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“You’ve Got Spunk: How The Mary Tyler Moore Show Reflected 1970s America”

By Sara Jordan

Originally written for Professor Kevin Mumford

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From 1970-1977— for a total of 168 episodes— the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* thrilled, enticed, entertained, and amused audiences across the country. The show’s heroine, Mary Richards, was an over 30 career woman with wacky neighbors, an uptight but lovable boss, and a motley crew of newsmen that always kept her on her toes. Never a man-eater, nor a radical, Moore played a character everyday people could relate to. Unabashedly liberated, with old school charm, Mary was a woman of many seasons— seven to be exact.

She had over a dozen boyfriends during the show’s run— unheard of at the time. Issues that were discussed included sexism, being a single woman, job discrimination, ageism, having a difficult boss, problematic neighbors— and that was just the first episode. Birth control, infertility, self-esteem, diets, beauty contests, the economy, anti-Semitism, premarital sex, sexual IQ, assertiveness, union strikes, insomnia, adoption and child rearing were all topics that were discussed, but never browbeaten. Viewers were left to form their own opinions on where they stood with controversial issues.

On September 19, 1970 at 9:30pm EST¹, CBS viewers watched the former housewife on the *Dick Van Dyke Show* “make it on her own.” Not intended as a spin-off, but often mistaken as one, the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* informed a generation of independent women that they were going to make it after all. Mary’s hat thrown up in the air at the end of the show’s intro, forever frozen, symbolized the protagonist’s never-ending determination. During its run, the *MTM Show* won 29 Emmy Awards, a record not broken until the hit show *Frasier* (1993-2004,) and saw the inception of three spin-

¹ “Love is All Around,” [The Mary Tyler Moore Show](#) (CBS; first aired September 19, 1970. All episodes accessed on Hulu.com.)

offs, in addition to the numerous shows Moore's production company turned out. Not since the 1930s had women comics been pushed to the forefront of entertainment, competing alongside their more established male counterparts.

Moore's popularity playing Dick Van Dyke's wife Laura on his self-titled show, (1961-1966) made her instantly recognizable, but also left her vulnerable to type-casting. The duo had been so popular that people believed they were married in real life. That was the key reason writers Burns and Brooks were dissuaded from writing Mary's character as a divorcee. "Fellas," began CBS programming vice-president Perry Laffery, "They're going to think she divorced Dick Van Dyke. We can't have that." The compromise was creating a character that was newly single after breaking up with a long-time boyfriend. CBS feared that audiences wouldn't believe that an appealing woman like Mary had never been married. "It tells you a little bit about our own lack of awareness of the women's movement at the time...our feeling was that if a girl was over thirty and unmarried, there had to be an explanation for such a freak of nature as that," commented writer Allan Burns. Mary Tyler Moore had reflected similar sentiments:

"We were lucky that our creative people were so tuned-in to what was happening in the world. It wasn't that Jim Brooks and Alan Burns created *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* because they were interested in polemics for women's rights— it wasn't that kind of program. But they *were* interested in what was happening to women in our society and, like all good writers, they wrote about what was foremost in their minds...When our show went on, we were considered very radical— so radical that there were

prophecies of instant disaster. Mary Richards was not a widow...She was an ambitious career woman interested in her own work and making it on her own. Nothing like Mary Richards had happened in television before.”²

Indeed, as Mary Ann Watson pointed out, “TV’s single women of the fifties and sixties were biding their time until matrimony would bring deliverance from the pressures of paid employment. But Mary Richards loved her job and grew into it.” Mary lived alone but wasn’t a lonely or sad person... There were many avenues besides procreation for a woman of the 1970s to leave her mark on the world.”³

In the pilot episode, Mary Richards had just moved to Minneapolis and was now hunting for a job.⁴ She arrived at WJM-TV. Lou Grant, the station manager, asked Mary a series of pertinent questions including her religious affiliation.

Mary: “Mr. Grant, I don’t know quite how to say this, but you’re not allowed to ask that when someone is applying for a job. It’s against the law.”

Lou: “Wanna call a cop?”

Mary: “No.”

Lou: “Good. (In an intimidating manor,) Would you think I was violating your civil rights if I asked if you’re married?” Insecure about her single status, (a common theme throughout the early years of the show,) hilarious hijinks ensued as Mary tried to dodge his questions.

² Judy Fireman, ed., “Mary Tyler Moore in Her Own Words,” *TV Book: The Ultimate Television Book* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1977).

³Mary Ann Watson, *Defining Visions: Television and the American Experience in the 20th Century*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁴ “Love is All Around.” *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. (CBS; first aired September 19, 1970).

