

# From *That Girl* to *Girls*: Rethinking Ann Marie/Marlo Thomas as a Feminist Icon

*Emily L. Newman*

Diamonds, daisies, snowflakes – *THAT GIRL!*

Chestnuts, rainbows, springtime. . . is *THAT GIRL!*

She's tinsel on a tree. . .

She's everything that every girl should be!

At times, the theme song for *That Girl* feels like a random conglomeration of words—albeit, a happy, glittery, random bunch of words.<sup>1</sup> And yet, those simple words are apt descriptors of the perky sitcom that aired on ABC from 1966–1971 and made actress Marlo Thomas a household name. She was the girl described in the song and the girl that everyone wanted to be, down to her perfect hair, eyelashes, stockings, and broaches. The show revolved around the independent Ann Marie, played deftly by Thomas, who moved to New York City by herself and maintained close ties to her parents. In typical sitcom fashion, the budding actress got herself into awkward, hare-brained situations: temporary gigs as a speaking mop or dancing chicken, jamming her big toe in a bowling ball, trapping herself in a fold-up bed, and even working for the mob—in a position where she starts as a coat-checker dressed as a cave girl who finds herself arrested after hiding inside a fake cake.

While the show is often saccharine, *That Girl* deserves serious reconsideration, particularly in light of Marlo Thomas' little-acknowledged role

as creator and producer. *That Girl* led the way for *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–1977), *Laverne & Shirley* (CBS, 1976–1983), *Kate & Allie* (CBS, 1984–1989), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988–1998), among others. Further, following the show, Thomas capitalized on her celebrity, publishing the powerful *Free to Be...* books and albums, starring in made-for-TV films that addressed timely and necessary topical themes like domestic abuse (*Nobody's Child*, CBS, 1986) and homophobia (*Consenting Adult*, ABC, 1985). Outside of her television and film career, Thomas advocated for various important political causes, like the Equal Rights Amendment, and worked with Gloria Steinem and others to found the Ms. Foundation for Women, a nonprofit organization with the goal of helping women and girls throughout the country.

Besides Thomas' important career and activism, *That Girl* needs to be seen as more than just the sweet little sitcom; it should be recognized for its willingness to take chances and start conversations, even within its conventional sitcom premise. The show dealt with the lead characters' sexuality repeatedly and distinctly, and there was increasing pressure for Ann and her boyfriend Donald to get not only engaged but married, which Thomas strongly resisted. It was her producing role that allowed Thomas so much control

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over the program and helped provide a space for women in television to do more than just appear or even star on a program, which is evident in the success of women like Mary Tyler Moore, Tracey Ullman, Sarah Jessica Parker, Zooey Deschanel, and, perhaps most significantly, Lena Dunham. In comparing the increasingly visible and powerful career of Dunham, the parallels between Thomas and the young ingénue become clear: supportive and artistic parents, commitment to their craft, devotion to their creative process, producing and running their series, supporting charitable causes close to their hearts, and using their visibility and celebrity to champion politics and politicians aligned with their values. When one looks back on Marlo Thomas and *That Girl*, it becomes clear that the show was a pivotal moment in television and women's history, one that marked a meaningful change in the roles women were able to play on television, but perhaps more pointedly, the behind-the-scenes positions that women were able to take.

*That Girl* could never have had happened without the powerhouse that is Marlo Thomas. Born Margaret Thomas in Detroit in 1937, she grew up primarily in Beverly Hills. Her father, Danny Thomas (1912–1991), was a traveling comedian and actor, as seen in *Make Room For Daddy* (which later became *The Danny Thomas Show*, ABC, 1953–1965). Perhaps most importantly for Marlo, he was a producer, working on (among other programs) *The Dick Van Dyke Show* for its entire run (1961–1966). Her mother, Rose Marie (Cassaniti) Thomas (1914–2000), was a singer who was starting to build a successful radio career when she got married and chose to focus on her family. In her memoir, Marlo decisively wrote, “I made up my mind... that the whole domestic scene was not for me. I had things I wanted to do and didn't want to do. I knew I didn't want to give up my dreams for love and miss them for the rest of my life, like my mother” (*Growing Up Laughing* 303). This choice shaped Marlo, who felt her mother missed out on an opportunity to have her own successful career.

After pursuing an education degree at the University of Southern California, Thomas

decided to pursue acting full time, and her big break came in 1965 when she was cast in a pilot called *Two's Company* for ABC. Focusing on newlyweds, the show was flat and never ended being picked up, but Thomas was electric on the screen. Head of ABC Edgar Scherick approached Thomas about finding a series for her and began sending her scripts. Remarkably though, not only was the network supporting Thomas, she already had a sponsor who wanted to work with her—Clairol, whose parent company was Bristol-Meyers (Cole 38–39). This was an incredible opportunity for Thomas, but she was struggling to find the right show. Looking back, she described her frustration:

Women are not the same women that were Lucille Ball or June Cleaver or the mother in *Make Room for Daddy* or any of those people. This is another generation of women. We don't particularly want to be our mothers. We want to be a different kind of woman. You know, we aren't all racing to get married. We all want a career. We're going to law school. We're thinking other things. (qtd. in “That Show... That Woman... The Creation of *That Girl*”)

Thomas wanted a show that she felt adequately represented women like her, something that had not and did not exist on television at that time.<sup>2</sup> To help convince Scherick that this was both missing and much needed, she suggested that he read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and in fact, sent it to him. The influential text detailed the increasing dissatisfaction that American women had with their lives—in particular, how unfulfilling life as a full-time stay-at-home wife and mom can be. According to Thomas, Scherick called her and the first thing he said was, “Is this going to happen to my wife?” She told him that she was not sure, but that this was what was happening right now, and that television needed to be made in the present (Cole 42).

