5. Of Female Cops and Docs: The Reformulation of Workplace Dramas and Other Trends in Mixed-Sex Ensembles

One of the first representational issues targeted by feminist criticism was television's limited depiction of women as workers outside of the home. The single-woman character dates to television's early years; however, depictions of women in the workforce after marriage or in lieu of homemaking and motherhood did not appear in a significant manner until the 1970s, and even then often enforced hegemonic American gender roles. Dramatic franchise series about male detectives, doctors, and lawyers have long told stories about the duties of work, but women rarely had a space in these worlds. Few stories about the work women do outside the home have been featured by television narratives, and until recently, stories about career women have primarily chronicled their struggle and difficulty with balancing careers, motherhood, marriage, and traditional constructs of femininity.

Second-wave feminism's emphasis on seeking equality for women in the public sphere made creating career opportunities for women the central activist project, and the results endure as one of the movement's greatest legacies. Like the changing American workplace, U.S. television series increasingly incorporated working women into their casts, with marked change beginning in the 1970s and early 1980s. As explored in the introduction, depictions of female characters pursuing professional careers developed for self-serving reasons when advertisers realized the consumption power of real-world working women.[1] Consequently, the stories about working women that did emerge in dramatic series focused on one particular type of work—that of the career woman. Dramatic stories about working women continued to ignore the work done by poor and most middle-class women, just as the working class has been nearly absent from U.S. television throughout its history.

Television depictions of career women have drawn attention as apparently feminist by definition because of characters' access to spaces outside of the home.[2] The careers of characters in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Murphy Brown, Cagney and Lacey,* and even *Charlie's Angels* were seen as progressive because their pursuit of careers indicated cultural importance, regardless of other, less feminist narrative and representational aspects. In the 1980s, female characters began more frequently appearing in roles with narrative significance, as they moved from secretary and nurse to detective and doctor.[3] Embodying career roles, however, still did not lead to many stories about women and their work.[4]

As stories about working women increased in the 1980s, two narrative trends developed that effectively contained the exploration of new stories about women in career roles. As women pursued a liberal feminist agenda that required assimilation into male-dominated workplaces, television series featured stories that suggested women are ill-suited for professional roles or could not be both mothers and career women. The career opportunities afforded these characters led to repeated stories about women's difficulty participating in the workforce, a reasonable story in moderation, as many real women likely had such experiences, but not as a primary type of story repeated across many series. The underlying message of these stories often suggested that women should concede their careers; *Baby Boom, L.A. Law,* and *thirtysomething* provide examples of such characters grappling with new gender scripts and modes of femininity.[5]

In contrast, other series presented stories that simply assumed women could balance work in the public sphere and at home with no difficulty. Networks depicted female characters who traversed the boundary between work and home, many of whom were primarily included in narratives set in the home. Such characterizations contributed to creating the "superwoman" who breezed through occupational demands (always off camera) and "second shift" duties at home (*The Cosby Show, Family Ties, Growing Pains*). These series rarely told stories about women doing work, despite attempting to associate themselves with the progressive trend of depicting women as qualified to work outside the home.

Even series that represented women as able workers and avoided narratives about the challenges they faced in the workplace had difficulty constructing stories that resonated with audiences. Despite the narrative importance of her role and the occupational power of her character, Joyce Davenport (Veronica Hamel) of *Hill Street Blues* presented a narrowly defined "career-woman femininity" that some female viewers found alienating, contradicting producers' efforts to offer empowered characters.[6] The

tough veneer worn by Davenport and her contemporaries—a revised femininity donned to survive sexist public spaces—further indicates the challenges in characterization and storytelling strategy that emerged as series began integrating women into the workplace.

The newness of the type, the network-era institutional context, and the conservative political era of backlash in which these series aired led each character to bear a tremendous representational burden. The paucity of working-women characters and the dominance of role-model frameworks for analysis led these characters to serve as bellwethers for understanding and communicating cultural shifts. Many of these shows could have told a greater diversity of stories about women in the workplace, but the attention to these characters as indicative of the success of feminist efforts provided a narrative straightjacket.