Mary: "Presbyterian."

Lou: "Huh?"

Mary: "Well, I decided I'd answer your religion question." Lou then asked why she wasn't married, as well as how many words a minute she could type.

Mary: "Fifty-five."

Lou: "Fifty-five reasons why you aren't married?"

Of course, she was answering the typing question, but her timing and nervous fidgeting created the comic relief. By this time Mary was quite flustered. "You've been asking a lot of very personal questions that don't have a thing to do with my qualifications," she finally retorted. After some awkward silence, Lou replied, "You know what? You've got spunk." A beaming Mary murmured, "Well..."

"I *hate* spunk!" was his curt reply. But Mary's persistence prevailed. The secretary position she wanted had been filled, but Lou Grant offered her another job. It paid \$10 less and he made it clear he wanted a man for the job, but Mary accepted nonetheless. In this first episode, Mary Richards became the associate producer of the 6 o'clock news. Even at this stage in the series, the interplay between Mary and Lou, (and eventual attempt at a romance,) would turn awkward situations into slapstick comedy. Grant dryly offered her the job as head producer, for an even sharper pay cut, but Mary politely joked, "I can't afford it." All she may do in the first episode is sharpen pencils, but she would go on to write scripts, produce the news, and even have airtime alongside Ted Baxter, the self-absorbed idiotic news anchor for whom the crew always covered for.

Unlike the socially conscious and politically charged Norman Lear sitcoms of the

1970s, such as *All in the Family*, *Maude*, the *Jeffersons*, and *Good Times*, the *MTM Show* took a nuanced position of the issues. There was no doubt that Mary was a strong-willed woman who could take care of herself, but she rarely delivered the satirical lines on the show. Those were left to sidekick and neighbor Rhoda Morgenstern, played by Valerie Harper. She was everything Mary wasn't: flamboyant, Jewish, slightly overweight, and from the Bronx. Rhoda was the yin to Mary's yang.

Mary was constantly reminded of her privileged WASP upbringing in Northern Minnesota, and how her problems paled in comparison to everyone else's. However, when a friend was in need, Mary was there. Her charm and wit transcended any jealousy that could be directed towards her. Unlike most female characters on television, Mary Richards was down to earth and eternally likable and relatable. Any time, day or night Mary's door was open."⁵

Grant Tinker, Mary's real-life husband at the time, (who also ran Mary's company,) described the success of his wife stating, "The extraordinary thing about Mary is that she is so extraordinarily normal." In the book "Love is All Around: the Making of the Mary Tyler Moore Show,"⁶ co-star Cloris Leachman related a story about an experience she had filming on location for a project and overhearing a conversation at a cafe about the upcoming debut of the *MTM Show*. Leachman, who played Mary's landlady Phyllis Lindstrom, commented, "The men were laughing at the absurdity of Mary Tyler Moore going out on her own to develop a tv show. I was very aware then of how wives are

⁵ Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism; Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁶ Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown, *Love is All Around: The Making of the Mary Tyler Moore Show* (New York: Delta Books, 1989).

perceived by others — you're a role, you're not a person with possibilities. And I think Mary's show did a great deal to subtly but profoundly address that.”

The female characters introduced on the show were strikingly different from one another; Leachman played Phyllis as a woman who was vain and possessed a superiority complex. She desperately wanted to be hip; she even let her daughter Bess call her by her first name. Mary only put up with Phyllis' self-absorbed behavior because they were former school chums. But Phyllis endured marital infidelity at the start of the show's fourth season. Then after her husband Lars unexpectedly died, (a character never shown on camera,) mother and daughter left Minneapolis for a spin-off series set in San Francisco.

Rhoda embodied the white ethnic minority, albeit with a few stereotypes about Jewish mothers. Sue Ann Nivens, played by Betty White, entered the show as the host of the “Happy Homemaker” television segment at the station. However, the only thing domestic about Sue Ann was her gin. Ever on the prowl, no man was safe, including Phyllis' husband. She wasn't the first loose woman on screen, but definitely the first in a comedic setting. Unlike a woman in her 20s setting her sights on a swinging lifestyle, Sue Ann was a woman in her 50s who had raging hormones. Her banter with newsman Murray Slaughter, played by Galvin MacLeod, poked fun at her two-faced persona, but there was a deeper message of unapologetic sexual lust that women “past their prime” could relate to in Sue Ann Nivens.

