

# The Comic Mirror

## *Domestic Surveillance in Mary Worth*

BY JENNIFER FISHER

For some time I have been intrigued by representations of women artists in the popular media. Fascinating mediations of the art discourse can be observed on TV soaps and newspaper comics. For one familiar with the contemporary art discourse these images have a quality of being “patently *wrong*,” yet are based on recognizable features and structures.<sup>1</sup>

The conventions of popular media uphold various, sometimes contradictory, stereotypes. In television soaps, both day and night (*The Young and the Restless* and *Dallas*), artists have been upheld as signifiers of elite culture, wealth or class, while syndicated newspaper comics, such as *Mary Worth*, have disclaimed the artist as a fool, subversive and an underminer of the status quo.

The sites of feminist struggle in representation are not absolute, but can be located between the transitory alignment of structures of power and lived experience, between the mediated image of the artist and the reader herself. In this article, I will consider some conventions of *Mary Worth* as they articulate with my own reading.

Feminism’s evolution through essentialist, subcultural and separatist textual approaches has ultimately allowed a practice which becomes a “play on the contradictions that inform patriarchy itself.”<sup>2</sup> For me the key word is “play,” in the sense that we can choose the way we interact with media representations as they shift and change in a shimmering dance. The sense of “play” is particularly significant because it enables movement between the representations seemingly *imposed* by a one-way communication process, and the presence *we choose* to express within our social formation (the art community).

I wish to focus on the fictional portrayal of a woman artist, “Jenny,” in the *Mary Worth* comic strip.<sup>3</sup> As the scenario, which in soap opera formula was interspersed with many other simultaneous dramas, gradually unfolded, a peculiar recognition occurred: not only did Jenny and I share the same name, but we both considered ourselves artists and had more-than-a-passing interest in reading our horoscopes. My sympathy for Jenny’s preoccupations triggered my sense of identification with her. In effect, I began to see myself reflected in the representation, despite the discouraging narrative. Over some time, my viewing of the portrayal of Jenny took on the quality of a hall of distort-

ing mirrors at an amusement park — where we view the amusing and outrageous distortions of who we believe ourselves to be. Yet, such a text occurs at a site, not where our permission has been given to participate in a carnivalesque inversion of reality, but in the appropriations of syndicated newspaper cartoons which frame content, in this case a women artist, in relation to particular conventions.

The fictitious *Mary Worth* community is presented as enacting roles that constantly re-establish a particular moral hierarchy. In effect, it presents an ideology of domestic surveillance where Mary Worth, the well-known central character, metonymically enacts and polices the “conscience” of American capitalism. Her tweed suits, decorated apartment and manners exude the normalized tastes of an upper-middle class, middle-aged matron. Indeed, the surname “Worth” is a synonym for the word “value.” Hence, Mary Worth’s constant mission throughout the strip, like an Ann-Landers-of-Mercy, is to intervene in people’s domestic lives, ascertain their “problems” — usually the result of straying from a conservative value system — and reinstate the hierarchy.

In the scenario illustrated here, Mary Worth and her friend Sybil Hull express “shock and distaste” at Jenny’s fashion designs which they deem too *risque*. Jenny’s constructions of taste are clearly in opposition to those of Mary Worth. Yet Sybil Hull’s husband encourages Jenny by hiring her to decorate the den of their home in the wealthy New York suburb of Greenwich. When Mr. Hull gives Jenny a one-hundred-dollar retainer fee, she is clearly amazed by the bill she holds in her hands. Later, Mary Worth suggests that Jenny use the money “to buy something suitable to wear.” Jenny replies that she has already designed a proper “Gemini decorator uniform ... a harlequin leotard with white cape and sandals.” Horrified, Mary then takes Jenny, wearing the harlequin uniform, out shopping to get a more “appropriate” outfit. As they return from the shopping trip, Kevin, the apartment security guard (the straight, patronizing, potential love interest), admires Jenny’s new suit, accented by a rather castrated tie around her neck.

This scenario in *Mary Worth*, in effect, reveals the corporate elite’s relationship with the “other.” Its disturbing narrative trivializes and ridicules Jenny’s concerns and sets her alone in relationship to a conservative social formation. Displacement is Jenny’s affective state, she is separate from others of her style,

age and interests, and positioned as a vulnerable, singular sitting duck. She is passively swept away by Mary Worth to invest in "suitable clothing" in a shopping spree at "Betty's Fashions for the Business Woman." Middle-class idioms of disciplinary scolding and affirmation: "young lady," "something suitable to wear," "don't want...the neighbours to think," "you look super," permeate the dialogue. The outcome presents Jenny transformed via fashion into a "pure object" worthy of Kevin's admiration. His role as "security guard" is somewhat ominous here, because it is bourgeois domestic security that is being guarded. In the last frame of this sequence we see Jenny from Kevin's point of view as the image of respectability.

Jenny's fashion sense and its expression are the site where the conflict occurs between her values and those of Mary Worth. The strip portrays a smoothing over of contradictions and assertion of one taste over another through the convention of ridicule. Roland Barthes describes the displacement of the "other" with that of clown as a way of reducing difference.

*If he comes face to face with him [her] he blinds himself, ignores and denies him [her], or else transforms him [her] into himself... any otherness is reduced to sameness. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he [she] no longer threatens the security of the home.<sup>4</sup>*

Jenny's attire, speech, economic marginality and [dis]taste threaten the security of Mary Worth's domestic hierarchy. Her marginal artistic and astrological preoccupations leave her clearly "astray" in the workings of her social milieu. Yet while deviant, Jenny remains in awe of Mr. Hull's money and dependent on Mary Worth's good will. It is not the money and comfort afforded by the corporate elite that Jenny does not tolerate, but its language. She prefers her own language—the Gemini decorator uniform.

In this "uniform," the cartoonists have created a potent metaphor that displaces the fashion of artistic, punk or street subcultures with that of an actual clown, Harlequin. The use of this convention of displacement-to-ridicule reveals a particular agenda which disempowers Jenny as "other." It is the quality of the distortion

which is important and which I recognized as connoting my own social formation. Jenny-as-clown functions to assert the morality of bourgeois domesticity over that of single women, artists, horoscope readers. Within this domestic ideology there is no place for contradiction.

In this sense analyzing the quality of the distortion itself is useful. To understand the positions designated in framing you is empowering. To see and name your representation allows conscious response and action. The representation itself, in turn, becomes material to be subverted, manoeuvred to another site or otherwise reinvested with, in this case, a feminist point of view. My reading refuses to accept the moral of this depressingly familiar story of a female artist and her body as a site where patriarchally informed agendas literally strip her of her desire for self-determination.

Ultimately deconstruction of such representations of women may be regarded as a strategic practice.<sup>5</sup> It is precisely in the spaces between actual experience and its representation that we can observe the distorting quality of the media-mirror itself. Any pleasure that exists for the feminist reader exists in reading against the grain, in refusing a complicit reception, in claiming

space within our own social formations and ways of reading popular texts.

*I would like to thank Charles Acland for his comments and suggestions on this piece.*



<sup>1</sup> Ann Bremner, "Money, Love, and Laughter: Art on the Soaps," *Dialogue*, Vol. 10, No. 4, July/August 1987.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Barry and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, "The Politics of Art-Making," *Feminist Art Criticism: An Anthology*, ed. Arlene Raven, Ann Arbor/London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1988, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Mary Worth* appeared regularly in the *Montreal Gazette* for most of my life, but was recently discontinued. The strips illustrated appeared in October 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. London, Toronto, Sydney, New York: Granada, 1976, pp.150-152 (emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> Annette Kuhn. *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 8.

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