

It's (Not) Only a Joke: The Changing Face of Sexist Humor in M*A*S*H

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Abstract: *Sexist humor in TV series enables sexist behaviors, minimizes its inappropriateness and negative effects, and contributes to misogyny existing in society. Audiences consuming television media are exposed to such consequences. Visual media has a massive impact on its viewers; therefore, it must reflect progressive and non-discriminatory values. Creators and producers bear a responsibility in enabling positive change and conversation about sexist humor and behaviors by producing media that eradicates such practices. TV series M*A*S*H (1972-1983) offers a framework for progressive humor. It relied heavily on sexist humor in its earlier seasons for much of the series comedy, featuring humor based on behaviors such as female objectification, misogyny in the workplace, and female characters created through warped sexist stereotypes. However, influenced by growing social change, M*A*S*H was successful in reworking its harmful humor into a productive one. The sexism within the show is transformed to illustrate the absurdity of such behaviors and female characters become more than props for comedic relief, thus allowing for reflection and productive conversation.*

Keywords: M*A*S*H, sexist humor, sitcoms

“That’s what she said...” is a phrase frequently quoted in *The Office*, and it encapsulates the sexist humor still used in popular television. Sexist humor has run rampant since the early days of television and continues to be prevalent in the media we consume today. The abundance of reruns of shows like *The Office*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and *Married with Children* indicates a return to the old and a need to relive the past. Martin Fradley concurs and points out that “rather than heralding a forward-looking ethos, the digital age seems acutely preoccupied with days gone by” (230). This demand for shows of the past, as pointed out by Jake Martin, is largely related to the sense of familiarity and comfort it offers to its viewers. With this return, sexist humor, common in older shows, is reintroduced to a new audience. Authors Marianne LaFrance and Julie A. Woodzicka offer a definition of sexist humor as it: “demeans, insults, stereo-

types, victimizes, and/or objectifies a person on the basis of his or her gender" (qtd. in Woodzicka and Ford 175). When used as a medium for communication, sexist humor desensitizes the viewer from viewing it as a serious issue (qtd. in Ford et al., "Effects of Exposure," 679). Illustrating the dangers of this in our media environment, author Beth Montemurro emphasizes that "television is omnipresent and televised images play a role in shaping societal understanding" (433). Be it a news broadcast or a television show, the scale of these shows' distribution and redistribution awards them a certain amount of credibility, whether it deserves it or not, and holds the power to impact its audience's views and values. The impact, according to Thomas Ford et al. is that "sexist humor expands the bounds of appropriate conduct in the immediate context creating a social norm of tolerance of discrimination against women" ("Effects of Exposure," 678). The wide range of diverse audiences consuming both new and rerun television shows are subject to the negative impacts of sexist humor, and it is the creators' responsibility to eradicate the use of it and facilitate conversation about the topic in society.

Among numerous reruns, there is one that clearly includes sexist humor in its content, but also offers an alternative to that type of humor. The CBS TV series *M*A*S*H* offers a substantive outline of how to successfully transform misogynistic humor into fruitful conversation, which advocates for more equal representation. Vital to the facilitation of this progressive conversation is the show's sexist humor-ridden earlier seasons. Exhibited a mere five minutes into the pilot episode, an example of derogatory sexist humor is displayed: "She came to me once with a sore throat. She didn't mind my examining her tonsils, but she didn't understand why she had to take off her clothes." Airing from 1972-1983, the comedy-drama show is set during the Korean War and focuses on the lives of American doctors and nurses stationed at a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) unit. While featuring serious and thought-provoking topics, the show offers a humorous outlook on the characters' struggles coping with the horrors of war. In its earlier seasons,

it openly depicts sexist humor towards the show's female characters. Physical appearance, body image, and professional success are only a few themes discussed in this paper that are used as the basis of *M*A*S*H*'s humor. James Wittebols notes that mirroring the steadily rising women's rights movement, notable changes regarding the depiction and treatment of women can be observed in the show's later seasons (26). Thus, the show enters a mutually reflective relationship with society, serving as a representation of current events and a vehicle to spread new ideas; the shift in society's values prompted it to depict the female characters as subjects pivotal to the storyline rather than objects of male desire and derogatory sexist humor. *M*A*S*H* shifts its legacy from entertaining comedy to a visual and textual conversation tackling sexism through its humor, thereby offering an exemplary framework of positive change for current television media.

