

Working in the Lear Factory

*Ann Marcus, Virginia Carter, and the Women
of Tandem Productions*

When television writer Ann Marcus proposed writing a memoir about her time working on *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*, she described the project as “the very subjective—but funny (and sometimes painful) story of my experiences as the co-creator and head writer of America’s most talked-about television show.” To illustrate what she had in mind, Marcus recalled a lengthy description of the pressures she faced in resolving the numerous cliffhangers left at the end of the first season. She set up an appointment with Norman Lear, the show’s producer and head of Tandem/TAT Productions, to discuss her concerns about starting the second season. She wrote about her exchange with Lear as follows:

“Norman,” I said, “we’re in terrible trouble. The hiatus is almost over. Production is going to start up in two weeks and we haven’t decided whether the bullet ricocheted off Merle’s belt buckle and shoots Charlie’s ball off or not!” “Annie,” said Norman, pinching my cheeks, “there are six hundred million Chinamen [*sic*] who have never even heard of MARY HARTMAN.” What he was telling me was that the world would survive whether the second season of MARY HARTMAN started or not and that was all well and good, but there were times during the first season of MARY HARTMAN when I damned well didn’t think *I* would survive.¹

Marcus’s anecdote underscores the offbeat qualities for which *Mary Hartman* was famous, as well as the intensive demands of managing the program’s complex story world. It also reveals that, even though Lear is credited for the innovative output for which Tandem was known, women like Marcus were central in cultivating and sustaining the company’s signature style.

While Ann Marcus was working on the second season of *Mary Hartman*, another writer, Paddy Chayefsky, was pondering the state of television. With the

release of *Network* in 1976, for which he wrote the screenplay, Chayefsky expressed, both in his script and in publicity for the film, concerns about the growing alienation of the professional and creative classes. Rather than finding satisfaction in work itself, people had “become involved in the product of the work” and gauged the value of their output through its profitability. To Chayefsky, the television industry exemplified the worst of this phenomenon. In its unrelenting drive to create simply “another merchandising situation,” television created intense anxiety in its workers and drove them to the place where they would “kill for ratings.”²

At this point in his career, Chayefsky had a long-standing relationship with television, starting with his work in early live dramas. In 1957, Chayefsky, heralded as “America’s leading television playwright,” characterized the conditions of television work as fulfilling. “I enjoy writing for television a good deal for personal reasons,” said Chayefsky, who praised his employer, *The Philco-Goodyear Playhouse* (NBC, 1951–57), for allowing him to “write as well as I care to.” Unlike the stage, which proved “too weighty,” and film, which proved “too intense,” television was the perfect medium for Chayefsky to deal with “mundane problems and all their obscured ramifications” and to “dispose our new insights into ourselves.”³

By the 1970s, Chayefsky’s estimation of television had changed. In 1973, he tried to sell to NBC a show about the “contemporary thing,” of “people whose work is so damned dull, so unrewarding, that it becomes a major trauma in their lives.” The network passed on the project. Their decision, in Chayefsky’s estimation, signaled how restrictive television had become since its halcyon days. Television’s drive for profitability made it a medium that dared not deliver meaningful content to its viewers. Therefore, it was doubly flawed: because of profit motives, it created “damned dull” and “unrewarding” conditions for its own workers, and because of these same motives it would not air content that realistically represented the problems of labor experienced by viewers.⁴ When asked who could be an antidote for the industry’s problems, Chayefsky named Norman Lear.⁵ Yet for all of Lear’s visionary creativity and boldness, Chayefsky predicted that Lear would ultimately be corrupted by television once he had to chase ratings. Chayefsky believed that male creatives suffered in their exposure to a corrupted television industry, a notion that informed his failed television project and *Network*, the film it would eventually become.

Marcus’s and Chayefsky’s differing accounts about television and the conditions of its making illustrate larger issues that emerged in the television industry during the 1970s. Chayefsky hails Lear as the savior of the industry and laments the downfall of male ingenuity and integrity that comes with a new type of television. In contrast, Marcus’s involvement in an innovative program challenges ideas about Lear’s single-handed influence over television. Marcus also underscores the difficult labor of crafting the complex television that Chayefsky decided was the antidote to mindless, ratings-driven television. Yet this content was unapologetically melodramatic, serialized, and sourced in soap opera conventions, all of which bore marks of the

popular, a supposed threat to the integrity of television and male creatives. If indeed television produced at Tandem saved the industry, then women's culture, knowledge, stories, and energies played a crucial part in that salvation. By recentering women who were occluded in the many assessments of Lear's genius, this chapter provides a richer, more precise history of "relevant" television of the 1970s and challenges opinions that hold the influence of women and feminized television genres responsible for television's downfall.

MARY HARTMAN UNSETTLES TELEVISION

Tandem Productions functioned as one of the most politically aware and successful independent production companies in the 1970s. The company challenged fundamental ideas of how the television industry worked, which audiences mattered and what would appeal to them, and who should be responsible for creating television content. Its programs, including *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971–79), *Maude* (CBS, 1972–78), *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972–77), and *Good Times* (CBS, 1974–79), "tend toward legendary status," as they ushered in "all manner of controversial subjects to prime-time entertainment television."⁶ Airing Tandem's shows helped CBS achieve a desired "turn to relevance," a commonly accepted narrative about television's interest in programming that, in Todd Gitlin's description, skewed "young, urban, and more 'realistic.'"⁷

Tandem was famous for contending with hot-button issues of race articulated through aesthetic and narrative realism. This topic matter and style, as Kirsten Marthe Lentz notes, stood in contrast to the gender concerns and "quality" style of MTM Enterprises, the other leading independent production company of the era, who was responsible for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–77).⁸ Although it was not known for exploring gender in the way that MTM was, Tandem nonetheless was concerned with changing gender norms. Women who worked at Tandem played important roles in expressing those concerns. They used their political awareness, skills developed in genre-specific productions of "women's television," and knowledge of women's experiences to enrich the company's "relevance." They also shaped the company's political awareness and its production cultures according to feminist priorities. Their contributions therefore broaden Tandem's cultural impact beyond questions of race and reorient focus from Lear as an individual, visionary auteur wholly responsible for Tandem's output.

Arguably, no Tandem program demonstrates the centrality of women both in subject matter and in its production more than *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. The show featured Mary Hartman, a housewife who lived in Fernwood, Ohio, amid a bizarre set of sexual, economic, and psychological circumstances. It employed the melodramatic conventions of daytime soap operas but magnified the tone and content of the genre to politicized effect. Mary's obsessive investment in her home and her inability to distinguish between the fictions presented to her

on television and the real world around her expressed the psychological state of women who felt trapped in the role of wife, mother, and homemaker. The program not only critiqued the capitalist underpinnings of domesticity—from women’s unpaid labor in the home to the unrelenting consumerist address to women—but did so through storylines that were considered taboo by television.

The story of a discontented, disturbed housewife facing problems that ranged from waxy yellow buildup on the kitchen floor to serial killers to her husband’s erectile dysfunction made selling the program in conventional ways difficult. Lear’s success in getting *Mary Hartman* to air bolstered his reputation as a change-maker and enabled him to challenge network television’s core business practices, narrow scope of representation, and unassailable programming power. After failing repeatedly to sell *Mary Hartman* to the networks, Lear invited independent station owners to his house for an evening meal and then passionately pitched the show. As the story goes, one brave station owner stood up, moved by the power of Lear’s plea and the promise of the show, and pledged his support by buying a twelve-program contract. The rest of the crowd quickly followed suit. Lear’s strategy for launching *Mary Hartman* prompted reports that Lear would deliver a “blow” to the networks and would have a “revolutionary impact on the way the TV industry works.”⁹ Lear’s strategy bypassed the networks, who were cast as a paternalistic force similar to the ones that constrained Mary herself. With their nearly monopolistic control over programming and their “play-it-safe approach,” the networks dictated what America “sees—and doesn’t see” and kept viewers from experiencing challenging and controversial content.¹⁰ Lear, along with the Writers Guild, Directors Guild, Screen Actors Guild, and other producers and production companies, had already brought a \$10 million lawsuit against the networks’ “Family Viewing Hour,” a 1975 amendment to the National Association of Broadcasters’ Television Code that restricted “programming unsuitable for the entire family” from airing between 7:00 and 9:00 p.m.¹¹

Once it was on the air, *Mary Hartman* successfully competed with television news. The program offered audiences melodramatic but nonetheless newsworthy material as well as a forthrightness that, to many, conventional newscasting lacked. It ran opposite the eleven o’clock news in many markets and, according to Elizabeth Ewen and Stuart Ewen, encouraged people to relinquish their “well-groomed compulsion for the late news” and its “paternalism” embodied in “authoritative figures” like Walter Cronkite, David Brinkley, and Harry Reasoner. Credited with “doing toe-to-toe combat” with Cronkite, “the father authority of the late-night news,” *Mary Hartman* used its hyperbolic news reports to comment on the absurdity of gender norms and sexual mores, the seductions of commercial culture, and television’s relationship to capitalism, something that network news failed to deliver to viewers.¹²

Mary Hartman drew viewers away from the late-night news and “occasionally outrate[d] at least one of the competing news shows” in the all-important urban

areas of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.¹³ In an effort to compete, a Los Angeles station developed its own “news spoof” program, *MetroNews MetroNews*, a “bizarre half-hour of soft-core items about nudity, prostitution and vasectomies.”¹⁴ With such an effect, *Mary Hartman* was cause for concern for the mainstream news establishment. In a *60 Minutes* interview, Mike Wallace told Louise Lasser that the show was “driving news broadcasts off the air,” to which Lasser blithely responded, “I know, isn’t it wonderful?”¹⁵ In a climate of growing skepticism about cultural institutions and detached patriarchal figures, the dramatic and affective expressions of *Mary Hartman* provided an important alternative to the traditions of network television news.

Controversial topics were the hallmark of *Mary Hartman*, which earned it both plaudits and criticism. Although television already dealt in sex and violence, particularly in daytime soaps and local news, *Mary Hartman*’s scheduling and tone differentiated it from these programs. *Vogue* argued that, unlike its daytime counterpart, the “hip” nighttime soap was “different” because of its “stylized” reality, which made it “more real than realism, more like life.”¹⁶ Others were not as amenable to the program’s frank sexuality. When a Cleveland station programmed *Mary Hartman* at 7:30 p.m., protests threatened to take the program off the air. The city was positioned in the top-ten Nielsen market, and the station was a CBS affiliate, so Lear took action. He met, via satellite, with a panel constituted of a city council member, a member of the clergy, a television critic from the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, a member of a citizens’ group, and the head of an area PTA. He defended the early evening scheduling of the program by characterizing the objectionable content of *Mary Hartman* as relatively tame compared to its competition, the five o’clock and six o’clock news. Lear argued, “If your news is like our news in Los Angeles and other news shows around the country—local news especially—it starts with any homicide that happens to be in the news, any rape, any fire, arson, any kind of violence you can manage.” The PTA member responded by saying, “That’s not as real as *Mary Hartman*.” Lear recalls his “stunned” reaction to this assessment: “She didn’t feel that all that news, as violent as it was, was as real as two women in bed for a moment on *Mary Hartman*.”¹⁷

In a 1976 issue of *Socialist Revolution*, Barbara Ehrenreich noted the political impact of *Mary Hartman*’s story structure. “We jolt from *Mary* musing about death to brisk homemakers competing in a paper towel wet-strength contest,” she wrote. “The contradiction is overpowering. Maybe the Waltons can sell granola, or *Mary Tyler Moore* can sell pantyhose, but how can *Mary Hartman* sell anything?”¹⁸ In its fractured and multiple storylines and characters, *Mary Hartman* deployed the narrative strategies of soap operas that enculturated women as domestic consumer-laborers in order to comment on these conditions.¹⁹ As it moved serialized melodrama from a daytime schedule and the associated viewership of those who labored inside the home, *Mary Hartman* attracted an audience that included women who worked outside the home. *Ms.* writer Stephanie



FIGURE 10. *Ms.* authorizes feminist identification with *Mary Hartman*, *Mary Hartman* on its May 1976 cover. (Photofest)

Harrington argued that the melodramatic terms of the soap opera always held appeal to a broader audience and were “not peculiar to an innately feminine sentimentality.”²⁰ Rather, *Mary Hartman* viewers may have always been attracted to soap operas but “all weren’t home at the right time for the daily sudsing.”²¹ *Mary Hartman* challenged prevailing ideas about television audiences and dayparting, or the organization of programs according to the time of day in a broadcaster’s schedule. The show’s success revealed that the television industry’s assumptions about who watched what and why formulated and constrained, rather than reflected, audience identification and pleasures.