By the late 1990s, however, depictions of female characters' choices in work and motherhood derived new meaning. The new multiplicity and diversity of female characters required new critical models for assessing representations. Where the depiction of Amy Gray's struggle in balancing work and life as a single mother might have been interpreted as a cautionary tale in the 1980s, by the 1990s her situation had gained social acceptance, and *Judging Amy* circulated among a broad range of other stories about women, work, and family. This makes it possible to assess this story as a service to those women with whom her struggles resonate, rather than as a conservative attempt to send her back to a failed marriage or into the domestic sphere. The "diversity" of female representations remains limited to those who are white, conventionally attractive, and for the most part, upper-middle-class, but the breadth of female characters at the center of narratives requires that critics account for the changed cultural context and representational environment. Despite various cultural and institutional changes, employment in a professional career remains a crucial component of female representations that critics consider progressive.[7]

Workplace dramas tell stories distinctive from those featured in other narrative types regardless of the universal presence of careers among the characters in the female-centered dramas at the turn of the twenty-first century. The heroines in action dramas often perform jobs that are secondary to their main capacity as warriors, but regardless of the nontraditional nature of this "employment," the heroines' saving-the-world activities primarily circumscribe them as nondomestic or as workers. Similarly, careers provide a defining feature of the comedic drama's new-woman characters, although the stories rarely emphasize the characters facing challenges because of their professional status. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* (despite their varying narrative occupa-

tion of "work" spaces) use storylines resulting from the characters' professions, such as the cases Ally works on and the stories Carrie writes, to probe issues related to their personal lives. Protagonist-centered family dramas often depict the characters struggling to balance professional activities and their personal lives, and many also focus on characters performing career tasks. The workplace cannot become of primary importance, however, because of the narrative equilibrium these series seek between stories of the protagonists' professional duties and their roles as daughter, mother, or sister. Mixed-sex workplace ensembles and series with mostly female casts, such as *Strong Medicine* and *The Division,* provide distinctive narratives that explore stories about public spaces and a diverse range of female characters.

Narrative and Thematic Attributes of Workplace Dramas

The predominant types of dramatic series throughout U.S. broadcast history—the police/detective procedural, the law drama, and medical series—reappear with unfailing consistency because of the sorts of stories their settings allow them to explore. These occupations are well-suited for the episodic nature of television storytelling, as workers in these professions constantly interact with new individuals with new problems, generating new stories. Although *E.R.* may only bear slight resemblance to *Ben Casey* or *NYPD Blue* to *Naked City,* the regular recurrence and gradual evolution of these series reveals much about changes in U.S. culture, from our understanding of diseases and cures to our varying faith in systems of law and order. The central place that workplace dramas occupy in American television storytelling has made them a crucial space for the integration of women; their unfailing repetition and recombination enables critics to trace the gradual progress of female characters into positions of narrative importance.

The predecessors of the characters in *Strong Medicine* and *The Division,* like the women of the second-wave generation, did not find themselves in workspaces accepting of women pursuing careers. Stories about female characters in ensemble narratives often focused on their struggle to infiltrate male spaces and be seen as equals in their colleagues' eyes. These stories emphasize female characters' difficulty balancing their careers with romantic partnership and child rearing or depict male characters questioning their abilities because they are women. Significantly, such stories persist; recent examples depicting complications for female workers include Jamie Ross (Carey Lowell) resigning her assistant district attorney position on *Law and Order* because her ex-husband threatens to challenge her custody of their child because of the number of hours she works, or the surgeon Kate Austin (Christine Lahti) encountering a

similar situation on *Chicago Hope* and losing custody of her daughter. The final season of *Homicide: Life on the Street* depicts the challenges Detective Rene Sheppard (Michael Michele) experiences in gaining the respect of other detectives because she was once a beauty-pageant winner and is still an exceptionally attractive woman. Her partner and colleagues are skeptical of her ability to handle the physical aspects of her job.[8]