That exemplary framework—where humor becomes a positive force of challenge—directly corresponds to the emergence of second-wave feminism and other movements during the production of the show. Wittebols argues that “*M*A*S*H* is a perfect vehicle for studying the relationship between society and fictional television” (9). During the time *M*A*S*H* was filming, society's attitudes toward women and their rights started shifting significantly, and those everyday life changes would affect the future of the television show. Besides civil rights, environmental, and anti-war movements, the gender revolution was rapidly progressing and gaining support during the show's early years (Wittebols 25-26). Women were openly challenging gender stereotypes and discrimination. Wittebols mentions in his book *Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America*, that even the producer of the show, Larry Gelbart, later acknowledged the fact that “women were treated very poorly in the first few years” (25). Noralee Frankel concisely asserts that “times changed and so did *M*A*S*H*” (68). Though slow and often times still overshadowed by lingering remnants of the earlier seasons' sexist behaviors and humor, a more acceptable and respectful portrayal and treatment of women appears and evolves throughout

the rest of the series' duration, reframing the already existing humor to spearhead this evolution. The following analysis of the show's episodes helps understand this evolution, pinpointing the major issues regarding sexist behavior masked as humor and providing a solid blueprint for sexist shows to utilize in their attempts towards altered, productive humor.

Featuring an array of derogatory humor and the sexualization of women in the workplace, the pilot episode of *M*A*S*H* sets the tone for many later episodes and introduces the show as inherently sexist. To note, the episode reviews are mostly positive and praise *M*A*S*H's* take on the topic of war: "With the canned laughter toned down, I thought the show came off rather well"; "[A] surprisingly well-done retread job"; "[T]hat black or absurd humor performs a legitimate function, in this case pushing personal existence to the limits of absurdity to cope with the absurdity of war" ("Reviews of the Pilot"). Clearly, the above quotes illuminate how humor was used in *M*A*S*H* to take on the horrors of war. However, this positive feedback is largely reflective of the show's audience and current political landscape where sexist behaviors were simply erased from conversation. The show's sexist behaviors are visible through the use of objectifying and patronizing language couched in humor, which, as stated by Michelle Bemiller and Rachel Schneider, clearly draws upon misogynistic preconceived differences between men and women and reflects a patriarchal system which favors one gender over the other (462). Women, throughout the episode, are patronizingly referred to as "baby," "honey," or "darling." Other episodes are similarly littered with sexist name-calling involving demeaning attitudes towards a woman's professional position and respect among co-workers. In the episode "Requiem for a Lightweight," while in the operating room, one of the main characters, Captain Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce, orders a female nurse to refer to him as "Doctor darling" rather than simply "Doctor." Similarly, he and fellow Captain John "Trapper" McIntyre openly undermine female Major Margaret Houlihan's (nicknamed "Hot Lips") authority by referring to her as "Major baby" and refusing to follow her direct orders.

Going hand in hand with this derogatory, undermining language, the women of *M*A*S*H* are further sexualized through entire episodes revolving around the women's physical appearance and personalities that do not conform to stereotypical "ladylike" standards. The pilot episode's main plot point is a raffle for a weekend pass in Tokyo, accompanied by a "gorgeous nurse"—her attractiveness being used as the main incentive for participating in the lottery. Similarly, in "Edwina," the nurses of the unit declare themselves off-limits for the males until one of them goes on a date with nurse Edwina, who is portrayed as a klutz and is therefore automatically unappealing to men. This degrading language and objectification towards women is written off as humorous and even used as prominent episode themes to entertain the audiences.