The long-dismissed genre of the soap opera, rearticulated in *Mary Hartman*, appealed to sought-after viewers across gender, regional, and class demographics. The show assured stations of a “rabid cult following among the trendy” across the nation and, in particular, the most desirable from “Manhattan high-rises to the Hollywood hills.”²² *Ms.* reported that, “on the authority of an international representative of the United Auto Workers,” when *Mary Hartman* began airing, “the hottest topics of conversation among the men on the assembly line were Daniel Patrick Moynihan and ‘Mary Hartman.’”²³ San Francisco’s Commission on the Status and Rights of Women adjourned its meetings by 10:30 p.m. so as not to conflict with the program’s 11:00 p.m. airtime. Viewer mail to local stations confirmed the show’s outreach to women who were alienated from television’s conventional representations of gender. “I’ve never been able to sit through a soap opera before,” asserted one woman, “and I’ve never written to any TV station, but your show is the BEST show of any kind I’ve seen made for TV in years! Keep up the great scripts.”²⁴ “This is my first letter to a t.v. station,” wrote another, “but I had to write to let you know how much I enjoy Mary Hartman. I’m an Oakland school teacher, a 33-year-old single woman and I spend every evening watching MH MH before I go to sleep. My friends all do the same. It’s a great show. I am involved in the women’s movement and theater and from that point of view I want to say ‘right on!’”²⁵ A woman who watched every night with her husband declared, “I don’t follow any of the daytime serials, but I have become addicted to Mary Hartman.”²⁶ “I have never watched daytime TV from 9:00 a.m. to 6:30 even though I am home all day,” another woman wrote. “I can’t stand either soap operas or games shows. Then last week I found Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman. I think it is a soap opera spoof and the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”²⁷

WOMEN AS THE “DRUNKEN LENS MAKERS” OF MARY HARTMAN, MARY HARTMAN

Mary Hartman, *Mary Hartman* pushed the boundaries of television’s conventions to such a degree that it disturbed even Lear’s own employees. In a 1976 profile of Lear on *60 Minutes*, Mike Wallace described *Mary Hartman*, the “sleeper hit of the television season,” as “slow-moving, some say soporific,” and listed the topics the show “deals with, satirically we are assured”: “mass murder, exhibitionism,

FIGURE 11.
Norman Lear looks
on while Sally
Struthers saves
Carroll O'Connor
from an uncomfort-
able discussion
about *Mary
Hartman, Mary
Hartman*.
60 Minutes, CBS,
April 11, 1976.



impotence, venereal disease, and the yellow waxy buildup on Mary's kitchen floors." When Wallace asked Carroll O'Connor, who played Archie Bunker, "What do you think of *Mary Hartman*?" O'Connor talked over the question, ignored it, and continued his thoughts on his ongoing salary negotiations for his work on *All in the Family*. When Wallace came back to the question later, a visibly uncomfortable O'Connor struggled to respond. "Uh, I haven't seen . . . well, I, uh, enjoy it," he stammered. He then asked Wallace, "You're not asking for uh, a, uh, a kind of a, uh, of critical thing . . . ?" Wallace pointedly countered, "I'm asking for a television criticism." At that moment, costar Sally Struthers came to O'Connor's rescue. She instructed Wallace to "ask [O'Connor] again what he thinks of *Mary Hartman*" and then held a "Do Not Disturb" sign up to the camera.²⁸

The hesitancy, equivocation, and stonewalling of the *All in the Family* cast responses indicated wider unease with *Mary Hartman*. Although the pilot was initially scripted for CBS, the network did not pick up the series. CBS's reaction seems surprising, considering that Tandem supplied the network with socially responsive content that was both highly rated and critically acclaimed. By the 1972–73 television season, the network had revamped its image and positioned itself as a formidable ratings winner by using "three sitcom anchors" (*All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and *M*A*S*H* [1972–83]) to contend with "overtly with social issues of the day."²⁹ By the time of *Mary Hartman*'s airing in January 1976, CBS had aired Tandem programs that addressed a host of "controversial" concerns (*All in the Family*, *Good Times*, and *The Jeffersons* [1975–85]) and centered female protagonists who represented changing gender roles and the influence of women's liberation (*Maude* and *One Day at a Time* [1975–84]).

Seemingly, *Mary Hartman* would have complemented CBS's evolving relationship to relevance and, more particularly, would have worked with what Elana Levine describes as the "politicized brand of sexual humor" of its comedies. In the early 1970s, CBS led the way into "new sex-themed territory," and the other

networks soon followed.³⁰ NBC relaxed its standards and practices, and dramas at ABC and NBC featured content involving sexual issues and identities. With depictions of and discussions about sexual dysfunction, exhibitionism, bisexuality, a relationship between two men, gay marriage, and group sex, *Mary Hartman* effectively merged the soap opera with comedy and social commentary that fit in with television's new sexual frankness and experimentation.

Despite what seemed like an ideal product for television at the time, all three networks passed on *Mary Hartman*, and Lear turned to Rhodes Productions—a company that specialized in syndicated programs, including game shows and animation—for distribution.³¹ Publicity generated by Tandem redefined rejection by the networks into a positive value. The press kit for *Mary Hartman* uses the networks' reactions to underscore the program's unprecedented unconventionality: "Regardless of the impressive credentials of Lear (*All in the Family*, *Maude*, *Good Times*) and his superlative writers and cast, all three networks rejected the series on the grounds that it was 'too far out' for their viewers."³² Lear amplified the oddity of the program by describing *Mary Hartman* as "simply taking a look at our life and times through another kind of prism" and followed this innocuous description with a more unsettling one: "Of course the prism may appear to have been fashioned by a drunken lens maker in a darkly wooded German forest."³³ This promotional framework positions Lear, the only named figure involved in the production, as responsible for shepherding a perversely innovative show past the unimaginative gatekeepers of the television industry.

Crediting Lear as the central agent of *Mary Hartman*'s success is tempting and perhaps inevitable. Erin Lee Mock's scholarship on *Mary Hartman* identifies the problems of focusing on individualized creation mythologies, given the collaborative dimensions of television production. Yet Lear is a difficult figure to decenter. Mock maintains that "*Mary Hartman* could only have existed due to the stewardship of Lear, whose prominence and history of genre play prepared him to create this unique program and prepared viewers to accept it."³⁴ Journalistic coverage at the time of *Mary Hartman*'s airing supports this assessment. A *Newsweek* article decreed, "Only Norman Lear has the power—and the chutzpah—to bring such a mind-blowing mélange to television."³⁵ Lear's creative abilities were matched by his talent to generate publicity through his dynamic and self-assured personality, all of which made him a central character in the story not just in *Mary Hartman* but in all of Tandem's productions. In his 2014 autobiography, Lear looms large in his retrospective history of the company's ingenuity and popularity:

The way I experienced the wonder we were caught up in was on a number of red-eye flights from L.A. to New York. I would look down anywhere over America and think it just possible that wherever I saw a light there could be someone, maybe an entire family, I'd helped to make laugh. In my dissociated fashion I marveled at this, but it was nothing compared to what I understand now, that I was the architect of all that.³⁶

Despite the mystification of collective labor through the exceptional individual, other workers—the drunken lens makers who skewed conventional storytelling to tell unsettling truths about contemporary culture—very clearly played critical roles in Tandem’s products.

At the height of his and his company’s success, Lear took care to acknowledge the collective force of workers and to minimize his centrality in Tandem’s operations. Although, given the ways that Lear’s auteur status was advantageous to the company and his career, this move seemed counterintuitive, it was crucial in challenging the reputation of Tandem as “the Lear Factory.” This moniker was used by Wallace in his *60 Minutes* profile of Lear to sum up the company’s intensive productivity and method of content creation. When, in the interview, Lear claimed that television’s commercialism and concerns of retaining advertisers made getting Tandem’s shows to air difficult, Wallace countered by claiming that Lear’s interests were very similar to those of the forces he criticized. With seven shows running concurrently at the time of the interview, Wallace asserted, “the Lear Factory is in the business of improving last year’s profits.” In Wallace’s assessment, the organization of the company mimicked an assembly line workflow, with Lear functioning as “a foreman” who “spots problems and solves them fast, because time is money.”³⁷ While Lear evaded the issue of his drive for profitability, the physical organization of Tandem confirmed a goal of maximizing efficiency. The production of all programs at the time of the *60 Minutes* interview, with the exception of *Mary Hartman*, took place in a single building. This arrangement afforded Lear efficient access to the company’s shows and reinforced the factory concept.

A factory model positions Lear as the central figure who drives the output of the company; all other workers are rendered invisible or envisioned as cogs in the machinery run by Lear as overseer. Lear rejected this conceptualization of his company, and Wallace noted that Lear “hated” to hear Tandem called the Lear Factory. In a rejoinder to Wallace’s characterization, Lear argued, “Each show, as you well observed, is staffed by the best writers, the best producers, the best directors, the best actors, the best in this town.”³⁸ Regardless of Lear’s true feelings about profitability, in order to maintain Tandem’s brand Lear needed to foreground the creativity, individual perspectives, and exceptional skills of each of the company’s workers. With such qualities, the company’s workforce positioned Tandem as a unique entity within the commercial television industry.

Lear’s investment in Tandem’s image as artisanal and collectively driven was doubtless strategic as well as ideological. Lear championed progressive movements through his own celebrity and the programming his company produced, and his sense of self and public persona were clearly grounded in “liberal” politics. Therefore, his valuation of workers aligned with his political sensibilities and commitment to innovative television production. But it also made good business sense. Relying on its workers for their unique insights and talents helped Tandem respond to changing cultural norms and enriched the company. This was particularly

true of women workers at Tandem. They brought with them important points of view about gender, professional capabilities and work practices atypical for prime-time television production, and personal commitments to projects about women that shaped the company, enriched its product, and fostered its standing as a maverick force in the industry.

