

MARY TYLER MOORE (1936-2017): A TRIBUTE

Like most of the world, which will no longer be turned on by her smile, I was deeply saddened to learn of Mary Tyler Moore's passing, at the age of eighty, on January 24, 2017. Tributes have poured in, not only from her "Mary Tyler Moore Show" family (Ed Asner, Valerie Harper, Cloris Leachman, Gavin McLeod, who held back tears), but from younger women she influenced. These include journalists Katie Couric, who watched the show at age thirteen and decided to go into television news, Nora O'Donnell, and Lesley Stahl, who recognized a kindred soul. Mary Murphy commented that she brought women into the work force, including women who were fearful of the women's movement.

Actresses also give her full credit. Allison Janney commented that "Mary Tyler Moore was my role model" for the character of career woman C. J. Cregg on "The West Wing": "We should all bow down and thank her." Patricia Heaton praised "her incredible technique and craft," and Candice Bergen admitted that the "Murphy Brown" show, about a woman reporter/anchor, would not have existed without Mary Richards. Comediennes Tina Fey, Julia Louis Dreyfus, and Amy Schumer recognize that she paved the way for them – by, among other achievements, demonstrating that it was possible to be both attractive and funny.¹ In the 1970s Mary Tyler Moore was sometimes compared to the great comic actresses of the 1930s and '40s: Carole Lombard, the Kate Hepburn of "Bringing Up Baby," and so on.

My personal tribute is in the form of a paper originally presented at the Canadian Association for American Studies (C.A.A.S.) annual conference in Ottawa, October, 1974, when the show was still on the air. My presentation was taped, and I was interviewed by the local CBC channel, because the role of women in the media was a hot topic (the interviewer was a young woman reporter). Professor Naomi Black collected some of the conference essays in the hope of finding a publisher for them, but it wasn't to be. My paper compares the late 1960s fantasy-adventure series, "The Avengers," starring Patrick McNee and Diana Rigg, with the comic realism of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." I sought to lead up to the latter, as more women could identify with the heroine and her serio-comic struggles and triumphs, than with the formidable Mrs. Emma Peel. I am producing the paper here unchanged, in order to evoke the

¹ Above comments from various news and entertainment sources, including "Entertainment Tonight," "The Insider," and the CBS special, "Mary Tyler Moore: 'Love Is All Around'" (January 26, 2017).

hopeful spirit of the times, with just this updated introduction, and a new conclusion examining where women have come since, and particularly the representation of women in the media.

I had arrived in Toronto in September, 1970, just when “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” started to air. As a young Ph.D. struggling with the U.S. academic depression of the late 1960s, soon to spill over into Canada, and lasting until the late 1980s, I began a fifteen-year career of precarious part-time employment. Like young women today, we thought we had it made, armed with our professional qualifications. I remember being warned by an older woman colleague, who in the 1930s had been the first female doctoral candidate in English at Yale University, but who had spent most of her life in part-time, temporary appointments, that prospects hadn’t changed that much since her day. During my studies, in the days shortly before Affirmative Action, I found only one woman faculty member in the Cornell English Department (she was contractual), and I was one of only approximately seven women among sixty-five teaching assistants in English.

I immediately became hooked on “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” focusing on a young woman, unmarried in her early thirties, who wore pant suits and slacks to work. Tall, slim, brunette, walking confidently, she invited identification with her, while I felt that there lay buried inside me a tall, slim brunette (I was short, rounder, and a redhead).

While her fashion was scarcely at the forefront of my fascination with the show, it is interesting to see how many comments after Mary’s death reference her clothes sense. Current remarks suggest that she set a trend imitated in real life, but in fact it was just the reverse: she insisted on wearing clothes that women were actually wearing at the time, but not on television – Capri pants for “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” pant suits for “The Mary Tyler Moore Show.” Most television heroines of the time were playing mothers, wearing full skirts and frilly aprons, which were no long a reality by the mid-1960s, but rather of Betty Friedan’s “desperate housewives” of the 1950s, the postwar “back to the kitchen” years. “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” had the wisdom to parody this tradition in Betty White’s brilliant evocation of Sue Ann Nivens, the ruthless “Happy Homemaker” (or “Happy Homewrecker”), the only principal character I can recall regularly wearing a skirt (and apron) on the show. It was anthropologist Margaret Mead who once commented in an interview that the greatest debt she owed the women’s movement

was the pantsuit, which was truly liberating. We were gratified not to have to worry about crossing our legs, even behind a kneehole desk, while wearing the mini-skirts of the early 60s.

