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"MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN":  
AN ANALYSIS OF SATIRE AS A  
VIOLATION OF SOAP OPERA STEREOTYPES

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ABSTRACT

The soap opera "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" presents an interesting new genre in television as it defies the conventional standards and stereotypes associated with daytime drama. The central character is not a dependent victim, but rather a survivor who indicates to her viewers the concept held by advertisers and media management of them. A parody of the form of soap opera and a satire on American consumer society, "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" reveals the social mythology which tends to oppress both men and women.

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SATIRE IN THE VIOLATION OF SOAP OPERA STEREOTYPES

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the most successful venture of television's "second season" was the appearance of a non-network broadcast, serialized, pseudo-soap opera from the producer of "All In The Family," "The Jeffersons," and "Maude" to mention a few. Norman Lear's "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" became the hit start of an idea rich new television genre.<sup>1</sup> The show centers on its title character, a tense, complex, blue-collar, small town, American consumer, wife, and mother. Such a character may appear at first to be too trite and too common to all of daytime television serials to deserve significant attention, yet Mary's tragic state and her approach to life lend a humour to the show that is all too often absent in its prototypes.

Nearly one hundred years ago, Kate Sanborn wrote that while the wit of men had long been a subject for admiration and discussion, and was even then growing threadbare, the wit of women had been almost utterly ignored and unrecognized.<sup>2</sup> Women often emerge as the victim of the joke as in the cartoon where a man watering his lawn turns to watch a pretty mini-skirted young woman walk past. In his distraction, he sprays his wife who has been sitting on the porch. As the presenter of the cartoon astutely observed, a fantasy (the desire of married men to philander) is presented as a joke and therefore does not seriously approach the secret dissatisfaction of the men. Women, in contrast, rarely tended to see anything funny in this type

of joke or cartoon as they understand its underlying meaning and true intent all too often finding themselves uncomfortably close to the role of the sprayed wife.<sup>3</sup>

The description of the above cartoon and its intent exemplifies woman as victim in the joke. Jessie Bernard has discerned that joking and kidding along with playful insult and teasing may involve non-communication, pseudo-communication and mis-communication all at the same time.<sup>4</sup> The woman is a victim because she is uncertain of what to believe from the teaser. When she has finally become thoroughly convinced, the joke is revealed and her embarrassment becomes the source of laughter.

"Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" can be valuable to the student of language as it exposes the foibles which have been conditioned in women by society and ridicules the culture itself rather than the product which has been created. An examination of currently popular television soap operas reveals that "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" defies their conventional form and philosophy. The show employs the use of humour to support arguments and to construct statements which assess American society. In the view of this author, it is precisely this defiance of traditional soap opera characterizations which allows "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" to demonstrate through irony a disrespect for stereotypical roles. Mary Hartman is a tragic figure, yet she manages to make her audience laugh.

Prior to the provision of specific examples of stereotype violation by "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," and a close motivational analysis of the character of Mary, it is first



necessary to discuss both the role of humour and the construction and function of stereotypes in general and as they emerge in popular soap operas, as well as to provide background information on the show and its intent.

#### ROLE OF HUMOUR

Disguised in trivia and nonsense, jokes may be used to express profound truths and to release inner tensions. The joke can be socially constructive as it is a shared experience for the participants while serving as a resistance against authority and as an escape from the pressures of social institutions. Comedy serves to uphold as well as resist authority by making absurd, ridiculous, or laughable whatever threatens the social order.<sup>5</sup> All comedy is highly moral as it seeks to unmask vices by confrontation. Mary confronts the consumer oriented soap opera viewer without hostility or derision, she mirrors their own behavior to the extreme in order to heighten a recognition of the power of social order, to emphasize the need for change, and contribute to the inaccuracy in assessment of the public by media and advertisers. She ridicules the exaggerated mannerisms of the consumer under pressure to consume in order to point up weakness in the system. Through comedy, "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" exposes the transgressions of actions without calling into question the actions themselves.