As part of the shifts in recurring narratives explored through workplace dramas, it is worth noting that some series also emphasize the effect of family demands on male characters—a challenge traditionally faced only by female characters. Harvey Lacey of *Cagney and Lacey* provided an early example of a trend that has since expanded to primary male characters. Early seasons of *E.R.* reversed the situation in which narratives punished women for having demanding careers with repercussions in their family life when Dr. Mark Greene's (Anthony Edwards) marriage ends in divorce because he is unable to devote time to the relationship. His wife later remarries and moves away, which leaves Greene with limited access to his daughter, again because of his career. Dr. Peter Benton (Eriq La Salle) faces a similar challenge in trying to share custody of his infant son with the child's mother. The child's deafness exacerbates Benton's struggle, and the series often depicts the impossibility of balancing the demands of work with the needs of his child. He ultimately resigns from his hectic schedule as an emergency surgeon to gain custody of his son following the death of the child's mother; Detective Rey Curtis (Benjamin Bratt) leaves his job entirely to care for his chronically ill wife and their children on *Law and Order.* Although not emphasized here, the changes in the stories told by late 1990s dramas about women also affect the stories told about men. These series alter previous norms so that female characters increasingly appear as able careerists, and male characters come to realize the family/work double-bind that has long troubled women.

Even ensemble workplace series such as *Law and Order, Homicide,* and *E.R.* do not tell uniform stories about women in the workplace. The professional roles of women appear more naturalized, so that many characters appear as doctors, lawyers, and detectives who are women, rather than as *women* doctors, lawyers, and detectives. This naturalization of women into historically male-dominated careers illustrates an expansion in the range of narratives. The de-emphasis on gender helps series move beyond stories confined to debating the ability of female characters to balance work and home. For example, *Law and Order* and *E.R.* do not depict their doctors, lawyers, and lieutenants as *women* performing jobs so much as they are *people* performing jobs. The shift from highlighting gender when a woman occupies a professional role indicates an acceptance of women in these positions.

The development of "reconfigured" workplace dramas provides the most

notable innovation for workplace series in the late 1990s. *Strong Medicine* (2000–2006) and *The Division* (2001–4) both air on Lifetime and move beyond incorporating women into traditionally male spaces to allow them to dominate these spaces in rank and number.[9] Neither series primarily explores stories about women who struggle in their careers because they are women. They also offer the broadest depiction of women as a group composed of individuals with varied needs, experiences, and privileges.[10]

In addition to these reconfigured workspaces, some mixed-sex ensemble series have integrated female characters so that they are no longer exceptional. This development was evident in a variety of series by the early 1990s: doctors in *E.R.;* detectives in *NYPD Blue, Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,* and *Homicide: Life on the Street;* and lawyers in *Law and Order* and *Family Law.* The characters in these mixed-sex ensembles are similar to those in *Strong Medicine* and *The Division;* however, the overwhelmingly female composition of the latter series and their location on a network that specifically targets female audiences enable them to explore stories about women on a weekly basis. Such stories may only receive attention once or twice a season in the mixed-sex ensemble series.

A Space of Their Own: Lifetime's Female-Dominated Workplaces

I have emphasized commonalities by delimiting the characteristics of the type and exploring how prevailing motifs, themes, and elements recur across the series to indicate the similarities and differences of the stories told within each and among all of the narrative types. The workplace dramas require less explanation as a dramatic form; they are defined by their institutional setting, the presence of female characters in professional careers, and their focus on telling stories about the lives of women. In this chapter I examine each series separately and note the different narrative strategies they use to tell stories about women who work in spaces accepting of their presence. *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* provide an unprecedented opportunity for storytelling, although they pursue the objective of reaching female audience members through disparate means. Their variation indicates the diversity possible among series with similar composition and demographic targets and also suggests the breadth of stories workplace dramas can explore.