I once remarked to a women's studies class that if I were to write a book on the subject, it would be called *Fumbling Towards Feminism*. It strikes me that this would be a good subtitle for "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." I was particularly attracted by Mary Richards' combination of vulnerability and ambition, or determination. A female colleague of mine once asked, "Can't I be both respected and loved?" Mary Tyler Moore (and Mary Richards) was both. My partner (male) and I followed a Saturday night ritual of never missing the show, and he cheered her on, if anything, more enthusiastically than I did. We were at the time collaborating on a book project entitled *The Sexual Equation: Woman=Man*, which we will return to one of these days. Here, in retrospect, is a vision of the committed late 1960s and '70s by a contemporary of Mary Tyler Moore / Mary Richards.

**“YOU MIGHT JUST MAKE IT AFTER ALL”:
THE CHANGING IMAGE OF WOMEN IN TELEVISION**

How will you make it on your own?
 This world is awfully big
 And girl, this time you're all alone.
 But it's time you started living,
 It's time you let someone else do some giving,
 Love is all around, no need to waste it,
 You can never tell, why don't you taste it?
 You might just make it after all. ²

Two “liberated” heroines in television series, Emma Peel in “The Avengers” and Mary Richards in “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” provide cases in point of the dynamic nature of culture. These two reflect, albeit on the level of comedy entertainment, certain radical shifts in the situation of women which are as yet atypical in their societies. The manner in which the writers, producers, directors, and actresses present their characters in turn helps to shape and mold public opinion, and to make the “New Woman” of the later twentieth century not only acceptable to the public but appealing. The amazing thing about both shows is that they have managed to attract a loyal following from among two groups which have remained, for the most part, deaf to the sometimes strident cries of Women’s Liberation: men and housewives. Their success suggests that it is not so much the aims, as some of the more publicized methods, of the women’s movement which sometimes arouse hostility. The men are apparently fascinated by a woman who remains completely womanly while functioning as a fully competent, responsible human being. A female columnist describes the consternation with which the masculine world greeted the news of Mary Tyler Moore’s failure to win an Emmy Award in 1971:

There is a rumor around town, as yet unconfirmed, that when Mary Tyler Moore did not win an Emmy for best actress in a comedy series . . . several grown men actually cried. Cried, they say, wept real tears. If you don’t believe it, just ask the TV critic who is still recuperating from the shock of it, or the magazine

² Theme song of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” music and lyrics by Sonny Curtis.

editor, a perfectly rational happily married man from all outward appearances, who goes about muttering days later that there is no justice. (Marci McDonald 67)

And the housewife's supposedly delirious happiness does not preclude her vicarious participation in the adventures of the unattached woman. According to the ratings, in fact, she seems frequently to give these two shows the edge over others depicting the all-too-familiar trials of the wife and mother.

George Bernard Shaw was scarcely the first to exploit comedy as a more effective vehicle for social change than speeches and pamphlets, and, in fact, he frequently used it to dramatize his own commitment to the full emancipation of women. A television series may lack the compression and firm structure of a stage play, but it has the compensatory advantage of being able to develop the nuances of the characters over an extended period of time, thereby encouraging viewer identification with them. In both these series the primary aim is entertainment, but the writers and producers, and, to a considerable extent, the actresses, also seem to work gradually but consciously towards a painless reshaping of the feminine image. If the viewers accept it, their fantasies can make them free.

Both shows succeed in shattering the ingénue or supportive motherly image to which most television heroines have been reduced. Like such early feminist literary heroines as Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse and George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, they are both tall, slim brunettes with long, loose hair which at least does not *look* as though it were elaborately combed and teased during long hours at the hairdresser's. Neither woman gives the appearance of spending much time on narcissistic primping, and her verve and high spirits give the lie to the Anglo-American stereotype that blondes "have more fun" and are sexier.

Diana Rigg, the actress who played Mrs. Peel, was a model, Mary Tyler Moore a dancer; both have disciplined bodies and seem fully aware that queenliness and grace of motion are infinitely more attractive than the over-developed mammary glands which characterized the blonde sex symbols of the adolescent 1950s: Marilyn Monroe, Diana Dors, Anita Ekberg. Neither young woman conforms to the type of feminine beauty we have been conditioned to regard as the only one, from the courtly romance throughout most of Anglo-American history. Diana Rigg is elegantly insouciant and unconventional, whereas Mary Tyler Moore is "cute," vivacious and expressive rather than conventionally beautiful.

The Mrs. Peel influence has been visible in the appearance women have increasingly chosen to present to the world – straight, flowing hair, jumpsuits, hip-hugging trousers, a lean greyhound grace. The early success of her action costume may have had a great deal more to do than has been recognized with the current popularity of pantsuits. Viewers remarked that the skin-tight leather togs she donned corresponded to their hidden sexual fantasies. Their more obvious function was to symbolically liberate the female partner from her traditionally subordinate and supportive role. Margaret Mead, who accomplished her own personal liberation without the help of a movement, does acknowledge that what a woman wears has a tremendous influence on her freedom of action, on the way she thinks of herself and handles her body:

“The only thing I could empathize with women’s lib about was when I was able to put on pants,” she said, indicating her navy blue pantsuit.