Mary does not alienate her audience by her words and actions, rather, she instructs them by bringing their hidden conflicts to light through her life. The show is appealing

because it is "slightly bent," rough, and unpredictable, with the stark quality of real life. Norman Lear, who developed the series, expressed his gratification about the feedback on the show to an interviewer regarding the way the show had succeeded on two different levels. Those he expected to take the show seriously as a soap opera were able to pick up on the subtle parody parts, while those who were viewing it as a fad were actually able to become involved with the characters.<sup>7</sup> The spoof on Middle-American folkways does not go unnoticed by its audience, the very people spoofed. The characterizations of the consumer conscious home maker are not meant to degrade, but to pose a probable reality and, in the words of head writer Ann Marcus to parody "...how the media presents the American people to themselves."<sup>8</sup>

SOAP OPERA STEREOTYPES

Overgeneralized beliefs which are based on a limited set of experiences are termed as stereotypes. These stereotypes reflect beliefs about the personality traits of women and men and are widely shared. Stereotypes are, in fact, so widely shared, that their assumptions are believed to apply to nearly all men and women.<sup>9</sup> Although based on a core of clear differences, stereotyping's overgeneralizations distort and exaggerate to produce the thin characterizations which prevail on many daytime dramas. Women in soap operas are limited to certain areas of endeavor (mainly employment within the home) and certain behaviors in order to comply with assumptions about woman's "natural role."

While evidence supports the assertion that the stereotypes of men are more favorable than those of women, research indicates that both men and women tend to be evaluated negatively when they deviate from the expected behavior for their sex.<sup>10</sup> Men as well as women suffer; alternative concepts to a supportive, nurturant role may be unimagined for women, but the socialization of the American male has closed off certain options for him as well.<sup>11</sup> Traits such as tenderness, sensitivity and the open demonstration of emotions are strongly discouraged for men in our society. Soap operas, in general, structure their characters to reflect sex-role stereotypes, yet "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" poses an interesting exception. Originally planned as a "not very bright beer-drinking slug" who was not very sensitive and "sort of a redneck,"<sup>12</sup> Mary's husband Tom Hartman has evolved to transcend the John Wayne-"Father Knows Best" combination to emerge as a man trapped by the same societal pressures which confine Mary. He has been reduced to a powerless little boy as he works on the assembly line by the same rules and regulations that confine Mary to the kitchen.<sup>13</sup> Tom is unable to cope with his situation, managing tears, he resents them, and his failure to identify the source of his problems renders him incapable of helping Mary with hers (as "Father Knows Best") or protecting her (as John Wayne) from the outside world. Tom's attempt to achieve the masculine sex-role stereotype causes him an unhappiness which he will neither admit nor confront. Such behavior, as it will be discussed later in this paper, presents a radical deviation from the soap opera norm of male lead characterizations.

6

Perhaps it is Tom's desperate failure to actualize the stereotype that has attracted equal number of men and women viewers to "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman."<sup>14</sup> Tom does not seize the time, he allows himself to be a victim of his society. A victim of "performance anxiety", Tom turns to a payroll clerk, but their short-lived affair results in venereal disease and further problems with Mary. Successful in his bid for union election, Tom fails to expose corruption because it is too entrenched in the power system. Although he defies the soap opera norm, Tom's victimage deprives his character of humour ; Mary is comic because she realizes that something is wrong, that something is missing from her environment, but unable to make such an assessment Tom tragically allows himself to be caught up in societal expectations.

According to a report compiled in 1972 by the National Organization for Women Media Task Force, Tom Hartman is a definite exception to the prevailing male lead character in soap operas. The group surveyed twelve and one-half hours of soap opera programming in order to determine the differences in the ways in which characterizations of females and males were treated. Monitoring indicated that males were depicted as rational, independent, advice-giving professionals (quite unlike assembly line worker Tom), while women were portrayed as emotional housewives, mothers, or girl friends who sought and received advice from males. Women were more often portrayed as as being mentally or emotionally disturbed as compared to men,

and their problems were the major focal point of the storyline. These problems were found to be almost always related to the women's love lives, mental health, or children.<sup>15</sup>

Advice seeking is an important part of the "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" show, and perhaps the area in which it differs most distinctively from the conventional soap opera. Mary has identified "communicating" as her "thing" and is the primary advice giver on the program. She has even recently volunteered with a local help line, and having a special red phone installed in her kitchen, she dispenses advice while making coffee and cleaning counter tops. Her younger sister Cathy Shumway and neighbor Loretta Hagers are her close confidants. Mary discusses her problems with these women, but regardless of their advice she makes a final choice alone, whether it be to serve freeze-dried instead of regular instant coffee, or to meet Sargeant Dennis Foley for an extra-marital relationship.

