Television’s Wonder Women: the Evolution of the Single Female Heroine

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Angela Cary – angela.cary@my.und.edu

One night as I was flipping through the shows I’d recorded on my DVR, I noticed a programming pattern that had never occurred to me before. Dozens of episodes of Sex and the City, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and Girls were at my disposal, just waiting to be watched for a second, third, or fourth time. That’s when it hit me: I love shows featuring young, single, media-career-minded women!

Maybe this weakness isn’t too surprising. After all, I’d spent many years working in advertising and television. Thus, my viewing habits had given me the inspiration for my paper: the evolution of television’s single female heroines stretching across five decades – 1970-2013. How has the role of the single “career woman” lead developed over the past half century? Has feminism, in fact, created truly revolutionary role models, or are some stereotypical characterizations necessary to appeal to female audiences? And how has the agency of television itself affected the portrayal of women…from the sitcoms of the 1970’s and 80’s to the “dramedies” of contemporary TV?

This study will highlight the similarities and differences between four leading women whose characters represent different eras of the silver screen: Mary Tyler Moore (Mary Richards - The Mary Tyler Moore Show); Candice Bergen (Murphy Brown - Murphy Brown); Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie Bradshaw - Sex and the City); and Lena Dunham (Hannah Horvath - Girls).

All four characters shared some obvious similarities. Each was a single, white, heterosexual female who thrived in a creative career. And, like all woman, each one struggled with typical made-for-television identity issues – relationships with men, relationships with women, career roles, and family issues – but with varying degrees of drama. What set each woman apart was the role she played in her society’s
history. Differences in career functions will be a primary focus of this study, but other factors like age, income level, and sexual evolution will also be explored. To examine the group as a whole, we’ll first analyze each character separately.

**The Ground-breaker: Mary Richards** *(The Mary Tyler Moore Show, 1970-77)*

From the moment Mary Richards peeked into the WJM-TV newsroom to open the series’ pilot episode, the single career woman has been heralded as a television *tour de force*. While the second-wave feminism movement arrived long before Mary Tyler Moore, “few shows embodied more perfectly the intertwining of traditional femininity with new feminist ambitions,” (Douglas, 1994, 205).

Mary Tyler Moore represented a new benchmark for American women. Mary Richards was pretty and likeable. She had her own career, her own apartment, close-knit co-workers, and several devoted female friends. Mary also enjoyed the company of many men throughout the series, yet had only a few actual relationships. Like *Sex and the City’s* Carrie Bradshaw, Mary chose to end a long-term relationship on her own terms. “Take care of yourself,” her ex-beau says. Mary replies, “I think I just did,” (Episode 1, “Love Is All Around”). Men, she acknowledged time and again, were not the key to guaranteed happiness.

Her pioneer status aside, Mary Richards didn’t dive head first into the working man’s world, she ventured slowly into the office pool. Her role as the station’s token female often inhibited her role as television associate producer. Mary tended to conventional female “office manager” duties like getting coffee for a boss she willfully called “Mr. Grant”. Although she portrayed a character employed in television management, much of Mary’s workplace behavior would be considered subservient by today’s standards.
The opening theme song from the first season held an aspiration for Mary, “You might just make it after all…” Yet, the lyric still implied a sense of uncertainty for our ground-breaker. With good friends, a co-worker family, and an enviable career, feminists would argue, why was there still a question if Mary Richards *would* make it after all?

**Tough as (Manicured) Nails: Murphy Brown** (*Murphy Brown*, 1988-98)

Unlike her predecessor ten years earlier, Candace Bergan’s character didn’t share any of the same workplace fears and uncertainties that Mary Richards did. In fact, aggressive and outspoken Murphy Brown was quite the opposite.

As the powerful anchor on the network television news magazine “FYI”, Murphy’s boxy business suits and brash candor made her perfectly positioned to do battle with her male counterparts and win. Hers was an era where serious career women had moved far beyond the coffee-getting, mail-sorting stage to serving confidently in management positions, often overseeing the “Mr. Grants” of their day.

