows produced by Norman Lear's Tandem Productions such as *The Jeffersons* (CBS, 1975-1985), *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), and, *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978) to name just a few.

Meanwhile, prime-time television was slow to represent the other major social movement, the emerging 'women's liberation.' Cultural studies scholar Lori Landay has noted that women characters on American television during the 1960s and early 1970s were firmly embedded in the private sphere even using their superhuman powers - such as Samantha on *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964-1972) - to create a life as an 'ordinary housewife.'⁵⁶ Even as society began to shift and more women began working outside the home in paid employment, television failed to reflect their lives (by 1970, 43% of women worked outside the home in paid jobs.)⁵⁷ This reflected the dominant, post-war cultural tradition in North America, that productive, paid, employment was not an integral component of womanhood. A number of studies have examined the roles women and men played on prime-time television and found that women were consistently more likely to be primarily identified in their marital role while men were primarily represented by their occupational roles.⁵⁸

This representation of women on primetime television as confined to the domestic sphere began to slowly shift, perhaps by a heightened pursuit by the networks of the female audience and its consumer dollars. While women had always controlled most of the family's consumer-related decisions, increasingly they had more disposable income to spend. Advertisers wanted to attract the new demographic of white, middle-class

working women simply because it was good business. Television scholars argued the networks believed those women wanted to watch television programs with characters involved in plots and lifestyle choices that mirrored their own. However, scholars have also pointed out that swaths of the audiences were resistant to rhetoric of the women's movement so that most programmers wanted conventional 'safe' series, rather than anything that would have made feminism 'scary.'

In 1969, three years after *The Dick Van Dyke Show* ended, the actress Mary Tyler Moore and her husband, producer Grant Tinker, hired James L. Brooks to create a new show for Moore (Brooks had just created *Room 222*, a socially-relevant drama set in a racially-diverse classroom). Brooks' began by sketching Mary Richards' character as a thirty-year-old newcomer to Minneapolis to make it on her own in a rough and tumble world of a TV newsroom – and, recently divorced. According to various accounts, CBS vetoed the divorced characterization. Apparently, network executives argued that audiences would not tolerate certain kinds of characters on primetime sitcoms: men with moustaches; New Yorkers; and, divorced women.⁵⁹ Another account had CBS programmers insisting audiences who were already familiar and infatuated with Moore would be confused if she played a divorced woman: "they're going to think she's divorced Van Dyke!" they apparently said.⁶⁰ So Moore's character was a woman who was 'single', recently dumped by her long-time fiancé.

MARY: NOT JUST SINGLE, BUT A 'SPINSTER'

It is important to reinforce that the ultimate decision that sent Mary Richards into the working world as a single woman was a creative compromise rather than a daring

attempt to act as a social or cultural vanguard. The anxiety at CBS about a single woman character was initially born out: CBS surveyed audience members after the first episode and found Mary was seen as “a loser.”⁶¹ But CBS kept the show on the air, perhaps because it had already ordered half a season (rather than just a pilot episode) so it didn’t make financial sense to cancel the show.

The creators maintained that they never intended to create a social comedy, to use the ‘single career woman’ character to participate in a feminist critique on the social economic and political inequalities between the sexes. The creative team - every one of them male - acknowledged they had little awareness of the women’s movement when creating as *TMTMS*: “our feeling was that if a girl was over thirty and unmarried, there had to be an explanation for such a freak of nature as that.”⁶² That depiction can be comfortably situated within the historical cultural representations of single women as ‘spinsters’. Scholars such as Naomi Rosenthal examined the depiction of spinsters in 19th and early 20th century popular media and concluded they were seen as “almost pathological.”⁶³ Occasionally, they were portrayed as ‘exotic’ as Rosenthal noted, but the spinster motif was often drawn as selfish, eccentric, lonely, and old.⁶⁴ The author of *Bachelor Girl*, Betsy Israel, argued that since the hysteria of the Salem witchcraft trials, American society has regarded women who had never been married with grave suspicion or pity. Israel wrote that spinsters were “heartless women...who stole jobs from men. She stole herself away from men who needed her...she was missing a vital piece.”⁶⁵ The historical representation of spinsterhood, then, figured a woman on the periphery of life, isolated from society, separate from traditional, nuclear families; alone and ‘a lone’. In

summary, spinsterhood was not normal.⁶⁶ This motif is found within the narrative of *TMTMS* to portray Mary Richards.

The circumstances that led to Mary Richards being single called upon a familiar trope: the victim. Mary had supported her fiancé, Dan Whitfield, as he attended medical school but upon graduation he became ambivalent about getting married to Mary. In the episode, "The Courtship of Mary's Father's Daughter" (December 23, 1972),⁶⁷ Mary is living in a new city and building a new life when she encounters her past: she bumps into Dan who tells her he wants to reconcile. Mary agonizes over the decision and decides to turn him down. Then, she discovers that he was already engaged (to another woman). That discourse sees Mary disciplined for her single and independent lifestyle, a spinster who knows not love.

In many episodes of *TMTMS*, Mary's status as single woman allows spinsterhood to be represented as a lack. The plot of 'The Slaughter Affair' (January 15, 1972) revolved around the shaken marriage of Murray Slaughter, a WJM writer and his wife, Marie Slaughter. When Murray secretly moonlights as a taxi driver, Marie becomes convinced he's actually having an affair, with Mary. In an attempt to squelch the rumor, Mary visits Marie at home. As Murray returns, Mary forces the truth and the Slaughters are reconciled. Mary is then cast in the background, simultaneously visible and invisible. She is included in the image of domesticity because of her role in bringing about the reunion, but she's also excluded and cannot participate in the bond of a couple: the single woman is also 'the incomplete woman.'⁶⁸ The contradictory messages about ambivalence and duplicity informed the narrative for *TMTMS*. In an examination of the extra-textual discourse, feminist scholar Serafina Bathrick described how, even two years into the

TMTMS series, popular magazine articles conflated Mary and the private life of Moore.

The articles pointed to the fact Moore was *married* to Grant Tinker (the executive producer of the production company, MTM) and how Moore had previously performed as the *stay-at-home wife* of Rob Petrie in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*⁶⁹. The message for audiences was to differentiate Moore, the actress, from the character she played on television; that the actress herself was not a single woman.⁷⁰

The discourse of *TMTMS* was there is nothing as lonely as a single woman. In the episode, "Divorce Isn't Everything" (October 10, 1970), the narrative explores how the single woman is the object of social rejection. Mary comments on how her marital status above anything else, defines her to society: "I could discover the secret of immortality, and still they'd say, 'look at that *single* girl, discovering the secret of immortality'. Mary's divorced friend, Rhoda, invites Mary to join a dating club for divorced people. Mary initially pretends she is divorced so she can join, then when she reveals she has never actually been married, she is forced to the outside, revealing that married-but-divorced is privileged over perennially single. The motif of a spinster - relegated to the periphery of social life - echoes the motif of the journalist - an observer rather than a participant in society.

Mary Richards is a female trickster when she pretends she is happy with her single status, when, in fact, she is often dating, looking for a life partner, only to be constantly thwarted. She's persistent, but her suitors either can't measure up to her high standards, or, the 'good ones' reject her. Her frustration is evident in the penultimate episode, 'Lou Dates Mary' (March 19, 1977). Mary has taken an inventory of her dating career that includes *two thousand dates* and now she observes, she's getting "too old for

this.” Her failure in the quest for marriage is portrayed as the problem of ambitious women:

You know how you go along thinking some day you’ll meet the right person? Well, for the first time I’m not sure that’s going to happen...I’m not even sure he exists...I didn’t think I was asking for that much but I haven’t met anyone who even comes close. Someone who doesn’t care how I look, because he’s more concerned with who I am...somebody strong and intelligent...who respects me, who I can respect.

The rhetoric is that of a ‘feminist’, demanding ‘respect’ and ‘intelligence’ more than the security of a ‘good man’. Mary is urged to date her boss, because he’s the *only* man who fulfills all of Mary’s qualifications. The date is suffused with tension (partly due to the symbolic father/daughter taboo) but also due to the feminism made visible by conflating private and public spheres. When the series ends the following week, Mary is disciplined for attempting to be the liberated woman who wants it ‘both ways’ or ‘to have it all’: in the end, she is still single and no longer a career woman as she was fired from WJM (along with almost all of the rest of the staff).

“YOU’VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY.”

The Single Career woman...that great mistake that feminism propagated may find satisfaction in her job. But the chances are that she will suffer psychological damage. Should she marry and reproduce, her husband and children will be profoundly unhappy.

*Life magazine, Special Report on Woman, 1956*⁷¹

Mary Richards’ represented a liberated woman participating in a non-sexist society. This portrayal was dependent on the construction of her character as a ‘career woman’ even though it was represented in the narrative as her reaction to being denied the traditional role of wife that she thought she wanted when her fiancé hesitated about

getting married. However, it was crucial that Mary's character was single to conform with traditional, patriarchal ideology that the only women who chose careers (over domesticity) were single. It would have been a radical choice for the creators of *TMTMS* to have drawn Mary's character as a married woman, choosing to work outside the home. As Rosenthal has explained, historically, careers for women were seen either as substitutes for, or an alternative to marriage; fears that economically independent women might abandon men and marriage altogether meant that working women were perceived as a threat to the status quo.⁷²

The pilot and first episode of the sitcom, "Love is All Around," established the problems and the premises that drove the program, including the circumstances in which Mary Richards was hired at the third-rate local television station, WJM. She applies for an administrative job in the newsroom, not an editorial position requiring a journalistic background. (Viewers are not provided with any information about Mary's occupational experience previous to the start of the series. This was not inconsistent with the portrayal of working women on television in the 1970s. A study by Lillian S. Robinson found that "a general absence of skills of any sort characterizes television's female workers.")⁷³ As Mary walks into WJM, wearing a tight sweater, mini skirt and knee-high fashion boots, she tries to catch the attention of people in the newsroom – all men – who ignore her as they rush around. Finally, she captures the attention of Murray Slaughter and asks him where she can find Lou Grant. Rather than telling her, he flatly says, "We've already hired a secretary." Lou sees her and flirtatiously tells her to accompany him to his office where the crucial 'job interview' scene takes place.