Scherick was willing to take a chance on Thomas' idea of a show centered on a single woman living on her own in New York City, but she still had to find writers who could support her. She brought in Emmy award-winning producers Sam Denoff and Bill Persky who she had met through their work on her father's program *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. This provided them the opportunity

to create their own show, and Persky was particularly invested in the subject matter because of his daughters (“That Show... That Woman... The Creation of *That Girl*”). Thomas was hoping to call the show *Miss Independence* (her nickname given to her by her father), but that seemed to be too strong of a title for the network, who were not quite ready to allow their character that much freedom (Cole 40).

While Ann Marie would live on her own, ABC insisted that the character maintain her family ties. They originally proposed that she bring her six-year-old brother with her, to which she replied, “But that isn’t the way girls go to New York to be an actress. They don’t go to live with their aunt or bring their little six-year-old brother with them. What parent lets you bring your six-year-old brother?” (qtd. in Cole 40). Instead, Thomas encouraged a relationship between Ann and her parents, particularly her father. Lou Marie (Lew Parker) would become a beloved figure on the show, figuring prominently in many episodes, and importantly, the pilot. The other figure that Ann would come to rely on heavily is her boyfriend Donald (Ted Bessell), whom she met in the second episode, and stayed with the entire run of the series.<sup>3</sup> In the unaired pilot of the show, he was Don Blue Sky, not only her love interest but also her agent. In focus groups, he tested terribly, and the character’s reception forced writers to go back to the drawing board. Persky clarifies, “Her boyfriend should have been a strong, handsome, solid guy and her agent should have been a schmuck, so they could get the laughter out of it. By giving both parts to the same guy, he could be neither” (qtd. in Cole 64). To resolve the role, Donald was given his own career as a writer; therefore, his relationship with Ann was able to blossom, just as she was able to develop her career separately from him.

Once the show’s foundation was solidified, *That Girl*’s success arguably hinged on two things: Marlo Thomas as an actress and Marlo Thomas as a producer. Thomas’ education was actually in teaching, not acting; however, growing up Danny Thomas’ child provided her with clout and experience being surrounded by actors (“That

*Girl*,” *Biography*). Bit parts here and there got her foot in the door, but she was able to really hone her skills in a Mike Nichols-helmed engagement of *Barefoot in the Park* in London in 1965 (Thomas, *Growing Up Laughing* 139–46). On film, however, it is hard to describe exactly what makes Thomas so special. Her big eyes sparkle, her gravelly voice is interrupted with endearing squeaky moments, and her laugh is bold and genuine. She is an expert at what can only be described as tongue-acting—using her tongue as an extended part of her face to not just make funny looks, but to amplify her expressions to show any kind of emotion from hard work to excitement to bubbling energy. High boots, short skirts, and fishnet stockings became signatures of her style, yet she maintained a wholesome edge as she rarely showed much skin and only a handful of times showed décolletage. Her perfectly quaffed hair—both the signature flip and the bangs—as well as the dramatic eyelashes (which were actually two sets of fake eyelashes worn at once) became her signature trademark and eventually were simplified into the logo of *That Girl* (Thomas, “Marlo Thomas Discusses Ann Marie’s Look”). She is always flawless looking, setting the bar for young women impossibly high, as her make-up is never bringing smudged and she is perfectly put together (Spangler 88). Thomas was charming and could easily be imagined as a best friend or a girlfriend. Likable by both men and women, Thomas had appeal that made *That Girl* especially watchable.

Marlo Thomas did not just light up the screen, though; as mentioned previously, she was also a producer. This was not her original intention, despite having pitched the show and sold the idea to Scherick, as well as in Denoff and Persky, who would be integral to the show’s success, all of which are typical duties of a producer. In 1965, ABC needed someone to commit to produce the show for five years, and no one was willing to guarantee five years with the show. So Thomas stepped up and formed Daisy Productions, named after her favorite flower (“That Show... That Woman... The Creation of *That Girl*”). She put up her own salary as collateral, meaning that if the show ever went over budget, they would take

what was needed from her income. This was a risky move, but Thomas was not concerned, because the show was guaranteed to air twenty-two reruns over the course of the summer, which she knew would allow her to make her money back in a worst case scenario (“That Girl,” *Biography*). Her attorney at the time, Leo Ziffren, also gave her some incredibly powerful advice, encouraging her to own the negatives, so she would control all rights and revenue from reruns, syndication, spin-offs, and so forth (Cole 54). While her production company is recognized in the credits, Thomas’s name is omitted. Instead, and very slyly, Thomas stocks Ann Marie’s apartment with daisies and repeatedly wears different daisy broaches and pins throughout the series run.

Marlo Thomas very clearly helmed the show. The task was incredibly difficult; as she has said, “For a woman my age, at that time, in my very early twenties, the producer of a television show about a woman in which I starred—a lot of people—a lot of men—were not able to deal with that. They were not able to deal with a woman who signed the checks. Sometimes I think that my greatest accomplishment was that I survived it” (qtd. in “That Show . . . That Woman . . . The Creation of *That Girl*”). And it is true: Thomas had control. To be clear, Thomas was not the first woman to be a producer, but she was the first woman to do so on her own. Carol Burnett, Mary Tyler Moore, Elizabeth Montgomery, and Lucille Ball had all worked with and/or produced with their husbands. Thomas, then, was really striking out on her own path, and while she listened and certainly took advice, in the end, it was Thomas who had the final decision. Persky even gave her the nickname the “velvet steamroller,” with the idea that Thomas would roll over anyone that she needed to, but would not leave any marks (“That Girl,” *Biography*). For so many, it was hard to accept a female in a position of a power.