“All my life, I’ve had to think about how I should sit. Putting on pants is very liberating.” (Mead 1)

The outer effects in the television series seem to herald an inner revolution as well. In keeping with the ease of motion displayed in their favorite costumes, both heroines are endowed with independent minds. They are witty and bright, able to laugh at themselves as well as to kid affectionately their male co-workers and friends. Both shows also present male-female relationships which are desirable but far from typical in our society.

Mrs. Peel was initially described in the comedy-adventure secret agent series as John Steed’s “assistant,” a “talented amateur,” whereas he was described as a “skilled professional.” After about a year of this, however, in view of Diana Rigg’s spirited portrayal of the character, the producers evidently promoted Mrs. Peel to full partnership. When she first assumed the role, the climax of the show was invariably Steed’s rescue of her, in “Perils of Pauline” fashion, from a programmed cybernaut, from under the wheels of a railway train, from under a press. In about a year, however, her capabilities became so apparent that she was allowed to rescue Steed at least as often as he rescued her. Mrs. Peel is a kind of female James Bond: like Sean Connery, Diana Rigg seemed to discover the tongue-in-cheek potential of the role long before the writers and producers did.

Indeed, an earlier contender for the female lead admits that the producers encouraged the actress playing the role to develop her own conception of the heroine. One male columnist

characterizes Diana Rigg's character as "every thinking man's fantasy woman" (Clive Russell 40), but her notable Mrs. Peel also comes close to being "every thinking *woman's* fantasy woman" – the woman she would like to be. Diana Rigg is an intellectual, an articulate classical actress with forceful ideas of her own. There is no doubt that she brought this considerable intelligence to bear on "Mrs. Peel" as well. Curiously enough, this combination of intellect and attractiveness seems to have aroused no hostility in male viewers, no jealousy in female.

"The Avengers" operates on the premise that sex is more fun between equals. The producers tease the viewer with the couple's obvious attraction for each other but without quite spelling out the terms of their intimacy. If there is a *Mr.* Peel in the offing, it seems to be only to suggest that Emma has already had a life of her own apart from John Steed, and to make the relations between the team all the more ambiguous. When Diana Rigg left the show, someone evidently remembered Mr. Peel, lost in the jungle, and resurrected him as a means of facilitating her egress. But this seems to have been only an afterthought. Shaw's *Pygmalion* taught the same lesson that an audience's imagination can be more stimulated by wit and ideas than by spelling out the obvious relationship between the sexes. Mrs. Peel is the ultimate in "cool," and seems completely autonomous. It is that autonomy which makes her relation with Steed all the more piquant.

If there is a division of labor, it is subtle and inoffensive. Steed is most often the organizer, but Emma the brainier of the two. The writers were evidently out to shatter some stereotypes about women, as Mrs. Peel's functions usually run counter to sexist expectations. When an organization of highly intelligent people – a sort of sinister "Mensa" – plots to take over the United Kingdom, Emma and Steed must infiltrate it, Emma, in keeping with social assumptions, as a secretary, Steed as a member. The twist is that to do so Steed must first take an IQ test. After the test he asks Emma *her* quotient, which is 152. "Isn't that a *marvelous* coincidence?" he says. "That's *exactly* the same as mine." "Small wonder," she comments drily. "I took the test for you." Her near-genius IQ, moreover, exercises itself in such "unfeminine" studies as thermodynamics, nuclear physics, and meteorology. No wonder she is content to leave the organizing to Steed!

In one show she is captured by the enemy because she is invaluable to them as an expert on ciphers, cybernetics, and the entire Western defense system. Lest we miss the point, Steed is saddled with a buxom dumb blonde substitute for Emma in the course of this show, so that we

are aware of the writers' intention of inverting satirically some of the usual stereotypes about women. The series was highly literate and articulate, full of inside jokes such as the sinister gamekeeper encountered by the Avengers whose name turns out to be Oliver Mellors. Their dialogue is spiced with quotations from Francis Thompson, *Macbeth*, Robert Burns, and Steed describes a wild criminal chase at a fox hunt, in Oscar Wilde's epigraph, as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable." Lively and satirical as the series was, it never condescended to a hypothetical audience of twelve-year-olds, as American television is so often accused of doing.

In this atmosphere of intellectual badinage, Emma is not only the more wittily incisive and learned of the two partners, but also the more "physical." She is presented as a karate expert, whereas Steel relies on a steel-plated bowler hat (like Oddjob's in "Goldfinger"), often aided by his trusty "brolly." As one thug comments disgustedly after Emma has tossed him across the room, "She's emancipated that one!" She is not the sort of girl to have doors opened for her; as one critic remarked, she is more likely to kick them open. In one memorable scene the writers make mincemeat of a stock romantic situation by depicting Emma punting on the Thames, Steed recumbent in the boat.