Strong Medicine

Strong Medicine was the first of Lifetime's female-centered workplace dramas. It focuses on two doctors, Luisa (Lu) Delgado (Rosa Blasi) and Dana

Stowe (Janine Turner).[11] The pilot episode depicts Lu operating a street-front clinic for women and "those they love and care for" in inner-city Philadelphia. This is the neighborhood in which she grew up; the community helped her to pay for medical school, and she now serves them with the aid of a grant. On the other side of town, Dana works at the prestigious Rittenhouse Hospital as one of the nation's top women's health experts. She serves a very different clientele with similar needs. A variety of narrative complications result in Lu losing her clinic and Rittenhouse opening a women's clinic that both doctors must share. The first season emphasizes the differences between the doctors, their outlooks on medicine, and the options afforded to their patients. The series explores this area in subsequent seasons, but it becomes a less primary narrative focus. Janine Turner left the series during the third season, and her character was replaced by Dr. Andy Campbell (Patricia Richardson). Andy spent her career as a military doctor prior to joining Rittenhouse, which allows her to remain distinctive from Lu while creating different interpersonal and professional conflicts than those between Lu and Dana. Andy was appointed U.S. surgeon general in the final episode of the fifth season, and the series altered its form by replacing her with a male doctor, Dylan West (Rick Schroder) at the beginning of the sixth season.

Strong Medicine distinguishes itself from more general hospital franchise series through its focus on two female physicians and the problems that arise in a clinic for women. The series resembles medical dramas such as *E.R.* or *Chicago Hope* in its visual style, episode organization, and narrative emphases. Lu and Dana face dilemmas about how to best treat patients and obligations to a bottom-line-oriented hospital director, and the series occasionally explores the issues they face in their personal lives. Neither doctor is married, but Lu has an adolescent son, and Dana develops a romantic relationship with a male resident, which introduces narrative complications. Andy's marriage provides the focus of stories told about her in her first season. She is married to a man who was laid off and then struggles with his role as house husband and in accepting the duty of raising the couple's young teenage daughters, which eventually leads to uncontrolled anger and domestic violence against Andy. She forces him out of the house pending anger-management therapy; his refusal to seek help results in their divorce.

Strong Medicine also differs considerably from *Heartbeat,* a similarly constructed series ABC attempted in 1988.[12] *Heartbeat* featured containment narratives in which female doctors had to choose either personal or professional lives, a tension that is embodied by the lead character, Dr. Joanne Springsteen (Kate Mulgrew). The different social contexts of the late 1980s and the early 2000s allow the concept of a women's clinic run by women doctors to have

a different level of distinction. In *Strong Medicine,* Rittenhouse's mission to serve women across the socioeconomic spectrum receives narrative emphasis in a way that suggests that the notion of a women's clinic or the predominance of female doctors no longer seems exceptional. In *Heartbeat,* the creation of a women's clinic managed by female doctors functions as a point of narrative tension.

Three narrative aspects make the stories *Strong Medicine* tells particularly distinctive: the centrality of women's stories in the case of doctors and patients, the emphasis on episodic stories about patients over those of the doctors, and the hybrid entertainment and educative function of the narratives. The series explores conventional stories about its doctors, as Lu, Dana, and Andy struggle with moral dilemmas in caring for their patients.[13] Such storylines allow the series to interrogate the causes of the doctors' ambivalence about certain treatments in dealing with matters that affect the lives of their female patients, their patients' partners, and children. Narratives do not query the doctors' abilities, a common plot in medical dramas.

The emphasis on the doctors' struggles to resolve life-threatening predicaments suggests their centrality to *Strong Medicine*'s narratives, but Dana and Lu serve mainly as conduits through which the series tells the female patients' stories. This narrative strategy distinguishes the series from a medical drama such as *E.R.,* which foregrounds the doctors and hospital workers. Emphasizing patients' stories means that the series is organized episodically, as new patients enter in the opening scene of each episode and provide a "disease-of-the-week" crisis that must be alleviated by the end. By the third season, the series began emphasizing the personal lives of the two doctors more regularly, slightly decreasing the focus on patients' stories. Even with this readjustment, patients' stories and situations are more developed than is common among coterminous medical series.