Mary Hartman was notable for the number of women involved in its production. In its first season alone, the show employed women as producer (Viva Knight), two out of four directors (Joan Darling and Harlene Kim Friedman), three out of seven writers (Ann Marcus, Peggy Goldman, and Lynn Phillips), one out of two program consultants (Elizabeth Haley), two out of four creators (Gail Parent and Ann Marcus), both of the costume designers (Rita Riggs and Sandra Baker), the casting director (Jane Murray), the production assistant (Susan Harris), and the director of publicity (Barbara Brogliatti). With a cast that featured Louise Lasser as protagonist Mary Hartman, the “project was further enhanced” with Joan Darling as a director.³⁹

When publicity was not focused on lauding Lear as the guiding force of the production, it highlighted the accomplishments of these women and, in doing so, touted Tandem as a company that offered women remarkable opportunities for advancement. The press kit for *Mary Hartman* included biographical information on producer Viva Knight that traced her journey from North Texas University to California. Along the way, she had worked as a secretary while taking courses in television production, and then had taken jobs as a student talent coordinator for a local television show, an assistant to the producer for a local public affairs program, and a script secretary for a network series. Her success “prove[d] that a woman’s place is anywhere she has the desire and initiative for it to be.”⁴⁰

The story of Knight’s career at Tandem countered concerns that the hiring boom for women in television in the early to mid-seventies was merely, as the 1977 Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights described it, “window dressing on the set.”⁴¹ When Knight came to the company in 1973, she rose rapidly through its ranks, and her talents were recognized even when she was working in a traditionally feminized and undervalued position. Knight started out at Tandem as a secretary for *Good Times* producer Allan Manings and was promoted to associate producer of the show within six months.⁴² When the show went on hiatus, she served as the associate producer for Lear’s pilots, one of which was *Mary Hartman*. Knight’s impressive “performance” on the job, along with a producer’s unexpected leave, prompted Lear to “break precedence” and make Knight—who was not a writer, as would be expected background for such a promotion—a producer for the show. Her entire trajectory from secretary to producer at Tandem took “some two years and two months.”⁴³

In an interview with *Ms.*, Ann Marcus confirmed how her personal background shaped her vision for *Mary*; it was based in her own “sense of the everyday absurd, based on years of housewifely domesticity.”⁴⁴ Although Marcus shepherded the

program through its complex development across two seasons and 195 episodes and is named as one of the show's creators, she credited other women with bringing the titular character and her gender complaints to life. She acknowledged Gail Parent as the originator of the characterizations of Mary and her family, initial ideas that Marcus used to build a fully formulated story. Lear wanted to make a "funny soap opera," and from that guidance alone Parent worked "solo for a long time" as a "first creator" to produce a show bible that, in her description, was "more than a treatment." Whereas a treatment would typically run ten pages and cover what a show was "going to be about," the bible, in comparison, "actually took you a little more into a season" and was "about what could happen."⁴⁵ Although Parent was not directly involved in Marcus's work on the show—she was working on another project by the time the show moved into production—and was "not there on a day-to-day basis," Marcus honored Parent's contribution to the development of *Mary Hartman's* story world.⁴⁶ Parent also inspired Lear to cast Louise Lasser as Mary Hartman, as both women had a "very slow way of talking" and Lear wanted to bring that aspect to screen.⁴⁷ Marcus also credited Louise Lasser as the other primary influence on the character. Lasser "became Mary Hartman" and, in this transformation, "created that crazy little girl look . . . puffy little housedress and slow way of talking."⁴⁸

Lear himself recognized the influence women had on *Mary Hartman*. The show "became an amalgam of what [he] wished to do and of the great gifts that Louise Lasser as an actress brought to it and that Joan Darling brought to it." Lear went on to argue that one could not "separate" the contributions these women made: "'Mary Hartman' would not have been the same 'Mary Hartman' had another actress played the character, and it probably would not have been the same if another director had directed it. All of those components were important."⁴⁹

Acknowledging the collaborative nature of a television show's creation answers back to the rise of auteurism that was taking hold of Hollywood and film criticism, both academic and journalistic, during the 1970s. Television was following a similar path, searching for the singular authoring figure that would redeem it from the commercial morass of the industry. In 1977, Horace Newcomb named Lear as the "most prominent of the 'self-conscious' producers, a type of television worker that brought added value to productions."⁵⁰ Their personal vision, Newcomb argued, made it possible to "suddenly cut through the massive anonymity of television."⁵¹ In centering women in American film of the 1970s, Aaron Hunter and Martha Shearer identify the "critical construct" that is New Hollywood and the ways that the "academic cult of the auteurist New Hollywood" "only replicates and reinforces the industry's own exclusions."⁵² Centering women in television places similar pressure on notions of authorship and how texts identified as key to the era of "relevant" television in the 1970s were produced. The women involved in making *Mary Hartman* merged their individual creative visions and acknowledged as much, thereby accurately and

ethically reflecting the shared labor of television. Their testimony about their communal creativity also calls into question Lear as the primary creator of *Mary Hartman* and the notion of the “self-conscious producer” as television’s analogue to New Hollywood’s auteur.

Women including and beyond Parent, Lasser, and Marcus put their talents and labor toward creating a “prototypical” 1970s housewife who, in Marcus’s words, “never felt she was living up to her full potential and didn’t know what her potential was.”⁵³ The impact these women had on the program surpassed their job titles. Lasser credited both the director and the costume designer as key contributors to the character of *Mary Hartman*. The actor described Darling as a “director that cast everything, and it was her vision of the show that got shot, and she was the one that was like an acting teacher, so we were very dependent on her.”⁵⁴ The genesis of *Mary*’s look came with the unusual intervention of costume designer Rita Riggs. After consulting with Lasser about the types of colors she liked, Riggs told Lasser, “I’d like to make a costume for you” —a unique offering at the time because, according to Lasser, “no one in those shows had that kind of a separate costume before.”⁵⁵ With this “brilliant costume to take through everything,” Lasser and the women who worked on her hair “all sort of nursed [*Mary*] along.”⁵⁶

ANN MARCUS AND THE FEMINIST-HELMED WRITERS’ ROOM

Ann Marcus’s expertise as a soap opera writer allowed her to actualize *Mary Hartman*. The program needed to both satirize the conventions of the soap opera and “have enough of a storyline going for it, so that it would attract people on that level, too.” When she interviewed for the job, Marcus was working on *Search for Tomorrow* (CBS, 1951–82; NBC, 1982–86) and understood very well the work demands of soap opera writing. Marcus “didn’t have a reputation as a top comedy writer” but won the job as head writer for *Mary Hartman* over “a lot of male top comedy writers at that time” who interviewed for this highly coveted position. None of them could capture the complexity of the storylines and tone of the show. Marcus, however, knew how to “keep the story going” with a storyline, “a lot of characters,” and intermingled stories. Such work was not just rarefied but onerous. As Marcus said of the work, “It’s difficult. It’s hard. It’s tricky.” Knowing how to keep up the pace of producing a daily program was something Marcus brought to the production. She maintained focus and efficiency in the writers’ room and moved conversations to larger-picture issues when others in writing meetings were mired in smaller details. The “chore” of working on a serial and the “hard, hard work turning out five scripts a week” was something, again, that Marcus knew well.⁵⁷

As *Mary Hartman*’s head writer, Marcus took responsibility for story structure in the development of scripts and often reminded the writing staff and Lear

about the structural elements that the serial form required. Given her background in soaps, Marcus was able to prioritize story arcs, economy in reaching climatic moments, and believability in the midst of heightened drama. In one meeting, the writers struggled to find a satisfying end to an episode that involved a dramatic death of a character and the ongoing decline of Mary's marriage. They debated the consequences of two choices: a discussion of a funeral or a scene with Mary in her kitchen. The argument for the former was the alleviation of work for Lasser, who already had two full scenes, or half of the episode, in which to act. Anything additional would be "a nightmare to handle." Marcus countered with a bid to end with Mary in the kitchen. "All we're trying to do is to give it a kind of flow," Marcus reasoned, "and to remind [viewers] to tune in tomorrow so they'll tune in."⁵⁸ In other meetings, Marcus guided writers on what and how much content would successfully constitute an act, what would help move storylines along, and what would help remind viewers of multiple storylines and conflicts.

While Marcus was capable of fostering a culture of productivity, she also pushed back against pressures on output, particularly when they compromised her own needs and the pacing of work she felt necessary to work through a script. Seemingly without exception, these pressures came from male coworkers. *Mary Hartman* writer Daniel Gregory Browne said to Marcus in a writers' meeting, "I just want to throw you ahead to what Norman had said in terms of the end of this week and where we go from there." Marcus replied, "I haven't finished because I'm getting to there," and proceeded to return to the plot concern that was under discussion.⁵⁹ At a meeting held in late December, before a vacation break, when someone asked Lear when he wanted an outline for a complex storyline, Lear answered, "They're due. The scripts are due. They should be done right before you hit the slopes." Marcus responded, "You're kidding. You have two weeks of scripts."⁶⁰ After this comment, Lear relented and asked for outlines rather than completed scripts before Marcus left for her vacation.

As head writer on *Mary Hartman*, Marcus occupied an authoritative position on the production of the show, something that she worked hard to define and defend. She struggled in the first season of the show to balance "wanting very much to succeed, to be loved and needed and admired," with the difficulties of working in "the midst of all those other people with egos just as big or bigger even than mine." Even as she negotiated her desire for acceptance, Marcus kept sight of the importance of her perspective and held the line on telling stories that reflected women's experiences. When Lear and the show's writers proposed their various storylines, Marcus was "most times the only woman in the meeting."⁶¹ As transcripts for *Mary Hartman*'s writers' meetings demonstrate, Marcus was keen to offer women's perspectives and was able to insist on introducing them to and keeping them in the script.

In a writers' meeting held on December 30, 1975, program consultant Oliver Hayley raised an objection to a storyline involving a pregnancy that ended in a

miscarriage. The ensuing conversation reflects the contested efforts to ground a storyline in realistic and meaningful women's experiences. Hayley began the conversation by asking, "May I just say something, and everyone can get offended? I HATE dead babies. I don't think there is anything funny about dead babies." He then pitched "an outrageous idea" from director Joan Darling. Darling suggested that the pregnancy itself could be a false alarm: and that rather than carrying a fetus, the character would have a misdiagnosed fibroid tumor. Marcus responded to this suggestion by saying, "I think it's hysterical" and proceeded to build, with others in the room, a string of humorous scenarios and lines. Writer Jerry Adelman was not convinced by this plan, arguing that "this is a honest-to-God tragedy." After Hayley further defended the comedic possibilities of the scenario, Lear asked, "How big a mistake is that for a doctor to make?" Someone else in the room argued, "It's a ridiculous mistake." Hayley replied, "It is not. There are a great many women who think that they are pregnant and turn out to have a fibroid tumor."⁶² The fibroid storyline that originated with Darling made it to air on the twenty-fifth episode of season 1 with very few changes made to the idea generated in the writers' meeting. The successful corrective to the original storyline revised a potentially unfunny storyline about "dead babies" to one that highlighted women's experiences with reproductive health care; it also indicates how the writers' room, under Marcus's guidance and with collaborative efforts, protected an idea that originated with another woman on the production team.

The very notion that *Mary Hartman* should explore a woman's dissatisfaction, something that defined the series, was a concept that had to be defended in its early stages of development. In a writers' meeting that took place on January 20, 1976, just two weeks after the inaugural episode aired, Lear outlined the terms of Mary Hartman's unhappiness as a working-class wife and mother. The complications of her situation stemmed from her desire to be something more, which conflicted with other messages women like her received from powerful anti-feminist, anti-ERA forces and television's consumerist address to women. Lear reminded the writers of the class-based dynamics of the character: "We forget all of these commercials that are interrupting our shows are about oven cleaners, etc. and it's because the bulk of America is still wrapped up in those problems and we forget about all those products if we can afford to have somebody do this for us, we forget how much time is spent cleaning ovens, etc." Lear wanted to develop the complexity of Mary's awakening as someone who "lives where she lives, has only as much knowledge as she has," and is therefore "trying to break out and denying at the same time that that's what she's trying to do." Marcus supported this characterization for the efficient way it determined the story world. "Giving her this whole inner thing that you're talking about," she argued, "defines the other characters immediately" because Mary gauged her sense of self through the women in her life who presented various options for emancipation.⁶³

Not everyone in the room was supportive of this framework. Writer Daniel Gregory Browne responded negatively to characterizing Mary's struggle with empowerment. He described the central conflict as "very boring and not very comedic because it's been done to death all over the country." Browne elaborated his misgivings by asserting, "I think it's done on television a great deal. I think that everyone is somewhat into it—I think we're very deep in the women's movement now." After some back-and-forth with others in the room, Browne noted that *Alice* (CBS, 1976–85) was forthcoming and "we don't want to ace Alice out on this." Someone else felt that the frustration of a woman was not unique and that it "doesn't manifest into terribly exciting or funny scenes because it's where every woman is at."⁶⁴ The objections raised in the writers' room suggest the fragility of launching a project that expressed women's disillusionment and connected to themes of the women's movement. Resistance to such a project was based on assumptions that there was a finite capacity for stories about women on television, that they were abundant, and that women's concerns had been more than adequately expressed.