The consequences of the sexist behaviors in *M*A*S*H*, however, reach further than simply perpetuating inaccurate female stereotypes. They add to a general disregard for women as equals in the workplace. In light of the feminist movement, women were demanding equal rights to work and prove themselves in their chosen career. Even the fact that the nurses of the MASH unit were portrayed as working alongside men was vital and provided the showrunners with an outlet to elevate women as they strive for equal professional opportunities. The nurses, though, were not treated with equal respect and were constantly degraded to being the punchline of the male staff's sexist remarks. *M*A*S*H*'s sexist remarks have far-reaching repercussions: "Jokes that target women by demeaning and devaluing their personal and professional attributes, or that sexually objectify women, including through sexual violence, reinforce and normalize gender inequality and the subordination of women to men" (Bemiller and Schneider 462). Montemurro adds to the conversation by arguing: "the use of sexual harassment as humorous material in situation comedies may result in women's status as workers being viewed less seriously than men's" (434). Generally, the terms of endearment and objectification—baby, honey, darling, etc.—that undermine women in the workplace are used to emphasize a woman's aloof-

ness or assumed incompetence and position her as an object of male pleasure—all followed by a laughter track that further indicates to audiences that this is to be perceived as humorous. So, despite reflecting women's growing willingness to enter the workforce and make their own decisions regarding their future, the earlier seasons failed to portray that entry in a positive light and utilized objectification and sexist language to undermine female authority and capability.

Later seasons shift *M*A*S*H's* comedic sexist tones by highlighting the unit's female staff accomplishments and competence. While retaining humor, producers switched its tone from sexist comedy to reflective comedy. In this reflective comedy, female objectification and discrimination are no longer treated as humorous; rather the absurdity of the sexist treatment itself becomes the joke. During later seasons, derogatory language and humor that would have previously been used to demean female authority becomes a teachable moment and grants female characters a soap box to stand on as they explain why their achievements and authority should be respected regardless of their gender. Simon Critchley adds to the conversation about how humor is productive by observing how "humor shows us the absurdity of the familiar and points to how that situation might be changed," a sentiment that becomes the driving force behind the progression of *M*A*S*H's* humor (qtd. in Reed 774). In later episodes the nurses become more than just background characters entertaining the needs and wants of the men. The always humorous and charming Hawkeye, for example, who is often the instigator of demeaning humor, gains more respect towards his female co-workers. The captain is forced to gain perspective and contemplate his treatment and perception of women in the episode "Inga," when he fails to handle a female nurse's dominant personality. Frankel points out that: "Hawkeye realizes that he rejects her because she fails to act as his medical subordinate" (68). This is vital to reframing the idea of women in the workplace, establishing them as an equally active part of the environment and portraying them as more than just their sex. Frankel highlights that, in the episode "Taking the

Fifth," Hawkeye is further prompted to address this issue when he advertises an evening with him and a bottle of wine with the help of which he hopes to woo one of the nurses (68). His scheme falls through as the nurses devise a plan and essentially embarrass Hawkeye for his sexist behaviour. As the characters—including Hawkeye—laugh at the absurdity of his actions, Major Margaret Houlihan emphasizes his major character flaw by rhetorically asking: "Did you really think you could buy us with your expensive wine?" The scene becomes humorous by calling out Hawkeye's sexist behaviour that undermined the nurses' competence and contribution within the MASH unit; the nurses establish themselves as hard-working, respected women.