The interview scene established the patriarchal relationship between Lou - the gruff boss - and Mary - the obsequious applicant. Lou quickly demonstrates that he embodies all the power by virtue of his gender, his body language and conduct, as well as his superior position. Lou tells her that although the secretarial position is filled, he has another that is open, although he says he thought he'd be hiring a man. He drills her with questions, asking her religion, her age, and her marital status. Mary ignores his questions, finally telling him they "don't have a thing to do with my qualifications for this job." She tells him, in fact, the questions are illegal. Lou stares at her and snaps: "What you going do? Call a cop?" After she is rebuked, Lou addresses her salary and position, offering to appoint her 'associate producer' (a position in real newsrooms that would rank above the administrative level). However, since Lou is punishing Mary, he offers her a salary lower than that of a secretary. Just as Mary is about to accept, he then offers her an even grander-sounding title, but lowers the salary, again, all in the process of exploiting Mary's naiveté, for performing boldly and not conforming to expectations about women's behaviour. Lou tells Mary this in a classic scene: the camera closes in on Lou as he admonishes her for sticking by the rules.

Lou: You know what? You got spunk.

Mary: (grinning with pride) Well...yes...

Lou: I hate spunk!

'Spunk' carries a childish, patronizing connotation, suggesting that the subject is 'bigger than her britches'. The comedy arises from the layers of duplicity: Mary applies for a lowly administrative job without demonstrating why she is qualified, yet she keeps getting promoted. Film and television studies scholar Darrell Y. Hamamoto argued that the focus

on the inverse salary differential between the secretarial job and that of associate producer, “represented the price of ‘making it’ in a male-dominated profession.”⁷⁴ In the scene, Lou reinforces that Mary’s admission to the rarefied newsroom is conditional and tenuous, when he tells her the conditions of his offer: “If I don’t like you, I’ll fire you. If you don’t like me, I’ll fire you.”

However diminished and humiliated, Mary accepts that this is the way men in power address women. To confirm her hiring, Mary offers a symbolic gesture for acceptance and equality by reaching across the desk to shake Lou’s hand. Lou ignores her, signalling a repudiation and undercutting any pride she may have assumed for being hired. Mary’s status is further eroded when she lifts her rebuked hand and waves goodbye, a performance evocative of a child rather than a colleague. Mary is admitted to the WJM newsroom without any presumption she will be treated equally or with respect yet she’s appreciative of whatever slivers of the public sphere she is offered. The first episode established elements that were crucial to the narrative of the series: Mary is stultified in a subordinate position; forever referring to her boss as ‘Mr. Grant’, never ‘Lou.’ It signals the traditional patriarchal order even within a professional system will endure because that is the preference of the vassal.

Mary’s achievement in obtaining access to the newsroom job was reinforced throughout the series as a decision to denote her ‘tokenism, like Hildy in *His Girl Friday* and Jane in *Broadcast News*. When Mary finds herself on the first day of the job, with nothing to do, she wonders aloud, “I wonder why he hired me?” Murray answers: “Don’t you know? You’re our token woman!” In another episode, when the WJM manager is giving a tour of the newsroom to potential advertisers he introduces each employee by

name until he reaches Mary: "This is our token woman executive." This discourse suggested Mary was making an *individual* choice to operate as a woman in a man's world rather than representative of a feminist-informed goal that would see women's access to the workplace as crucial to the movement towards an equal society. The comedy erupts by exposing the tensions of the striving individual in a challenging, alien environment - the workplace. Feminist scholars have identified this recurring narrative in primetime television sitcoms to represent 'feminism': women were given equal access to 'male' jobs but if they failed, their behaviour, morals or values were criticized. A feminist-informed narrative would suggest a woman's success in the workplace may be limited by structural or political barriers.

Mary's tokenism meant she was rarely granted influence in the newsroom, and when she did gain some authority, her attempts to wield power and how she was then disciplined, became the humorous narrative. This strategy was demonstrated in an episode in the sixth season, 'What's Wrong with Swimming?' (October 16, 1976). In an parallel attempt to exercise her authority and to promote the advancement of women, Mary audaciously suggested that Lou hire a woman as a sportscaster. The proposition was considered absurd by all the newsmen but Lou permits Mary to hire B.J. Smathers, a former Olympic swimmer, as a lark. The move is sabotaged at every turn, demonstrating, what semanticist Hugh Duncan has described as rendering the challenge to the social order (Mary's pursuit of power) seem absurd.⁷⁵ Lou subverts responsibility: although Mary has never managed such an ambitious assignment, Lou offers her no guidance or mentoring. Mary undermines her own conduct when she hires B.J. without determining whether she is qualified as a sportscaster. Only when she's hired and on the air does Mary realize that

the sportscaster is inadequate. B.J. is opposed to violence in contact sports, so she refuses to include the results or other information about professional sports teams in her sportscasts. When the hometown football team plays a game, B.J. ignores it, and instead reports on an amateur diving event. The sportscast is ridiculed and Lou tells Mary to fix the problem. So, she mimics Lou's ruthless management tactics and fires B.J. Mary is humiliated and accepts the disaster the way it is framed by Lou and the rest of the male newsroom: proof that women can't work as sportscasters as they are women in a man's world. In a clumsy attempt to cheer her up, Lou tells Mary that the incident has demonstrated that a woman – meaning Mary – “has the chance to be just as lousy in a job as a man.”

Lou's admonishment is aimed at two targets - Mary and B.J., the two women attempting to exert their influence in an inflexible, masculinised workplace. It is a familiar trope for disciplining ambitious women. This episode was significant for establishing what Dow described as one of the hegemonic messages from the experience of women working in a man's world: “compliance produces more happiness than resistance.”⁷⁶ It was also instructive for Mary who was disciplined for rebuffing the authority and experience of Lou and the other newsmen – misogyny disguised as advice. The lesson was: when a woman tries to liberate herself from patriarchal authority she will blunder, be found lacking and retreat to a position of subservience.

Other episodes of *TMTMS* contained a criticism of Mary's ambitions as a journalist. Mary's competence was limited to that of a secretary, window dressing, more than an editorial producer or journalist. As film critic Molly Haskell remarked (about films released earlier in the century), “a woman's intelligence was the equivalent of a

man's penis: something to be kept out of sight.”⁷⁷ The journalistic skill accorded the most respect – writing – was privileged to Mary's colleague, Murray. This was demonstrated in a couple of similar episodes when Mary is asked to replace Murray when he is away. Normally, Mary is shown as a competent typist, her fingers flying off the keys. But they suddenly froze when she was given some of Murray's tasks, such as re-writing stories from the wire service. Lou stomps around impatiently barking about the impending 6:00 p.m. deadline. Rather than offering encouragement to Mary, he pushes her off her chair, sits at her typewriter and speedily types to get the stories to air. The scene demonstrated Mary was carrying out a charade as a journalist and while she may have the performative abilities of a journalist she is not a compeer with the men of the newsroom. In this way, Mary's character was consistent with the cultural rendering of a working woman found in a study of the portrayal of working women on primetime sitcoms a decade earlier. Researcher Phyllis Japp's study found that “a woman's identity as a working professional does not call for qualities such as competence (or) confidence...locked in conventional gender stereotypes ofinadequacy, her work invisible and irrelevant.”⁷⁸

Mary's charade is just one of the strategies that allowed for a critique on *TMTMS* of career women and women journalists. The episode, “Room 223” (Oct 9, 1971), demonstrated how the comedy of humiliation undermined Mary's portrayal of a successful career woman. Mary decided to enrol in a college course to upgrade her journalistic training. Once Mary was situated in a classroom the narrative challenged her ability as an associate producer and as a writer. Her instructor grades her writing with a C-plus, labelling it ‘flowery’ and ‘feminine’. When she protests, he dismisses her complaint, but asks her out on a date. The narrative then revolves around the romantic relationship

that develops with an authority figure, who should be assisting her. The episode closes with an upbraiding by the instructor of her professional skills and personal qualities.

Since Mary was striving beyond the gender designation that contained her to the domestic sphere, she was disciplined and mocked. Scholar Susan Cormier observed that "Mary frequently suffers the humiliation of a woman-out-of-place, or of not being up to the place she aspires to, for she inevitably falls short of her own aspirations for romantic fulfilment or professional success."⁷⁹

It is instructive to examine how issues central to the women's movement were addressed or commented upon in *TMTMS*. The issue of 'equal pay for work of equal value' was addressed - after Mary was hired. Mary knew and accepted that her value, as determined by the pay structure, was lower than that of a subordinate. However, she only discovered the true inequity, two years later. In "The Good-Time News" (September 16, 1972), a spoof of 'Happy Talk' television newscasts, Mary learns that her male predecessor earned \$50 per week more than she did, and he was less competent. Lou matter-of-factly explains that her predecessor needed the higher salary because he had a family to support.⁸⁰ Lou dismisses Mary's request for a raise as "one of those woman things," then attempts to mollify her by giving her an important assignment: to lighten up the humourless anchor Ted Baxter. Mary is awkward in a position of authority and sexist Ted resents her direction. The two have a confrontation which ends when Mary barks, "Oh, Shut Up, Ted." Film scholar Bonnie Dow said that scene demonstrated that Mary learns that "she is inferior to other, specifically male, characters in the public realm where her success depends more on her interpersonal than professional skill."⁸¹

When Mary accepts Lou's responsibilities she is also required to adapt her feminized style. So rather than tolerating Ted, she becomes aggressive in a masculine style, perhaps fuelled by her own anger at the pay inequity. (This allowed *TMTMS* to avoid commenting on pay equity as a social cause.) Furthermore, Lou rewards her transformation and her masquerade as a masculine boss with the pay raise. Rather than suggesting that a modern, gender-equitable workplace can accommodate a diversity of leadership styles, Lou valorized only one mode of behaviour. He also demonstrated that his workers must mimic his proto-masculine manner. We must ask whether this reflected the ways in which patriarchy endured even when women challenged the status quo?

Another strategy to discipline ambitious women journalists was pursued in an episode which allowed a collision between traditional femininity and career feminism. 'Put On a Happy Face' (Feb 24, 1973) also saw an attempt by Mary to adopt tactics of a 'female trickster' in an attempt to escape the career limitations of the WJM workplace. When the episode begins, Mary hears she has won a prize for journalistic excellence to be presented at an awards dinner. But by the time we see her pick up her award, her professional abilities are challenged and undermined and she is eviscerated. Her first task when she hears of the award's dinner is to find a date; but can land no one other than Ted which comically demonstrates she is disciplined for her singlehood. Next, her feminine appearance: Mary is always perfectly coiffed so she meticulously chooses her dress, hairstyle and makeup so to appear as the image she imagines for a television journalist. By attempting to wear the disguise of a professional rather than a lowly associate producer, Mary adopts the strategy of a female trickster to create a better identity. It is a complex layering of performances: Mary Richards is ultra-feminine to critique the masculinity of

the newsroom; a cultural identification which she attempts to take on ('career woman') with resultant failure.