During the 1980’s, the phrase “having it all” became the popular postfeminist anthem for a generation of working women whose careers were as valued as their family lives. In a fantasy perpetuated by popular culture these ultra-females moved from the boardroom to the kitchen (and the bedroom) with great ease, never missing a step along the way.

While Murphy epitomized this new breed of individualistic “take charge” gals, one missing piece sets her apart from the other characters in this study – true friendships. “Single-minded attention to getting to the top of her field meant, for Murphy, no personal life, no network of female friends,” (Douglas 2010, 38). Unlike Mary before her, and the two sets of girlfriends to follow, Murphy had traded the security of interpersonal relationships for the benefits of career success. When a fellow female reporter asks Murphy
for advice, the sharp-tongued protagonist was at a loss for words. “I don’t know, Corky. I’m not good at this stuff. Isn’t there some all-night radio station you can call?” (Episode 59, “Trouble in Sherwood-Forest”).

Describing other “postfeminist, post-family” television shows of the era like Designing Women and Golden Girls, Bonnie Dow noted in her book, Prime-Time Feminism, “These shows, to varying degrees, contain the message that female friendship and support are important and valuable to women. Murphy Brown, on the other hand, embraces individualism so thoroughly that she is seemingly incapable of deep emotional ties,” (Dow, 143). For Murphy, breaking the glass ceiling meant “having it all”, but at what price?

**Cosmopolitan with a Carefree Twist: Carrie Bradshaw (Sex and the City, 1998 – 2004)**

What Murphy Brown lacked in personal relationships was quadrupled by Carrie Bradshaw and her three female confidants in HBO’s breakout hit, Sex and the City. With the fortune of good timing, Sex and the City’s characters emerged as the liberated female voices of a renewed sexual generation. The show launched on the heels of the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal in 1998, when even the nightly news discussed sex with an openness that had never been heard in mainstream media before. The taboo terms had been spoken aloud, the discussion was finally out there, and four of Manhattan’s femme fatales were poised to ride what some considered feminism’s third wave.

Set before the age of the blogosphere, Carrie penned her weekly column titled “Sex and the City” for a fictitious, off-beat city newspaper called The New York Star. If one wonders why she didn’t make the transition from paper columnist to online blogger during the show’s six-season stint, the answer may lie within the newspaper itself which serves as a prop to reveal Carrie’s hip media identity during several episodes. “I’m a writer,” she tells a potential suitor. “That’s cool,” he replies, “What do you write?”
Carrie points to a copy of The Star on the counter. “Turn to page seven of your newspaper there.” (Episode 45, “Hot Child in the City”). It would’ve been difficult to get the same effect with a laptop.

Carrie’s literary success elevated from newspaper columnist to full-blown author when a collection of her prized columns are published. The show is structured around the production of Carrie’s “Sex and the City” column, complete with tales of her own social escapades and her friends’ intimate disclosures. These adventures were, of course, what fueled the show’s storylines. Yet, Carrie’s work as a columnist comprised a surprisingly small part of the show’s overall narrative. In her book Redesigning Women, Amanda Lotz observes, “For comedic dramas and their new-woman characters, it is crucial that the characters have careers, but the actual depiction of them engaged in work is often minimal,” (Lotz, 96).

It was Carrie’s interpersonal relationships, and the subsequent discourse between the four friends, which got top billing. In Reading Sex and the City, contributor Astrid Henry marks the importance of Carrie’s “friendship family” which is very similar to the “work family” concept at Mary Richards’ WJM-TV. “While the ‘family of friends’ concept is hardly a new one for TV, Sex and the City is relatively unique in its focus on women’s friendships,” Henry writes. “The women’s relationships with each other – both as a group and individually – are continually depicted as these characters’ primary community and family,” (Henry; Akass & McCabe, 67). When Carrie meets her friends for lunch at the end of an episode, her voice-over concurs about the vital role of the “friendship family” dynamic. “The most important thing in life is your family…in the end they’re the people you turn to. Sometimes it’s the family you’re born into and sometimes it’s the one you make for yourself,” (Episode 27, “Shortcomings”).