Additionally, for the entire first season of the show, Thomas was the only woman on the staff, a position she found incredibly lonely and isolating. She constantly had to correct the rest of the writers, noting she would have to say, “I would never do that. I don’t think any girl would do that.”

There was kind of a struggle, to really get to the point where we knew who *That Girl* was and what she would or wouldn’t do” (“That Girl,” *Biography*). While she did have to make her arguments, she found support with her writing staff; Persky was a champion of women’s rights and Denoff was against too much schmaltz, and somewhere in the middle, they produced a nice balance. Things changed during the second season. Danny Arnold replaced Jerry Davis as producer, and he brought Ruth Brooks Flippen in as a story editor. No longer was Thomas the lone female, as she gleefully reminisces,

One woman alone is a pest. Two women is a coalition. You really have a group of people now, even if you are two. And then we started hiring more women writers. And so then, it really became a collective wisdom, that that’s not what a girl would do in a situation like that, she wouldn’t say that to her boyfriend. There are certain things that even though they may get a laugh, that isn’t the truth. (qtd. in “That Show . . . That Woman . . . The Creation of *That Girl*”)

Flippen’s addition to the staff opened a door—it led to the hiring of more women and a more comfortable atmosphere for Thomas and the rest of the staff. Additionally, Flippen’s hiring allowed Thomas to fully express herself, as well as to support the work of other women. She passionately explains, “I felt it was a great accomplishment of my life, that when I got hit in the gender, when I was told it wasn’t feminine to be assertive or to take command, to seize power—I still did it because I believed it to be right” (qtd. in “That Show . . . That Woman . . . The Creation of *That Girl*”).

Thomas also was assertive when it came to her image. At the time of signing her contract for the show, she was very concerned about losing her merchandising rights, so she consulted her cousin who was a lawyer. He smartly came up with the idea to sign her rights to him, so that she was able to keep control of them and not allow the network that kind of power, which typically would be required of the package deal that ABC and Clairol were giving Thomas (Thomas, “Marlo Thomas Discusses *That Girl* Merchandising”). As soon as the show aired and became popular, Thomas was immediately met with increasing

demands for consumer products. Clairol wanted to do an entire line of “That” Products—That Shampoo, That Foundation, That Lipstick, and so forth. She was also pressured to put her name on a clothing line and sunglasses, naturally products that were geared at a younger female audience (Cole 127–28). While Thomas rejected these would-be lucrative offers, she did, however, grant her image to handful of projects—a limited number of dolls, a board game, coloring books, paper dolls and a novelization—all items geared toward children, and notably all products that were not going to make much money. She described her decision by saying, “I was really thinking about what I wanted to do with my life and what my work was going to be about. I mean, I had pressure from my partners, because we would all benefit financially from it. . . . What’s it going to cost me to buy back my name and my image, because I would have so exploited it?” (qtd. in “That Girl,” *Biography*). Repeatedly, Thomas showed her media savvy, but also her willingness to put herself first even if meant foregoing financial gain.

Thomas perpetuated *That Girl*’s success by crafting a reliable and dependable sitcom. Ann Marie was relatable. Thomas had worked hard to argue for and create a character who would speak to a new generation of women, and by all accounts (and the amount of fan mail that she received) she achieved it. As she articulates,

And when young women heard what it was about, they knew it was them. And when they turned on, they saw themselves. . . . It wasn’t like she was from Mars, that’s exactly how they felt. That’s who I want to be. That’s what I want to do. And I think why I think it was a success so quickly. And so what the network saw, and thought was a revolutionary figure was, in fact, a *fait accompli*. She was there. She was in the fabric of the society. . . . And that was for me, also very confirming. Because I really wasn’t sure if I wasn’t the only girl in the world who thought like me. (qtd. in “That Show. . . . That Woman. . . . The Creation of *That Girl*”)

Ann Marie was a new kind of woman on television—a voice that was much needed and was certainly absent, she was a single, independent woman, who was trying to live her life and stand on her own. The start of each episode reinforced both her uniqueness, but also her femininity, as the show opened with a short scene that typically

set up the story, but always ended with a directed phrase, a brief pause then a dramatic “*that girl*” and the camera shifting to a close-up on Ann Marie (or a photograph or reflection of her), with the text *That Girl* appearing below her face and mirroring the vocalization. For example, in Episode 1.5, “Anatomy of a Blunder” (6 Oct. 1966), Ann’s father, Lou Marie, sets up this moment by saying, “There isn’t a guy in the world who’s good enough for *that girl!*” What was originally supposed to be done just once in the pilot as a fun nod to the title was so successful that they decided to keep running it through the entire series (Cole 165).

*That Girl* was a standard sitcom in that its episodes were self-contained stories, it relied often on slapstick humor, it was lighthearted and funny, and its plot perhaps feels conventional. Storylines often centered on the same subjects: Ann’s acting career, Donald’s writing career at the fictitious news magazine *Newsview*, family conflict, or Ann and Donald’s relationship. Ann seemed to have at least four Broadway debuts (or near-misses) over the course of the series and while she kept getting closer to achieving success, she never did quite make it, necessitating the pursuit of side jobs throughout the run of the series. Donald would get promoted a few times, and he showed some depth as a creative writer by working on a novel in his free time, but he never left his job at the magazine. Ann’s parents, and sometimes assorted other relatives, popped up every once in a while to get Ann into multifarious odd situations. While Ann did occasionally interact with neighbors and friends, they were not consistent across the series and often changed according to the season.