That evening, the female trickster is bested by one fiasco after another. Mary physically falls apart when she sprains her ankle on a freshly waxed floor and then catches a cold. She is subverted by self-sabotage as well: she arrives at the awards ceremony wearing the wrong dress; wearing a slipper rather than a sexy sandal on her sprained and swollen foot; her hair limp and her nose damp with a cold. As she's accepting her award, making a shameful apology for her appearance and demeanour, she is ridiculed by the audience of her peers. The comedy of humiliation functions as a 'slap in the face' corrective to challenge Mary's ambition and independence. She fails in her attempt to perform female trickery and persuade us that she is a career woman and an authentic journalist. Meek and feminine, Mary Richards cannot adopt a persona to comfortably negotiate between the private and public spheres. The disastrous awards evening offers a rebuke to women who believe they have achieved success in the public sphere. The cruelty of her audience also allows the narrative to explore the ideology that journalists are to be feared, they are not normal people.

THE WJM FAMILY: MOTHER, SISTER, DAUGHTER

Many second-wave feminists who observed popular culture's construction of patriarchal families argued it reinforced gender inequities and hence contributed to women's oppression. They sought to champion women's rights and bring equity to gender role socialization. They looked forward to 1970s primetime programs to move out of the living room into office corridors and *TMTMS* was notable for being among the first

to do so. However, *TMTMS* retained more than traces of a domestic comedy to transport the familiar and familial roles into an occupational setting in a surrogate family situation. Rather than challenging or dismantling the traditional, idealized, patriarchal, nuclear family and its stereotypes that assigned roles to the public or private realm, depending on their gender, many scholars have observed the strategies that *TMTMS* employed to retain the familial framework.⁸² Film scholar Hamamoto argued that the domestic setting created what was viewed as a politically neutral zone. "The domestication, that is, containment of liberal democratic ideals, has minimized the risk emancipatory ideals might pose to undemocratic economic and political structures of domination."⁸³

The WJM newsroom functioned as a social model mirroring a family unit: Mary's role was as a submissive 'daughter' to Lou, a nurturing 'mother' to the rest of the newsroom, and a supportive 'sister' to Sue Ann, the only other woman in WJM, who hosts a cooking show, "The Happy Homemaker". Mary could perform those roles as a spinster, an iconography which invoked a denial of her personal self and success as a news producer. "Mary sacrifices with a smile at WJM," observed Serafina Bathrick.⁸⁴ She referenced Mary functioning as Welter's 19th Century 'True Woman', "upholding the pillars of the workplace with her willing hand."⁸⁵ Even in the episodes in which Mary attempted to assert herself and reject the nurturing role, ended with a return to the familial roles as she subsumed her own desires. The nature of domestic sitcoms meant family harmony must be upheld by the end of the episode; like the spinster, Mary often lost the battle for herself (in the newsroom) but kept 'the family' intact.

The family and home iconography and setting also reinforced Mary's masquerade of her ultra feminine performance. This was evidenced as she was positioned

to function as a wife-substitute for the three men in the newsroom. In the seventh and final season, "Mary's Three Husbands" (February 26, 1977), explored this 'fantasy' as the three men imagined being married to Mary. In Murray's dream, she gives birth effortlessly to Murray's child, reinforcing Mary's selfless, unflinching servitude as well as emphasizing her own position as childless and unmarried. In Ted's (Freudian) dream, Mary is his unconditional provider. Lou dreams they have been married for 50 years, but it was a relationship never consummated. Mary begs him to have sex, enacting a fantasy of the older, father-figure being desired by a younger, beautiful woman. Yet, the narrative shows how Mary could never be a wife or sexual partner to the most influential and powerful man in her life. "We must ask if this is because our society has deeply cultivated a belief that women can only be mothers or whores, a dichotomy that leaves no place for a 'good' career woman?"⁸⁶

While I argue the steady discourse in each episode that saw the characters reenact familial roles, reinforced and reminded audiences that 'spinster' Mary did not have a role within a 'normal' family structure. However, some television scholars saw the same narrative as more positive. Rather than seeing Mary's singlehood as a lack, television scholars such as Jane Feuer argued Mary created a surrogate family with her friends and colleagues and *TMTMS* presented a utopian alternative to the traditional, nuclear family that had been mythologized by American television. The WJM workplace (as well as those of other sitcoms produced by MTM Productions) mythologized the workplace as an arena of intimacy and harmony, but also presented a utopian view and an alternative to the nuclear family that may be more palatable to women, argued Feuer.⁸⁷ As a single woman

with time and energy not diverted to husband or children, Mary was able to to nurture relationships with her family of choice.⁸⁸

The mixed messages about femininity and career women in *TMTMS* could have been subtly influenced by what seemed to be the traditional views of the actress, Mary Tyler Moore. Twenty-five years after the show went off the air, Moore was interviewed about the dynamic in the production caused by the relationship between herself as the heroine and her producer-husband, Grant Tinker:

Mary Tyler Moore: We got along just great because I didn't do anything. It was Grant's company and he made all the decisions. And that was just fine.

Larry King: You had input, though. You're the star. You didn't want input?

Moore: Yes, well, I didn't have to have input about my show because Jim Brooks and Allen Burns and the writers that they then hired were so good that they just bombarded us with one storyline after another that made our heads spin

King: So whatever they wrote you did?

Mary Tyler Moore: That's right.

King: Do you ever remember saying, I don't want to do this?

Moore: I'm sure there were one or two scenes like that and I can't think of one right now, but so unimportant as to be not worth discussing.⁸⁹

Mary Richards is frequently admired for the positive traits of femininity she exhibited in the newsroom: her nurturing, sensitivity, empathy, cooperative, and unwavering support. However, circumscribing Mary to the quasi-domestic sphere, forced her to adopt those traits, so she was constantly conforming to others' expectations. Those traits such as sentimentalism, that lead to suppression of the mind and repression of the body, also limited her ability to occupy a journalistic role within the newsroom.⁹⁰ It seemed Mary's poise and intelligence was subverted in the 'Put On a Happy Face' episode, among others. Mary was often left stuttering and stammering – she literally could not articulate her thoughts and she was left without a voice. In what echoes the motif of

the spinster, Dow concluded that Mary was constantly compromising, acting “submissive and unassertively nurturing and, thus, has successfully adapted herself to the male culture.”⁹¹ By relating Mary to other members of the ‘family’ it can be a strategy to diffuse the radical aspects of feminism, undercutting Mary’s status as a liberated woman.

If *TMTMS* was attempting to reflect awareness of the feminist critique of gender roles that required a fundamental change in norms of thought and action, it would not have embedded the ideology of the family so deeply in the narrative. Radical feminist rhetoric attacked the nuclear family, suggesting it reinforced the patriarchal roles formed in the industrial age. They called for it to be dismantled so as to create a society in which “both men and women could consciously and deliberately choose which roles, both inside and outside the family, they would adopt.”⁹² Although ‘career-woman Mary’ had a choice of role outside of the family, to work in a man’s world, she was subverted and could not disentangle herself from the limitations of the public sphere. That would have called for a radical change. Film comedy scholar Steve Neale argued that the inherent conservatism of the domestic comedy valued stasis over change.⁹³ He argued that any cultural transformations such as Mary idealizing a more positive representation of a woman journalist in the newsroom would still have to be made “acceptable within the parameters of traditional family unity.”⁹⁴

Constructing Mary Richards more as an idealized wife, mother and daughter, than the facing of a feminist in the workplace meant the status quo was retained. *TMTMS* was consistent with primetime television portrayals in which female characters played roles that “emphasize communal traits, focusing on relationships and concern with

others...more likely to be seen interacting with others in familial and romantic roles,” whereas male characters were seen in occupational roles, exhibiting ambition, assertion and a desire for success.⁹⁵ Mary’s ambivalence with valorizing the career woman was most evident in the final episode of *TMTMS* “The Last Show” (March 19, 1977). A new station manager fires every one of the staff except for Ted, the buffoon anchor, suggesting an indictment of the shallowness of television news. In the final scene as the newsmen are sobbing and passing around tissues, the dehumanizing act of being fired provided them with a feminized identification. In a curious move, Mary Richards attempts to transform the collective loss and sentiment into a moral message that is strangely self-reflective. She tells her colleagues, “I just wanted you to know that sometimes I get concerned about being a career woman. I get to thinking my job is too important, and I tell myself that the people I work with are just the people I work with, and not my family. And last night I thought, ‘What is a family anyway? They’re just the people who make you feel less alone and really loved.’”

CONCLUSION

Hailed as one of the “most significant New Woman sitcoms,”⁹⁶ *TMTMS* offered multiple readings of a single, career woman in the city. Feminist critics, such as Bonnie Dow, argued that *TMTMS* remained an important feminist text.⁹⁷ Mary was independent enough to act as a symbol for women’s emancipation yet she was womanly enough to pacify alarms about women’s liberation. She offered a vision of the possibilities for life as a New Woman because she lived alone, had a career and raised issues important to working women, such as pay equity and equality in the workplace. However, those

challenges were reflected as Mary's individual struggle rather than as social and political problems originating in limited visions of gender of interest to all of society.

As a situation comedy, *TMTMS* had the potential to offer new meaning for the female experience. But rather than subverting and challenging the pre-second-wave feminism role of women in the home and in the workplace, *TMTMS* allowed a comedy of humiliation to discipline Mary for daring to transgress the boundaries of private and public spheres. So she was seen as progressive but the portrayal of Mary Richards reinforced the hegemonic patterns. As Lauren Rabinovitz commented, "the sitcom of the 1970s...offers a reformist or liberal feminism as 'progressive' even while it simultaneously works to disavow it."⁹⁸ Female trickery failed because Mary was only a token woman in the WJM newsroom. She failed to challenge and reconstruct the sexist ideology and institutions that limited women's roles.