Later, sweet as pie Georgette Franklin, played by Georgia Engel emerged on the scene. Her character was introduced at Rhoda's going away party held at Mary's

apartment⁷. She was a co-worker of Rhoda's at Hempel's department store, (both women were window dressers.) Ted Baxter, played by Ted Knight, was the lovable, but daft anchor of the 6 o'clock news, who promptly courted Mary's guest. He and Georgette would date off and on until they wed in a later season. Georgette spoke in a baby voice and was the epitome of a submissive homemaker, circa 1950. Rhoda and Mary observed how Ted would take advantage of the naïve woman and how he played with her emotions. They decided to help the young woman toughen up and build self-esteem. Mary even set her up on a few blind dates. Georgette finally recognized that she was "damn nice" and deserved the same treatment in return.⁸ After Georgette displayed Ted her newfound liberation, Ted in turn confronted Mary. "It's like being with a different woman. It's like being equal. I understand you're responsible. As long as I live, I'll never forgive you."⁹

Being the only woman in the newsroom, Mary's soft demeanor was countered by that of her boss, Lou Grant, played by Ed Asner. He was tough, macho, and everything Mary was not. As head of the department he attempted to put everyone in their place. Mary's respect for Mr. Grant was deep-seeded with romantic undertones one minute, and father/daughter dynamics the next. Murray Slaughter, Mary's co-worker, shared the show's funny one-liners along with Rhoda. His character developed through the season to include having marital problems that led to: a crush on Mary, a gambling addiction, and

⁷ "Rhoda Morgenstern: Minneapolis to New York." The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS; first aired December 16, 1972).

⁸ "The Georgette Story." The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS; first aired January 20, 1973).

⁹ Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds., *MTM: Quality Television* (London British Film Institute Publishing, 1984).

an eventual adoption of a Vietnamese child. Gordy the weatherman at the station, played by *Roots* star John Amos was an on again off again cast member. Most notably, he was the only African-American man in the newsroom. He left WJM-TV, becoming a famous talk show host. Phyllis, upon meeting Gordy, wrongly assumed he was a sportscaster, with racist overtones present in her comment.

Initially, television reviewers were mixed. A random audience that had been assembled to view the pilot episode thought Mary was a loser, Rhoda was unlikable and a negative character, and Phyllis was unrealistic¹⁰. Feminists complained that Mary was the token woman in the masculine newsroom. She was also the only character who called her employer Mr. Grant. Even her friends were on a first name basis with the boss.

Still, the plotline had potential, and some keen reviewers recognized the show's innovation. John Leonard, a writer for *Life* magazine authored the 1970 article "The Subversive Mary Tyler Moore."¹¹ He lamented, "If women have a profession, it's usually nursing, where they minister to men, (like the show *Julia*.) If they are superior to men, it's because they have magical powers, (*Bewitched/I Dream of Jeannie/The Flying Nun*.)

"If they are over 30 years old, they've got to be widows, almost always with children, so that they can't run around enjoying themselves like real people, (*the Brady Bunch/Partridge Family*.) And they're guaranteed to be helpless once every fifteen minutes." But of all the television women, Mr. Leonard praised Mary Richards. "If the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* ever goes into weekday reruns, vampirized homemakers may get their consciousness raised to the point where they will refuse to leave their brains in

¹⁰ Alley, *Love is All Around*.

¹¹ John Leonard, "The Subversive Mary Tyler Moore," *Life* 69, No. 25 (Dec. 18 1970).

the sugar canister any longer.”

In “TV and the Single Girl,” a *TV Guide* article, Diane Rosen pointed out that Mary Richards may not have been the first career woman to live alone, but she was the first one to be self-sufficient, single (by choice) and over 30 and never married. Parallels can be drawn between Mary Richards and Marlo Thomas’ character Ann Marie of *That Girl*, (1966-1971.) But Ann Marie was a would-be actress, who had stereotypical ambitions of fame. Intrusive parents and a wholesome boyfriend took care of the young actress.¹²

People magazine in a special 2010 supplement edition “Celebrate the 70s”¹³ described the *MTM Show*, “Nearly 40 years later, it’s amazing to think that Mary Richards, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s central character, was considered a daring creation. Her risk factors? She was a single woman in her 30s, had a job and was happy. Furthermore she had a sex life: An episode where she spent the night at her boyfriend’s house was much murmured about in kitchens and around water coolers across the nation.”

“I was never a militant women’s libber,” Moore insisted. “Though I have been very vocal about some of the inequities we still have. There’s a lot of Mary Richards in me—but there’s also a lot of Laurie Petrie, the housewife I played on the *Dick Van Dyke Show*.”¹⁴

Mary dated, and often, but was the first person to kick out a date she felt was

¹² Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism; Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

¹³ Kara Warner, “TV: From Classic Sitcoms to Norman Lear, Saturday Night Live, and Roots,” *People: Celebrate the ‘70s* (June 30, 2009): 90-109.