Here Marcus intervened and clarified that those who objected to the idea were mistakenly "taking what Norman is saying as a story line, this is only a subject." When the discussion continued along the same lines, Marcus broke in to move the discussion forward to more productive outcomes. "I don't think we should spend any more time on the philosophical underpinning of *Mary Hartman*," maintained Marcus. "I think we are in agreement on that. We need strong stories that aren't just 3 or 4 scenes. But based on this kind of character we have to build a strong story that has all kinds of things—we have to do wonderful inventive things. I haven't come up with these things yet because we haven't talked about them yet and I hope we can talk about this."⁶⁵ Marcus pushed the meeting past its sticking point. She prioritized her agenda—the development of "inventive" ideas—while asserting consensus on women's liberation as a central issue in the program. This small but effective gesture put an end to the momentum that was gathering against telling the story of a female protagonist's complex relationship to the women's movement.

In writing to Gloria Steinem, whom she credited, along with Simone de Beauvoir, with her feminist consciousness, Marcus described her staunch allegiance to feminism. "I have been in the Movement, spiritually, ever since I was a kid," Marcus informed Steinem.⁶⁶ Marcus's feminism played an important role in shaping *Mary Hartman*, particularly because, from her perspective, "Norman was a chauvinist in 1975."⁶⁷ Although Marcus credits Lear with being a "modern," "open-minded liberal" with an "incredibly inquisitive kind of mind," the timeline of his conversion to feminism is unclear.⁶⁸ Sometime in the 1970s, during his marriage to Frances Lear, whom their daughter Kate Lear described as a "feminist who changed the lives of many women," Norman Lear began to identify as a feminist.⁶⁹ "Frances was very much engaged in the women's movement," Lear recalled, "and I,

as the father of three daughters at that time, was also. So we all became feminists.”⁷⁰ Regardless of when, precisely, Lear identified as a feminist, his gender politics were not fully evolved at the start of his professional relationship with Marcus. If Lear’s chauvinism was intact and on display in the year prior to the premiere of *Mary Hartman* in January 1976, then it follows that Marcus, rather than Lear, was a central agent in articulating feminist sentiment and progressive gender perspectives in the planning of the show.

Marcus’s feminist consciousness helped move script ideas in development away from offensive and regressive content. When one of Mary Hartman’s neighbors, who was a closeted gay man, was outed to Mary by another character, a writer suggested that the line read, “By the way, your neighbor is a fag [*sic*].” Someone else at the meeting suggested that the “best euphemism you can find,” along the lines of “They weren’t really brothers after all, you know,” should be used instead of the homophobic slur. Another writer questioned how anyone would know someone’s secret sexual identity: it was “awfully convenient that a total stranger drops in” and, after a brief encounter, knows that Mary Hartman’s neighbor is “a fag [*sic*],” repeating the slur introduced earlier in the conversation. The writer then suggested that, rather than an uneventful, off-screen encounter that results in the revelation of the neighbor’s sexuality, “there has to be something there to build it up. I think if it’s made funny, it will work.” Without hearing further details, Marcus shut down this potential storyline by saying, “That isn’t funny.”⁷¹ Given the offensive language used in the pitch, it was likely that anything else that would make a gay man’s sexuality signify clearly enough for a stranger to identify it would be equally offensive.

HYSTERIA, MONSTROSITY, AND OTHER GENDERED ANXIETIES ABOUT THE STATE OF TELEVISION

Among its many accomplishments, Tandem introduced feminized genres into prime-time and late-night programming, appealed to women viewers, and acknowledged and accommodated activist concerns. Because of this, the company was credited with ushering in a new era of television that would reverse the industry’s worst offenses. In other contexts, however, these very same changes were ones that alarmed the most vocal of television’s critics at the time. In bemoaning the fate of television, even as they praised Lear, these critics identified women and minorities as the forces that were diluting and perverting television and its artistic potential. Most notably, as discussed at the opening of this chapter, self-professed Lear fan Paddy Chayefsky worried about feminizing forces corrupting even the most visionary creative who worked in the industry in the 1970s.

When he predicted Lear’s corruption by the “monstrous test pattern,” Chayefsky described how “hysterical” Lear would become once he encountered problems with ratings.⁷² In calling on hysteria, or “the symptom, to put it crudely, of being a woman,” to describe the downfall of a fellow television innovator, Chayefsky

signaled anxiety about the state of television in gendered terms.⁷³ Lest it seem that notions of monstrosity and hysteria are casual linguistic formulations, those responsible for the problems with the television industry and its labor demands are writ large in *Network*. As Chayefsky made clear in interviews, television had become a crushing, traumatizing industry that consumed and alienated both its workforce and its audience. To register that trauma, Chayefsky's script for *Network* indicts television's feminized and feminizing forces and lays much of the responsibility for television's degradation at the feet of women. Women in the television workplace humiliate men and dehumanize relationships both professional and personal. Their appetite for ratings introduces sensationalized news and coverage of political fringe organizations formed of, not coincidentally, Black and women radicals.

Network tells the story of Howard Beale, "a mandarin of television, the grand old man of news," in the style of Walter Cronkite; Max Shumacher, the head of the news division and a friend to Howard; and Diana Christensen, a woman who replaces Max and ushers in a new type of television news that displaces both men. When Howard learns that he is going to lose his job because of poor ratings, he tells viewers that he is going to commit suicide on-air. The next night, when he appears on what is to be his final broadcast, he admits that his suicide threat was "madness" and that his thirty-year marriage to a "shill, shrieking fraud" exhausted his capacity for disingenuity. His unhappy personal life and the end of his professional one, both determined by women, meant he "ran out of bullshit." With his newfound maverick reporting style to sustain him, Howard channels "the Truth" from a godlike voice he begins to hear, which results in increased ratings and saves his career. In the ensuing drama, Max is seduced and then discarded by Diana, and Howard becomes capable of heroically "articulating the rage" of Americans.

Christine Chubbuck, a twenty-nine-year-old television news reporter who shot and killed herself during an on-air broadcast on July 15, 1974, serves as a clear referent for Howard Beale.⁷⁴ Journalistic accounts of Chubbuck's death framed it in terms of her despair about her failed heteronormativity and femaleness. *Washington Post* coverage included a bullet-pointed list that ticked off Chubbuck's problems so numerous and obvious that they seemingly did not require elaboration. This list related Chubbuck's "sexual status" as a "spinster" and explained Chubbuck's distress, which ultimately led to her suicide, as caused by her self-identified virginity, her failure at dating, the removal of one of her ovaries, and a coworker's rejection of her romantic overture.⁷⁵

Chubbuck's suicidality, however, may have had less to do with despair over her gender transgressions and failures than with a workplace in which her self-assurance and success on the job threatened her male coworkers. One of these coworkers described Chubbuck as "a liberated woman, a pain in the ass, not very attractive, almost manly," and conflated her capabilities as a news anchor with perceived gender failures. Chubbuck "was doing a man's job, only doing it better than



FIGURE 12. Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway) as “television incarnate” welcomes Black militancy—in the form of Lauren Hobbs (Marlene Warfield)—to UBS. Christensen’s growing influence as the network’s head of programming signifies the problems of television in the 1970s, according to *Network* (1976).

a man. She was precise and efficient. There was nothing feminine about her.”⁷⁶ Chubbuck’s skill as a news anchor, doing a “man’s job,” functioned as both a professional and personal liability, and her colleagues judged her harshly for it.

In choosing to tell Chubbuck’s story through the figure of an older white man, Chayefsky revises the tragedy of a woman who was beleaguered by misogynistic forces and occludes the realities of sexism and racism in the television workplace. Chayefsky’s retelling of Chubbuck’s story fundamentally alters its ideological framework and expresses anxiety about the growing influence of women and racial minorities over television. Unlike the real-life story of Chubbuck, who faced intense pressure as a woman struggling to succeed in a hostile work environment, *Network*’s male newscaster and male news division president are victimized by a power-hungry female executive, who is identified as “television incarnate.” By the film’s end, a newswoman’s on-air suicide becomes a newsmen’s tragic assassination engineered by a career-obsessed female TV executive and carried out by a Black militant group.

In the world Chayefsky creates, men no longer exert influence over the television industry, much to its detriment. Unlike Howard Beale and his commitment to authenticity, Diana Christensen corrupts truthfulness and chooses spectacle over authenticity. Unlike Max Schumacher and his upholding of news traditions, Diana transforms television news into an outlet for sensationalism. She understands that “TV is show biz and even the news has to have a little showmanship.” This awareness ushers in a new era in television news that conflates entertainment with reality. Newsroom staff pitch stories about Manson cult member and murderer Squeaky Fromme; guerilla fighters in Chad’s Civil War; and kidnapped heiress and member of the Symbionese Liberation

Army (SLA) Patty Hearst. Such a lineup indicates a sea change in what count as newsworthy figures and issues and replaces the traditions of television journalism with stories of racial, ethnic, and gender unrest. The political uprising of African and Middle Eastern peoples and the social disturbance and violence propagated by white women have, with the aid of news media, victimized the “grand old men” of television.

Indicative of her drive to deliver increasingly sensationalized news and her corrupting influence on the industry, Diana produces *The Mao Tse-Tung Hour*, a program based on the Ecumenical Liberation Army (ELA), a group of Black militants who kidnap a rich white female heiress. Diana sees their criminal actions, clearly patterned after the SLA’s kidnapping of Hearst, as “something really sensational.” She hires the ELA to film real footage of their crimes and creates a fictional show based on the footage. The group is eventually hired to assassinate Beale on-air to boost ratings. The series and Diana’s revamped news show reverse the news division’s losing profits and propel the network from a last-place to first-place finisher in ratings. Diana’s success leads her to dream of even-greater perversions of television standards, with plans for a soap opera called *The Dykes*, a “tragic story about a woman who’s in love with her husband’s mistress.” Diana’s projects push the limits of television programming, excise white men from the industry, and hasten television’s focus on marginalized political and cultural groups.

Network was not alone in raising the alarm about the state of television and the terms of its demise. Chayefsky’s anxieties link him to other contemporaneous critics who identified the corruption of television with feminized and racialized forces. In state-of-television assessments that emerged in the mid- to late 1970s, the dehumanizing, degrading, and dangerous forces within television were linked to unwelcomed newcomers who challenged the traditions established by white men. *USA Today* published Robert Balon’s sci-fi article “Prelude to Big Brother? Measuring Broadcast Audiences in the Year 2000,” which expressed fear for the contemporary moment, 1978, through an imagined apocalyptic future. In Balon’s scenario, by the year 2000 the value of demographic audience capture that started in the 1970s has driven the industry to near ruination. Television has become a “junkyard of third-rate shows,” and programming looks like “verbatim reruns of *Police Woman*.” A dystopian culture, decreased human freedoms, and loss of creativity and innovation in television all function as by-products of television’s interest in women viewers and responsiveness to female empowerment, as symbolized by the woman cop drama. “Prelude” predicts that television will utilize extreme technologies to gauge audience responses to its product, going as far as to surgically implant Internal Audio-Visual Meters into viewers’ ears. The meter “instantly and continuously translate[s] all visual and auditory stimuli” to a computer center that compiles audience data made available to the highest bidder.⁷⁷ The viewer’s body, already rendered passive and feminized through its acceptance

of television's stock fare of the policewoman genre, is further objectified and commodified through this new surveillant technology.