⁴⁷ Bonnie J. Dow, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and the Mary Tyler Moore Show," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990), 263

⁴⁸ Matthew Gilbert, "They get credit as best show openers," *Boston Globe*, Oct 19, 2008, N.7

⁴⁹ Jane Feuer placed *TMTMS* among the top ten or close to the top ten each week (Feuer 1984) while Bonnie J. Dow placed *TMTMS* in the top twenty programs for six of the seven years it was broadcast. (Dow 1990, 263).

⁵⁰ Thomas Zynda, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show and the Transformation of Situation Comedy," in *Media, Myths and Narratives*, ed. James Carey (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1988), 140.

⁵¹ The Museum of Broadcast Communications, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show", (Chicago:MBC, n.d.), <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etc/M/htmlM/marytylermo/maytylermo.htm> (accessed July 7, 2008)

⁵² Lori Landay, *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: the female trickster in American culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

⁵³ Matthew Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*. (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

⁵⁴ Margaret J. Heide, *Television Culture and Women's Lives: Thirtysomething and the Contradictions of Gender*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 31.

⁵⁵ Heide *ibid*, 179.

⁵⁶ Landay.

⁵⁷ Serafina, Bathrick, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and Work," in *MTM: Quality Television*, ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 100.

⁵⁸ See: Signorelli, 1982; Tedesco, 1974, and Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture*, 317. Robinson argued that in the 1970s only 25% of the women characters on television worked outside of the home. That study would have included *TMTMS*.

⁵⁹ Feuer 1984.

⁶⁰ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 214.

⁶¹ Paul Kerr, "The Making of the MTM Show" in *MTM: Quality Television*, eds. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (London, U.K.:British Film Institute, 1984), 79.

⁶² Allan Burns, quoted in Gitlin, 214.

⁶³ Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Woman Possibilities*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 130.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 83.

⁶⁵ In the midst of the Depression, about half of the states in the U.S. outlawed women from working, since "jobs were for men". Betsy Israel pp150-156. Single women had been participating in the workforce; Israel found that about eight million single women were still employed after the war, albeit in semi-skilled or unskilled positions. Unless they were closeted or supported by their families, Israel describes how they were victimized or even legalized discrimination against with laws and societal norms that prohibited women earning wages.

⁶⁶ Naomi Braun Rosenthal, 31.

⁶⁷ Some of the episodes I have use in my analysis are from Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown. *Murphy Brown: Anatomy of a Sitcom*. (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1990) that includes an extensive plot summary of each episode, as only the first two seasons are available on DVD. However, I also base my description and analysis on my memory of the episodes from repeated viewings.

⁶⁸ Andrea S. Walsh, *Women's film and female experience, 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 184.

⁶⁹ Bathrick, 101-102.

⁷⁰ *TV Guide* July 15, 1972 and *TV Guide* September 9, 1972, as quoted by Bathrick, 102.

⁷¹ Betsy Israel, *Bachelor Girl : the secret history of single women in the Twentieth Century* (London : Aurum Press, 2003), 294.

⁷² Rosenthal, 83.

⁷³ Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class and Culture*, 318.

⁷⁴ Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1989), 115.

⁷⁵ Hugh Duncan, 1962 in Dow 1996.

⁷⁶ Dow 1990, 269.

⁷⁷ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (New York:Penguin Books, 1974), 4.

⁷⁸ Phyllis M. Japp, "Gender and work in the 1980s: television's working women as displaced persons." *Women's Studies in Communication* 14, (1991), 61.

⁷⁹ Susan Crozier, "Making it after all: a reparative reading of The Mary Tyler Moore Show", in *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 11 – 1 (2008), 62.

⁸⁰ In an interview on CNN to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the show, host Larry King asked Mary Tyler Moore to reflect on the ideology of her character:

Larry King: Do you think Mary Richards was a trend setter? Do you think she was a feminist?

Mary Tyler Moore: She wasn't aggressive about it, but she surely was. The writers never forgot that.

...There was the time where she found out that the man before her in that job was paid a good deal more money than she. And she stormed into Lou's office and said, explain this, will you? ...He said, all right, how about this? Would it make you feel better if I told you that that man was married and had three children? And she says yes. And she gives in.

Larry King interview with Mary Tyler Moore, CNN Larry King Live, May 8, 2002

⁸¹ Dow 1990, 269.

⁸² Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 31 and Feuer 1984, Bathrick.

⁸³ Hamamoto, 2.

⁸⁴ Bathrick, 130.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Feuer, 40.

⁸⁸ Bathrick, 121.

⁸⁹ Larry King interview with Mary Tyler Moore, CNN Larry King Live, May 8, 2002.

⁹⁰ Landay, 26.

⁹¹ Dow 1990, 269.

⁹² Heide, 33.

⁹³ Neale, Steve and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 239.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 244.

⁹⁵ Martha M. Lauzen, David M. Dozier, Nora Horan, "Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime-Time Television", in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 52, 2 (April 2008), 211.

⁹⁶ Susan Crozier, "Making it after all: a reparative reading of The Mary Tyler Moore Show", 51.

⁹⁷ Bonnie J. Dow, "Hegemony, Feminist Criticism and the Mary Tyler Moore Show," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7 (1990), 263.

⁹⁸ Lauren Rabinovitz, "Sitcoms and Single Moms: Representations of Feminism on American TV," *Cinema Journal* 29, No. 1 (Fall 1989), 3-19.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE POST-FEMINIST JOURNALIST:

BROADCAST NEWS AND MURPHY BROWN

Mary Richards entered American's television sets against the backdrop of second-wave feminism. She was 'an emerging woman', one who could look forward to the success of the women's movement, after the barricades fell away and when women had equal opportunities in the public sphere. That was the success that greeted the 'next generation' of women who worked as journalists in fictional newsrooms on primetime television and in film. Their arrival demonstrated that they had 'made it'. That was how Jane Craig in *Broadcast News* (director, James L. Brooks, 1987) and Murphy Brown in *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998) were celebrated. For instance, *Newsweek* hailed them as: "Woman Power/Networking Woman."

However, feminist scholars and writers noted that these liberated, successful career women were, in fact, far from representative of all that feminism allowed to dream. In a seminal feminist text published in 1991, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Feminism*, writer Susan Faludi argued that the rights women gained during second-wave feminism were being eroded, sabotaged in part by cultural products such as film and entertainment television shows. Her thesis: that the media were obsessed with propagating stories about American women who found themselves in the 1980s in unhappy and frustrated lives because they had focused on their careers, attaining power and therefore condemned themselves to a life lacking love and children. This narrative of how

feminism had failed women, Faludi argued, was a covert backlash against feminism, a moral tale repeated in journalistic and fictional media. Faludi specifically points to a period -1987- as “a scarlet-letter year for backlash against women’s independence...it is as if Hollywood has taken the feminist films and run the reels backward.”⁹⁹ That year coincidentally, also situates the two texts I will examine: the film *Broadcast News*, released at the end of that year; and, the primetime television situation comedy *Murphy Brown* which was in development in 1987 and went to air in November, 1988.

Both *Broadcast News* and *Murphy Brown* featured career journalists as heroines. Both were single, childless, ambitious and successful journalists working at the network level in the most prestigious and journalistically-significant news bureaus of their operations: Washington, D.C. Both Jane Craig, the producer in *Broadcast News*, and Murphy Brown, an investigative reporter and co-anchor of a weekly news program in *Murphy Brown*, were celebrated for their portrayal of powerful, intelligent, strong-willed women. Arriving just as second-wave feminism was on life-support, these seemingly dealt with the fact of feminism and women’s equality as established facts particularly by creating careers in the ‘men’s world’ of a journalistic environment. Newsrooms, as well as legal suites and doctors’ offices, were familiar settings for representing a seemingly feminist sensibility, argued Bonnie Dow, since it was assumed that: “the feminism is being represented when women do what men traditionally do, making male values the standard for measuring women’s advancement.”¹⁰⁰ But both Murphy and Jane adopt female trickery strategies similar to Hildy Johnson’s and Mary Tyler Moore, to allow a

critique of feminism and career women's aspirations through the characters of women journalists.

MURPHY BROWN: AN INTRODUCTION

Murphy Brown debuted in November 1988 on CBS (the same network which produced *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), and ran for ten seasons. The central character, Murphy (Candice Bergen), is a 40-year-old, experienced investigative reporter and co-anchor of a weekly newsmagazine show, *FYI (For Your Information)*, a tough program similar to the real CBS program *60 Minutes*. Like *TMTMS*, *Murphy Brown's* workplace was populated by family-like characters: Corky Sherwood, a bleached-blond, classically feminine, former Miss America from the south, with little journalism experience; Frank Fontana, an investigative reporter; Jim Dial, Murphy's older co-anchor; and Miles Silverberg, a superstar, nerdish Harvard grad in his mid-20s, in his first job producing a network show. *Murphy Brown* was popular and successful garnering four Emmys in its first year, eighteen in total.

Murphy Brown was significant as much for the fact that it saw Candice Bergen perform in television after a long film career. As well, *Murphy Brown* was frequently talked about as an example of a program not only about women and for women, but written and produced by a woman. The expectation was that representations of women would improve once more women were producing, directing and writing for primetime sitcoms, an assumption that writer Marjorie Ferguson called, "the feminist fallacy."¹⁰¹ The executive producer and writer of *Murphy Brown*, Diane English, had a background in

television news (as story editor at a PBS station in New York) and said in an interview that *Murphy Brown* was partly an autobiographical sketch.¹⁰²

Many television critics were fascinated with what they saw as the imitative qualities of *Murphy Brown*, calling it a re-worked *TMTMS*. A critic for *USA Today* wrote, “*Murphy Brown* was Mary Tyler Moore updated for the Eighties,” while *New York Times* critic John J. O’Connor observed, “She’s bright and beautiful and not married. She works in television news....Nearly 20 years ago, she was the adorably spunky Mary Richards...Now she’s *Murphy Brown*.”¹⁰³ Even journalistic accounts about the press coverage, reflected the imitative quality: *Newsweek* crooned, “the critics...haven’t lavished so much attention on an unmarried woman since Mary Richards walked into that other TV newsroom in Minneapolis.” The authors of a text on primetime television, David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, perceived inherited traces in *Murphy Brown* as well, “If Brooks and Burns (co-creators of *TMTMS*) cut the wood, no-one has sculpted the mythic figure of the post-Mary Richards sitcom woman in greater detail than Diane English.”¹⁰⁴ Television scholar Jane Feuer wrote, “the two shows really present a continuation of the same cultural theme – the earlier show riding the crest of the feminist movement, the later one detailing its ebb in the postfeminist era.”¹⁰⁵

While there were some parallels with *TMTMS* - both were set in television news settings with family-like colleagues, there were crucial narrative differences as well. I will argue that *Murphy* could trace her character lineage to Rosalind Russell’s *Hildy Johnson*.