The emphasis placed on female relationships explained why men were the program’s primary source of consternation. As Carrie’s paramour Mr. Big notes in the final episode, “You three know her better

**Clueless Ambition: Hannah Horvath** *(Girls, 2012 – present)*

The youngest of our heroines is *Girls’* Hannah Horvath, the archetype of contemporary millennial women everywhere. No other word describes Hannah better than “awkward”, and the show’s premise is best summarized by a *Girls* web ad slogan: “Living the Dream. One Mistake at a Time.”

Creator Lena Dunham, who plays hapless Hannah Horvath, explained *Girls’* premise to Linda Holmes of NPR, “I feel like, especially women – and really, by women, I’m speaking for myself – have been waiting to see a reflection of somebody who feels a little more like somebody they could know, or someone they could be,” (Holmes, April 8, 2012).

Like Carrie Bradshaw, Hannah plays a New York City writer, but for an entirely different medium. As a product of the digital media age, she shares her words online, not in print. Even the scenes which showed Carrie pecking out a newspaper column on her laptop, and her refusal to get cell phone, seem very dated compared to Hannah’s constant iPhone communique.

All of the tech savvy-ness in Hannah’s world, however, cannot blanket her naïveté. Unlike her older predecessors, Hannah weaknesses lie somewhere between her own character flaws and the generation she was born into. During the show’s third season, Hannah brokered a deal to write an eBook for a very impatient publisher. While Carrie Bradshaw could often be heard telling her friends, “I can’t, I have a deadline”, Hannah is the classic creative procrastinator, saving her writing for the last minute, then panicking under the pressure when its due. When she misses the deadline, she does what any self-entitled
millennial would due – she asks for an extension. The gaps between Mary Richards’ sense of responsible maturity and Hannah Horvath’s deliberate rebellion of adulthood seem very far apart.

Hannah’s growing pains also extend into her romantic relationships. Chicago Reader blogger Sarah Nardi compares Hannah’s choices in men with Carrie Bradshaw’s with some disdain. “Whereas Carrie tended to be involved with men who are attractive, talented, or wealthy, Hannah chooses to cast her pearls before Adam, a sadistic agoraphobic who, based on the yearbook photos, looks a lot like your average school shooter,” (Nardi, 2013). Their dysfunctional union enhances Hannah’s feelings of self-loathing. “I really care about you and I don’t want to anymore, because it feels too shitty for me,” (Episode 4, “Hannah’s Diary”). For any feminine-based comedy-drama, the quest to understand men absorbs a great deal of effort, emotion, and airtime.

While young women would argue that naïve Hannah Horvath doesn’t represent all twenty-something females, perceptive viewers with years of hindsight would beg to differ. In some sense, Girls has picked up Mary Richards’ struggle for the single girl to be taken seriously…and moved it a few steps back.

**Mary and Murphy – Second-Wave Feminism and Post-feminism Unite**

The launch of Murphy Brown offered an easy parallel for entertainment writers who hailed the new sitcom as “Mary Tyler Moore Updated for the Eighties”. Dow writes, “If Mary Richards was the feminist television icon of the 1970’s, then Murphy Brown is the post-feminist icon for the 1990’s,” (Dow, 137).

While the feminist community celebrated Mary Tyler Moore as their new icon, it wasn’t the goal her producers had intended. As Grant Tinker, Mary’s then-husband and partner at MTM Enterprises put it, “She wasn’t a woman’s libber except in the larger sense. She felt she had earned a place. Sometimes she would go in and ask for a raise or more responsibility or a better title, but it wasn’t a major thrust of the
show,” (Lehman, 133). Producer James Brooks agrees, “We did not espouse women’s rights; we sought to show a woman from Mary Richards’ background being in a world where women’s rights were being talked about and it was having an impact,” (Lehman, 133).