"The Avengers" was a really pioneering effort, as the show began in the early 1960s and Diana Rigg took over the role of female partner from Honor Blackman – who went on to bigger if not better things as "Pussy Galore" in the film of "Goldfinger" -- around 1964-65. It may, in fact, have been a little too pioneering for male network executives, if not for the public. One story that went the rounds when Diana Rigg left "The Avengers" was that the producers were looking for someone who would come on a little less strong, who would be a bit more bosomy and in need of rescue by John Steed. They found a girl who fit that description, and the show promptly "demised" a few months later amidst complaints from viewers that they had substituted a "screamer" for the "delicious" Emma. One viewer commented bitterly, "They've taken away the Peel and left us with a lemon." They made the mistake of looking for femininity in the obvious sexual attributes instead of in Diana Rigg's grace and marvelously modulated voice which, in the Royal Shakespeare Company, had successfully essayed such earlier feminist icons as Cordelia in *King Lear* and Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Although the show has been cancelled, its image of the liberated woman has left an indelible mark. In reruns on local stations the show still has a large and devoted following. One important male critic continually refers to the show as "the late, lamented 'Avengers'" and

viewers remember Emma Peel as “the true feminist heroine” (*TV Guide* 22-23). She is a kind of Superwoman, who goes far beyond the Moore show’s Mary Richards in exploiting the female potential. But the mode of “The Avengers” is, after all, fantasy-comedy-adventure, and the Moore show, if on the surface less daring, is also more realistic – at least for the majority of North American women. Emma Peel represented a logical extension of the emancipation experienced by certain Englishwomen – that is, the highly educated and dynamic. The show, then, fits into the context of a European aristocratic tradition which Kenneth and Ellen Keniston argue has produced the most aggressive and self-assured female intellectuals (356). That the show was at least as popular in North America as in England suggests, however, that it filled an important gap in the lives of North American women as well.

Mary Richards’ experiences are more characteristic of the average American single woman, and this fact has aroused the ire of some more militant members of the women’s movement. For one thing, she stumbles into a promising career only after a romantic failure, not entirely by choice. For another, she applies only for a secretarial position at the television station and lands instead the associate producership (with the warning that it pays less than the secretarial work). These factors are, however, realistic and typical of the way in which most women in our culture have to be forced to discover their identities – if indeed it is not too late. This may be why the show can reach not only the single woman, but the average housewife where she lives, even though it may appear weak to the woman who has long since very deliberately chosen to “go it alone.” Like Mrs. Peel, moreover, the character moves from strength to strength in succeeding shows. Mary’s self-confidence begins to grow from the moment she has the courage to finally reject the young man who has been exploiting her for several years.

Mary Richards, as portrayed by Mary Tyler Moore, discovers, as the theme song reminds us, that “love is all around”: she is presented in relation to a whole group of men and women friends and colleagues instead of in partnership with a single male. Mary, formerly Dick Van Dyke’s television wife, is a talent who clearly deserved a show of her own and seems to have achieved her own professional liberation. The theme song, which concluded “You might just make it after all” during the first season and which has now been altered to “You’re going to make it after all,” is clearly a double-edged tribute to her own career as well as to that of the character she plays. During the first season of the new Van Dyke show, CBS ran it after his

former “spouse’s” so as to take advantage of her high ratings. Predictably, the Van Dyke show turned out to be a pale copy of his first series, and most critics felt that a major cause of its relative failure was the absence on it of the Mary Tyler Moore who had originally been regarded as a mere “second banana.”

Since Mary Richards is a television news associate producer, the situation provides ample opportunity for several levels of good-natured satire aimed not only at the predicaments of women living alone, but also at the imperfections of the “man’s world” in the newsroom. So far, the producers have avoided the temptation of lumbering her with a male vis-à-vis. The only steady romantic interest in evidence is in the past, the long-time boyfriend whose propensity for taking rather than giving (she evidently supported him all the way through medical school) drove her into the newsroom.

One service the show performs for bachelor career girls is to suggest (finally) that “Love is all around,” and that there are more definitions of the feminine role – and of love – than one. Mary is the only woman in the newsroom but she does not trade on her sexuality and gets along well with her co-workers’ wives. Her even temper, warmth, and common sense help to puncture the pretensions of the narcissistic, handsome but brainless male anchorman, Ted Baxter (someone has evidently thought to invert the usual *feminine* image), and to smooth the edges of that diamond in the rough, her boss Mr. Grant. The boss comes to love her like one of his own daughters, the writer at the adjoining desk to love her like a sister. Only Ted, the anchorman, is so in love with himself as to remain relatively immune to her personality.