BROADCAST NEWS – AN INTRODUCTION

Just as *Murphy Brown* was compared with *TMTMS*, some critics compared *Broadcast News* to *His Girl Friday*. *The Globe and Mail's* esteemed film critic, Jay Scott, began his review: "Were a contemporary Hecht and MacArthur to satirize the peculiar world of electronic journalism, they would probably come up with *Network* or *Broadcast News*, both of which at least understand the medium under discussion and the personality types it attracts."¹⁰⁶ That veneer of authenticity is not surprising for the film was written, directed and produced by James L. Brooks, the former CBS news copyboy who created the *TMTMS*. One wonders what Brooks wanted to say about television news that he didn't say in *TMTMS*. His answer, to the *Los Angeles Times*, did not elucidate: "I had no idea what broadcast news was anymore because it had changed so much and was changing quicker than anything else I was aware of."¹⁰⁷ *Broadcast News*, despite being released in the final week of 1987, made almost every critic's list of the top 10 films of the year. *Ms.* magazine began its review, "Everybody's telling you to see *Broadcast News* - and you should."¹⁰⁸

The film's heroine, Jane Craig (Holly Hunter), was a driven, perfectionist, senior producer for the network news based in Washington D.C. She was brainy and obsessed by work, in fact it *is her life*. Her best friend, Aaron Altman (Albert Brooks, no relation to the writer/director/producer), is an equally talented and brainy reporter who worked with her on assignments. Tom Grunick (William Hurt) is an unschooled, journalistically-inexperienced former sportscaster who manoeuvres into the prestigious anchorman chair on the basis of his good looks, not talent. With shrewd and snappy dialogue, it featured a romantic triangle set amidst media downsizing and exciting behind-the-scenes sequences in a hyper-competitive news bureau. Fans admired its authenticity: Linda Ellerbie, a

veteran U.S. network television reporter and anchor, concluded in her review, "*Broadcast News* is simply wonderful and very, very funny."¹⁰⁹ *Ms.* magazine's Laurie Stone reflected on Jane:

We've never seen a working woman in a film with this combination of devotion, excellence, entitlement, and authority.... The authority comes from knowing her own worth so thoroughly she doesn't need approval.¹¹⁰

In a familiar discourse Jane's drive and success could only be achieved when personal happiness in the domestic sphere was made to seem impossible. The heroine in another film released the same year (*Fatal Attraction*, 1987), was seen by some film scholars as "the unmarried, professional woman (is) pathetic and mad ...(reaffirming) the value of marriage and home as havens of warmth and stability and acts as a warning to women of the unnaturalness of living independent, solitary lives."¹¹¹ *Broadcast News* is part of the body of films that Faludi considered as representing a backlash against feminism. Jane also employed some strategies of the female trickster to operate in the masculinised journalism environment to function within the ideology that women in journalism is not normal.

WHAT FEMINISM GAINS, BACKLASH NEGATES

Early feminist film scholar Molly Haskell argued that it was possible to see the attitudes towards women in film as a reflection of the political, economic and social conditions at the time or periods prior and subsequent.¹¹² I would argue it is worthwhile, then, to examine cycles in the past when the women's movement seemed to be successful, to see if they were then followed by a backlash, as Faludi described.

Each revolution promises to be 'the revolution' that will free her from the orbit, that will grant her, finally, a full measure of human justice and dignity. But each time, the spiral turns her back just short of the finish line.¹¹³

My examination of the movement to advance women begins in the period surrounding the 1940 release of *His Girl Friday*. According to Molly Haskell the social and political situation at about that time for many women in the U.S. was strikingly familiar to that of the 1970s.¹¹⁴ It followed the 1920s that saw the emergence of the 'New Woman' who questioned moral and social codes, sexual practices, marriage, and laws that limited women's participation in the workforce. The economic downturn and job shortage of the 1930s economic depression saw women lose their jobs to be replaced by men, although some scholars argue the social reforms allowed women to attain power and visibility.¹¹⁵

The films of that period represented in Haskell's analysis "a world in which male authority, or sexual imperialism, is reduced or in abeyance, while the feminine spirit is either dominant or equal."¹¹⁶ The author of *Popcorn Venus*, Marjorie Rosen, agreed the on-screen portrayal of women exuded optimism, but, pointed out the paradox: "perhaps because the Depression was treating its women so cruelly, the screen could afford to offer comfort in some small way."¹¹⁷ That invited a backlash, according to Faludi. She quoted a feminist writer of the time, Doris Stevens, observing: "All about us we see attempts being made, buttressed by governmental authority, to throw women back into the morass of unlovely dependence from which they were just beginning to emerge."¹¹⁸ So, a fear of women's power - of their potential to threaten the economic hegemony of men - as well as anxiety about the war in Europe created a space for *His Girl Friday* to discipline the

radical career woman, Hildy Johnson. A half-century later a reviewer observed (in another film but would apply here):

The anger at women in movies today is a last-gasp reaction to the ever increasing likelihood that women en masse will never again accept old, confining roles....Not only are we witnessing a smear campaign against sexually free women, but we're also seeing hearth and home painted as a safe utopia.¹¹⁹

It was that anti-feminine overtone in *His Girl Friday* that motivated Hildy Johnson to adopt strategies of a female trickster, including the masculine masquerade, to escape her limiting circumstances.

The characters of Murphy Brown and Jane Craig similarly adopt the same strategies in the late 1980s. Anxiety about women's achievements and 'feminism' were part of a sweeping trend of revisionist sexual politics influenced by Reaganite neo-conservatism, a post-permissive backlash linked to the AIDS crisis and a nostalgic longing for a mythical, traditional, nuclear-family. Feminists observed that feminism was vilified as a false ideology to which women sacrificed their happiness by eschewing domesticity in favor of careers and independence. Faludi found the media, including Hollywood films, framed women's lives as morality tales in which the "good mother" wins and the independent woman gets punished.¹²⁰ Both Murphy and Jane are constructed as women who have successful careers but - deprived of a satisfying domestic life - they are emotional 'basket-cases'. The film and primetime sitcom, then, function to discipline the women as part of the post-feminist backlash. This process is facilitated by the women's careers as journalists which made them easy prey.

MURPHY AND JANE - A MASCULINE MASQUERADE

“The highest compliment you can pay a female journalist is to call her “a newspaperman.”

Joe Saltzman, “*Sob Sisters*”

While *Murphy Brown* and *Broadcast News* were created in an era heightened and influenced by feminist ideology, it is worth noting that the creators of both texts disavowed even the murky and confusing strands of feminism and the social changes that would have allowed those women to achieve success in real U.S. news organizations. James L. Brooks reflected that in writing and directing *Broadcast News*, he “knew we didn’t want to do a picture that could be in any way a feminist picture...(t)here was great effort given to presenting what I hoped was a new kind of heroine.”¹²¹ Murphy’s creator, Diane English, was ambivalent about the feminist discourse that informed the creation of her character and the series each week. English’s definition of feminism meant, “I don’t waste my time pointing at men, blaming them for holding us back, because that has not been my personal experience.”¹²² The actor who played Murphy Brown, Candice Bergen, said in an interview that she didn’t believe “feminist rhetoric makes for the stuff of a great sitcom.”¹²³

Distancing the character of Murphy from feminism is not problematic because her character actually operated as masculine. Phyllis Japp, in a study of working women characters in U.S. primetime series produced and broadcast in the years immediately preceding *Murphy Brown*, was disappointed that Murphy’s character “fell outside the confines of true womanhood... essentially a male persona in a female body.”¹²⁴ Like Hildy, Murphy’s given name represented tough and masculine. Every aspect of her appearance and carriage de-emphasized femininity. Murphy’s work clothing was

evocative of the power dressing style of the 1980s when women entered previously restricted areas of the job market. Murphy's uniform was severely tailored: 'dress for success' boxy suits in blacks and browns, shoulder pads concealing a woman's natural torso. Murphy's de-feminized look was constantly contrasted with her only female colleague: Corky Sherwood, a perky ex-Miss America who wore pastel colours, blouses with bows and scarves, and high heels. Bonnie Dow observed that "Corky's appearance is part of her general performance of femininity, while Murphy's style reflects the goal of gaining credibility in a male world."¹²⁵

Murphy was uncomfortable in human relationships; so she employed one strategy that suggests a masculine performance – the playing of practical jokes. She ordered dozens of pizzas to be sent to a colleague's home, she hired actors to pretend to be journalistic sources for colleagues and to reclaim a journalistic prize from Frank. Certainly comedic pranks were one of the tactics of the female trickster. Murphy's behaviour often signified a masculinized, fraternity-house mentality.

Murphy's strategy was more consistent with the strategy of the women journalists in my study, who operate in 'a man's world' by adopting a masquerade. In a study of films featuring women in work situations, film scholar Yvonne Tasker noted some female characters selected 'masculine' features in dress and hairstyles to articulate the mobility of gendered identities and behaviors. Tasker's study included women who cross-dressed, while mine suggests a mask. Both, I argue, are strategies to create opportunity for themselves in a man's world. They are "presented as allowing female protagonists an opportunity and a freedom (of both physical movement and behaviour) that they would not otherwise achieve."¹²⁶ Murphy commands attention when she speaks. Her grand,

confident gestures ensure she dominates her space, she strides across the FYI office in her flat-heeled shoes, always the focus of the shot to highlight her strength.

Murphy's personality is harsh. She is belligerent and aggressive, and she expresses her opinions unequivocally. In a second season episode, 'The Strike' (11 December 1989), Murphy's clandestine interview with a secret defence contract informant goes awry because of a technicians strike. Humiliated, Murphy decides to act as mediator and sit the union and management negotiators down together in her living room. Furious with their posturing for power, she barks: "Just pull down your pants, I'll get a ruler, and we'll settle this once and for all." These personality traits are clearly aligned with masculinity and as such, the message is that Murphy's personality traits, according to Bonnie Dow, "are key to Murphy's professional success in a patriarchal world."¹²⁷ As with Hildy and Jane Craig, Murphy's competence is assumed. That she is a knowledgeable, driven, investigative reporter who has won numerous awards is demonstrated in every episode and therefore reinforced. Unlike Mary Richards, who worked at a struggling, third-rate local newsroom, Murphy has climbed to the top, working in a prestigious, national investigative show as a reporter and co-anchor.

