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Introduction

by MARGARET MCFADDEN

IN AN INFLUENTIAL ARTICLE called “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” first published in 1986, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott argued that the field of women’s history needed to re-examine and revise its theoretical premises. While celebrating the outpouring of historical monographs and articles exploring women’s lives that had emerged in the preceding twenty years, Scott analyzed the three major paradigms that she saw as having shaped most of this work (theories of patriarchy, Marxism, and psychoanalysis) and critiqued the limitations of each model. Further, she noted that women’s historians had focused their attention only on subjects that had obviously to do with gender roles, relations, and ideologies and had not expanded analyses of gender beyond these areas. Drawing on the ideas of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Scott proposed that gender is “a primary way of signifying relationships of power” and that “concepts of gender structure perception and the concrete and symbolic organization of all social life.” In other words, Scott argued that since “sexual difference is a primary way of signifying differentiation,” representations of gender were simultaneously representations of power relations and hierarchies that had material consequences for the organization of *all* aspects of social life. If we looked for them, we would find that gender metaphors structured thinking and debate about politics, war, diplomacy, and other topics that seemed, on the surface, to have nothing to do with gender, and we would find that those ideas had had material effects in the real world. In this view, language and material reality cannot be separated; language and representation are inextricably part of material life.¹

Scott’s arguments were received in some quarters with skepticism, particularly by scholars who feared that the attention to metaphors and representations of power would distract from the analysis of the very concrete and often violent ways that unequal power relations had been created and enforced in the past. These historians were unconvinced that the study of language and of discourse, the so-called “linguistic turn” in historical studies, was likely to illuminate the real lived experience of people in the past; indeed, they feared that such analyses would be unable to account for the agency of individual

1. Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 28-50.

people to change their lives and the world and that they would lead to the false and disheartening conclusion that people's lives were so shaped by discourse that they were (and are) powerless to change their situations.²

Now, nearly fifteen years later, these arguments may have lost some of their intensity as a wide range of critics and historians have embraced the idea of looking at gender as a category that structures every aspect of our lives, often in ways that we are not conscious of but that profoundly affect us. The articles collected in this special issue exemplify this general premise in that they make clear that attention to gender is essential to understanding the work of popular texts in twentieth-century United States culture. And while the authors use an exciting variety of interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological approaches to conduct their analyses of radio programs, Hollywood films, popular advice literature, and television shows, they all attend carefully to the ways representations of gender work, not only to structure the social roles and relationships of real men and women but also to normalize unequal and unjust power relations in many other areas of life. Further, they all explore the ways that gender intersects with other key categories of analysis like class and race to construct an ideological picture of the world that has tremendous power to shape what consumers have perceived as reality, as what is normal, natural, and inevitable in everyday life, and thereby to sustain economic and political hierarchies that are not in the interests of most Americans.

Matthew Murray's article, "Mae West and the Limits of Radio Censorship in the 1930s," uses a fascinating array of archival materials to demonstrate that the controversy surrounding Mae West's well-known 1937 radio appearance was not merely a matter of a comedian exceeding the bounds of good taste on a family-oriented Sunday radio show. Rather, he illuminates how West's image as a white, working-class sex symbol with ties to African-American culture became the terrain on which a variety of Americans competed to define what would constitute appropriate representations of female behavior and sexuality.

Murray details how West's "multiple contraventions of normative gender, class, sexual, and racial taboos" made her a lightning rod for the moral panic of a white middle class fearful of the effects of the Great Depression on American society. At the same time, however, West's case created an opportunity for the radio industry to use questions about the representation of gender to justify the implementation of forms of censorship that consolidated their control of the airwaves and took power from comedians and others in the production process. At the same time, they increased their ability to restrict radio programming to much more conservative representations that would not disrupt a new middlebrow status quo.

2. Perhaps Scott's most vehement critic was Bryan D. Palmer, whose polemic *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1990) both vigorously attacked Scott and other postmodern historians and argued for the continued importance of historical materialism.

In “Spock, I Love Him,” Jane F. Levey carefully contextualizes one of the best-selling and most influential books of the twentieth century, Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946). Levey’s interest is in understanding how this book, which basically taught a whole generation of Americans what normal family life should be like, shaped the reconstruction of gender roles and relations during the turbulent years after the end of World War II. Combining remarkable archival evidence with theoretical tools from the field of reader-response criticism, she provides a compelling account of how ordinary Americans both embraced and resisted Dr. Spock’s prescriptions and thus worked through the cultural tensions and social transformations that made the postwar period so turbulent for so many people. Levey’s analysis is an important contribution to the dismantling of the resilient myth of the 1950s as a time of social harmony and prosperity, cheery suburbanization, and untroubled, “Father Knows Best”-style family life. At the same time, she offers a powerful example of readers who are anything but passive receivers of prescriptions from popular culture, and thus new insight into how people used popular culture to make sense of their lives.

Stephan Prock’s “Music, Gender and the Politics of Performance in *Singin’ in the Rain*” combines theoretical approaches from film theory, feminist theory, musicology, and performance studies to construct a stunning reading of one of the most important musicals in film history, *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952). Prock’s background as a composer leads him to approach the film through an analysis of its specifically *musical* dimensions and thus to an interpretation that persuasively explains how the musical discourse of the film creates and sustains hierarchies of gender that symbolically represent, justify, and reinforce male superiority and dominance. Further, Prock’s argument exemplifies another important dimension of gender studies of popular culture: careful attention to the construction of masculinity as well as femininity and a clear recognition that gender is a relation, not a thing.

Cultural critic Kathleen Newman’s “The Problem That Has a Name: *Ally McBeal* and the Future of Feminism” explores a popular contemporary television show with wit and insight. Implicit in her account of how viewers use a fictional character to think through their own real-life anxieties and concerns is a sophisticated understanding of how popular cultural texts attract viewers by presenting those anxieties in some coded or indirect way and then offering “strategies” for thinking about them. Newman quite convincingly explains the appeal of the show to many Americans who see in *Ally*’s conflicts the same confusions they have about love, relationships, and careers. But Newman then situates her reading of the show in the larger context of the media’s construction of feminism and demonstrates how powerfully the media shape our understanding of gender roles and relations and what it is possible for us to imagine about the possibility of gender equality, even in the year 2000.

Scholars of popular cultural texts have often had a certain amount of difficulty persuading their colleagues that the study of such materials was appro-

priate and worthwhile, given many educated Americans' belief that popular culture was simply mass-produced dreck, designed to enrich its producers by appealing to the lowest common denominator of our culture. These skeptics tended to assume that, unlike more ambitious forms of art, literature, music, or theater, popular cultural forms did not challenge their audiences, ask them to think or imagine in new ways, or pose deep and serious questions about pressing moral, social, or political issues. Andrew Ross has succinctly captured this attitude in the title of his 1989 book, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*.

But the essays in this issue demonstrate that popular cultural forms have had enormous influence on twentieth-century American culture and have profoundly shaped the ways Americans have perceived the reality of their own lives. Whether we approve of popular texts aesthetically or not, it is impossible to deny their ubiquity and their power to construct and naturalize our understanding of our social order, and we ignore that power at our peril. These essays all reflect the new maturity and sophistication of popular culture studies and suggest that, contrary to what some scholars imagine, consumers of these texts have used and continue to use them to think through and develop "strategies" for living. If popular texts are often engaged in this way with important contemporary issues, they are perhaps not so "escapist" as their detractors imagine, and, if we can understand what they mean to audiences and how people have used them, we can gain new insight into how ordinary Americans have imagined their lives and life chances.