In addition, at home Mary has a somewhat biting, abrasive, but complete friendship with two women, the intellectual Phyllis, a doctor’s wife with a precocious brat of a child, and Rhoda Morgenstern from New York, who has a cynical wit and dresses dummies in a department store window. These two serve as foils to Mary, who is gradually finding her completely womanly way as a single girl in a man’s world.

Phyllis seems to vacillate between the “trade-unionism of married life” – she is not above reminding Mary that “career gals” are jealous of married women – and the drive to have a career herself. She boasts of her Master’s degree and has written books on child psychology, but when Mary babysits with her daughter and exercises a little old-fashioned discipline instead of “going by the book,” the child does not want to go home. Rhoda, on the other hand, is nothing if not single-minded. Her job is not sufficiently creative, and she is aggressively anxious to get

married, although she too has a fount of common sense which would prevent her from making any very dreadful mistakes. She has apparently been traumatized by a domineering “Jewish mother,” who appears in the episode, “Support Your Local Mother.” Rhoda, in effect, dumps her on the ever-tolerant Mary to protect herself from claustrophobia, and in no time Mary is also being stifled with kindness. On Rhoda’s twenty-first birthday, she recalls, with no marriage prospects in sight, she received a card from her mother which read, “No one will ever love you more than I do.”

The series shows increasing signs of presenting a wide spectrum of feminine roles, from the dizzy, sweetly loving Georgette, Ted’s girlfriend, and, later, wife, to the “Happy Homemaker,” Sue Ann Nivens, who runs the network cooking show. The latter is played by Betty White in a witty parody of some of her own more commercial moments when she dispenses household hints. In contradistinction to career girl Mary, Sue Ann exploits the domestic feminine stereotype ruthlessly, turning it to her own advantage and barely concealing steel claws beneath a kittenish exterior. It seems that one can be a “professional female” as well as a “female professional.” The ambitious professional “Happy Homemaker” serves as a foil not only to Mary, but also to the male narcissist Ted, whose ego she more than matches, and to the discontented housewife Phyllis, whose husband Lars she tries to steal. As Rhoda remarks, Sue Ann would seem more plausible as the abandoned wife, and Phyllis as the other woman – but then domesticity may seem a pleasant change to Phyllis’s husband. One of the funniest scenes in the show is the now-informed Phyllis’s confrontation on set with Sue Ann, who has a soufflé in the oven. Phyllis finally opens the oven and kicks it shut, while Sue Ann laments the murder of her soufflé more than the death of her love affair.

The show also pokes fun at the stereotyped attitudes various elements in society exhibit towards the single woman – the young cameraman who assumes that any woman like Mary who is over thirty and unmarried, no matter how attractive, must be desperate enough to be ripe for picking, or the suave, handsome married man who is always ready to divorce his wife, but in the meantime Along the way the show manages to take pot-shots at a number of the sacred cows in our society, including local television news shows, where the idiotic announcers’ school product like Ted all too frequently shows up as anchorman (and an anchor, literally, is what he is).

The funniest show to date was the “election” show, televised coincidentally the same week as the real American off year elections of 1970. Its basic premise is that, since the sponsor has paid for the time, the show must go on and stay on until a winner is declared, even though there is a Minneapolis blizzard raging and the phone lines and machines have broken down. No returns are coming in, and the figures stay constant all night – Mitchell 85, Turner 23 (“a real cliffhanger,” announces Ted earnestly). It was an extreme case, but calculated to convulse an audience that had just finished watching *real* election returns spread out over far too many hours, with no significant trends being set, and newscasters driven to distraction for something to say. Ted eventually resorts to reading recipes, until Mary drags in the priest who was to deliver “Sermonette” to chat with him. The priest has a good deal more aplomb, presence, and even “cheek” than Ted – “Where’s my mark?” – but even he is stumped when the distracted Ted addresses him as “Padre.” But the real point of the episode is that Mary is left – reluctantly – in charge, and grows to meet the needs of the position. When Ted threatens to declare a winner, without any further information, so they can all go home, she tells him that if he does, he is fired. She is a novice, and surprises herself most of all when she instinctively does the right thing, but she does learn. One male viewer was rooting so hard for her on this show, in fact, that he regretted the fact that she and Rhoda did not take over from the inept Ted and prove how really bright and interesting women can be. In a later season she and Rhoda are finally given permission to produce their own public affairs program, but their plans are foiled when they are forced to use the dumb and egotistical Ted and Sue Ann as hosts.

In other shows Mary receives an offer from a rival network to produce her own series, and finally receives an award. But her special talent lies in handling people: in squelching Phyllis who becomes obnoxious after pressuring Mary to hire her as an assistant, in keeping Ted in his place, in persuading Mr. Grant not to laugh at his wife for wanting to go back to college after their youngest daughter marries. The strength of the character lies in her increasing awareness that authority is not necessarily a masculine barking of orders but can also be gentle and reasonable persuasion.