As much as Thomas pushed to break boundaries on her sitcom by portraying an independent woman, the network did force certain restrictions on her. She may have been a single woman living on her own, but she was not really ever single, was she? From the first aired episode to the last, she was involved with the kind, considerate Donald. He had a habit of trying to rescue her, and Ann often did need saving, yet, in most situations, Ann managed to help herself. The oft-repeated

refrain of “Oh Donald” consistently reminded the viewer of their affection and the chemistry between the couple, one that encouraged the viewer to root for the couple’s success. Yet, of the 136 episodes that aired, at least thirty focused on threats to their relationship. While this may make it seem like they were insecure about their relationship, in fact, it only reinforced their strength in their relationship, as the threats never panned out as anything serious. The two repeatedly came back to one another, despite the trials. At the start of season five, when they do get engaged, they have been together for four years and it seems like a natural progression.

While *That Girl* may have felt like a more contemporary woman because of her living circumstances, her relationship with Donald felt like it belonged in the 1950s more than the 1960s (Thomas, “Marlo Thomas Discusses Ann and Don’s Relationship and Sexuality on *That Girl*”). Standards and practices was constantly making sure that just as Ann Marie was shown greeting Donald and welcoming him into her apartment, she also needed to be showing him the door and telling him goodbye. It had to be made very clear not only did he not stay in her apartment, but her bedroom was off limits (“That Show... That Woman... The Creation of *That Girl*”). Her father was consistently appearing at her apartment and questioning why Don was there and asking when he was leaving. This often became the central storyline, as evident in Episode 2.23, “Odpdy-pahimcaifss” (22 Feb. 1968), where Donald’s mother finds a pair of Donald’s pants in Ann’s closet, which is inevitably made more complicated and awkward when Ann’s father finds out about the situation. Many have felt and argued that these ridiculous scenarios are perhaps why we should not take *That Girl* as seriously as other shows of the 1960s and 1970s. Mollie Gregory has said that the show “has been called a prototype for the independent woman on 1970s television, though the girl, Ann Marie, was still deferring to Daddy as the female characters on TV deferred to husbands or boyfriends” (34). This is Gregory’s *only* mention of *That Girl* in her book *Women Who Run the Show: How a Brilliant and Creative New*

*Generation of Women Stormed Hollywood*. Undoubtedly, family was important to Ann Marie, and she listened and took advice from both Donald and her father, but she often defied them and challenged their responses. This was the first independent female character on television on a show produced and created by the first independent woman producer, and how sad of Gregory to be distracted by a few of the characters on the show. Rather than be taken seriously and critically, *That Girl* is positioned more as fluff, which is why it is more aligned with perkier, happier shows and can be found in the entertainment book *Glamour, Gidgets, and the Girl Next Door: Television’s Iconic Women from the 50s, 60s, and 70s*.

A clear argument in favor of seeing *That Girl* as deviating from television norms of the era is in how the sitcom ended. At the start of the fifth season and the last year of the contracts, everyone but Thomas was open to extending the series, including the rest of the cast, Denoff and Persky, as well as producers Saul Turleltaub and Bernie Orenstein, who had also taken on much of the writing. But Thomas was thinking about the big picture, and as she said, “I’m not a girl anymore, I’m a woman now. It’s five years later. Girls grow into women, boys grow into men. I can’t play *That Girl* anymore. It’s really over for *That Girl* in me. And now I’m either going to move on to being ‘That Woman’ with Donald, or stop” (qtd. in Cole 125). Two endings seemed natural: Ann would get her big break and become a star, or Ann and Donald would get married (“That Show... That Woman... The Creation of *That Girl*”). Thomas was resolute on how the show should end, “I really felt that *That Girl* getting married sent a wrong message to the girls of America. They had really counted on her for a certain stand. If her story ended with a marriage they might think that it meant that that was the only way to have a happy ending” (qtd. in Cole 142). The last episode, 5.24, “The Elevated Woman” (March 19, 1971), saw Don write a mocking article on a liberated woman, a loosely disguised Ann. Affronted, she convinces him to attend a women’s liberation meeting with her,

only to find them stuck in an elevator where they reminisce about their past, a plot device that allows for clips to be shown from the past five seasons. When the elevator finally opens, all the women from the meeting enter and it turns out that none of their boyfriends/husbands showed up, and the gathering was called off. Donald had tried nonetheless, and the episode ends with the two of them reconciled and engaged but definitely not married.

“The Elevated Woman” is one of a number of episodes that did actually tackle serious and relevant topics. While *That Girl* may not have addressed the Vietnam War, the show did manage to deal conscientiously with issues of security and robbery, sexual harassment and lechery, mental illness, and racism. Even smaller topics, like the bonds between father and daughter, are treated with sensitivity and kindness. In Episode 1.11, “What’s in a Name” (17 Nov. 1966), Ann Marie is thinking about changing her name from Ann Marie (what inevitably feels like two first names) to something with a little more heft, like Marie Brewster (after her hometown, north of New York City). Her dad feels deeply betrayed, and makes his feelings clearly known. In the end, he, of course, stands by her, and even sends her flowers to celebrate her tiny television role. But she does not change her name, and as the episode concludes, Ann tells her father, “I wanted to change my name to help me, not to hurt you. But then I realized it was hurting you so much more than it could ever help me.” The series continues to build the relationship between Lou and Ann over the course of its run.