The male characters are not rational, independent professionals on "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman", and there have only been two cases of characters experiencing mental or emotional disturbance and both have been male. Nineteen year old Davey Jessup murdered the entire Lombardi family along with their eight chickens and two goats, and later held Mary hostage in an abandoned Chinese laundry for a ransom of amnesty and a brand new Porsche Carrera. Mary later attributed his aberrant anti-social behavior to low blood sugar. The second disturbed person was Mary's Grandfather, Raymond Larkin, who was arrested



as the notorious "Fernwood [Ohio] Flasher." Grandpa Larkin was released with a conditional suspended sentence, provided he agree to treatment by a psychiatric social worker, who was a woman. Charlie Haggars, Tom's co-worker at the automotive plant and Loretta's husband, is a forty-six year old man who sees no way out of his environment. His hopes hinge on promoting his twenty-three year old second wife as a country and western singer. Dependent on Loretta, Charlie allows her dreams to also become his so that he may share in her achievements. Similarly, Mary's father George Shumway, who is also employed at the same automotive plant as the other two men, finds his last dream shattered in his unsuccessful bid for union office. George is the total victim, he has been beaten by the system and it has left him cynical and bitter. Martha, Mary's mother, attempts to remind her husband of his former ambitions, but meets with no success.

Although "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" does conform to the traditional portrayal of women employed within the home while men work at outside occupations, the conversation patterns of the characters differ markedly from the usual present in daytime dramas. The FOW task force found that over seventy-five percent of the male conversations had to do with business and professional affairs, while all of the conversations between females related to romantic, marital, or family affairs.<sup>16</sup> The non-professional status of the male lead characters on "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" perhaps best explains the absence of work related conversations. More accurately, as Tom Hartman

described his job, "What is there to think about putting two screws in a dome light all day long?" Men in the show may work outside the home but the work in which they engage is uninteresting, unchallenging, and unworthy of any additional time other than that it takes to perform the task itself. Therefore, male conversations are usually presented as taking place on a break or at lunch in the employee cafeteria. Marital problems (or the lack of them as in Charlie's case) predominate, with other issues such as alcoholism and homosexuality occasionally being presented.

As Mary Hartman is the central character of the series, there is greater emphasis on her interactions with others. Female conversations usually occur in Mary's kitchen and like the exchanges between males, are concerned with marital problems. However, the conversations between the women stress current issues to a greater extent than those of the men with pornography in the media, exploitation by morticians, destruction of the ozone layer by aerosol propellants, sensitivity training, and religion receiving attention and often serving as a theme for episodes to come. The popular theme of total dependency by the married woman on her husband is almost totally absent in "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," another feature that distinguishes the show from the traditional soap operas. Charlie depends on Loretta as the key to escape his boring routine, Mary pulls Tom through his crises, Cathy manages almost instantaneous recovery after each broken engagement, and Martha turns to her daughters

and more recently, to a neighborhood astrologist for support.

Extra-marital affairs have consistently been areas of attention and emphasis for the soap opera, as have the consequences of divorce and child custody. As determined by the NCW survey, married women whose husbands were shown as having love affairs (or who were overly involved to the detriment of the marriage) were shown as totally incapable of coping with the problem. Divorce was often not an alternative to these women as they feared losing their (usually male) children, yet male characters never expressed similar concerns.<sup>17</sup>

While the area of extra-marital relationships is included in "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," the treatment offers such a radical deviation that it emerges as humorous. Tom's affair with payroll clerk Mae Glinski did not render Mary unable to cope with the reality around her. When Mary meets Mae she offers to give Tom up because she doesn't want him any more "and there's no sense in letting him go to waste." When Tom changes his mind and decides to break off the relationship with Mae to try to work out his problems with Mary, a forlorn and lonely Mae takes an overdose of sleeping pills and then visits Mary, as she considers Mary her only friend. Mary saves Mae's life by walking the much larger woman around her kitchen, making coffee, and calling a doctor. Mary advises Mae and then arranges a meeting between the woman who would have been portrayed as an enemy and rival in a traditional soap opera, and her second husband, the man Mary feels Mae still loves.