An interesting phenomenon – perhaps demonstrating that women are at times their own worst enemies – is that the best show we have seen, on the election, was written by two men, the producer and his assistant, but the weakest by a woman. The latter had some amusing lines, but the overall concept was unconvincing. It focused on Mary’s and Rhoda’s being dragooned into

serving as bridesmaids for a girl Mary has not seen since they were friends at camp at the age of twelve. The humor was supposed to derive from their consternation at being thirty-year-old bridesmaids. Actually this attitude is probably more characteristic of the desperate (if one is going to be desperate) mid-twenties than of the already reconciled thirties. The male producers and writers have so far shown a greater awareness of what it is to be truly “liberated,” although the show has also most admirably provided a launching pad for several talented young women writers.³ Parenthetically, it has also helped to launch the career of the first woman director in U.S. television – hitherto an exclusively male preserve – that of Nancy Walker, who plays Rhoda’s mother. And it has recently been reported that the second woman director is Mary Tyler Moore, who has just directed an episode of her own series. Moreover, although she plays the role of an *associate* producer, in real life she owns – along with her husband – the production company which puts out this show and an increasing number of other quality series.⁴

Of course, there are discrepancies between shows because each has a different writer, or writers, and some seem more determined than others to hold up some future hope of marriage and motherhood for the heroine. This would, of course, destroy the show’s *raison d’être*, and one can only hope that the two executive producers, who originally developed the basic concept, and who seem most responsible for the vision of emancipation, will have the strength to resist taking the easy way out.

The show was attacked in 1971 by feminist Caroline Bird, the author of *Born Female*, on the grounds that it reinforces two old clichés about women, that “1. You’re not really interested in work; what you really want is a man!” and “2. Women can’t boss men” (8). The creators and producers put their finger squarely on the paranoia inherent in her charges in a reply that is too good not to quote in its entirety:

Speaking as two red-blooded male chauvinist pigs, we would like to take issue with Caroline Bird. She made a number of factual errors in regard to the *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (of which we are executive producers). Our heroine does not use her work

³ An updated comment: I have learned since Mary Tyler Moore’s death that eventually one-third of the show’s writers were women, a record for that period. Interestingly, they were asked to provide more material on the domestic and romantic side of Mary Richards’ life.

⁴ Again an update: although I could not have known it at the time, apparently her marriage to Grant Tinker was coming apart around 1974, when this paper was originally written. Tinker died in 2016 at the age of ninety, just a little before his ex-wife.

as “man-hunting ground,” and does not use her work “to promote unemployable clods in the hope they’ll give her a tumble.” Caroline Bird’s negative attitude toward virtually every female featured on television might be construed as a classic case of Venus envy. Please excuse the sloppy typing, but our secretary refuses to have anything to do with this correspondence, and we can’t understand what’s bothering him.

James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, Los Angeles (TV Guide 22-23)

Like some more militant feminists, Bird misses the humor and the gradual strengthening of the heroine. Most males would agree with the critic who enthuses:

. . . we like her best when she’s standing in the news room flinging her arms helplessly and saying gently to nobody in particular, “But I’m supposed to be in ch-charge!”
Mary as far as we’re concerned, you *are* in charge.

(Cleveland Amory 2)

Mary Tyler Moore’s comedic talents – her versatility, sense of timing, and mobility – were overlooked by the Emmy Awards until three seasons ago, as was the show itself apart from two individual episodes in its first season and two excellent supporting players. For two years in succession the winning show was the now famous “All in the Family,” a Norman Lear comedy debunking prejudice, and the winning actress was Jean Stapleton who plays the wife of a bigot on it. One cannot resist the suspicion one critic voiced:

It [the Moore show] is not only the best situation comedy of the year but by far the best ever, in every respect, and its failure to win TV’s own acceptance as such can only be attributed (barring sheer stupidity, which is always a possibility) to the fact that it poked so much of its fun at television itself. (Conversely, the main factor in All in the Family’s victory is undoubtedly TV’s penchant for embracing anything controversial – provided it is also successful.)

(Scott 24)

Television is notoriously willing to espouse liberal causes – hence the award to “All in the Family” -- but it is not so willing to be kidded itself, as the Moore show has done on countless occasions. This suspicion seems borne out by the fact that neither of the two individual Moore shows that won first season awards (for best script and direction) had much to do with the newsroom – “Support Your Local Mother” and an episode in which Mary is attracted to a man much shorter than herself. In the eyes of most viewers, we suspect, the election show was by far the funniest and most pointed. As for the best actress award, Jean Stapleton is excellent, but this is strictly a one-note performance, a “flat character,” and the show is not built around her. She is, in fact, a supporting actress in every sense of the word – playing a long-suffering wife and mother, she supports uncomplainingly all the stupidities of a world run by men. Millions of American homemakers undoubtedly identify with Edith Bunker – salt of the earth, moral center of the show – but just a bit dumb and without a specific human identity apart from her family.