Though Major Margaret Houlihan challenges sexist humor in relation to language and the workplace in later seasons, in the earlier ones, as the only main female character, she is continuously sexualized and objectified in demeaning ways. She is introduced early on, as Wittebols notes, as a woman with "an appetite for powerful, macho men," using her sexuality to convince her male superiors to do her favors (23). Similarly, author Robert Schrag argues that "Margaret allows herself to be defined to a great extent by the men she chooses to have around her" (113). This theme of her apparent promiscuity is often used as the butt of countless misogynistic jokes and plot points. In the "Requiem for a Lightweight" episode where Trapper is training for a boxing match, the main objective of which is to have a transferred nurse he fancies be returned to the unit, Houlihan questions if the punching bag belongs to fellow colleague Major Frank Burns. Hawkeye retorts: "I thought you were Frank's bag." Whenever she attempts to point out how some of the captains' attitudes are offensive and derogatory, she is immediately shut down with a sexist remark presented as a humorous one-liner. So, instead of being a strong and inspirational female character, Houlihan is degraded to being a bitter army brat who uses her body to get what she wants, discourages the male staff from having fun and enjoying themselves, and is subjected to demeaning and degrading attitudes from both her male inferiors and superiors. Even though her portrayal and personality

develop significantly throughout the later seasons of the series, this early depiction leaves a lasting negative impression on her overall character.

Over the course of the series, Major Margaret Houlihan evolves from being the object of derogatory humor and objectification to becoming a successful and strong female character who is well-respected among her team. She cracks jokes that illustrate the sexist ways and behaviors of her colleagues, as well. This allows "...her role as antagonist in the show's early years to be reconsidered" (Bertsch). Schrag claims that "the changes in the Houlihan character reflect an archetypal model of an evolving feminist consciousness," which further illustrates the relationship between evolving feminist consciousness and the inclusion of a productive humor (112). Much like the women inspired by the feminist movement, Houlihan asserts herself as independent, and in comparison to earlier seasons, she is no longer defined by the men around her. In season eight's "Stars and Stripes," her lover Jack Scully turns up for a surprise visit. He strongly implies his expectation for Houlihan – he wants her to comply with traditional gender roles and be his inferior. At first Houlihan attempts to alter her appearance to appear more appealing towards the private, but she quickly decides not to alter herself for any man, and she sarcastically quips: "I'm just as much a major as any other major. You'll notice these leaves come in gold, not pink for girls and blue for boys." Early *M*A*S*H* might have taken this theme and made a mockery of it by setting up Houlihan and her romantic relationship as comic relief. However, the comedic moment becomes another lesson on sexist behavior, urging viewers to see Scully's behavior as inappropriate. Similarly, in "Inga," Houlihan does not hesitate to call Hawkeye out on his sexist treatment of women, mocking his self-asserted ego: "...we actually survive without you. We live, we breathe, we dream, we do our work, we earn our pay, sometimes we even have our little failures, and then we pull ourselves together all without benefit of your fabulous electric lips!" This comedic reflection by Houlihan spearheads her changing representation; she has, as Frankel observes, "emerged as her own

woman, assertive but loving" (68). Through these changes, she becomes an essential part of the storyline. The episodes "Stars and Stripes" and "Inga" illustrate a trend toward humor that is used to question the invisibility of sexist behavior.

Prior to the productive questioning humor discussed above, the sexist portrayal of female characters and the use of derogatory language is amplified in earlier seasons through the lens of intimate relationships. Complete disregard towards marriage and infidelity—predominantly exhibited by the male characters—is treated as comedic relief. The trope of comedic relief is used as just another way to demean women, further framing them as replaceable objects and less deserving of respect than the man in a marriage or partnership. Frankel points out that "jokes about casual sex and adultery provided much of the humor" (68). In the pilot episode, Hawkeye and Trapper light-heartedly discuss Trapper's adulterous nature as he receives a letter from his wife. McIntyre bemoans: "Bad news from my wife—she still loves me," and then both characters continue to joke about the wife's concern that her husband has been unfaithful. In the same episode, Hawkeye does not back down in trying to seduce Lieutenant Dish, even after she repeatedly reminds him that she is engaged and is trying to stay faithful. The latter statement also implying that a woman can easily be swayed by a man's charm to be disloyal towards her significant other. His attempts are portrayed through short clips of him sneaking up on the Lieutenant, hiding in her tent, and not taking "no" for an answer—all accompanied by the laughing track. Most of the male characters are married but they engage in serious and not-so-serious affairs at the unit. Colonel Henry Blake, for example, is continuously seen with different women, despite the fact that his wife and children are waiting for him back home. Infidelity with women on the losing end is a serious issue that is simply brushed off and treated as comedy in the early seasons of the show. Interestingly, despite the fact that humorous one-liners and slapstick about women's bodies, outer appearance, rank, and infidelity run rampant in almost every episode of the earlier seasons, it was specifically the "network's concerns over

sex and marital infidelity in the pilot episode that prompted changes" (Wittebols 23).