Yet the show did wish to deal with more somber issues, and as a press release during the third season attested, the show hoped to portray issues such as voting, violence, and more (Spangler 90). In episode 3.66, “Secret Ballot” (31 Oct. 1968), Ann engages in a serious debate with her father about which political party she registers for and about becoming an informed voter. All of this takes place without any character actually admitting any political allegiance, while advocating for the importance of political awareness one the eve of the 1968 presidential election, which was to

be Ann Marie’s first. Civic importance continued to be addressed when Ann was called up for jury duty in “Eleven Angry Men and That Girl” (3.3, 10 Oct. 1968). Other tough themes were explored throughout the third season when Ann was mugged in “A Muggy Day in Central Park” (3.8, 14 Nov. 1968) and was part of a near plane hijacking along with Donald and Lou in “The Hi-Jack and the Mighty” (3.2, 3 Oct. 1968). Even the heavy topic of divorce is brought up by her neighbors, albeit in a humorous way, via a fight over the addition of sour cream to a baked potato. Jerry and Ruth Bauman are thankfully able to reconcile, thanks to Ann and Don’s quick thinking in “Just Donald and Me and Jerry Makes Three” (3.9, 21 Nov. 1968).

The risk-taking was not limited to season three. In “That Script” (5.14, 1 Jan. 1971), Ann attempts to locate her favorite author, Joseph Nelson, and secure the rights to a beloved novel, *A Woman’s Story*. When conventional routes prove unsuccessful, she wrangles Donald into a plan to track the author down at his country home. At first, the pair meet resistance, but Ann Marie seems to win Nelson over, and he is willing to consider granting her the rights, but only if he can be the one to write the screenplay. Nelson’s wife is reluctant, and seems very distrustful of Ann and Donald. After the couple leaves, Nelson pulls out a picture of his first wife, on which *A Woman’s Story* is based, and she bears a remarkable similarity to Ann. As the deal starts to progress, Ann’s agent is excitedly negotiating her salary with film companies, as Nelson will only sell the rights if Ann is allowed to star in the film. As her agent pushes for a bigger salary, Nelson’s wife arranges a meeting with Ann. She is concerned, and tells Ann that Nelson’s mental health has been in steep decline since he wrote that novel. He has been reclusive and withdrawn because he can no longer write. She has brought Ann a current draft of the screenplay, to which Ann can see it is complete gibberish. Heartbroken, Ann realizes that there is nothing she can do. Rather than try to find a new screenwriter or tell anyone about Nelson’s mental illness, Ann decides to turn to her agent and demand a salary

of one million dollars, which was completely unfathomable for an unknown actress at the time and would effectively kill the project. It was a touching act of kindness, a sacrifice that was not needed. While Nelson's issues were not talked about sophisticatedly or with even with terms like "mental illness," the kindness and unselfish action that Ann pursued was striking. Both the preceding episode and the following episode used guest actors and showy numbers to command laughter, while this episode of tiny moments and nuanced performances seemed more consistent with the heart of the show itself.

Two episodes of the series dealt significantly and subtly with issues of race. In "The Defiant One" (3.22, 27 Feb. 1969), Ann witnesses a young black boy, David, get caught stealing a candy bar. When asked who his mother is, he points to Ann and says "*that girl!*" She befriends him and buys him the candy bar, asking him to help her carry her belongings back to her place for her. He tells her he lives on Park Avenue, but she doesn't believe him. Donald comes over and tries to get Ann to call the police. The kid is able to sneak off and call his father, telling him he has been kidnapped by a "crazy white lady." The father arrives at Ann's apartment to pick up the child, and it becomes clear that the family is actually quite wealthy and does, in fact, live on Park Avenue. At the end of the episode, Donald and Ann discuss the stories that the single child David has told them, elaborate tales about his "hard" life in the rough area of town with his many siblings. Ann felt that she believed it easily because he was black. She questions, "You think we can change that Donald? Do you think we can make it so that when any child of any race paints the kind of picture David did, we'd know it was his imagination because our society just wouldn't have that anymore?" ("The Defiant One"). This was one of the first episodes of the show to feature a person of color in any significant kind of role, and beyond that, the show demonstrated a unique self-awareness. While the episode began as if it might reinforce stereotypes, the end of the episode had both Ann Marie and the viewer questioning their own expectations and understandings of race.

This line of thinking is carried over into "That Señorita" (5.12, 11 Dec. 1970). In this episode, Ann gets a part in a Broadway revue where she is asked to play a part with a Hispanic accent. It becomes clear to Ann, her friends, and others involved in the show that the role is offensive to Mexicans and Mexican Americans. After consulting with Donald and others, she decides to drop out of the show, despite the potential negative consequences. Again, at the end of the episode, Ann gets reflective as Don asks her why she decided not to do the sketch:

Maybe tomorrow I'll think I was all wrong. I don't know. Maybe it really isn't wrong to talk with a funny Spanish accent. Maybe it isn't wrong to talk with a funny Negro dialect or a funny Jewish or French accent. But whether its right or wrong, it really does offend people. And I thought about it Donald, and in all honesty, I had to admit, if I was Mexican or Latin American, I wouldn't like it either, so whether I was right or wrong, I just couldn't do it. ("That Señorita")

This is a sitcom, though, so while Ann is initially threatened with a lawsuit by the producers, the theater critics applaud the decision to drop the sketch in the revue, so her decision to leave is validated.