Can it be that the Emmy Awards were trying to tell us something, at least until disinterested critics forced them into belated recognition of the Moore show’s superiority? Can it be that they find this show more “subversive” in a way than “All in the Family,” because it tells women that they might just make it on their own? Television is, after all, a “family medium,” dependent financially on one woman in particular, the consumer housewife, as Betty Friedan demonstrated. Jean Stapleton’s character does not threaten our social structure; Mary Tyler Moore’s might. As for the flamboyant “Maude,” a later supposedly feminist entry in the viewing schedule (and a spinoff from “All in the Family”), far from being more daring than the MTM show (despite its treatment of controversial topics such as abortion), it is difficult to see how the heroine (apart from the marvelous comic power of the actress who portrays her, Beatrice Arthur) differs from a 1970s Helen Hokinson matron dominating her family for want of another outlet.

Both “The Avengers” and the Moore show have been targets for the forces resistant to change. It is an encouraging sign, however, that despite cancellation of “The Avengers” and certain compromises on the MTM show, the producers of the latter, now in its sixth season, have given Mary added weight and authority in the newsroom, so that the image of women presented by the media is gradually evolving. Under pressure from both sides either to make the heroine more dependent or more independent, the show is building on its initial success and strengthening its heroine. In the first show of the fifth season, Mary goes to jail in defense of the newswoman’s right to protect her sources and shares the cell with two prostitutes who comment

that they too are being punished for “just doing their job.” She now lapses occasionally from her usual sweet temper and snaps at her boss when she discovers that she is being paid less than her male predecessor, or when she is passed over for a promotion because she is a woman. Although the character of the more marriage-minded Rhoda has been “spun-off” into a show of her own, there are signs that the producers are refusing to compromise their conception of Mary. The show continues to afford fresh insights into the evolving mores of the later twentieth century, as did “The Avengers.” The judgment of the commercial faction of the industry notwithstanding, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” may have the last laugh yet, with its sign-off using an adaptation of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer trademark, in which the letters MTM replace MGM,⁵ and a pussycat the lion. Maybe power will finally belong to the pussycats!

⁵ A woman star’s initials, moreover, are replacing the initials of Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer, the patriarchal studio bosses of Old Hollywood.

LOOKING BACK ... AND FORWARD (2017)

When I reexamined my conclusion from 1974, I wondered, from the perspective of 2017, whether I should change the term “pussycat” to “kitten,” given the appalling use of the slang term that surfaced during the recent U.S. presidential campaign. Then I thought of all the women who marched in Washington, New York, and around the world proudly wearing their pink pussycat toques, and decided that “power to the pussycats” was exactly the right ending for my paper, with the MTM image of women taking control.

When I finished the paper, “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” was still in full swing. It ended finally at the height of its powers, a decision apparently made by Mary Tyler Moore and her production company. The show was subtly evolutionary, if not revolutionary. The MTM “family” included a principal Jewish character, Rhoda; Lou Grant, played by a Jewish actor; Phyllis Lindstrom, whose husband Lars was evidently a Swede from Minnesota; Phyllis’s brother, who is gay, and Gord the weatherman, played by a black actor, John Amos, who typically bounced jokes off the obtuse very white (including his hair) Ted Baxter.

Some later episodes included the hilarious “Chuckles the Clown” in which the uptight Mary grieves while her colleagues cannot help “chuckling” over a death that had its ridiculous aspect. At the funeral home, in a virtuoso performance, Mary’s restraint slowly slips away as she tries unsuccessfully to stifle inappropriate laughter – a tribute Chuckles the Clown would have appreciated. In another enjoyable episode Mary, who is not much of a cook, enlists Sue Ann Nivens to help prepare a gourmet dish, Veal Orloff. Unfortunately, the servings, while attractive, are small, and Mr. Grant takes the whole dish for himself until Mary has to tell him to give it back. This dinner party rang a bell with many aspiring hostesses.

Finally, the last show has become a classic, imitated but never matched by other series. It set the bar high, as it reinforced the theme that these people *were* a family, not by blood, but by choice and common goals. Of course, it had its funny side – the new station management fired everyone but the totally clueless Ted, the anchorman. The scene left not a dry eye in the house, including mine, as the newsroom group gathered in one giant hug and exited together – an inspired curtain call! Finally, Mary steps back in, looks around fondly, and turns off the lights.