A reverse of the situation, however, nearly destroys Tom. On learning of Mary's brief affair with Dennis Foley, Tom first threatens Foley with physical violence, and failing in his threat, resorts to excessive drinking. He leaves Mary claiming he wants a divorce, loses his job as a result of drinking while at work, and bungles an attempt by the Haggers to reunite him with Mary. Heather, the Hartman's twelve year old daughter, favors divorce so that her father will have to take her someplace special every Saturday. She warns her mother that if Mary doesn't want to end up like Warren Beatty in "Shampoo", with no one, she had best come to terms with the situation. Heather spends most of her time at either her grandparents's home or with her friend Trudy, and does not figure significantly as the force which would affect the decision of her parents regarding divorce.

"Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" viewers can care for the characters in the series as they present a response to the absurdities with which viewers are accustomed. The show examines how working class respond to their lives, and dramatizes that their responses are motivated by Reader's Digest, Abigail Van Buren, commercials, and of course, soap operas. Although Mary and her supporting characters do not present the stock one-dimensional types which have come to be expected from daytime television, through their intricate interplays they manage to construct a probable reality which emerges as more real than realism. "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" presents people caught up in an attempt to achieve appropriate sex-role identities



and constantly falling short of their goals.

Louise Lasser, the actress who portrays Mary Hartman, expresses the motivation of her character as an attempt to both identify and deal with human problems, problems which would continue to exist even if the way in which men and women were brought up was changed. Mary may be passive and vulnerable, but Lasser considers such characteristics as important to anyone, as an attempt to suppress them denies humanity itself. The opinion that differences between men and women have been stressed too much contributes to Lasser's portrayal of Mary: "Its time now to discuss the similarities between men and women. There's a part in all of us that's needy."<sup>18</sup> Lasser's Mary exposes the myths of American society because she is not assertive in her denial of them, but chooses instead to abide by their rules.

#### MARY HARTMAN AS COMIC SURVIVOR

Mary Hartman is a woman who is striving for the impossible, but who will, in the final analysis, survive all of the trials which she meets in her life. While her categorization as a "survivor" may be denied acknowledgement as truly tragic heroism, Mary is still heroic as her success and failures in her attempt to survive present the viewers with insights into their own struggles.<sup>19</sup> Mary is in terrible trouble, even for a soap opera.<sup>20</sup> A sense of desperation underlies her attempt to live properly, her aprons are spotless, puffy sleeved dresses and braids make her look like a small child posing as a clown, her intuition is keen although her intelligence is based on Reader's Digest and Family Circle. Mary wants to grow up, but



she has been led to believe that she can only do so by the rules, the same rules which keep her dressed as a child and which inhibit the woman from emerging. A child-woman, Mary must grow up before she cracks up.<sup>21</sup> Raised to believe in the system with all its benefits, Mary is still a good little girl who can't really understand why everything is falling apart around her.<sup>22</sup> She has played by the rules, but was never taught to consider the possibility that she still might lose. Director Joan Darling feels that the character of Mary Hartman is someone who is "...under total bombardment by everything...She is a cartoon of everyone who bought the system hook, line, and sinker and has tried to live it."<sup>23</sup> In agreement with Darling is a former president of the Los Angeles chapter of NOW and a current aide to Norman Lear, Virginia Carter. Carter sees in Mary the foibles and confusions of someone who is caught up in the very fiber of the system, although Mary may be struggling, she's part of what she's struggling against.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Hartman's involvement in the system which results in her own oppression is even more serious because of her ability to take everything at face value. She has been so effectively conditioned by the consumer culture that she can ask a reporter in her home for the first time to gain information on a recently murdered family, if he notices any "waxy yellow buildup" on her kitchen floor. Mary buys all the right products, cleans and scrubs her home on a rigid schedule, takes out library books to try to be a more interesting sex partner, works at being a good wife and mother by the policies set out by Dr. Joyce Brothers,

and waits for happiness to find her.<sup>25</sup> Mary genuinely feels inadequate because the bugs aren't always frightened into running away by the laid spray, or because she can't see her reflection in the plastic dish detergent container. Her acute consumerism has distorted Mary's own perception of herself; she is unaware of herself in time and space, so unaware that she is saved from being truly tragic, and emerges instead as a humorous parody of the problems of her situation. Mary is caught in trauma, but is determined to survive in a world that may not be worth surviving for.<sup>27</sup>