Of 136 episodes, some were more willing to deal with heavy material while others were obviously much more light-hearted in nature. In one memorable moment, Donald takes Ann to a fancy party where she feels completely out of place and encourages her to mingle (2.17, "Fur All We Know," 4 Jan. 1968). She goes up to different groups of people and stands behind them, pretending to be a part of their cohort, joining their conversation by repeating "mingle-mingle-mingle, mingle-mingle-mingle-mingle-mingle, here a mingle, there a mingle, everywhere a mingle," pretending to belong and laughing along with everyone at the party. She walks from group to group, enjoying the ridiculousness of the situation, until a handsome partygoer catches on to her shenanigans. As much fun as the episodes were, the cast and crew were having fun behind-the-scenes as well. Not only was every cast and crew members' birthday celebrated, but after the show wrapped every Thursday night there was a party and poker game. Everyone seemed to have



genuine affection for one another, and was certainly sad to see the show come to an end (“*That Girl*,” *Biography*).

When the show wrapped in 1971, Thomas continued to pursue her film career. Her production company went on to work on two made-for-television films, both of which she starred in, *Acts of Love and Other Comedies* (1973), a variety of short sketches about love and sex, and *It Happened One Christmas* (1977), a retelling of *It’s a Wonderful Life* with a woman in the lead role. Thomas was able to dramatically increase her time devoted to activism and her personal causes, something that actually developed because of her time on *That Girl*. While on the show, Thomas received between 3,000 and 5,000 letters a week, and while some were complimenting her wardrobe or her hair, many were much more serious (Spangler 90). Women told her personal stories, asking her where to seek information about being a minor and finding out they were pregnant or how to handle domestic abuse. Thomas hired assistants to help her respond to each of her letters, and they set out searching for resources and information, and what they quickly discovered was that the information they needed was not there (Cole 130–31; “*That Show . . . That Woman . . . The Creation of That Girl*”). For Thomas, this exposed her to a part of the world that her privilege had not allowed her to see, as she articulated, “*That mail politicized me. And as much as anything else I had witnessed in my life, it was the seed for much of what I’d put my energy toward in the years ahead*” (*Growing Up Laughing* 306).

For Thomas, Gloria Steinem would become an important ally. Their meeting, however, was typical for the time and epitomized what they were up against. Thomas was being considered to play Steinem in an adaptation of her story of going undercover as a Playboy bunny. As they sat down to have a conversation, the agent said, “*Boy, I don’t know which one of you I’d like to fuck first*” (qtd. in *Growing Up Laughing* 307). The Playboy bunny project never came to fruition, but Thomas and Steinem developed a lasting friendship and working relationship. Thomas and Steinem joined with Patricia Carbine and Letty

Cottin Pogrebin to found the Ms. Foundation for Women in 1972, a nonprofit organization that championed women and children’s causes. For the foundation, Marlo Thomas organized and released the project *Free to Be . . . You and Me* (1972), an illustrated book and album. The books sought to disrupt gender stereotypes and featured songs, poetry, and drawings about boys having dolls and women disliking housework, among other topics. The project spawned sequels, television specials, and re-releases, and won both Emmy and Peabody Awards.

While Thomas did continue to act and star in films, she became increasingly selective in her choice of projects. She focused on films with strong female roles like *Nobody’s Child* (1986), where she played a woman who had attempted suicide at the age of sixteen and had been institutionalized for the next twenty years of her life without receiving appropriate or adequate treatment. The film won Thomas an Emmy for her performance, which for many solidified her acting career. She also continued to write and published a number of advice books: *Thanks & Giving: All Year Long* (2004), *The Right Words at the Right Time* (2004, Volume 2, 2007), and *It Ain’t Over . . . Till It’s Over: Reinventing Your Life — and Realizing Your Dreams Anytime, at Any Age* (2014). Additionally, she published her memoir, *Growing Up Laughing* (2010), which not only included her own personal stories, but also brief interviews, jokes and quips of influential and powerful comics like Jerry Seinfeld, Joan Rivers, Chris Rock, among others. Meanwhile, after her father died in 1991, she ramped up her involvement at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, which he founded, and where she now serves as the national outreach director and notably appears in their national ad campaigns. More recently, in 2010, she created a Web site for women over thirty-five (marlothomas.com), partnering with AOL and Huffington Post, where she posts articles frequently, as well as weekly videos interviewing celebrities, doctors, scholars, and important national figures.

*Mondays with Marlo*, a popular series of videos that appear on her Web site, averages half a million viewers per episode and prompted *The New*

*York Times* to call her “an unlikely innovator on Internet TV” (Kaufman). Targeting an unusual demographic (women aged *over* thirty-five), Thomas was able to find an enthusiastic audience, one that AOL was happy to support, as was General Mills, who sponsors the program. Thomas may have Mondays with her videos, but Lena Dunham has Tuesdays with her new project *Lenny Letter*, which debuted in September 2015. The newsletter arrives in email inboxes every Tuesday, with content generated by *Girls* creator Lena Dunham and her writing partner Jenni Konner. In the October 16, 2015 issue, Dunham interviews Gloria Steinem and vacillates between hard-hitting questions about favorite curse words (“Fan-fucking-tastic”) to a serious conversation about crying in the workplace and the way that women express emotion. This link to Steinem is a nice way to connect Thomas and Dunham, who do not seem to have any direct ties to one another, even though Dunham’s own work and life owes much to Thomas’ career and advocacy.