This finale was not really an ending, however, but a new beginning. The show is now generally recognized as the best and most brilliantly written and performed situation comedy to date, raising the genre to a new level. It inspired not only actresses and comediennes, but

producers and other shows. In a CBS special, Thursday, January 26, 2017, “Mary Tyler Moore: Love Is All Around,” hosted by Gayle King, the formidable Oprah Winfrey admitted that Mary Tyler Moore was the only person she idolized. Referencing the kitten at the end of the credits, she said she realized that you could be your own boss, run your own production company: “She was the women’s movement for me.” She added, “She led us from one century to another.”

Of the situation comedies inspired directly or indirectly by “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” three stand out. First, “WKRP in Cincinnati” (1978-82), which was also an MTM production, changes WJM to WKRP (yes, just as it sounds), and plays its comedy more broadly. Here the Ted Baxter dimwit is the station owner’s son and general manager, the “dumb blonde” receptionist is the smartest person in the room, and the intelligent moral center amidst a sea of eccentrics is the program director, a young man, Andy Travis, in the Mary Richards role. It is therefore not so groundbreaking in its choice of protagonist. An often hilarious comedy, its funniest episode is probably the Thanksgiving one when the dim station owner’s son decides it would be a good idea to drop live turkeys from a plane over the inhabitants of Cincinnati. As the turkey-bombs land on unsuspecting heads, he stammers, “But I thought turkeys could fly!” This episode is obviously more in the vein of slapstick than any of those on “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” – but apparently it was based on a real event!

The second show, and probably the one closest to “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” is “Murphy Brown” (1988-98). As we have seen, star Candice Bergen cheerfully admits the debt. Murphy is an anchorwoman/ reporter, in front of the camera rather than behind, and over forty. A recovering alcoholic, she is frankly more abrasive and acerbic than Mary Richards: one of the running jokes is that she goes through a secretary a week, whereas Mary would have handled the situation tactfully. Murphy’s interpersonal relations with men and with other women are, understandably, more prickly, sometimes corrosive, than Mary’s. She has an ex-husband, and becomes a single mother at one point. We also see a little less of her in the newsroom, and more at home, whereas “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” balanced the two.

Finally, the third, and most recent show is “30 Rock” (2006-13), also, as the lead actress Tina Fey gladly admits, a tribute to Mary Richards and MTM. It focused on the production of a show modeled on “Saturday Night Live.” Liz Lemon, the head writer, is based on Tina Fey’s own experience as the first female head writer on “Saturday Night Live.” This too is a very

funny show, but unlike “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” and “Murphy Brown,” it eschews comic realism for parody, and sometimes seems like an expansion of “Saturday Night Live” sketches.

Perhaps even closer to “The Mary Tyler Moore Show” than “Murphy Brown,” both in tone and comic effect, was not a television show, but a 2010 film, “Morning Glory,” in which Rachel McAdams portrays a Mary Richards type of capable young woman parachuted in to help a hopelessly floundering morning anthology show. Her first assigned task is to fire the narcissistic, incompetent male anchor, played by Ty Burrell (of “Modern Family” fame) as a riff on Ted Baxter. She also has to handle an egotistical female co-anchor, played by Diane Keaton, who has to be paired, against her will, with a new male anchor, dragged reluctantly out of retirement, and played to the hilt by a gruff Harrison Ford, who wants to deal only with “hard news.”

Aside from fantasy figures emerging from a comic book world (Black Widow, possibly influenced by Emma Peel), the roles assigned to female characters in the media include women detectives, such as “Cagney and Lacey” (1981-88) or the U.K.’s “Scott and Bailey” (2011-16? -- possibly inspired by the former). Both pair a single woman with a married one, and in both cases the single woman has a drinking problem and serious man complications, while the married woman has issues of her own. Above all, there continues to be a proliferation of mother figures evolved from those of the 1950s: they now often have careers as well as husbands and children. But it is never made clear how these women doctors, lawyers, businesswomen manage to cope with both careers and household management. These depictions often convey a Superwoman image that can not only frustrate the average working woman, who may not be able to have her house cleaned by the underclass of poorer women, often exploited, who may tend to the homes of the more fortunate.

It seems that while there has been progress in the media depiction of diversity, in other ways there has been regression rather than advancement. Mary Richards had a sex life, but it was not prioritized on the show, which offered a pioneering image of a woman who could compartmentalize public and private spheres, as well as a man could. There are hopeful signs today as well, however, indications that the spirit of Mary Tyler Moore/ Mary Richards lives on. While we know that Mary Tyler Moore’s life was more shadowed than her alter ego’s, as probably Diana Rigg’s has been, compared to the unconquerable Emma Peel, both performers may have been acting out their ideal selves, just as we women viewers wished to identify with

their characters. What we dream can make us free. The Women's March on Washington was the largest such gathering in history. As a Henry James character once said, "The ladies will save us" (*The Portrait of a Lady* 23), and Hillary Clinton affirmed recently, emerging from defeat, "The future is female." Mary Richards (and Emma Peel) would agree.

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