Strong Medicine's narrative emphasis on patients enables the third feature of the series: educating viewers through fictional storytelling. In each episode, the doctors cite statistics, health concerns, and discuss good health practices in an explicitly educative manner that clearly links storytelling with education about women's health issues. Most episodes begin with Lu facilitating a women's support group, to whom she explains new developments in women's health care and preventative protocols. Because the series is based in a women's clinic, it explores disorders that disproportionately affect women in a way that introduces lesser-known ailments, their symptoms, and the importance of medical treatment. The series often addresses the subordinate status of women's medicine and the inadequacy of medical models that consider women as smaller versions of men. The official *Strong Medicine* Web

page on Lifetime's site reinforces the explicit educative function of the television narratives. Information about the series such as cast biographies and episode guides are secondary to various medical resources, including a link to women's health resources, an expanded description of the disease of the week, links to groups discussing women's health issues, and an "ask the expert" column.

A noteworthy difference in storytelling emerged when Lifetime debuted its *Women Docs* (2001–2) series, a reality show designed to anchor the spin-off Lifetime Real Women network. Each week this series presents a day-in-the-life glimpse of four women doctors, with a new location and new group of doctors in each episode. In contrast to *Strong Medicine,* these stories focus on the doctors and their lives. The dilemmas faced by Lu and Dana are somewhat mirrored in the real doctors' decisions regarding medical protocol, although their quandaries are rarely as ethically complex as those explored in the fictional series. The series focuses on doctors rather than patients for practical reasons, primarily issues of privacy. The combination of these two series on Lifetime aids the network in establishing a brand that centers upon women and presents programming that seeks to serve entertainment and educative functions.

Paradoxically, the "real" depiction of medicine, *Women Docs,* does not pursue the educative agenda clearly established in the fictional *Strong Medicine. Women Docs* emphasizes personalities, with new "characters" each week, and it explores the doctors' personal lives in greater depth than *Strong Medicine.* Audiences hear about the difficulty of balancing home and professional life; the doctors express guilt about the hours they spend away from their children, admit the difficulty of maintaining balance in a career that often requires eighty hours of work per week, and acknowledge their sense of accomplishment in the work they do. Various doctors also have addressed the effects of having few female classmates and colleagues on their feelings about their work and have told stories of being mistaken for nurses because they are women. Having the challenges of the workplace articulated by "real" women provides a different narrative effect than when fictional texts address similar issues, and this alters the viewer's relationship to these ideas. The doctors' challenges evoke a sympathetic response and ally the audience with their struggles. Although the "stories" told in *Women Docs* resonate with the challenges fictional characters faced in 1980s series, it is difficult to find evidence of a containment strategy. Where networks targeted the 1980s ensemble dramas to mixed-sex audiences, Lifetime's female niche makes this televisual space one of women talking with women, which allows the stories about work-related struggles to function more as stories told in confidence than as containment.

Despite the conventions of *Strong Medicine* and its clear attempts to fit within yet vary from the medical drama franchise, the series enables some of the most radically distinct stories of any of the series that air contemporaneously. General medical dramas have not introduced topics such as bleeding fibroids, the dilemmas of becoming a surrogate mother, or the disparate medical opportunities available to poor and upper-class women within the cultural arena, but these stories are possible for *Strong Medicine* because of its narrative construction and Lifetime's niche focus. The stories it tells provide multiple points of distinction. The women's clinic allows for repeated and sustained stories about less-common women's health issues. The emphasis on patients' stories shifts the typical identification point for viewers from the all-knowing physician and provides an opportunity to explore the difficulties poor women face in the absence of universal health care. Its most noteworthy accomplishment, allowing patients a voice—particularly those who are working-class and underprivileged—expands stories available to female audiences and is feminist in nature, providing a service for women beyond narrative entertainment. Lifetime's ability to augment the *Strong Medicine* stories with those of real *Women Docs* allows the network to also tell developed stories about the experiences of female physicians in a narrative space that is supportive rather than threatening.