Despite their trailblazing similarities, the two characters began their journeys on very different footing. While Mary’s adventure begins when she first moves to Minneapolis, Murphy’s begins when she returns to the network fresh out of rehab. One woman was searching for a meaningful television career; the other had already achieved television stardom. “While Mary Tyler Moore was firmly within what Norman Lear called the ‘emerging woman’ genre, there is no doubt that Murphy Brown has made it,” (Dow, 136).

One of the most telling differences between the two women was their assertiveness, an evolutionary symbol of the working woman’s growing voice in the workplace. Though Mary Tyler Moore’s character became more confident and self-assured during the program’s seven-year run her confidence was hedged by displays of tentativeness. Upon learning she has to fire the station’s sports director, Mary pleads with her boss. “Mr. Grant, please, no. I’ve never fired anybody in my life. I had a cleaning lady once I couldn’t fire. So I moved,” (Episode 77, “Hi There, Sports Fans”). Like her much-younger fellow heroine, insecurity is one trait Mary Richards and Hannah Horvath have in common.

Fast-forward to 1988, the decade of the unshakable Murphy Brown. In The Rise of Enlightened Sexism, Susan J. Douglas observed, “In a culture where women were, twenty years after the women’s movement, still urged to be soft-spoken and to censor themselves, Murphy embodied the sheer joy of talking back, committing verbal transgressions, of revolting against such self-silencing,” (Douglas 2010, 39). Like Carrie Bradshaw whose witty quips were quoted endlessly on the show’s online fan forums, Murphy’s zingers were equally appreciated by its female audience. “Viewer letters sent to the show affirmed that many women embraced Murphy as a role model,” noted Douglas. “[They] wrote in with
comments like ‘I am 39 and I need a couple of Murphy-like lines to say back to people’,” (Douglas, 2010, 39).

**Carrie and Hannah – Seeing Women’s Stories through a Different Lens**

When *Sex and the City* debuted exactly one month after *Murphy Brown’s* final bow in 1998, television had already revolutionized a new, more sophisticated way to appeal to women viewers of the same demographic: the “female-centered drama”.

This new genre, coined by Amanda Lotz to pinpoint a series which constructed its narratives around one of more female protagonists, was designed to appeal to female audiences. “After years of relegating female characters to the limited dimensions of situation-comedy characters,” she writes, “networks have begun to employ a variety of approaches to telling stories about women and finding female audiences,” (Lotz, 31).

In the same way *Murphy* was forever linked to *Mary*, the cast of *Girls* endured similar comparisons to *Sex and the City* when the show premiered in 2012. Entertainment bloggers rattled off articles like, “HBO Smack down: *Sex and the City vs. Girls*. Magazine quizzes which used to ask, “Are you a Carrie or Samantha?” now asked readers to gauge “Which *Girls* Character are you?” During the pilot, *Girls* buys into the comparative hype when flighty Shoshanna proudly shows off a *Sex and the City* poster, proclaiming, “I think I’m definitely a Carrie at heart, but sometimes…sometimes Samantha kind of comes out. And then, when I’m at school, I definitely try to put on my Miranda hat,” (Episode 1, “Pilot”).

A notable difference between the newer programs and their older counterparts, however, was that each of the two female-centered dramas featured four principal female characters rather than a single lead. The limelight of each program was still placed upon one central character – *Sex’s* Carrie and *Girls’* Hannah –
but the other three actresses could hardly be accused of playing supporting roles. Rather, each friend acted like a crucial cog in the wheel to make the storylines turn.

Juggling four actresses’ storylines, however, diluted the depths of their characterizations in ways that weren’t issues for Mary and Murphy. While Sex and the City and Girls have been praised for their straightforward dialogue and depictions of sex and relationships, both shows have virtually ignored the news of the day. In the wake of 9/11, no mention of NYC’s most dramatic day was ever mentioned by Carrie Bradshaw and company. Conversely, Murphy Brown tackled headline issues, like the 1992 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings with a head-on, bull-by-the-horns approach. The Mary Tyler Moore Show worked the occasional political reference into its evening news headlines, and even scored a cameo appearance with former First Lady Betty Ford.