¹⁴ Judy Fireman, ed. “Mary Tyler Moore in Her Own Words,” from *The TV Book* (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1977).

becoming too fresh. When her parents came to visit ¹⁵ Mary put her foot down over their noisiness. After staying out all night, her mother wanted to know what her daughter had been up to. A date that ended in sex was implied, but Mary merely said, “Mother, I’m not going to tell you... I am over 30 years old.” She pointed out that her parents never called to check up on her before, only now that they were in town. Her father casually replied, “It was long distance.”

In a later episode, Mary’s parents were again visiting.¹⁶ While leaving the room, her mother called out, “Don’t forget to take your pill!” to which father and daughter replied in unison, “I won’t.” It was that simple statement that made a nation of single women nod in agreement, and made men raise a few eyebrows.

By 1974 and 1975 the Rhoda and Phyllis characters had left the show for their own self-titled series. This occurred under the guide of Mary Tyler Moore’s production company, having been penned by the same writers, (Allan Burns and James L. Brooks.)

On October 28, 1974, stars Valerie Harper and Mary Tyler Moore appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine¹⁷. The news publication was, and still is, known to cover economic, social, environmental, and political issues. Having two actresses interviewed as the cover story was a daring move. For example, the issue that ran the previous week of November 21 had Jerry Brown of California on the cover; the previous weeks saw Gerald Ford and a story on the trials and tribulations of political wives. The week of November 4 had the Shah of Iran, followed by Yasser Arafat. In the MTM feature, the

¹⁵ “Just Around the Corner.” The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS; first aired October 28th 1972).

¹⁶ “You’ve Got a Friend.” The Mary Tyler Moore Show (CBS; first aired November 25, 1972).

¹⁷ “Rhoda and Mary—Love and Laughs,” *Time* 104, No. 18 (Oct. 28, 1974).

interviewer wrote, “From the look of the ladies and the sound of their followers, TV '74 has a glow that extends to viewers who may yet be witnessing television's true Golden Age of comedy—stronger and longer than the one in the '50s. Indeed, Mary Tyler Moore and Valerie Harper are enough to make almost anyone forget the comedies of the past. And even the crustiest nostalgia buffs cannot ponder *Rhoda* or *The MTM Show* without admitting that on these long autumn evenings, all that glitters is not old.”

In 1977, after seven seasons, Moore decided that the show had become creatively exhausted. In the final episode¹⁸ of the show, Phyllis and Rhoda returned for one last goodbye. Mary and her co-workers were forced to seek new employment after the station came under new management and everyone in the office was fired— except for Ted. While the last moment the cast is assembled is rightfully somber, the tension was broken when the gang, huddled together in a group hug, shuffled over to Mary's desk to grab some Kleenex.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show may not have been radical enough for some feminists, but in those seven years Mary grew as a woman not ashamed to “be a ma'am.” Still single, and now over 40, Mary didn't let Rhoda's marriage and move back home, or her friends' growing families ever make her independence waiver. As she asked in the closing scene of that last episode, “What is a family anyway? They're just people who make you feel less alone and really loved.” At that moment, Mary realized her newsroom family was just as comforting and fulfilling as that of a husband and children. For seven seasons, television viewers shared that love of her unconventional family— a family that could not have endured before the 1970s.

¹⁸ “The Last Show.” *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS; first aired: March 19, 1977).

After the show ended, many of the cast members went on to have successful careers in film, television, and theatre. Ed Asner continued his character on the spin-off *Lou Grant* (1977-1982.) Despite the name, the *MTM Show* had never been solely about Mary. In fact, she personally only won four of the show's 29 Emmys. Nevertheless, Mary was the center of the sitcom. In 2002, a statue of Moore was erected in Minneapolis near the spot the famous hat in the air scene was filmed.

Character dynamics made the show entertaining; the social commentary made the show relevant. But the warmth and grace of the star was the glue that bound those elements together. Mary wasn't a man hating, bra-burning feminist. She wasn't a member of the Black Panther Party or Weather Underground— but then again neither was the majority of society. She was a mainstream character who appealed to the general public. To some that may have been a missed opportunity to push an agenda; to others it was a brilliant way of surviving the backlash of the polarizing 1970s. Mary turned the world on with her smile, and never shut it off. "I'm an experienced woman," Mary Richards once said. "I've been around...Well...all right, I might not've been around, but I've been...nearby."