Nonfiction accounts of the television industry also raised concerns about the influence of activist groups. A 1975 *Newsweek* article, "Do Minorities Rule?," profiled advocacy groups and the complaints they lodged against offensive television content. By leading off with the question "Who owns TV?," along with its title choice, the article implicitly sounds an alarm about encroachments of "pressure groups from virtually all of America's minorities: blacks, feminists, homosexuals, the elderly, youngsters, ethnics and religious sects of all stripes" on the industry's autonomy and self-governance. Although US television had always belonged to the public, only in the 1970s were people aware of the ramifications of this ownership, according to the article's author, Harry Waters. As a result, "Scores of citizen-protest groups [were] demanding—and often achieving—a pronounced say in what viewers see."⁷⁸

The growing influence of "pressure groups" troubled Waters. He cited how the National Organization for Women (NOW) had won "concessions from Detroit's ABC affiliate to increase women's programing" as a landmark moment that was met with a response by the antifeminist group Happiness of Womanhood, who "promptly filed a license challenge against the station for allegedly surrendering its programming prerogatives under duress." The back-and-forth between activist groups, Waters reported, threatened the creative control and innovation of television creatives. NBC refused to air an episode of *Police Woman*—ironically the very program that signaled the banal, dystopian future in Balon's year 2000 predictions—when "homosexual activists" complained about a storyline that featured murderous lesbians. David Gerber, the show's producer, "fume[d]" at the situation and issued a warning about the perils of activist influence: "We're going to end up with sterilized pap. By trying to please everybody, the networks will please nobody."⁷⁹

As imagined in journalism and film during the 1970s, the influence of women over television, whether as viewers, an influential demographic group, on-screen characters, or industry workers, threatened the well-being of the industry. The anxious defensiveness about television's patriarchal traditions and the influence of activist forces rendered women's expanding roles in television incompatible with fruitful, creative innovation. Vilifying them and perpetuating notions that they were destructive to television was one way to nullify their value. The other was to render them and their contributions invisible and instead elevate men as rarefied individuals who operated beyond the constraints of industry. Ironically, while Lear was credited with refusing and resisting the worst impulses of television—the predominance of least objectionable programming, the need to placate networks, and the privileging of ratings over creativity—in reality, he welcomed and depended upon women and feminized television traditions, the forces that critics identified as the corruption of the industry. Exploring the importance of women

to Tandem and tracing their impact on the company's experimentation and creativity therefore counter the erasure of their contributions and help rectify the disparagement of women's influence over television.

WOMEN WHO WORK: CONTEXTUALIZING EQUAL EMPLOYMENT

Women's employment at Tandem came at a time when the television industry faced new legislation and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policies meant to correct gender discrimination in the workplace. In December 1971, pressured by advocacy groups, including NOW, the FCC revised its equal opportunity employment forms, which indicated the employment of members of minority groups, to include women.⁸⁰ In 1973, the first Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complaints and suits were filed against stations WREC-TV in Memphis and WRC-TV in Washington, D.C.⁸¹ In 1974, the protections created by the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEOA) became federal law. While these actions promised to open the television industry to women and minorities, the resulting protections often fell short of their intended effects. The television industry often tried to skirt or minimize equal opportunity employment measures while appearing to comply with them by manipulating statistics and job categories. And even when data accurately reflected increased numbers of women employed in television, television workplaces often continued to perpetuate inequities and differential treatment for women.

As a group composed of industry women, American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) was aware of the differences between official EEOA reports and actual workplace realities. In 1972, it launched a large-scale, multiyear survey of women's employment. The study was designed to correct FCC findings based on television stations' self-reporting of employment figures, which were often manipulated to protect against FCC interventions. For example, secretarial positions were folded in with male-dominated, higher-level managerial positions in order to suggest changes in women's employment, which, in reality, was static. To "overturn some conceptualizations based on purely numerical quantification," AWRT surveyed individual workers to better account for where women fell in the hierarchy of responsibilities, decision-making processes, and management.⁸² In asking for information directly from the organization's members and others working in the industry, AWRT's approach circumvented statistical adjustments that stations made to mask inequalities in employment practices. These surveys also offered women the opportunity to articulate what it meant to carry out their jobs and to meet the demands of the television workplace as they experienced it.

The issue of equal employment in the 1970s helped bring about significant changes in the relatively conservative AWRT. AWRT had been founded in 1951, when the National Association of Broadcasters disbanded its women's division,

the Association of Women Broadcasters. From the start, AWRT strove to challenge preconceived notions about what a women's organization looked like and how it could best take the concerns of its members seriously. A form letter used to recruit prospective members described the AWRT as "NOT a social organization, or a union, or a bunch of rattle-brained party-going women" but instead as a "very large group of women," "from heads of networks to agency girls," "who have joined together to work to make our industry better."⁸³ This document reflects the basic, defining goals of the organization: to position women as serious-minded professionals, to acknowledge a range of occupational influence and power in the industry, and to reassure women that the organization would advance their professional status and improve the industry.

Historically, the organization was averse to anything they regarded as overt politicization and instead positioned themselves as an educational outlet for professional women.⁸⁴ In its 1967 report to members, AWRT identified its primary value as "the professional knowledge made available" to members.⁸⁵ Although the organization acknowledged that women's professional lives were distinctively defined by gender, it did nothing at this time to acknowledge the presence or usefulness of feminism, even as the women's movement was taking hold in the US. It instead addressed the gendering of work through the work-life balance facing its members. The typical member, according to the AWRT's 1967 report, held "in common with all modern career women" the need to "combine careers with homemaking."⁸⁶ This arguably factual statement was followed by more affective and subjective reassurances that women could retain their domestic roles: "Whether married or single . . . 89.6% maintain a full professional schedule and still find time to run their homes" and "only 6.2% have a full-time household assistant."⁸⁷

The emergence of the EEOA and its uneven enforcement helped motivate AWRT to adopt a more active and more critical role in understandings of gender inequalities and obstacles to women in the workplace. In 1975, Lionel J. Monagas, head of the FCC's Equal Employment Office, maintained that "the former impression of AWRT as complacent, quiet and conservative [was] no longer true."⁸⁸ Once the organization began to focus on how media industries perpetuated gender inequities, their annual reports on members reflected their critical perspectives. By 1978, AWRT was continuing its practice of publishing statistics about the work-life balance of its members but had modified the ways it framed the issue. Its presentation no longer seemed motivated by a need to reassure women that having both was possible and that they would still assume responsibilities over the home. Statistics that reinforced the need and ability to remain a housewife as well as career woman, such as those included in the 1967 annual report, were replaced by different types of statistical findings. Members who operated as the "sole support of a household" constituted over 50 percent of the organization, and, while "many women combine[d] a professional career with managing a household," there was no longer an emphasis on their abilities to manage the household without assistance.⁸⁹

By the late 1970s, AWRT had been charting incidents of discrimination in the workplace long enough that it could track changes in those areas. In 1978 it noted that while the “typical” AWRT member reported to a man on the job, 40 percent of the women polled supervised the work of at least one man, which marked an increase of 10 percent over 1974 findings. In addition to numerical data about women’s place in hierarchical structures, the 1978 report included information about women’s workplace experiences in its “Women on the Job” section. AWRT’s 1973 survey found that 23.6 percent of members “cited sex discrimination as the major obstacle” in the workplace, but between that survey and the 1978 report, 75.8 percent of members had “personally witnessed or experienced an improvement in attitude toward women in their field of work.” By 1978, the “majority” of survey respondents indicated that they had “experienced neither sex favoritism nor sex discrimination on the job, and only 12.2% considered their sex a major deterrent to job advancement.” AWRT believed these findings demonstrated “a change in attitude” within the industry and signaled meaningful improvements. Although hopeful about the progress women were making, the report was careful to identify new challenges for women in the workplace, primarily in the “lack of opportunity” that “impede[d] their progress.”⁹⁰

In her work on equal employment practices during the 1970s, Miranda Banks corrects assumptions about workplace opportunities for women and minorities when these are gauged by statistics alone. She dissects numerical figures and supplements them with experiential evidence from women as they worked on productions. Even when women were employed on television shows that were “comparatively progressive about racial or gender inclusivity (few were both), the experience of women working on the series often involved playing educator to male colleagues about sexism.” When women were not in positions of authority on a production or in a company, their efforts at education generally had no measurable effect. For instance, when writer Treva Silverman worked on *Mary Tyler Moore* and called attention to sexism in a script, “the head writers were unresponsive.” Even in “best case scenarios,” Banks argues, “producers responded well to criticism and made adjustments—but with virtually all series run by white men, the parameters of inclusivity were still determined by white men.”⁹¹

VIRGINIA CARTER AND FEMINIST OVERSIGHT AT TANDEM

When FCC chair Robert E. Lee addressed the AWRT at their 1975 meeting, he advised them on how best to make real gains in their professions.⁹² Characterized as a “champion” of equal employment, Lee identified the “divide and conquer” strategy the television industry used to “pit women against minorities for jobs” and advocated for “united action” among all marginalized workers.⁹³ Lee especially urged “women in minorities” to seek out high-level jobs as “news directors,

program directors, producers, directors and editorial writers,” where “the real power” in broadcasting was located.⁹⁴ Finally, Lee called out the entire film and television industry, including institutions that operated beyond FCC jurisdiction, to account for racist and sexist employment practices. Television networks, film studios, and production companies alike were responsible for improving the number of women and minorities they employed within and beyond creative jobs, particularly in executive positions that held considerable authority and influence.

In 1973, two years before Lee’s speech, Virginia Carter was hired as an assistant to Norman Lear and as a consultant for feminist guidance and oversight within Tandem. Concerns about women’s role in television motivated Lear to hire Carter. Lear understood that his own production company was not immune from gender inequalities, particularly at its most powerful levels. In a planning meeting for *All That Glitters* (1977), a gender-role reversal satire in which women dominate the executive ranks of multinational corporations, Lear reflected on the persistence of sexism in business, including television. “This company is perhaps as open in that respect as any company I know,” observed Lear, “and yet look around. True, Virginia [Carter] and I have talked about this. . . . The doors have not been opened enough.” Lear speculated that a woman would not ascend to his job “until the doors have been opened long enough, enough women have been able to write long enough, produce long enough, direct long enough. Women are only beginning to direct. They’ve never had the opportunities.”⁹⁵ Lear’s assessment reflects his awareness of structural barriers and sexist traditions that restricted women’s full participation in the industry. In spite of Tandem’s shortcomings, women did possess the all-too-rare ability to control and counsel on certain productions and in specific roles in the company.

Carter was an unlikely hire, in terms of both her job description and her professional background. Her primary purpose at Tandem, according to Lear, was to “establish and maintain equity in our hiring and in our scripts.”⁹⁶ At the time Lear hired her, Carter was a trained physicist working at the Aerospace Corporation. Lear acknowledged the unorthodox decision of hiring a research scientist for a job in the entertainment industry but explained Carter’s worth through her feminist credentials. Lear valued Carter because of “what she could teach [him] and [his] company about the fledgling women’s movement and, in fact, about being a decent human being.”⁹⁷ Given Tandem’s status as an independent production company, which operated outside of FCC regulations, Carter’s hiring, influence, and ascent in the executive ranks there indicates the company’s investment in the types of equal opportunity practices endorsed by Robert E. Lee.

Carter came to Lear’s attention through her relationship with Frances Lear, Norman’s then-wife and the “resident EEOC” in “the Lear household.”⁹⁸ After hearing Carter speak in her capacity as the president of the Los Angeles chapter of NOW, Frances championed Carter as a feminist activist whose credentials and experience would benefit Tandem and urged Carter to meet with her husband.⁹⁹ Carter



FIGURE 13. Frances Lear and Norman Lear in the early 1980s. (Photofest)

agreed to the meeting only as a favor to Frances, who “was a friend at that point because she was so supportive as I went about my business in NOW.”¹⁰⁰ Otherwise, Carter “couldn’t imagine why” she would take the meeting.¹⁰¹ “I was embarrassed about it,” she recalled. “It was a waste of my time.”¹⁰² Carter had no experience in the television industry, to the extent of being unaware of who Norman Lear was. It was only when Carter’s partner, Judith Osmer, told her that Frances’s husband was on the cover of *Time* magazine the week she planned to meet with him that Carter understood the magnitude of the meeting.