Susan Douglas attributes this lack of depth to the bottom line. “This is because, in part, if you’re a producer thinking about syndication, you don’t want the show dated by references to Clinton, Bush, or terrorism, and you don’t want to offend viewers’ political or aesthetic sensibilities,” she points out. “But this is another example of how commercial exigencies – the need for a show to be evergreen – promotes an image of women as much more unidimensional and superficial than they are in everyday life,” (Douglas, 2010, 175).

Superficial or not, female viewers coveted the glamorous lives of Carrie, Samantha, Charlotte, and Miranda. In reality, most viewers had lived – and wanted to forget – the blunders of Hannah and her friends Marney, Jessa, and Shoshanna. Desirability was the reason to watch Sex; relatability is a reason to watch Girls. For most women over 25, the Hannah character is a more identifiable fit, though not necessarily a more comfortable one.
Classic Media Women vs. Media Lite Girls

For Mary Richards and Murphy Brown establishing their characters as successful media women meant dressing in business suits, going to an office, interacting with others, and dealing with unusual workday tribulations. Each character’s primary role was that of “co-worker”, and both shows revolved around a traditional office setting.

Shifting to the more liberated side, Carrie Bradshaw and Hannah Horvath were able to roam Gotham as free-spirited adventure-seekers because neither was tied down to a desk job. Their new breed of employee had no offices, no co-workers, no established workday. Lotz’s Redesigning Women notes, “The 1990’s comedic dramas depict women finding alternatives to the trappings and behaviors of the previously all-male public work spaces. Such depictions help diminish stereotypical constructs such as the ‘working woman’ as it emerged in the 1980’s,” (Lotz, 96). While their characters’ careers still played an important role in their personas, their work lives weren’t the central focus. When Carrie announces she’s quitting her column to move to Paris with a man, her friend Miranda insists, “Carrie, you can’t quit your column, that’s who you are.” Carrie counters, “No, it’s not who I am, it’s what I do,” (Episode 92, “Splat!”).

While their cubicle-free lifestyle seems idyllic to many, our younger heroines’ freedom comes with a price: financial instability. Rarely, if ever, are established nine-to-fiver’s Mary Richards or Murphy Brown shown in the throes of real economic peril.

The pilot episode of Girls’ features a defining scene where Hannah’s parents visit Brooklyn to sever the purse strings. (“I could be a drug addict,” she reminds them, “Do you realize how lucky you are?”) Solving her financial woes means taking a job at the quintessential workplace for liberal arts graduates – a coffee house – to make ends meet. Meanwhile, across the bridge in Manhattan, low-credit Carrie
Bradshaw asked for - and received - a $30,000 loan from Charlotte when her apartment building went co-op. Given the show’s friendship-family concept, this is far from a shocking request. However, Carrie’s infamous $400-per-pair shoe collection, and lack of real investments, revealed her true sense of priorities.

**The Sexual Evolution**

The developing women’s movement of the mid- to late-1960’s opened the door for one of television’s closeted subjects: sex. While movies of the same era showed Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin Braddock entangled on the big screen, silver-screen censors were less accepting and more conservative. Today, of course, it’s difficult to find a program involving fictional characters that doesn’t use sex as a primary theme. How did television’s female leads find a way to bridge television’s sexual gap?

**Mary – The Other Side of TV’s Single Girl Next Door**

When *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* laid the groundwork for women in the workforce, it also needed to find a way to address Mary’s “Sex and the Single Girl” status. By all indications, Mary was a well-bred woman who lived in a one-room apartment. The setting simply wasn’t conducive to those “coming-out-of-the-bedroom-buttoning-your-shirt” sexual indicators used in other series. How, then, could producers reveal that Mary, an attractive woman with many dates, was just like everyone else?