Dunham’s parents, painter Carroll Dunham and photographer Laurie Simmons, created an artistic and bohemian lifestyle for the free-spirited daughter. She attended Oberlin College, graduating in 2008. Her breakthrough came with her film *Tiny Furniture* (2010), which she starred in, wrote, and directed. It was a film festival darling, and very clearly loosely based on Dunham herself, as a young woman returns home after graduating from a liberal arts college in the midwest to find herself aimless and lost and in New York City. The success of that film earned her a development deal with HBO, which led to the TV series *Girls* (2012–present). Like *Tiny Furniture*, *Girls* seems to incorporate autobiographical elements, with Dunham playing a character (Hannah) who roughly resembles herself—a writer, bouncing from relationship to relationship, dealing with postcollege life, and struggling when cut off by her parents. She is surrounded by three other “girls:” Marnie (Allison Williams)—a tightly wound wannabe curator or singer depending on the day, Shoshanna (Zosia Mamet)—an NYU college student discovering the joys of sex and mainstream popular music, and Jessa (Jemima Kirke)—

a wandering free spirit with a penchant for indulgence and creating havoc. While these girls support Hannah, she is the heart of the show, and much like *That Girl*, Hannah’s parents (Becky Ann Baker and Peter Scolari) and her boyfriend(s) are critical to the success of the show.

It is important to address the similarity of the names of these shows: *That Girl* and *Girls* (and, of course, others including *New Girl*, *2 Broke Girls*, among others). Why the use of the term girl and not woman or women, or for that matter lady or ladies? Girl is a complicated, loaded term, which was commonly used to describe young females in the 1400s and used for women, often derogatorily, as early as the 1800s. (Fogarty). Context often can determine intent; if used informally or by a friend, “girl” can be a sign of affection. If used by a boss or person in a position of power, however, it is almost always insulting or demeaning. In her commanding 1975 essay, Robin Tomach Lakoff addresses the topic:

In recalling youth, frivolity, and immaturity, *girl* brings to mind irresponsibility: you do not send a girl to do a woman’s errand (or even, for that matter, a boy’s errand). It seems that again, by an appeal to feminine vanity... the users of English have assigned women to a very unflattering place in their minds: a woman is a person who is both too immature and too far from real life to be entrusted with responsibilities and with decisions of any serious nature. (56)

Thomas’ intended title for her show was *Miss Independence*. Like *Girls*, the “girl” in *That Girl* could be used to describe a young woman in a period of transition. Graduating college, leaving home, and living on one’s own are all pivotal parts of growing up for sure, and yet, while the term “girl” might adequately address the term for a woman, the lack of a direct male equivalent and the potential for the condescending, mocking use (which does happen occasionally in the opening set-up just prior to the credits in *That Girl*) make the use of the term in the title feel less than ideal and problematic.

The titles to both *That Girl* and *Girls* were determined with help beyond Thomas and Dunham. Thomas had suggested *Miss Independence*, but the network was concerned that it would encourage people to view the lead character as too separated from her parents and her boyfriend,

inappropriately liberated for television at the time. It was a battle that Thomas chose not to fight, allowing Denoff and Persky to come up with *That Girl* (Cole 40). Dunham was interested in using “girls” in her title, but could not settle on anything and resorted to calling the show *The Untitled Lena Dunham Project* while it was being developed. Executive producer Judd Apatow (popular filmmaker himself) suggested going by the simple *Girls*, of which Dunham has said, “The fact is I think like there’s something a little ironic about calling 24-year-old women girls was a little cheeky [sic]. But, at the same time, I don’t think that they would self-identify as women yet and the idea that they are still kind of feeling like little girls, capitalizing on their girlish charm to get what they want” (qtd. in Poniewozik). It seems more than a coincidence that men were involved in pushing Thomas and Dunham to using girls in the titles of their show, a term that might not have felt derogatory or personal to the men, but would certainly have added meaning to Thomas and Dunham. There is more to be discussed here certainly, particularly after *Girls* ends its run and Dunham moves on to other work, but it is worth noting the lack of agency that both women had in this situation, which was unusual for two women who exerted total control almost every aspect over their entire careers and programs.

Since *Girls*’ debut, Thomas has been asked about Dunham and the show’s programming, and originally she was a bit nervous to claim her as an heir to *That Girl*’s legacy, instead preferring *New Girl*’s squeaky clean Zooey Deschanel, who stars as a quirky teacher who moves in with three challenging male roommates after a bad break-up (Shire). Even the marketing for *New Girl* seemed to mirror *That Girl*’s look in which Deschanel appeared in sixties-inspired dresses, and with her hair and make-up styled similarly to Ann Marie. Thomas came around to Dunham, however, and recognized the larger breadth of her career and program actually mirrors more of what Thomas was trying to do with her own career and television show, saying of Dunham, “She’s brilliant, she’s powerful, she’s funny, and she’s just 26 years old. Talk about your wunderkinds. As creator of the HBO’s white-hot

series, *Girls*, Lena Dunham is a bona fide triple-threat, serving as the show’s executive producer, writer and co-star” (The ‘Girls’ of TV”).

*Girls* itself seems to take a few pages from *That Girl*, beyond just the single girl struggling in New York City (Lehman 12). For example, both shows playfully allow for the stars’ real-life parents to make cameo appearances. Thomas’ father, sister, and brother all appear in one episode (3.19, “My Sister’s Keeper,” 6 Feb. 1969), where her brother Tony plays an agent to a fabulous singing nun (played by her sister Terre, a singer herself). Ann bumps into Danny Thomas, playing a priest, and says, “Oh, excuse me, Father!” to which he replies, “That’s all right, my child.” Lena Dunham casts her artist mother, Laurie Simmons, as a cruel and exacting gallery owner who is interviewing Marnie for a gallery position, providing a tie to the art world (2.2, “I Get Ideas,” 20 Jan. 2013).

Beyond the nepotistic casting, both shows know when to employ costumes and timing for comic effect, be it a chicken costume or a Monopoly game piece (*That Girl*) to a neon yellow see-thru mesh shirt or painful performance art (*Girls*). Choreographed dance numbers and elaborate montage scenes carefully set to music appear at moments on both programs. While *Girls* takes full advantage of being on a paid, subscription-based network and utilizes cursing and nudity, both shows are not above taking advantage of a completely over-the-top situation to draw two characters closer together and to create a really sweet moment.