In later seasons, relatable family issues and quarrels became the basis of the show's humor rather than tasteless jokes about infidelity and cheating men. The careless attitude towards infidelity and marriage is transformed. A lot of these changes are brought on by the introduction of new characters who dramatically alter the previously discriminatory nature of *M*A*S*H's* humor (Frankel 68). Following the departure of Trapper, a new surgeon replaces him: Captain B.J. Hunnicutt. He is a family man who struggles greatly with being apart from his wife Peg and their young daughter Erin. Unlike Trapper, B.J.'s greatest pleasure is receiving letters from home (Frankel 68). Hawkeye humorously rolls his eyes every time B.J. rereads them to muse over his family, instead of making comments about them being a burden, limiting his sexual freedoms. Similarly, after the departure of Colonel Henry Blake, a new commanding officer is quickly established. Colonel Sherman T. Potter is an older man with strong family values, many of which he passes onto the people around him, prompting positive changes. In the season eight episode "Too Many Cooks," Potter gets incredibly upset about a letter from his wife that threatens their marriage and expresses the turmoil of a long-distance relationship. He solemnly explains: "She tells me she's all by herself watching her life go by. She thought by now we'd be in some cushy stateside post, looking at the sunset in the same hemisphere." Treated as cheap material and the basis for sexist humor in earlier seasons, infidelity becomes a serious and personal issue in the episode "Hanky Panky" when B.J. has an affair with a nurse; this causes him to feel immense guilt and heartache (Frankel 68). The introduction of the new male characters provides a more realistic outlook on partnerships, which positions women as equals deserving of respect. The sexist jokes about adultery and marriage are replaced by reminders of the importance of equality and mutual respect. Even though the characters do still occasionally take a jab at the topic of marriage and infidelity, mostly in regard to Major Frank Burn's and his wife, it is done in a much

less derogatory manner.

Sadly, the early moments of sexist humor within *M*A*S*H* remain present in twenty-first century media. A large part of today's television continues to embrace sexist humor and fails to equally represent women. Visual media containing humor is a powerful tool in shaping society's values and mindset and can have negative impacts if misused. In such instances, "sexist humor...trivializes sex discrimination under the veil of benign amusement" (Ford et.al., "More Than," 159). It is necessary to consider the impact of sexist humor alongside Fradley's observation on viewing trends: "rejection of a dissatisfying present in favour of an idealised past...is manifest in a series of high-profile televisual artefacts" (230). *M*A*S*H*, as one of these televisual artefacts, allows for reflection. Significant tropes such as female objectification and sexualization, used as humorous moments in the earlier seasons, were eliminated in the latter seasons. The reflective humor that emerged, highlighting the absurdity of such derogatory behavior, should be an example for producers of the twenty-first century. Many producers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have continued to solely rely on sexist humor—the sexist comments of Michael Scott from *The Office* toward his female coworkers, the objectification of women by Barney Stinson from *How I Met Your Mother*, and Al Bundy's mistreatment of his wife on *Married with Children*. These shows and others have failed to transform their humor. *M*A*S*H*, however, offers a tentative layout for the evolution of sexist humor into a humor which facilitates conversation about the ridiculousness of such misogynistic behavior. While not ideal, *M*A*S*H* was, is, and will remain a powerful visual medium igniting discussion about humor, gender, and society. It would do well for producers of modern television to adopt *M*A*S*H* and other such show's success in altering their sexist humor as a framework for changes towards more inclusive and critical humor.

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