#### CONCLUSIONS

Naive and confused, Mary Hartman manages to avoid the characterization of most of the popular soap opera female lead characters because she can not only manage to cope, but she will survive. Through Mary, the viewing audience can see how they are also caught in a system to which they have contributed and continue to support, but that responds to them by relegating them to certain pre-determined role prescribed behaviors. Mary confronts her life situation with a proper mixture of strength and vulnerability to prompt audience concern for her out-of-synch life. Conversations between Mary and Tom register an emotional impact that is rare in the soap opera. The Hartmans are aware that their life expectations have not been realized, and probably will never be attained. They defie conventional soap opera stereotypes in order to examine the lives of men and women who are caught in the pressures of

trying to achieve societal expectations. The overstatement of the situations adds the humour which allow "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" to present the Middle-American life without mockery or derision. Carolyn Heilly of the San Francisco Commission on the Status of Women contends that Mary is not offensive to her viewers as she embodies the American spirit. The Commission adjourns their meetings promptly at 10:30 p.m. in order to allow members sufficient time to arrive home and watch the show.<sup>29</sup> Mary is more than the national spirit to laquer, she see the character as the personification of the post-Liberation problems of American women. Through her portrayal of Mary Hartman, the actress hopes to demonstrate that the only real limitations on women are emotional ones.<sup>30</sup>

"Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman" shows the American consumer what advertisers and the media management think of them. As the consumer is generally portrayed as a woman, Mary's satire of home maker behavior demonstrates the manipulative intent of advertisers without criticizing the women who are led to believe that they must buy the products in order to have happy, successful lives. Mary's unconscious role in her own oppression creates a poignant sense of the manner in which pre-determined societal expectations condition individuals to forsake initiative and originality. Through her distorted and comic reflection of society, and in her defiance of accepted soap opera traditions, Mary accurately presents the failings of society. Rather than an insult, she is an indicator of the need for change.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lorraine Davis, "The Soap Opera," Vogue, June 1976, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup>Kate Sanborn, The Wit of Women (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob Levine, "Approaches to Humour Appreciation," Motivation In Humour, ed. Jacob Levine (New York: Atherton Press, 1969), p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>Jessie Bernard, The Sex Game: Communication Between The Sexes (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 205.

<sup>5</sup>Hugh Dalziel Duncan, Communication And Social Order (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 376.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>7</sup>Ed M<sup>c</sup>Cormack, "Mary Hartman's Secret Recipe for Rock Cornball Surprise," Rolling Stone, March 25, 1976, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 46-47.

<sup>9</sup>Kay Deaux, The Behavior of Men and Women (Belmont, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1976), p. 13; Daryl J. Lem, Beliefs, Attitudes, And Human Affairs (Belmont, Cal.: Brooks/Cole, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>Deaux, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup>Sandra L. Lem and Daryl J. Lem, "Case Study of a Non-Conscious Ideology: Training the Woman to know her place," Beliefs, Attitudes, And Human Affairs, p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>"Meet Greg Kullavey, Mary Hartman's Perfect Husband Tom," Soap Opera Digest, June, 1976, p. 40.

<sup>13</sup>Stephanie Harrington, "Mary Hartman: The Unedited, All-American Unconscious," MS, May, 1976, p. 98.

14 Ibid. , p. 83.

15 National Organization for Women and Dr. Muriel Canton, Women In the Wasteland Fight Back: A Report on the Image of Women Portrayed in Television Programming (New York: National Organization for Women, 1972), p. 52.

16 Ibid. , p. 58.

17 Ibid. , pp. 61-62.

18 Davis, p. 119.

19 Harrington, p. 98.

20 McCormack, p. 70.

21 Harrington, p. 55.

22 Harry R. Waters with Martin Kasindorf, "The Mary Hartman Craze," Newsweek, May 3, 1976, p. 43.

23 Harrington, p. 55.

24 Ibid. , p. 55.

25 Ibid. , p. 98.

26 Ibid. , p. 55.

27 Waters, p. 63.

28 Amanda Murrah Latetsky, "Who's Who on the Mary Hartman Set," TV Mirror, June, 1976, p. 7.

29 Waters, p. 54.

30 Davis, p. 119.