Another important similarity between the two shows is their unwillingness to be comfortable with their status quo. Both shows exude white privilege, but they also take conscious steps to at least address it and at times to create a thoughtful dialog concerning it.<sup>4</sup> While Ann humbly dissected the way she interacted with David in “The Defiant One,” Hannah’s relationship with Sandy (Donald Glover), a black Republican, begins to implode when it is pointed out to her by her roommate that their political beliefs should make them incompatible (2.2, “I Get Ideas,” 20 Jan. 2013). He does not like an essay that she wrote, and Hannah takes advantage of that moment to start a fight:

Okay, well . . . this is hard for me to say, 'cause I really like you, but I think our political beliefs are just too different and that we should just be friends.

Sandy: I knew this. This always happens . . . like 'Oh, I'm a white girl and I moved to New York and I'm having a great time and oh, I've got a fixed gear bike and I'm gonna date a black guy and we're gonna go to a dangerous part of town.' All that bullshit? Like, yeah, I know this. I've seen it happen a million times and then they can't deal with who I am. ("I Get Ideas")

The fight devolves even further as Hannah spirals out of control and tries to claim that Sandy is just lumping all white women all together as one. Then, she says she does not even "see" race, and she proves this by quoting African-American rapper Missy Elliot (although Hannah denies knowing who she is). Both the viewer and Sandy are infuriated with Hannah's stubbornly insensitive comments; what she is presenting as an argument about race just masks her feelings of insecurity about her writing and her position in her relationship. Dunham and Jenni Konner, the episode's writer, smartly and effectively turn on their critics, as Sandy seems to be skewering Hannah the way the show was challenged for its all white cast after their first season. Like Thomas before her, Dunham is unwilling to just simply tell a story; rather, she prefers to start a conversation that prompts commentary and discussion, one that helpfully challenges societal conventions.

As the fifth season of *Girls* is about to hit airwaves at the start of 2016, Dunham has begun to hint that the sixth season might be the show's last. Her words echo Thomas' sentiments at the end of *That Girl*, "I started working on this show when I was 23, and now I'm going to be 30 so it kind of feels right that this show kind of sandwiched my 20s and then I go off into the world" (qtd. in Satran). As the writers consider the show's end, Dunham has also pursued a number of projects that should also feel familiar to Thomas: a memoir (*Not that Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned,"* 2014), a book tour on which she teamed up with Planned Parenthood to both raise money and provide information about their health services, a documentary (*It's Me, Hilary: The Man Who Drew Eloise*, 2015, HBO), and activism—vocally supporting voting rights,

birth control and political candidates, in particular, Hillary Clinton. When further describing Dunham, Thomas has elaborated, "Dead-honest, whip-smart and hilarious, *Girls* paints a vivid portrait of the young 21st century woman—anxieties, passions, triumphs, and all. As the driving force behind the program, Dunham embodies a new generation that has brought a distinct female sensibility to television" ("The *Girls* of TV"). What Thomas might not recognize or even remember is that she was the 1960s version of Dunham, or better yet, Dunham is the 21st century version of Thomas. Both of these women have worked hard to be the "voice of their generation" (to quote Hannah in *Girls*, 1.1, "Pilot," 15 Apr. 2012), and both *That Girl* and *Girls*' lasting success will be a testament not just to their impressive acting abilities, but more to their capabilities as leaders and, ultimately, voices of their generations.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The lyrics, while now very familiar, were actually only introduced in the fifth and final season. Sam Denoff, one of the show's creators, wanted to add something to the existing theme song by Earle Hagen that could really describe both Ann Marie and Marlo Thomas (Cole 139–40).

<sup>2</sup> *That Girl* is often credited as being the first show about a single woman, and yet, that is not entirely true. There have been other shows about single woman, but many are either widowed, divorced, living with others, set in a prior time period, or very short-lived.

Both *Private Secretary* (CBS, 1953–1957) and *Our Miss Brooks* (CBS, 1952–1956) did feature independent women, but they were both above forty. For a more nuanced and detailed breakdown of this genre, see “‘Sisters Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Single in the City” in *June Cleaver was a Feminist! Reconsidering the Female Characters of Early Television* (O’Dells 162–75).

<sup>3</sup> Because of an attempt to court viewers and get a jump on the other networks, CBS aired a special preview episode of *That Girl* on 8 Sept. 1966. This episode (“Don’t Just Do Something, Stand There”) introduced Donald to the audience by having Ann and Donald meet for the first time. Chronologically, however, it was the second episode in the series. Following the episode, Marlo Thomas appeared in a brief clip and thanked the audience for watching and told them to tune in next week where they would see the first episode of the series and meet her parents. That episode, entitled “Good-bye, Hello, Good-bye,” focused on Ann’s closeness to her parents and her move to New York City.

<sup>4</sup> In the late 1960s, television shows were typically geared toward black or white audiences, including casts made up of one race or the other. For more information, see Christine Acham, *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power* (2005) and Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (2001). Since it began airing in 2012, *Girls*’ main criticism was its extreme whiteness, both in subject and casting. Many important sources have addressed that, but to start, see Nikita T. Hamilton, “So They Say You Have a Race Problem? You’re in Your Twenties, You Have Way More Problems Than That” (2014); Judy Berman, “‘I’m a White Girl’: Why ‘Girls’ Won’t Ever Overcome Its Racial Problem” (2015); and Ta-Nehisi Coates, “‘Girls’ Through the Veil” (2015).

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