Murphy demonstrates that her personality traits – ruthless, abrasive and arrogant, are what it takes to be successful. In short, she privileges the masculine style to achieve success. She is the "clone of the male competitive model" as described by anti-feminist economist Sylvia Ann Hewitt. It was these same traits that were equated with success in the television newsroom of WJM on *TMTMS* and Hildy Johnson's *Morning Post*. When Murphy displayed feminine traits, she was diminished, even emasculated as a professional journalist, as in the episode 'The Unshrinkable Murphy Brown' (May 1,

1988). When Murphy is grilling a corrupt judge during a live interview, he suddenly falls silent and dies in the middle of the broadcast. Murphy is guilt-ridden, convinced she browbeat the judge to death, and becomes uncharacteristically feminine: contrite and overly polite, even baking cookies. She becomes paralyzed with fear about conducting interviews. Her emotions render her without a voice and unable to function as a journalist. Dow has argued that feminine qualities were incompatible with Murphy's success as a journalist, in which masculine traits are inscribed: "in order to be successful she must be tough and competitive, and must reject behaviours that contradict such a persona."¹²⁸

The character of Jane Craig in *Broadcast News* was also associated with female trickery including the masculine masquerade and duality. Jane personified the respected and respectable, traditional 'masculine' news values. This was established in an early scene when we meet Jane, a diminutive, tidy woman in her early 30s, who was lecturing to journalists attending 'The Conference of Local Television News Broadcasters'. She decries the encroachment of entertainment values in news and recalls that on a day when there was a major policy change in the 'Salt Two' disarmament talks, not one television network ran a story on the evening news. Jane says the networks chose, instead to run another story, which she plays for the conference audience. It is a minute-long clip of the Japanese Domino Championships, a perfectly-choreographed sequence of domino blocks falling on to one another and setting off fireworks. Jane's audience applauds loudly and squeals with delight. Dismayed, Jane tries to speak over the applause, "I know it's good film. I know it's fun. I like fun. It's just not news." As the audience starts quickly heading for the exit, Jane shouts into the microphone, "Well, you're lucky you love it -- you're going to get a lot more just like it." More haughty than humiliated, Jane is

established as clinging to conventional news values, privileging hard news reporting – the masculine - over ‘soft’ news – the emotional, feminine stories. Jane is thereby associated with a masculine discourse.

Just as Jane’s performance in *Broadcast News* functions as a masculine mask, so too does her appearance and ‘plain Jane’ conservative pant suits. To underline her normally unremarkable appearance, she shocks her colleagues by wearing a strapless gown to the Washington Press Association gala. She becomes, for the first time, the object of the gaze. But it is short-lived as she flees the gala to return to the newsroom to cover breaking news - the gown-wearing news producer creates a visual oxymoron.

Jane’s best friend, Aaron, is a veteran, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. Together they are conjoined as twin guardians of traditional news values. They bridle at the show-business gimmicks they see trespassing on their old-school journalistic integrity. The locus, symbolically, of the challenge to those values, Aaron believes, is Tom Grunick, the sportscaster-turned-anchor. Aaron tries to persuade Jane that news values will be eroded by the Devil, and that he is embodied in Tom:

What do you think the Devil is going to look like if he's around?
Nobody is going to be taken in if he has a long, red, pointy tail. No. I'm semi-serious here. He will look attractive and he will be nice and helpful and he will get a job where he influences a great God-fearing nation and he will never do an evil thing...he will just bit by little bit lower standards where they are important. Just coax along flash over substance... Just a tiny bit. And he will talk about all of us really being salesmen.

And he'll get all the great women.

One traditional value of news - objectivity has been described as masculine because it requires a detachment, a dispassionate distance from the subject. Geographer and

journalism scholar, Minelle Mahtani, has argued objectivity was oppositional to the subjectivity associated with women: “non-rational or non-objective forms of feminine knowledge are relegated to the private sphere, as unimportant or as too uninteresting to be considered truly ‘newsworthy’.”¹²⁹ Jane’s masculine personality traits, such as confidence, were crucial to her success. In one scene, Jane’s boss was watching her improvise under pressure, obsess over details, checking and double-checking sources, remaining cool under the pressure of a live report. He comments, “It must nice to always believe you’re the smartest person in the room.” Mahtani argued women such as Jane have been forced “to attempt to adopt more masculine traits in the field of journalism in order to become more successful.”¹³⁰

Jane demonstrates an ability to demand quality performances from her staff and to pursue a singular absorption in order to produce the best work. In a memorable, near-slapstick scene, Jane is sitting with the editor just minutes to deadline as he completes a story Aaron and Jane have reported about a war veteran. Suddenly Jane decides to add a visual of a Norman Rockwell painting to create poignancy. But she needs to get the book and have a camera record the image on videotape. And the clock is ticking. She starts barking commands at the production staff to get the stock shot as they shout back that there isn’t enough time. Jane ignores their pleas to stop, pushes on determinedly and finishes only seconds before airtime. Like Hildy, Jane’s ability to prioritize professionalism over civility is acknowledged by her male colleagues who admire her abrasive style. When Jane publically reprimands a reporter who missed a live appearance on a breaking story because he couldn’t find a parking spot, the executive producer, observing the reproach, remarks “I had NO IDEA she was this good.” Feminist writer

Andrea Press argued that the portrayal of women such as Jane (and Murphy, Hildy and Mary) as too competent, was entertaining because “these characteristics are quite humorous in a woman.”¹³¹

One of the tensions of *Broadcast News* is the corporatisation of news, with the threat that shrinking audiences will lead to lower advertising revenues which will, in turn, lead to editorial cuts. Jane, when working as a producer opposed the profit motivation of the news bosses but she is strategic and ruthless about her own advancement and she realizes she needs to support the corporate chiefs. Her transformation is evident in a scene in which Jane has been promoted to bureau chief. Her boss reveals he has to cut \$8 million from the news budget; Jane is non-plussed. Toward the end of the film, the network cuts a number of editorial positions, but Jane’s is not among them. In fact she is promoted - to managing editor - thereby “benefitting from staff cuts by the bottom-line boys she detests.”¹³² Bonnie Dow concluded that women such as Jane and Murphy “adapted successfully to the masculine culture of television journalism and made (their) way to the top of (their) profession through rugged individualism.”¹³³

The perspective that journalism is gendered masculine was advocated in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as well. Mary produces occasional sentimental stories that one scholar noted, placed her in the “soft-news ghetto that is a woman’s place in journalism.”¹³⁴ Although Mary’s work was recognized by a professional association it was ridiculed and demeaned by ‘real journalists’ such as Lou, who privileges masculine prose such as that by Raymond Chandler. Mary attempts to persuade Lou there is more than one style of writing and audiences “love reading about delightful, warm-hearted old men.” Mary writes about her grandfather, a story Lou bluntly assesses: “it stinks” (“Mary

the Writer”, October 2, 1976). Lou insists on giving Mary what he considers a truthful assessment of her writing because he believes she should learn the craft “like a real man”. Lou represents the journalistic myth that privileges objectivity and distains sentimentalism – ultimately a denunciation of women journalists.

The masculinisation of Jane and Murphy as they work in a medium seen as feminized creates another opportunity to examine gender inversion. Many television scholars have chronicled the physicality of the ‘television set’ in the family living room, the feminine space of the domestic sphere, as well as the early emphasis on family programming, and deemed it a feminized medium (as opposed to cinema and literature, which are masculinised).¹³⁵ Television scholar Lynne Joyrich has argued that one of the tensions in *Broadcast News* was the challenge to “expose the ways in which a ‘feminine’ sensationalism, emotionality, and dramatic focus on the image, threaten to take over the masculine domain of ‘hard’ news reporting and programming.”¹³⁶ Women in television news such as Murphy and Jane have learned their lesson from Mary Richards. They had no choice but to adopt the masculine: “Women are caught within the conflicting definitions of femininity and of ‘the news’ – themselves trivialized, they can be blamed for trivializing.”¹³⁷

By allowing Jane Craig and Murphy Brown to operate as tricksters, the texts play with our notions of truth, a value that is the foundation of journalism. As Murphy is shown flirting with ethical boundaries and Jane self-righteously perches herself on the ethical high ground, the question emerges of who represents truth. The texts contribute to a challenge, if not undermining, of society’s trust in the ability of all journalists to bear the truth.

WOMEN JOURNALISTS DENIED PRIVATE SPHERE

As I have suggested, the success of Murphy and Jane in their careers in the public sphere, is met with near failure in the private sphere. A female colleague of Jane's tells her: "except for socially, you're my role model." Jane is single, and her only potential mate is the de-sexualized Aaron. Their relationship is cerebral. Like Hildy and Walter, their dynamic is explored with rapid-fire, witty banter. They have marathon, midnight phone conversations, each lying in bed alone in their own apartments. Romance is impossible. Aaron secretly desires Jane but is too unassertive to tell her until she falls for Tom and rejects Aaron. Her trickster tactic of masquerade and duplicity are hinted at when Aaron tells Jane, "I would give anything if you were two people, so that I could call up the one who's my friend and tell her about the one that I like so much."

The other potential mate for Jane is Tom, an intellectually dim but personally savvy anchor who embodies the superficiality that Jane derides. But she succumbs to his bad-boy charms. As quickly as her passion flares, Jane's magically-tinged romance with Tom is corrupted by her inability to escape the public domain that 'is' her life. Jane learns that Tom faked a camera shot that showed him shedding a tear during an interview with a rape victim. As a brilliant producer, Jane should have realized this trick when she first viewed the interview, but she was blocked by her desperate crush on Tom. So she fails, temporarily, in the public domain, when she allows her libido, as a symbol of her private sphere, to become an obstacle to rational decisions making. Once the cheat is revealed (and Tom offers no remorse) she desperately tries to school him in the error of his ways. But his success (with her guidance) has boosted his confidence. He refuses to acquiesce to her standards, leading Jane to complain: "I'm great when I'm helping your career but

when I'm a woman for a second I get immediately fucked around by you?" So, she abandons a passionate vacation with him.