Although Carter initially was uninterested in a career in television, the benefits of working at Tandem quickly became clear to her. From her first meeting with Lear, Carter was impressed with Lear’s sensitivity, which suggested a similarly enlightened workplace and a welcome reprieve from the masculinized world of science to which Carter was accustomed. Since Lear knew nothing about physics, and Carter “didn’t know anything about show business whatsoever,” they “fell back on one issue we had in common,” their past encounters with cancer. Carter, a breast cancer survivor, and Lear, who had had a precancerous growth on his face, bonded over their health concerns. “And we sat there, with facing death as our common ground,” Carter remembers, “and we both wept a little. And I had

only known men in engineering and physics-type subjects. I had not known this kind of a man who would cry.” Lear’s emotional intelligence was one of the reasons Carter took the job at Tandem, and the immediate interpersonal, affective bond between Lear and Carter defined their working relationship from that point on. When, in 2019, Carter looked back on her initial impressions of Lear, she stressed how much she valued Lear’s personality. “I never met anybody like Norman,” she said. “I’ve never met anyone like Norman since. Just the most amazing man. A gentle, caring man.”¹⁰³

Carter had faced considerable sexism and pay inequities in her job as a research physicist, and the prospect of appropriate compensation and respect for her labor was another key factor that led her to accept Lear’s job offer. The position granted her several advantages over her previous job. The first was “the kind of decision-making power and respect she had been denied in her scientific work.”¹⁰⁴ The sexism of the scientific community meant that Carter was unlikely to advance in her career there. “I felt discrimination every time I turned around,” Carter recalled. She did not get paid as much as her male colleagues did, and although she followed the same paths they used to get promoted, this “had no impact on [her] position in the company whatsoever.”¹⁰⁵ In comparison, Lear acknowledged the worth of Carter’s labor and expertise in financial terms. When Lear offered her a job, Carter requested around \$25,000, which significantly surpassed the \$18,000 she earned at the Aerospace Corporation. Unfazed, Lear granted her request immediately.

The economic benefits at Tandem continued for Carter after initial salary negotiations. After she had been working at the company for only a few months, Carter received her first end-of-the-year bonus. Unlike her previous employer, which gave employees a turkey, Tandem gave Carter a \$5,000 bonus. The unusual compensation and continued pay raises Carter earned at Tandem signaled the company’s respect for her abilities and demonstrated their commitment to minimizing sexist pay differentials. Carter’s financial security had the added benefit of allowing her freedom and autonomy at work. Once she had accrued enough savings and felt secure enough in her position, Carter realized, “I didn’t have to worry about what I said,” and acted accordingly.¹⁰⁶

What Carter had to say was deeply informed by her feminist activism, which was what had attracted Lear to her in the first place. With no previous experience in the television industry, the former president of the Los Angeles chapter of NOW and high-profile ERA advocate explained her unorthodox skills as a worker in this way: “I understood that the only reason possible to explain my presence in television was my expertise in Women’s Liberation. I knew I could be very productive with this focus, supplying this deficiency.” Carter’s activism proved a pragmatic asset as much as an ideological one. Her work within the women’s movement lent her translatable skills for her new job. Carter felt that “the way things work in show business is exactly the way they work if you are the president of a local chapter of the National Organization for Women and you’re trying to run the Board. The

financial stakes are just a whole lot higher. Being president of NOW, I learned a whole lot of stuff, especially about group dynamics.”¹⁰⁷

Famed for representing topics previously considered taboo in the industry, Tandem attracted considerable attention from political groups. Rather than skirt controversial topics to avoid protest, Tandem used “clashes” with groups to reflect more “realistic” concerns in their programming.¹⁰⁸ Described as the person Lear hired to do “nothing but negotiate with the pressure groups,” Carter understood input from activists as advantageous for the production process: “We do better story lines when we hear what people are caring about.”¹⁰⁹ Tandem provided “advance screenings of his more sensitive episodes” for activists, whose feedback was “discussed in consciousness-raising sessions among the show’s writers.”¹¹⁰ Carter’s abilities to bridge the needs of the public and the demands of production reflected well on Tandem and resulted in praise from activists who sought to reform television. For example, unhappy with depictions of a same-sex couple on *Hot L Baltimore* (ABC, 1975), the National Gay Task Force met with Carter. The Task Force commended the resulting adjustments, which made the couple “more loving and less given to role-playing,” something they attributed to Carter’s decision-making authority at Tandem.¹¹¹

It is important to note that not every group was equally pleased, particularly when it came to matters of race. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) protested *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* for “stereotyping black matriarchs and emasculating their husbands.”¹¹² Lear responded by producing three shows written by CORE-approved writers. Even with this concession, certain members of the group remained critical: “Gene Garvin, the chairman of CORE’s Los Angeles chapter, still calls Lear ‘the father of tokenism,’” and CORE’s western regional director, Charles Cook, described Lear’s comedic approach as “some white person’s idea of how black people live.”¹¹³ When Garvin frankly called out Lear as being dishonest—saying that he had “lied”—when making an earlier promise in November 1977 to hire more Black production workers, Carter managed the conflict in the press.¹¹⁴ She characterized a second, January 1978 meeting between CORE and Lear as “affable” and anticipated that she and Lear and “others in the company will attempt to continue a dialog with these interesting and passionate people.”¹¹⁵

Carter’s job included educating Lear on issues he did not yet understand and people he did not yet know. Using firsthand encounters and interviews, Carter gathered information from members of marginalized groups and created reports for Lear to read or brought people to Lear’s office so he could meet and talk with them himself. When he planned for storylines in *All That Glitters*, he asked Carter to assemble members of the LGBTQ communities in the area. Carter brought gay men, lesbians, and a trans man to Lear’s office, which resulted in a meeting where Lear knowingly met a transgender person for the first time in his life. In exposing Lear to experiences and perspectives of people he might not otherwise easily

come into contact with, Carter helped expand program content to include sexual minorities, presumably—but arguably not always successfully—from an informed perspective. Characters and storylines, which Lear would have had to approve, grew from stand-alone episodes about gay men (*All in the Family*'s “Judging Books by Covers,” aired on February 9, 1971) to recurring gay characters (Gordan and George, a couple on *Hot L Baltimore*) and the first recurring transgender character on television (Linda Murkland on *All That Glitters*). Personal interactions were critical in Lear's growing political awareness. Here, too, Carter played an important role. As an out lesbian, Carter was able to “not scare” her interview subjects and acted as an effective conduit between Lear and LGBTQ communities. Lear was “comfortable” with Carter's relationship with her partner, which helped pave the way for their discussions about sexuality. Carter remembers this part of her job as “easy and fun” because of the respect Lear showed her and her experiential authority and the ways that, in turn, that experiential authority played a central role in her job.¹¹⁶

When *Hot L Baltimore* featured two gay men as characters, Carter screened the content for twenty-five “major representatives of the gay communities” in Los Angeles and sixty-five in New York City, including press. In spite of the “heated,” “intense,” and “lengthy” discussion that ensued, Carter reported to the series' writers and to Lear that “it all came to a clear consensus that the show is a major step toward improving the image of gays on television” and that she had been “asked to say thank you to you. . . . For your information, you are appreciated.” Carter's understanding of how gay relationships should be depicted on television was based on her earlier interventions on *Mary Hartman*. She conducted research and proposed how the show's writers should consider their treatment of two men who had moved to town, were closeted, but were contemplating coming out and getting married. Her memo outlined three significant concerns: a stereotypical “dominant vs. passive” dynamic between men in a relationship; attempts to explain why a character would be gay, as “there is no real evidence about what made ‘gayness’”; and the absence of physical contact between the couple, when “everyone else touched everyone else.”¹¹⁷

Although a considerable part of her job, Carter's work exceeded meetings with activist groups. She “had involvement in essentially all of the shows” at Tandem. She filled in for Lear when he “had an issue that he wanted to confront, and he couldn't” because of the demands of multiple shows; she sat in on meetings and dealt with network censors. In addition to these bureaucratic tasks, Carter also found herself operating in the creative side of the company. At times, she pitched promising story ideas after they had been initially turned down by Lear. When writers came into Carter's office after Lear had rejected one of their stories to express their disappointment, Carter would sometimes recognize the quality of the story and would facilitate its approval. “Once or twice, I would listen and think it was a hell of a good idea. And I'd wait for them to go,” Carter remembers. “And

then I'd go into Norman's office and say, I don't get this, why didn't you buy this? And then I'd give him a pitch but use my words, not theirs. And the next thing you know, my office would be filled with flowers" from the grateful writer.¹¹⁸

Carter not only acted internally within Tandem to get stories to air but also worked with the networks to overcome their resistance to controversial stories. She remembers "Maude's Dilemma," a two-part episode of *Maude* in which Maude gets an abortion, as the content that created the most objections from Program Practices, the networks' in-house censors. To overcome these objections, Carter constructed pragmatic arguments about the realities of abortion and the economics that made Lear's desires worth heeding. Carter describes her meetings with CBS about the episode as follows:

My mission was to tell the truth. Abortions are taking place all over the country. I got statistics on that, as well as I could. And then I would go to the network, and say to Program Practices, "Norman has asked me to come." I had to use Norman's name, because they're making a freaking fortune off his shows. They have to pay attention to what he wants. And he wants to do this because it's part of his policy to do things that are real in society.¹¹⁹

Carter's efforts paid off. CBS aired the episode in November 1972 and rebroadcast it on August 17, 1973. Merely persuading the network to air the program was reason enough to celebrate, but the real feminist impact of "Maude's Dilemma" made Carter's victory particularly significant. Written during Supreme Court deliberations on the *Roe v. Wade* ruling, the episodes were intentionally crafted to persuade audiences to support legalized abortion. The coauthors of the episodes, Susan Harris and Irma Kalish, turned to newspaper articles about women's abortions to ground the story in the real-world concerns of reproductive rights.¹²⁰ The goal of writing such material was, in Harris's perspective, to "have a point of view" and to use television "to raise audience consciousness."¹²¹ According to Kathryn Montgomery, "Maude's Dilemma" played a vital role in making the 1972–73 television season a "critical test year for determining just how far entertainment television could venture into controversial territory."¹²²

Carter maintained her political investments throughout her career at Tandem and was named Entertainment Woman of the Year by the American Civil Liberties Union in 1975.¹²³ She was often frank in her assessment of the industry's and Tandem's shortcomings in employment practices and awareness of marginalized groups. When the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) criticized an episode of *Mary Hartman* for being "libelous to Jews and questionable in taste," Carter arranged for screenings of the objectionable episode and a face-to-face meeting with the organization.¹²⁴ Carter represented her actions in the press as an earnest desire to engage and understand the political stakes that drove the protest and to incorporate these concerns into the company's ethos and education. With this motivation, she strove to create immediate and intimate connections with political activists.¹²⁵ In

response to the ADL, Carter forewent “third party” interventions and arrangements because, as she explained it, “We wanted to hear it in person. We do better shows when we’re smarter.”¹²⁶

At a 1976 National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) conference panel concerning race and television, Carter’s talk was the one that “attracted most of the interest.”¹²⁷ When challenged as to Tandem’s lack of equitable employment practices for Black workers, Carter did little to refute the claim or to defend the rationale behind such practices. She admitted that the television industry was one that had “practiced de facto segregation for a number of years.”¹²⁸ When asked if she thought the industry was improving, Carter responded, “When I’m not in total despair the answer is different than when I’m tired. It’s a subtle blend of yes and no.”¹²⁹ Carter’s forthright appraisal of television’s imperfect political evolution did not harm her career at Tandem. Less than a year after her comments at the NAB conference, Carter was promoted from vice president of public affairs to vice president of creative affairs at Tandem.¹³⁰ Her promotion, which came on the heels of her critical and public assessment at the conference, supports the notion that Lear genuinely valued Carter’s political views and critical awareness and saw them as qualities that enriched his company.