As Katherine Lehman explains in *Those Girls*, the conundrum was resolved in an unusual way. When Mary’s parents moved to Minneapolis during the third season, it “prompted discussions on changing sexual mores,” (Lehman, 149). In one episode, Mary pulls an all-nighter but won’t reveal the details to her mother. In another episode, her mother reminds her father, “Don’t forget to take your pill.” Both Mary and her father reply in unison: “I won’t,” (Episode 59, “You’ve got a Friend”). A handful of interactions with her parents had proved the point – Mary Richards had a sensuous side.
In a 1973 TV Guide article, Mary Tyler Moore herself explained how Mary Richards’ perceived innocence was a perfect fit for the show’s format. “Let’s face it. Mary Richards in the show can tell her mother she was out all night and not explain where and with whom. That’s as far as we want to go. I feel strongly that sex is a private thing not to be shared with an audience,” (Lehman, 150). While Mary’s character served as a feminist trendsetter in many ways, overt sexual promiscuity wasn’t one of them. Sex, for the time being, would remain behind closed doors…but not for long.

**Murphy – The National Crisis of Single Motherhood**

“Major shifts in narrative premise often spell disaster for situation comedies,” warns Bonnie J. Dow in *Prime Time Feminism*, (Dow, 150). She further suggests that *Murphy Brown*’s producers were close to making a dangerous turn when Murphy learned she was pregnant during the 1991 season finale.

In the storylines that followed, questions arose about sexual responsibility, the child’s paternity and Murphy’s choice to become a single mother. When Murphy’s ex-husband Jake was revealed as the baby’s father, it gave the pregnancy what Dow called “an aura of legitimacy” since they had once been married, (Dow, 151). Murphy’s decision to have the baby and raise him on her own, coupled with Jake’s decision not to be involved in the child’s life, and son Avery’s rare appearances, made motherhood a lesser issue for the show’s dynamic. This allowed *Murphy*’s producers to avoid a “major shift” to the narrative after all. Little did the production team know how politically explosive the idea of Murphy’s pregnancy would become.

Douglas recounts one of the decade’s non-newsiest news story this way: “In May 1992, the day after Murphy gave birth, Vice President Dan Quayle delivered a speech denouncing *Murphy Brown* for ‘mocking the importance of fathers,’ ‘glorifying illegitimacy,’ and turning the decision to bear a child
alone into ‘another lifestyle choice,’” (Douglas 2010, 40). Quayle’s audience was the Commonwealth Club of California, an elite organization for predominately white men.

While this episode was just another misstep for the bumbling vice president, both *Murphy Brown* and series creator Diane English fought back hard. “If the Vice President thinks it’s disgraceful for an unmarried woman to bear a child, and if he believes that a woman cannot adequately raise a child without a father, then he’d better make sure abortion remains safe and legal,” said English, (Dow, 154). After a summer-long Quayle vs. Brown political controversy, Candice Bergen herself fought back during the Season 5 premiere with Murphy’s sharply-worded response about the struggles of single motherhood ending with, “I didn’t just wake up one morning and say ‘Oh, gee, I can’t get in for a facial, I might as well have a baby!’” (Episode 102, “You Say Potatoes, I Say Potato”). Perhaps there was no better television character to take on the conservative establishment than Murphy Brown.

**Carrie – All in a Day’s Work**

Searching for the unique sexual identity of *Sex and the City* is more complex than it seems. Where do you start? The show explores more sexual references than the Kama Sutra – threesomes, lesbianism, bisexuality, adultery…and those are the tamer subjects. Carrie’s occupational status as a “sexpert” allowed the show’s writers to dive into every erotic angle imaginable. Wading through the episodes, each one offers some new element of the subject to be explored.

As we’ve previously discovered, the key to the show’s success is its relationships. In many episodes, sex just serves as a vehicle to teach its characters a lesson about the greater good. “What made *Sex and the City* so revolutionary was that it was a sex-positive show from a female perspective,” suggests Susan J. Douglas. “And unlike *Melrose Place*, the women here who jumped from bed to bed were classy, not trashy. You simply would not apply the word ‘slut’ to any of the main characters, including Samantha,”
Astrid Henry of *Reading Sex and the City* agrees. “In episode after episode, Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte are not punished for being sexually active; they are not treated as ‘fallen women’. Rather, their sexual ‘selfishness’, if you will, is rewarded and praised, which is highly unusual in either film or TV representations of women’s sexuality,” (Henry; Akass & McCabe, 75-76).

For Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte, sex held a certain key to empowerment. During the show’s pilot, the four women discuss “having sex like a man” which they define as no guilty feelings or emotional backlash. Task accomplished, Carrie confidently walks away from her one-sided tryst. “I left feeling powerful, potent, and incredibly alive,” (Episode 1, “Sex and the City”). This breed of sexual power wasn’t about female revenge or climbing the corporate ladder. It was about pleasure – and the lessons learned from it – simply for pleasure’s sake.

**Hannah – ‘Strong Sexual Situations’ Personified**

Since *Girls* began in April 2012, every episode of the HBO series has been preceded by disclaimers for either “Nudity’ and/or “Strong Sexual Situations”. Between the flawed relationships and less-than-grACEful social moments, its characters find many opportunities to hit the floor, or the shower, or the…

Like *Sex and the City*, (and unlike *Mary and Murphy*) the show thrives on its subscription cable status where restrictions are fewer and carnal liberties are allowed. Most of the sexual exploits involve Hannah herself, a woman whose bathroom scale reads heavier than most of television’s lithe sexual creatures. (“I am thirteen pounds overweight and it has been awful for me my whole life!” she claims.) In fact, most online articles about the show’s steamy side have focused less on storylines and more on Hannah’s “brave” nudity which has been both heralded and panned by critics. There’s nothing avant-garde about beautiful 25 year-olds having sex on television, but seeing Hannah’s real curves has somehow rocked the online community to its core. “The sexuality of these ‘Girls’ is truly their own, graphic and far from
erotic, played less for humor than to convey a perpetual state of ambivalence,” writes Los Angeles Times television critic, Mary McNamara, (McNamara, April 13, 2012).

Lena Dunham (Hannah) reveals that it’s sometimes easier to expose her body than her emotions. “I find it really awkward to do a scene where I’m supposed to seem like I’m in love. That stuff to me feels in some way more dangerous than just having my butt exposed,” (Holmes, April 18, 2012).

Hannah’s nudity, like the show itself, offers a level of genuineness that resonates with its viewers far more than Mary Tyler Moore ever did. Compared to the hush-hush days of Mary Richards, Girls has demonstrated what fifty years of female-centered television has given us – it’s brought the evolution of television sex full circle.

**Behind-the-Scenes Success**

The one undeniable similarity these four women share is their success behind the camera. In addition to being the lead actress for their series, each served an important role in its production.

Mary Tyler Moore took the lead by establishing MTM Enterprises which, in addition to her self-titled series, produced spin-offs like *Rhoda* and *Phyllis*, plus dozens of other hit TV movies and series like *The Bob Newhart Show*, and *Hill Street Blues*. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* ran for seven seasons with a total of 168 episodes.

Candice Bergen served as co-executive producer or executive producer for over 50 episodes of *Murphy Brown* during its ten-year, 247-episode run. Sarah Jessica Parker shared this honor, serving in several producer capacities for 62 episodes of *Sex and the City’s* six-season, 94-episode run.
With twenty episodes to its credit, Lena Dunham is credited with being the creator, executive producer and director for all three seasons of *Girls*. The show will enter its fourth season in January 2014.

**Conclusion**

As long as television relies on its recombinant culture, single woman narratives will always have a voice on network and cable television. With each new era brings a new definition of feminism, but the characterizations will never be clearly defined.

Katherine J. Lehman’s *Those Girls* sums it up best, “While modern heroines may display higher career aspirations and sexual drives than their historical counterparts, they still often resist aligning with feminism, strategically use their sexuality as a means to power, and express deep ambivalence about remaining single,” (Lehman, 241).

Like most viewers, I’d like to think that I’m not living vicariously through these single feminine heroines. Rather, I’m enjoying their successes, as well as their cringe-worthy moments, as I see images of my own young, single, career woman history repeating itself on the silver screen.
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