Trading on her emotionalism is unfamiliar to Jane and rather than seeing her decision as a courageous rejection of principle, Jane believes she has "started to repel people she's trying to seduce." Some journalistic critics have argued that Tom's ethical breach was not irredeemable. But the narrative demands Jane forfeit sexual pleasure. The film critic for *Ms. Observed*, "Jane is allowed to be gratified by work, but the movie doesn't want her to have other sorts of pleasure. I can't think of a film so sensually depriving of its purportedly beloved heroine."¹³⁸

The comedy in *Broadcast News* largely follows Jane's character interloping with irony because she doesn't act as we expect a woman to act. Her work *is her life* on at least two levels: as a producer, she juggles journalistic and logistical decisions that place her in charge. She is always 'on', micro-managing. A recurring comedic scene sees her giving detailed instructions to the Washington cab driver who defers to her back-seat driver position. She produces her life, too, scheduling regular, private, and confined crying jags. At the appointed time, she sobs for a few minutes, then abruptly stops. The episodes do not relate to any heartbreaking trigger, she simply programmes her emotional outbursts in her agenda. Two journalists reviewing the film, concluded:

Implicit in the film is the notion that any woman like Jane, who is driven, successful, morally serious professional, would, by necessity, live a tearful and solitary existence; that for a professional woman to have a happy personal life she would have to submerge some part of herself into a conventional female persona.¹³⁹

Jane's contained emotionalism and self-sacrifice is evocative of the 'spinster' iconography. As Naomi Rosenthal argued when examining the films of Frank Capra and

other films of that era, “the spinsterhood represented the opposite of the normal, the desirable, the good.”¹⁴⁰ This would align with journalism historian Mathew Ehrlich’s contention as well, that in film, “journalism is not for normal people.”¹⁴¹

The mask that hides Jane’s emotionalism so she can perform in a ‘man’s world’, functions for Murphy Brown as well to disguise the chaos of her private life. Murphy’s character is a decade older than Jane and is more complex. Murphy is a recovering alcoholic and has had many romantic relationships, all failures. (However, three years into the series, Murphy becomes a ‘single mother’. I cannot address the complex and extra-textually controversial aspects of that narrative development in this study.) Murphy lacks feminine qualities such as nurturing, physical affection and closeness. She is, as Dow observed, “the stereotype of a driven career woman with no time or talent for relationships.”¹⁴² The interaction between Murphy and her only female colleague, Corky, allows the primetime series to exploit the conflict between professional success and femininity. Murphy and Corky have an extremely competitive relationship which is somewhat surprising, since Murphy arrogantly dismisses Corky’s journalism - her penchant for doing soft stories that appeal to women viewers. Corky, then, is firmly located within femininity, with her visually-appealing appearance, performance and preference for soft news.

Murphy’s concern with Corky may be explained by a potential threat that Corky poses to Murphy: a fear that it is *only* women like Corky who can seemingly ‘have it all’. That is one of the tropes that Susan Faludi examined as part of the backlash phenomenon. She found that it was the primetime female television character who “buries her intelligence under a baby-doll exterior (who) is granted a measure of professional success

without having to forsake companionship.” (Faludi cited Melanie Griffith’s character in *Working Girl* as one such example.)¹⁴³ As the *Murphy Brown* series progresses, Corky learns from her more-mature colleague and the competitive spats between the two became opportunities to allow Corky to triumph, calling attention to the duality of domesticity and femininity. In *Murphy Brown*, neither major female character can be totally complete. The ‘weaknesses’ of each are highlighted through contrast with the other. The sitcom allows only “polar conceptions of womanhood, refusing to permit integration of traditionally bifurcated masculine and feminine qualities attached to the public and private spheres.”¹⁴⁴

Much of the comedy in *Murphy Brown* is founded on Murphy’s failure to meet conventional expectations for womanhood. She can’t cook: “The last time I tried to bake brownies, I had to call in an industrial cleaning service.” Yet she tries over and over, without gaining insight on her failures or trying new approaches. The series suggests that domestic talents are biologically programmed for ‘real’ women. Her lack of feminine talents are ‘broadcast’ to her fictional audience when Murphy guest hosts a morning show and is forced to do a cooking segment. Although she demonstrates her feminine lack when she fails on live television to separate eggs, her masculine tendencies erupt and she starts a fist fight with a world-famous chef. That is just one example of the narratives that explore the dichotomy between the public and private sphere. She is humiliated professionally when she can’t perform to traditional feminine standards, demonstrating that “Murphy is the victim of conflicting expectations.”¹⁴⁵ Murphy’s incompetence as a homemaker recalled the ‘representative anecdote’ of the earlier primetime series studied by Phyllis Japp. Her research found that the portrayal of the ‘incompetent working woman’ “clearly reinforces the cultural division of woman and work and implicitly

supports the belief that work contaminates woman by rendering her ineffective in the home.”¹⁴⁶

As with Jane Craig, Murphy's attempts at romance and to secure a steady domestic life come into sharp conflict with her dedication and commitment to her career. Susan Faludi's observation of Jane Craig is also descriptive of the tension between Murphy's public and private aspirations: "Her aggressiveness at work cancels out her chances for love. Her attempts to pull off a romantic encounter fail miserably every time."¹⁴⁷ Murphy is so focused on self-propulsion that she seems incapable of deep emotional ties. We learn early in the series that Murphy was married once, for five days, twenty years earlier. Her ex-husband, Jake Lowenstein, has become a controversial environmental activist who, in the episode 'Signed, Sealed, Delivered' (December 5, 1988) has been booked for an interview with Murphy. Their sexual passion is palpable and in the midst of the interview on air, Jake proposes to Murphy. But the negotiations for the relationship cannot be contained within Murphy's professional life and they weave in and out over the next three seasons. Her professional life constantly challenges the logistics of her emotional life. Murphy is forced to choose her public sphere, thereby sacrificing what would seem to be a love life and personal happiness. In another episode, in a rare scene of reflection, Murphy concedes, "Maybe I deliberately sabotage my personal relationships because I fear losing some professional edge." In other episodes, when she is challenged to debate a man whom she is dating, she loses her aggression and sharp wit (also the traits necessary to succeed in journalism), becoming so tongue-tied she is rendered almost mute signalling an incompatibility between journalism and the private sphere. The discourse demonstrates

that qualities necessary in one sphere are radically different than those required in the other.

One character is a constant running reminder of the void in Murphy's life and her 'failure' to get married: Eldin Bernecky, Murphy's housepainter. At the start of the series, he is painting a mural on Murphy's kitchen ceiling, titled, 'Scenes From the Industrial Revolution.' But, it seems the painting at Murphy's house is never-ending and Eldin is ever-present. He doesn't live at her home and they never engage in a romantic relationship, but Eldin is the only participant in Murphy's private life (until her son is born) and the only person she connects with beyond verbal repartee, physical pranks and competitions. Japp's study of the working women in primetime television in the mid-1980s found a number of fathers or father surrogates that functioned as the real nurturers, "suggesting that if the working woman is not really a worker, neither is she really a woman."¹⁴⁸ Eldin's role serves to maintain a dialogue about the ambivalence and dichotomy of the two spheres. He also reminds Murphy of the traditional domestic life she doesn't have. Murphy Brown "embodies what media constructions of postfeminism posit as the negative consequences of female independence.....the message that her profound ambition precludes lasting personal relationships."¹⁴⁹

Eldin never finishes painting because Murphy keeps changing her mind, ostensibly about the paint colour and scope of work, but really whether she wants to be in the private or domestic sphere. (The series finale on May 18, 1998, 'Never Can Say Goodbye', perpetuates the ambivalence about Murphy's negotiation between the public and private spheres. After a bout with cancer, she decides to leave the television show, but once she recovers she decides to return to work to conduct an interview with 'God'. The episode

then flashes forward ten years, and we see Eldin proposing to Murphy. She turns him down but asks him for a touch-up paint job.) But the show ends with ambivalence between the two spheres, Murphy never resolving the tension between them.

By employing the tactics of the female trickster, the characters of Murphy, Jane, Mary and Hildy represent ambivalent attitudes towards women's progress, subverting the normalcy of their choices as working women. These portrayals of female journalists reinforce and support that abnormality, because journalism as an occupation is represented as a masculine culture that does not represent a normal life. The actor playing Murphy, Candice Bergen, underscored this central abnormality in her character when she pondered in an interview the toll that Murphy's career was taking on her ability to have a satisfying domestic life: "It's really a high price to pay – not having a life. And yet if Murphy gets cut off from her work, she gets desperate....her work is her life. She is her work. There's something traditionally masculine in that."¹⁵⁰

⁹⁹ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Feminism* (New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1991), 126.

¹⁰⁰ Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 137.

¹⁰¹ Marjorie Ferguson, "Images of Power and the Feminist Fallacy," *Gender and Mass Media Newsletter* (November 1991), 21-30.

¹⁰² Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown, *Murphy Brown: Anatomy of a Sitcom*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1990).

¹⁰³ John J. O'Connor, *New York Times*, Nov 27, 1989.

¹⁰⁴ David Marc and Robert J. Thompson, *Prime Time Prime Movers*. (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1992), 93.

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- ¹⁰⁵ Jane Feuer, "Genre and Television, in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1992), 117.
- ¹⁰⁶ Jay Scott, *Globe and Mail*, March 7, 1988.
- ¹⁰⁷ Tom Cieply, "Brooks Takes Another Look at Broadcast News", *The Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 1987.
- ¹⁰⁸ Laurie Stone, "Me Jane", *Ms.* (March 1988), 26.
- ¹⁰⁹ Linda Ellerbie, "Screen & Print: Triumph of style over substance - Broadcast News". *Sunday Times*. Jan 10, 1988.
- ¹¹⁰ Laurie Stone, 26-27.
- ¹¹¹ Leonard Quart and Albert Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945*, (Westport, Conn: Prager Publishers, 1991)
- ¹¹² Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 132.
- ¹¹³ Faludi, 46.
- ¹¹⁴ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 42-90.
- ¹¹⁵ Philip Hanson, "The Feminine Image of Films in the Great Depression" in *The Cambridge Quarterly* (2003), 32:2, 2003.
- ¹¹⁶ Haskell, 131. Some of the strongest female personalities in film history rose at that point (Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Ginger Rogers, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, Carole Lombard) reflecting what may have seemed a reflection of American's confidence and security about having an equal place in American society.
- ¹¹⁷ Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973), 138.
- ¹¹⁸ Doris Stevens, *Equal rights* (National Women's Party publication, 1933), as quoted in Faludi, 50.
- ¹¹⁹ Stone, 27.
- ¹²⁰ Faludi, 113.
- ¹²¹ James L. Brooks, in *American Cinema: Romantic Comedy*, film documentary, Fox video, 1995.
- ¹²² Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown, *Murphy Brown: Anatomy of a Sitcom*, (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1990), 22.
- ¹²³ *ibid*, 99.
- ¹²⁴ Japp, Phyllis M. "Gender and work in the 1980s: television's working women as displaced persons." *Women's Studies in Communication* 14 (1991), 71.