ALL THAT GLITTERS AS MARY HARTMAN, REDUX

Mary Hartman paved the way for greater experimentation at Tandem and offered women who worked there greater opportunities and visibility. *All That Glitters*, the next show Tandem produced after *Mary Hartman*, represented a world where gender roles were inverted: women were the executives at multinational corporations and men were their secretaries; women were wage earners and men were househusbands; and women were confident, driven, and unemotional, while men were sexualized, taken for granted, and unfulfilled. In the initial planning meeting for the program, Lear described it as a “kind of *Executive Suite*, except everything is turned 180-degrees around in terms of male-female, men and women, male-female relationships.”¹³¹ Lear based the original sketch for the women characters on men who worked in the television industry: “There’s a cool and calculating, utterly brilliant Lew Wasserman-type, and the jokey, rotarian Bob Wood-type, and suave, smooth-talking (these are all women) lothario kind of Grant Tinker-type.”¹³² The satirical soap opera style and programming strategies for the show promised, much like *Mary Hartman*, to disrupt traditions of “appropriate” content and programming schedules. A *Variety* headline, “Frontloaded with Sexual Titters, ‘Glitters’ Could Bother Carson,” emphasizes both the industrial and ideological implications of such disruptions.¹³³ Additionally, the show helped women solidify or elevate their status at Tandem. From producing *Mary Hartman*, Viva Knight moved to the producer role on *All That Glitters*, and Stephanie Sills was named executive producer.¹³⁴ Virginia Carter, whose “special interest and responsibilities”

included *Glitters*, rounded out Lear's "top three lieutenants" for the program.¹³⁵ Ann Marcus wrote its initial scripts.

The success of *Mary Hartman* and the ways Lear sold it informed Tandem's approach to marketing *Glitters*. A full-page ad in *Variety* signaled Tandem's independence as a production company with "exclusive distribution" of the program.¹³⁶ According to this promotion, "Norman Lear and 40 stations made television history" with the premiere of *All That Glitters*. Sold to stations at "big prices," *All That Glitters* benefited from the "success of Lear's 'Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman'" and amplified its formula for bypassing networks.¹³⁷ On the heels of *Mary Hartman*, Lear's success was so great that he did not even shoot a pilot, which forced television stations to buy *Glitters* "sight unseen," as many, particularly in top markets, did.¹³⁸ The reported asking price for the show was \$35,000 a week for five shows a week, a deal that was comparable to the asking price for the then-established hit *Mary Hartman*, which cost \$38,000 a week at that time.¹³⁹ The novel, controversial content of both *Glitters* and *Mary Hartman* created unprecedented competition for late-night television. Because of family-friendly viewing hours, many stations carried *Mary Hartman* at 11:00 p.m. to avoid viewer complaints.¹⁴⁰ This placed *Mary Hartman* against the late-night news. When these same stations picked up *Glitters*, they frequently scheduled it directly following *Mary Hartman*, which then put it in competition with *The Tonight Show*, which threatened to create "a lot of trouble for Carson."¹⁴¹

Glitters promised to build on the success of *Mary Hartman* and cement the challenges it posed to the staid traditions of the networks. Conventional wisdom suggested that the show would thrive. The program registered with television insiders and enjoyed a "fast start" in ratings in competitive markets.¹⁴² After an annual meeting of the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE), a "five-day sales bazaar conducted by 192 distributors," *All That Glitters* was among the 113 new syndicated shows that "survived" this "first acid test."¹⁴³ More than merely surviving, it ranked as one of the twenty-one shows in this pool that were "particularly far along in terms of station and/or sponsor interest."¹⁴⁴ Initial reviews were positive, with predictions that the show would "come on strong" and "could become more controversial than 'MH2.'"¹⁴⁵ Another early review described *Glitters* as "ratings gold," with a target audience of "enthusiastic fans" composed of "young married women who liked the dominant women/inferior men theme."¹⁴⁶ Even in its largely negative assessment, *Time* granted that the show was Lear's attempt to "take on his biggest subject: sexual habits and stereotypes."¹⁴⁷

Although all signs pointed to the show's potential, *Glitters* was canceled after only thirteen weeks on the air. While Lear's shows had dealt with issues of sexuality and gender before, *Glitters* was the first to place them at the show's center and to use gender role reversal to do so, which likely had much to do with its demise. The show's basic premise involves female executives who run a successful global corporation and men who work as secretaries and serve as women's sexual playthings. Men are

sexualized, men are cuckolded, men sit at home worrying that their wives no longer take an interest in them, and men gain weight and worry about it. Virginia Carter remembers that the planning of the show, which was a “whole lot of fun,” involved figuring out how to create positions of power for women: “It couldn’t be somebody who played football and got all that money, but it had to be something. We had to work out what these women would be in order to have the power positions. And they would pinch their male secretaries’ butts and things like that.” Lear received hate mail written about *Glitters*, something Carter attributes to the show’s “role reversal.” “It was just so fascinating to see how the public reacted to that,” said Carter. “We couldn’t keep it on the air because it was so unpopular.”¹⁴⁸

“Macho male types will be up against the wall,” predicted *Variety* in its review of *Glitters*. Regarded as “the tv football wife’s revenge,” the show’s efforts to appeal to a “young female demographic” and “large homosexual following via the male secretaries” did little to appeal to heteronormative male viewers.¹⁴⁹ The New York preview bore out this prediction. Of the male critics present, all but one left after the first two episodes and none was present after the third episode, leaving only women in the audience. At its Washington, D.C., gala premiere held at the Kennedy Center, the show was presented to the audience of “glittery people,” where “it became apparent that 90 percent of the laughter came from women.”¹⁵⁰ In spite of his argument that the gender politics of the show had nothing to do with its cancellation, *Time* television critic Gerald Clarke spent a significant amount of his column detailing “the wearying jokes” that relied upon gender role reversals and the sexualization of men in the workplace. “The Globatron secretaries are sleek young men,” wrote Clarke, “and their female bosses can’t take their eyes away from the male derriere, packed into tight pants, as it passes out the door.”¹⁵¹

The show’s overt sexual humor and the novelty of representing objectified men on television dominated reviews of *Glitters* and overshadowed the meaningful gender insights the show offered audiences. At the Washington, D.C., premiere of the show, a male audience member remarked, “I was traumatized” and described how “uncomfortable” he was, to which Lear replied, “That’s terrific.”¹⁵² The same “traumatized” male viewer also demonstrated signs of conversion from unthinking patriarchal privilege, a hoped-for by-product of the show. He asked his female companion, “Is that the way we really are?,” and she responded, “Absolutely.”¹⁵³ Writer Nora Ephron attended the screening and was “knocked out” at the way that women claimed power for themselves and disregarded others if they impeded their striving for success, particularly in their abilities to “click off” men in the middle of their conversation.¹⁵⁴ While the show was by no means universally received by feminists as an unequivocal good, it did warrant some serious consideration as an effective tool for feminist ends. As Lee Novick, vice-chair of the National Women’s Political Caucus, noted, the show, though troubling in its portrayal of women replicating masculinist behaviors once they obtained power, also held potential as a “consciousness-raising vehicle for men.”¹⁵⁵



FIGURE 14. Gender role reversal operates at the heart of *All That Glitters*: executive Christina Stockwood (Lois Nettleton) leaves for work at Globatron Corporation while husband Bert Stockwood (Chuck McCann) keeps house. (Photofest)

Ads placed in industry publications underscored *Glitters*' feminist principles and satirical indictment of sexist workplace culture. These reviews tended to three central themes. The first called upon television's capacity to reformulate the social landscape, with sexism, like other isms, faltering in the face of thought-provoking programming. The *Washington Post* claimed that *Glitters* "could do to sexism what 'Roots' did to racism—show a huge audience the specifics of a whole system of discrimination." Another review anticipated that "*All That Glitters* could do for sexism what *All in the Family* did for bigotry." The second theme attributed distinctively feminist political principles to the show, which then served as a litmus test for sexism. The show promised to "do more to shake up male-female relations than a decade of consciousness-raising." It would "threaten many men, offend some women, and be a breath of refreshing air to the rest," and would serve as "a good test for men and women who are not sure they are emancipated." Finally, a third theme was the claim that the show was "a giant step forward for television" in general and "the most shocking and compelling new show of this up and down television season."¹⁵⁶

Ann Marcus, who helped create the series, pushed to differentiate the show through unconventional genre depictions of women in the workplace. In a planning meeting, Marcus suggested a dramatic opening scene that featured women in roles typically reserved for action films and their heroic male protagonists. "You could almost start with a sort of catastrophe," she proposed. "I don't mean that this is a formula sort of thing for a Norman Lear serial starting, but like a towering inferno kind of thing. Something where there's danger and you see these women in action, and they are decisive, wonderful and whatever."¹⁵⁷ Marcus's suggestion did not make it to script. Instead, the dramatic opening storyline revolves around an underappreciated man, Michael, who cannot convince his high-powered lover, Andrea, to commit to him or even to say she loves him. In despair, he tries to commit suicide but fails when he faints at the sight of his own blood. The female EMT who arrives on the scene to treat him responds to his condition with little sympathy and instead discusses the best way to get bloodstains out of carpets. The callous nature of women in this inverted gender order carries out the central theme as it was originally conceptualized, but it does not deviate from the "formula" of satirical programs in the tradition of other Lear productions, as Marcus hoped it would.

In her correspondence with Gloria Steinem, to whom she sent copies of her scripts for *Glitters* in 1977, Marcus expressed displeasure in the direction the series took. Although she was "not so sure they're any better than what went on the air," Marcus was clear about her feminist "intentions" in writing the scripts. Marcus describes how, after writing the first two episodes of the series, she "cut out," an action that suggests her awareness that the show was not going to reflect the feminist concerns she had articulated in early meetings. As she told Steinem, "Unfortunately the series got stuck in the bedroom and really never got around to dealing with much more."¹⁵⁸ While *Glitters* ultimately proved a disappointment

to Marcus, she persisted in future projects creating television that utilized satire and genre conventions to express feminist ideas.

BEYOND THE FACTORY

When Ann Marcus left Tandem, her work on *Mary Hartman* became a calling card for her abilities to create audacious yet successful programming. She created, with husband Ellis Marcus, *Life and Times of Eddie Roberts (L.A.T.E.R.)*, which aired as a syndicated show in 1980. At this time, Marcus was regarded as the person who could duplicate the success of *Mary Hartman* and “reopen [the] late-night slot first entered by Hartman.” The reputation of *Mary Hartman* and its head writer was so compelling that syndicator Metromedia offered *L.A.T.E.R.* producers a thirteen-week guarantee and sixty-five episodes. Marcus’s “association with *Hartman* was not lost on Columbia or Metromedia,” where executives at both companies “unabashedly refer to the success” of *Hartman* “when discussing what they expect to come from *L.A.T.E.R.*” Ken Page, vice president for executive sales at Columbia Television Pictures, admitted that, in selling *L.A.T.E.R.*, he had “no particular marketing strategy other than to ‘trade off the success of *Mary Hartman*,’” which undoubtedly contributed to the show’s cancellation after its first thirteen-week run.¹⁵⁹

Much as she did *Mary Hartman* and *All That Glitters*, Marcus envisioned *L.A.T.E.R.* as a satirical exploration of gender. Although it “wasn’t as outrageous,” the show shared “some of those elements” with *Mary Hartman*.¹⁶⁰ Marcus described the show as deeply political, taking on “all of the social problems of the day.”¹⁶¹ *L.A.T.E.R.*’s plot line centered on college professor Roberts, whose “sexual problems” resulted in his wife leaving him. At work, he was an object of interest for a female colleague who wanted to use him as a “guinea pig for [her] new male contraceptive drug.”¹⁶² Roberts’s chief rival for tenure at his college was a “female, Latina paraplegic,” and “had all of those things going for her,” but they were nonetheless “good friends,” and his wife had aspirations to be the first female professional baseball player in the country.¹⁶³ Despite its soap operatic elements, Marcus linked it to the realities of her own aspirations. “It had a lot of me in it,” Marcus said in a 2001 interview with the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Foundation. “I would have loved to have been a baseball player, too.”¹⁶⁴

With disappointing ratings, *L.A.T.E.R.* lasted only one season. Critics were divided as to why viewers were not attracted to the program as they were to *Mary Hartman*. While some identified weaknesses in the show’s humor, characterization, and storylines, others suggested that the quality of the show was not to blame. *Variety* critiqued the show for not pushing controversial ideas further but also suggested that television’s conservatism, despite the “supposed greater latitude available to producers of latenight programs,” was responsible.¹⁶⁵ The fickle and fast-moving genre cycle in television, along with the expectations of fast-developing storylines and immediate audience capture, worked against *L.A.T.E.R.* According to the

Hollywood Reporter, *L.A.T.E.R.* was comparable to *Mary Hartman*, but the “exaggerated soap opera approach” had lost the “impact” it had had when it “was a novelty.”¹⁶⁶ *New York Times* reviewer John O’Connor suggested, “*L.A.T.E.R.* needs—and probably deserves—time.”¹⁶⁷ These sympathetic reviews stress the staid politics of late-night programming and the challenges of sustaining experimental television.