The Division

In contrast to *Strong Medicine*'s emphasis on patients to introduce narratives, *The Division* uses its regular cast of characters to explore the intricacies of women's lives. Many of the victims of the crimes they investigate are women, but the series does not develop these episodic characters with the depth afforded to the patients of *Strong Medicine.* The victims serve as catalysts for storylines about the detectives or for providing greater character depth, a conventional narrative organization among contemporary workplace dramas. *The Division*'s large cast, five detectives and their female captain, aids its internal focus.[14] Its emphasis on the personal lives of recurring characters affords it a more developed serial component than *Strong Medicine.*

The cast has shifted slightly over the course of the series. Captain Katelyn McCafferty (Bonnie Bedelia) commands the San Francisco unit. She is a divorced white woman with a complicated relationship with her adult daughter who resents Kate's commitment to her career. Kate belongs to the generation that first integrated the police force, and she understands her status as a woman in a police organization differently than the detectives. Detective Jinny Exstead (Nancy McKeon) is a talented cop, a single white woman from a law-enforcement family, but she begins the series on an alcoholic spiral of

destruction. Detective Magda Ramirez (Lisa Vidal), a Latina single mother, partners with Exstead after beginning the series with a married male partner who requests a transfer after she rebukes his romantic advances. Detective C. D. DeLorenzo (Tracey Needham) finds herself with a new partner, Angela Reide (Lela Rochon Fuqua), in the first season, after her previous partner (with whom she was having an affair) killed himself. Reide, an African American, advanced through the ranks quickly and has little street experience. After Rochon Fuqua leaves the series, DeLorenzo partners with Nate Basso (Jon Hamm), the only regular male character on the series. Raina Washington (Taraji Henson), an African American raised by white lesbian mothers, begins the series as a uniformed officer assigned to the squad room and later becomes a detective. Stacy Newland (Amy Jo Johnson), a young white woman from a privileged background, replaces her as a uniformed officer in the fourth season.

The factors complicating the characters' personal lives provide much of their differentiation, as the series depicts all of them as able officers. Many of the detectives have complicated personal and family relationships, and much of the weekly story focuses on them discussing personal crises with their partners while going through the motions of police work. Many of these stories create ongoing difficulties for the characters that span multiple episodes and even seasons. For example, the father of Ramirez's child returns after an eight-year absence and desires to create a traditional family. The couple eventually marries, but her husband's constant traveling leads her to have an affair, and he leaves again after she confesses. Her storyline also chronicles her son's fight with leukemia and her complicated relationship with her sister. Similarly, Exstead begins the series as a recklessly promiscuous drunk and requires an intervention by the force and her family at the end of the first season. She goes to rehab but becomes addicted to painkillers after she returns. She marries a man she meets in rehab and divorces him a few months later. She marries again after apparently overcoming her addictions and becoming pregnant. Meanwhile, her family life is complicated by history (her mother committed suicide when she was a child). One of her brothers is gay and struggles to come out to the family and police force; her other brother is killed in the line of duty; and she learns that her father (a retired officer) had a wife and child she and her brothers never knew about. This sample of two characters' storylines suggests the types of stories the series focuses on and its emphasis on the detectives and nonpolice matters.