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- ¹²⁵ Dow 1996, 140.
- ¹²⁶ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 35.
- ¹²⁷ Dow 1996, 141.
- ¹²⁸ *ibid*, 142.
- ¹²⁹ Minelle Mahtani, "Gendered News Practices: The Experiences of Women Journalists in Different National Contexts." in *Journalism: Critical Issues*, ed. Stuart Allan (London: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2005), 301.
- ¹³⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹³¹ Andrea Press, *Women watching television: gender, class, and generation in the American television experience*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 41.
- ¹³² Christopher Hanson, "Where have all the heroes gone? (Journalists are no longer portrayed as heroes)." *Columbia Journalism Review* (March 1996).
- ¹³³ Dow 1996, 140.
- ¹³⁴ Serafina Bathrick, "The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and Work," in *MTM: Quality Television*, ed. Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (London: British Film Institute, 1984), 127
- ¹³⁵ Kirsten Marthe Lentz, "Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970's Television," *Camera Obscura* 43:15:1 (2000)
- ¹³⁶ Lynne Joyrich, *Re-Viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 167.
- ¹³⁷ P. Holland, "When A Woman Reads The News", In *Turning It On: A Reader In Woman And Media*, eds. Baehr, H, And A. Gray. (New York: Arnold, 1996), 198.
- ¹³⁸ Laurie Stone, Ms. 27.
- ¹³⁹ Leonard Quart, and Albert Auster. *American Film and Society since 1945*. (Westport, Conn: Prager Publishers, 1991), 172.
- ¹⁴⁰ Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Woman Possibilities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 131.
- ¹⁴¹ Matthew Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*. (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 173.
- ¹⁴² Dow 1996, 144.
- ¹⁴³ Faludi, 128.
- ¹⁴⁴ Dow 1996, 147.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 146.

¹⁴⁶ Japp, 1991, 61.

¹⁴⁷ Faludi, 128.

¹⁴⁸ Japp 1991, 60.

¹⁴⁹ Dow 1996, 144.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Alley, 1990, 103.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

“I’m gonna be a woman, not a news- getting machine.”
Hildy Johnson in *His Girl Friday*

“Being a journalist and being a woman may require some juggling but they aren’t incompatible.”
Molly Haskell, *Holding My Own in No Man’s Land*.²

Film critic Molly Haskell’s optimism about reconciling the roles of ‘female’ and ‘journalist’ referenced Hildy Johnson’s ability to navigate the social traps of gender and profession, even though Hildy herself felt challenged. Haskell argued that Hildy, in continuing to work as a journalist, remained “true to both natures, feminine and professional.”^{cli} However, throughout this thesis, I argued that Hildy – as the prototypical, fictional female journalist -- did not operate as a woman because the production of news is a masculinized occupation. Hildy and my other heroines were presented in their respective narratives as single, career-focused, independent women who achieved success in journalism. But in the process of cultural reproduction they were devalued as women and participated in reconstructing the sexist ideology that limited women’s roles. By employing tactics of the female trickster, the heroines represent ambivalent attitudes towards women’s progress, and subvert the normalcy of their choices as women. Their portrayal of women journalists reinforces and supports that abnormality, because journalism as an occupation is represented as not being for ‘normal’ people.

Hildy, Jane Craig in *Broadcast News*, Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and Murphy Brown in *Murphy Brown*, are ascribed similar personality traits that allowed me to consider them together as representative anecdotes. These texts offered an important cultural site to map the constructions of gender, the constructed meanings and social myths about women's roles within the journalistic profession. The texts employed similar strategies to make the women's rejection of traditional notions of womanhood seem more palatable for audiences ambivalent or oppositional to women achieving success in the public sphere. I discussed how the heroines adopted strategies of 'female tricksters' that allowed the women to escape the limiting circumstances suggested by Joan Riviere's masquerade of maleness or hyper-femininity. (The mask of masculinity tactic was most interesting since news is masculine.) Through comedy they were made to 'suffer' in their private lives for their successes in the public sphere - they were humiliated, embarrassed and laughed at. It was a strategy to debunk, ridicule and subvert the ideology they represented which was aligned with feminism. It thereby allowed the texts to act as gatekeepers to support the status quo ideologies of the patriarchal society.

Ostensibly, these two films and two television shows pursued themes that were informed by liberal feminism: they positively depicted women in occupations dominated by men, challenging notions that defined and limited social roles in masculine workplaces. However as feminist film scholar Bonnie J. Dow observed, having access to those occupations did not represent a complete victory for female autonomy and liberation. Hildy, Mary, Jane and Murphy were represented as token successful women in their newsrooms. In Chapter Three (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), I discussed how tokenism replaced power and authority in the newsroom. All of my texts called attention to the

tensions between women's ambition and the limitations of femininity. The characters were expected to know the limits of their influence so when they overstepped the boundaries, they were disciplined in a comedic style for attempting to threaten the status quo. This was evident in one episode of *TMTMS* when Mary defied her male boss and co-workers to hire a female sportscaster, a move that marked a disruption to the social order that sparked disaster.

REBUKE TO FEMINISM

Although I discussed in the introduction how I was drawn to these films and sitcoms partly due to what I initially viewed as feminist ideology, it was evident that feminism is not represented by these texts. Firstly, the token aspects of the characters' position in the news organizations underlined that the women characters made their career choices as individuals rather than being informed by a political or social movement such as second-wave feminism or liberalism. Secondly, the favored female position was represented by Barbara Welter's 'True Woman' that located the essence of femininity in women who remained in the domestic sphere (whereas the public sphere -the workplace - was for men).^{clii}

Whether it was a 1940 film (*His Girl Friday*) or a primetime television sitcom that ran until the late 1990s (*Murphy Brown*), my texts about women in the workplace reinforced society's values that had originated from the 19th century, that women's domain is in the private. All of the texts were consistent with the observation made by Dow about *Murphy Brown*: "By sacrificing Murphy through humiliation, embarrassment, or ridicule, *Murphy Brown* turns the tables on the basic project of liberal feminism, which is to critique how the public sphere excludes women."^{cliii} Feminist scholar Phyllis Japp studied

the portrayal of the workplace on primetime television (before *Murphy Brown* began its ten-year run). She concluded that the notion that women were not considered natural in the workplace, that their presence 'contaminated' the workplace, seemed to prevail long after second-wave feminism.

Despite attempts to create a believable working woman, images remained constrained by the power of the cultural divide at the heart of the anecdote. The medium's inability to rise above clichés and stereotypes reinforces the power of the cultural tradition that separates woman and work and demonstrates that television entertainment, dependent upon both commercial sponsorship and public acceptance, is unlikely to be in the vanguard of social change.^{cliv}

Rather than these texts adopting an overtly feminist discourse and arguing that patriarchy is the problem the tables were turned. The films and the primetime sitcoms showed that the extent of the problems of the female characters were actually the fault of 'feminist aspirations'. Although my texts represent distinct periods in contemporary American society, I argued that each was informed by a discourse of 'backlash' against a perception that women had made progress towards autonomy.

Writer Susan Faludi described the cultural phenomenon of 'backlash' as a reaction to feminism, partly by men who are grappling with threats to their economic and social well-being and demonstrates hegemonic efforts to reassert patriarchy and the traditional status quo.^{clv} The female journalists in my study were punished for being too successful and consequently, they paid the price for their recalcitrance. Mary, Murphy, Jane and Hildy were portrayed as achieving success, but viewers were reminded of what they sacrificed: marriage, children and domesticity. I argued that the narratives insisted that the heroines suffer for their success so that their rejection of traditional femininity is more palatable and more marketable. Film critic Molly Haskell pointed out that Faludi's theory

of 'backlash' could be aligned with an observation by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud that "maternal deities were at their most powerful when the matriarchy was about to be toppled, and the same principle of compensation may account for the rise and fall of goddesses in cinema."^{clvi}

FUN AND FACTS IN JOURNALISM

Hollywood screenwriters and television sitcom creators have happily exploited journalistic settings and characters for their creative potential. Hildy and Walter made the world of newsgathering in *His Girl Friday* a fun, adventurous occupation. Watching the slapstick, racing-against-the-clock on *Broadcast News* was invigorating. However, while journalism is ruled by fairness and holds values such as neutrality and objectivity, these cannot surmount the masculinity of the profession. As Minelle Mahtani discussed, these ideals are structured by masculinism.^{clvii} Jane Craig's chevron was her unflinching ethical code; Murphy Brown's and Hildy Johnson's dismissal of 'soft news' reinforced the privileging of 'hard news', and Mary Richard's modest leadership success was accomplished when she adopted a ruthless management style in the newsroom. Success was linked to their ability to perform as male. I would extend Dow's observation for *Murphy Brown* to my other texts, to conclude, "a woman cannot be professionally successful and retain traditional qualities of femininity."^{clviii}

In an era that has seen most of North America's university journalism schools graduate a disproportionately high number of women, it is dismaying that they are launched into careers that have been informed by the images of the characters in my texts who were devalued in the process of cultural reproduction.

^{cli} Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: the Treatment of Women in the Movies*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1974), 133

^{clii} Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood 1820-1960," *American Quarterly* 18:162, (1966).

^{cliii} Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 149.

^{cliv} Phyllis M. Japp, Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc. in *Women's Studies in Communication* 14 (1991), 72.

^{clv} Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. (New York: Crown Publishers Inc. 1991).

^{clvi} Molly Haskell, 1974, 132.

^{clvii} Minelle Mahtani, "Gendered News Practices: The Experiences of Women Journalists in Different National Contexts." in *Journalism: Critical Issues*, ed. Stuart Allan. (London: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill, 2005), 299-310.

^{clviii} Dow 1996, 146.

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