Late-night television ultimately did not foster satirical soaps and their social commentary. Instead, it opted to sustain the paternalism of the eleven o’clock news and talk shows. Marcus, however, continued to find expression for gender politics and associated “taboo” subjects through soap operas in daytime and prime time. Before, during, and after her time at Tandem, Marcus wrote for *General Hospital* and *Days of Our Lives*. Despite her success in daytime soaps, Marcus was reluctant to undertake this type of work after having “been to the heights” by working at Tandem and with the success of *Mary Hartman*. Marcus’s reluctance to return to soaps was a matter of labor conditions rather than prestige. She was careful not to “put down” soaps in comparison to the other kind of television work she did and acknowledged that some of “best and hardest writing” in television happened on soaps.¹⁶⁸ But Marcus also acknowledged that she could sustain writing for soaps only for short periods, no more than three years at a time.

Programs like *Mary Hartman* and *L.A.T.E.R.* attest to Marcus’s influence not just over daytime soaps but over prime-time and late-night programming as well. According to Elana Levine, by the early 1970s soap writers had begun to reshape daytime soaps, with complex storylines, more explicit sexual concerns, and troubled gender identities; these elements “innovated the continuing ensemble drama, crucial to TV storytelling writ large for decades to come.”¹⁶⁹ Marcus applied those innovations of daytime soaps directly to prime-time serial dramas when, by the late 1970s, she became the supervising producer for *Knots Landing* (CBS, 1979–93) and *Falcon Crest* (CBS, 1981–90).

Marcus’s impact on television extends to the industry’s working conditions. She was heavily involved in the Writers Guild of America (WGA) as a six-term member of the board of directors; a secretary-treasurer from 1991 to 1993; and a member of numerous committees that dealt with labor exploitation and unfair labor practices, including one on age discrimination and one supporting an animation strike. In 1999, Marcus received the Morgan Cox award for service to the guild.¹⁷⁰ In addition to the Age Discrimination and Animation Strike Fund Committee, Marcus served on committees on blacklisted writers and on freedom of expression and censorship. With firsthand knowledge of the working conditions facing soap writers, Marcus advocated for better labor protections for them. When she ran for reelection to the WGA board of directors in 1990, Marcus argued that the guild needed to heed the “legitimate grievances of daytime writers who suffer first (and probably most)” from writers’ strikes.¹⁷¹ She urged the guild to “investigate and punish scabs who not only keep the Soaps going during strikes” but also kept their jobs after the strikes ended.¹⁷² Marcus also held the WGA accountable

for its lack of respect for daytime TV writers, both in material terms and in organizational culture. Current contract negotiations did not adequately address the conditions those writers faced, and the Guild did not treat daytime writers as “an integral part of the Guild,” which made them feel like “second class members.”¹⁷³

Although Marcus was one of the most visible and most prolific of the women who worked at Tandem, other women benefited from their involvement in feminist-oriented programs at the company. Susan Harris, who wrote for *Maude* and was responsible for “Maude’s Dilemma,” “Maude’s Facelift,” and “Like Mother, Like Daughter,” parlayed her success at Tandem to a considerable career in television, most notably in her work on *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985–92), which garnered her multiple Emmy nominations and a win. She maintained creative control over programs when she became a partner in a production company with Paul Junger Witt and Tony Thomas. One of the company’s productions, *Fay* (NBC, 1975–76), a short-lived situation comedy that Harris wrote and created, extended and enhanced the feminist issues Harris had explored in *Maude*. The ripple effect of working on Tandem’s woman-centered productions extended to the career of Lee Grant, who played the role of Fay. Grant, along with Nessa Hyams, who wrote for *Mary Hartman*, and Gail Parent, who originated the character of Mary Hartman, were part of the AFI’s first Directing Workshop for Women in 1974 and would continue to work in film and television as directors, casting directors, writers, producers, and creative consultants.¹⁷⁴

Although a “series essentially cancelled by NBC before it aired,” *Fay* was tremendously important to Harris and to other women who worked on the show and valued its expression of feminist ideas.¹⁷⁵ *Fay*’s titular protagonist is a recently divorced forty-year-old woman who returns to work at a law firm, resumes dating, and reestablishes her sense of self through personal and professional means. In centering on a newly single, middle-aged woman, the series explored topics of women’s sexuality, economic precarity, and refusals of domesticity and femininity in a capitalist-consumerist system. Throughout all these concerns, *Fay* explicitly referenced women’s liberation. One episode alone, “Not with My Husband You Don’t,” dealt with workplace misogyny, the passage of the ERA, NOW’s political perspective, and the use of “Ms.” as a replacement for “Mrs.” When asked to describe *Fay* in an interview, Lee Grant, who played the role of Fay, prefaced her response by saying, “It was way ahead of its time.”¹⁷⁶ Harris, too, saw *Fay* as a groundbreaking show. She credited Grant with bringing a “different kind of woman” to screen and imbuing Fay with a mode of empowerment that was new to—and ultimately too challenging for—viewing audiences: “You could hardly call Lee Grant or the character she played ‘sweet.’ People were threatened by her acerbity. By contrast, Maude was married, and even though she had a big mouth, Walter, her husband, still prevailed. Maude played so much bigger than life, you didn’t relate to her as being anyone real. She didn’t pretend to be all that real, whereas Fay was. And I think it was too threatening.”¹⁷⁷

While Harris attributed *Fay*’s failure to viewers’ response to the show’s bold representation of women’s empowerment, she also held the network accountable for failing

to provide time for the show to develop and build an audience. Grant attributed the show's cancellation to its airing during the Family Viewing Hour, the FCC policy that held the networks responsible for programming "family-friendly" viewing from 8 to 9 p.m. This time slot spelled disaster for *Fay*, in Grant's estimation. Grant asserted that the show "would have hit the roof" if it had been scheduled more appropriately.¹⁷⁸

Fay's cancellation was so abrupt that when Grant showed up to set one day, she found herself "evicted." The set furniture was unceremoniously dumped in the parking lot, and a stagehand was the person who informed Grant of the show's fate. Grant was scheduled to appear on *The Tonight Show* later that same day to promote the show. Despite the cancellation, *The Tonight Show* encouraged Grant to appear, which she did. During her interview with Johnny Carson, Grant literally "gave the finger" to the "guy who canceled the show." When asked about the repercussions of such an action, she denied that there were any and maintained that the act granted her tremendous relief. Grant described the defiant gesture as cathartic, "so much better" than "pulling over to the side of the road and crying . . . so it was over, over in a very healthy, fun way."¹⁷⁹

Grant's commitment to women's authority and autonomy was evident in her emphatic acknowledgment of Harris's creative control on set. In response to interview questions that suggested a difficult production environment or the influence of male production staff, Grant was careful to correct misperceptions that would detract from Harris's accomplishments. Although Alan Arkin directed the first episode, Lee clearly delineated his contribution only as a director, not as a wide-ranging and influential force in the show. "Susan did all the writing," said Grant. When asked to describe table readings and discuss the level of her input and ability to change content, Grant explained that she was permitted to do anything but did not want or need to because "Susan was a genius. . . . I was just thrilled to have the kind of stuff that she gave me to work with."¹⁸⁰ When asked if scripts were in rewrite until the time they were shot, Grant responded that it never was any problem. By countering assumptions that Harris had failed to create a successful program and a functional workplace, Grant expressed feminist ethics. Most obviously, she supported a female coworker whose reputation was on the line. Grant also emphasized Harris's facilitation of a production environment that fostered cooperation and helped articulate the feminist vision on-screen that both she and Harris shared and collectively built.

DID TANDEM MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR WOMEN IN TELEVISION?

Norman Lear acknowledges the importance of women workers to Tandem's success. From the start of the company, women were part of the picture. Marian Rees began working with Lear and his partner Bud Yorkin in 1955 as an assistant, advanced to associate producer at the founding of Tandem Productions in 1958 with *An Evening with Fred Astaire* (NBC), and worked as associate producer

on pilots for *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son*. In his 2014 autobiography, Lear describes Rees as the “first of a series of women who provided the glue that held things together in the most hectic of times and situations.” In the acknowledgements of the book, Lear asserts, “I’ve never worked on a production where women weren’t ‘the glue that held things together’” and names multiple women who worked in creative and executive roles.¹⁸¹

While Tandem seemed like a haven for women to express their talents and their feminist politics and Lear a champion of women television workers, the company’s investments in progressive gender politics were complicated. Notably, Tandem did not employ women consistently across its productions. In her history of the Screenwriters Guild, Miranda Banks complicates the claims of her interview subjects about their progressive gender politics, Lear included, with statistical data and analysis. According to the WGA’s “Women’s Committee Statistics Report” of November 7, 1974, for “teleplays” written by women that year, Tandem employed women for 4 out of 69 episodes of *All in the Family*, Fox’s *M*A*S*H* employed women to write 1 out of 38 episodes, and CBS/Freeman employed women for .5 (half of a writing team) of 133 episodes of *Hawaii 5-0*.¹⁸² MTM made the strongest showing, employing women to write 50 percent of its *Mary Tyler Moore Show* episodes (25 out of 50).¹⁸³ These statistics reflect the realities of underemployment for women writers and indicate that women, when employed, were more likely to write for programs that featured women and/or feminist sentiment centrally. For instance, women at Tandem wrote 11 out of 37 episodes of *Maude* but 0 out of 49 for *Sanford and Son*.¹⁸⁴ While writing afforded women some inroads into television, depending on subject material, other jobs remained out of reach. Even at companies like Tandem where programming brought women into the writers’ room and Lear credited women as the “glue” that held a production together, a woman employed on a Tandem show, according to Banks, typically “was not leading it on set or in post-production.”¹⁸⁵

As for television’s executive ranks, by the early 1980s the situation for women showed some promising changes. In 1981, *Variety* published “Women Are on the Rise in Television’s Executive Suites,” which included its own survey findings that women occupied “respectable status in the executive and production ranks in tv.” Tandem was one of the companies *Variety* named to support its claim, since, at the time of the survey, the women working at Tandem included Virginia Carter (vice president of creative affairs), Kelly Smith (vice president of business affairs), Pam Fond (assistant treasurer and director of tax), Fern Field (director of development and producer), Frances McConnell (director of public affairs), Molly DeHetre (director of business affairs), and Barbara Bragliatti (vice president of media affairs).¹⁸⁶ The placement of women in the business side of Tandem suggests that the broader company workplace, rather than only its production ranks, afforded a means by which the company addressed employment disparities and utilized women’s skills to forward their own business interests. As the case of

women working at network headquarters discussed in chapter 1 demonstrates, as impressive as executive job titles are, the conditions of those jobs and the day-to-day functioning of the workplace warrant examination to understand more fully what women's gains in television meant.

To claim that Tandem affected wide-sweeping changes for women working in television or that, by the early 1980s, feminism had converted the entire television industry to enlightened, equitable employment and production practices would be an overstatement. For many women, the realities of working in the television industry in the 1980s and beyond meant continued inequality in pay, occupational status, and employment. Working at Tandem, however, did provide the women who worked there opportunities for feminist expression and for placement in its ranks, even if they did not have conventional credentialing. Their previous employment as secretaries, writers for soap operas, and workers in unrelated industries proved less of a barrier and more of an asset to Tandem, as did their feminist perspectives. More expansively, the state of women's employment in television during the 1970s, as illustrated by the responses of the FCC and AWRT and addressed at Tandem, moved multiple organizations and figures in the industry closer to feminist awareness and action. *Variety's* hopeful headline of 1981 suggests the not-inconsequential outcomes of these actions.