Ongoing work-related stories filled with this type of melodrama are less frequent, although each episode features the detectives solving a crime. A long plotline chronicles difficult dealings between McCafferty and a sexist police

chief and then her pursuit of his job after he is killed, and Exstead's future on the force is uncertain in the early seasons in which she battles addictions and various internal review boards threaten her employment. Each episode of *The Division* features a homicide the characters must solve, which requires some narrative time spent tracking down leads and interrogating suspects, but narratives about solving crimes are emphasized much less than in a series such as *Homicide: Life on the Street* or *Law and Order. NYPD Blue* provides a better comparison, particularly in later seasons in which the personal lives of Sipowicz, Simone, Russell, and Sorenson dominate the narrative, although crime solving is more central than in *The Division. The Division* creates a workplace environment dominated by female characters and then emphasizes intimate aspects of their lives and personality that bear little relation to their professional duties. The series depicts discussions of crime solving and their personal lives much more than it attends to their doing—plot action is minimal, and standard cop-show fare such as chase scenes or action sequences are negligible (which may also be a budgetary factor related to airing on a basic cable network).

The stories told by and about the female workplace ensemble in *The Division* focus on working women coping with their jobs and the problems they encounter. These problems rarely result from the fact that they are women; the crises are presented as problems working people commonly face, and the narratives depict the characters enduring these struggles. The disparity in the types of stories told by *Strong Medicine, The Division,* and even *Women Docs* indicates the inadequacy of workplace settings as a predictor of story type. *The Division* offers little innovation, tells few original stories, and mainly provides a different version of the cop series by exploring interpersonal relationships among officers more than the work they perform. Like *Strong Medicine, The Division* attends more to diversity among women than any of the other dramas. While *Strong Medicine* emphasizes stories about class difference, *The Division* is notable for the ethnic diversity of its cast—a diversity the series attends to in storylines rather than allowing it to exist only as window dressing. The series also introduces stories about other socially subordinated groups through the families of the detectives. Washington was raised by a white lesbian couple; McCafferty's daughter and Exstead's brother are gay, and the series uses them to explore stories about prejudice, discrimination, and closeting. Basso's sister has Down's syndrome, and the series includes multiple stories about her and her group home. Because the detectives all have the same job, class is not a central issue in this series; *The Division* constructs the differences among the characters as related to their variant demographic features.

The Division immediately evokes comparisons with *Cagney and Lacey,* a groundbreaking series that preceded it by nearly twenty years. The series are very different and indicate the changes in American culture and the television industry. Where Christine and Mary Beth often retreated to the women's room for conferences, the squad room of *The Division* features more women than men, and the series rarely draws attention to the characters' status as women or outsiders. Julie d'Acci's comprehensive study of *Cagney and Lacey* examines CBS's creative interference to make it acceptable to mainstream audiences, including the recasting of Christine Cagney for the more conventionally feminine Sharon Gless and the network's mandate that she be glamorous and linked to upper-class family wealth.[15] In contrast, *The Division* depicts the characters and their duties with a grittier tone (although not as gritty as *Hill Street Blues*) and makes the differences among the women more complex than those of class and marital status. The writers and producers clearly expend little time balancing the femininity of their characters with dominant norms, which CBS constantly required of *Cagney and Lacey.* The arrival and relative success of *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* suggest noteworthy gains, as their workplace settings dominated by female characters make stories about professional women and those they encounter a primary narrative focus that mixed-sex ensemble workplace series can feature only on occasion.

Notable Stories in Mixed-Sex Ensembles

In addition to the reconfigured workplaces of *Strong Medicine* and *The Division,* a few mixed-sex workplace series require mention. Each provides some distinction particularly relevant to the topic of telling stories about women, whether through characterization or in their ability to explore stories pertinent to contemporary gender issues and politics. Female characters engaged in professional careers proliferated in mixed-sex workplace dramas in the late 1990s and early 2000s; there are far too many to explore the varied significance of each. I address these four series because of their distinction (or lack of distinction, in one case). The possibility of disagreement with my selection, arising because of the plurality of representations, is a significant departure from the uniform agreement of previous eras that was possible only because of the paucity of representations and stories.

These series are distinct from many of the others considered in this book because they are less clearly intended for female viewers or do not emphasize the telling of women's stories. These series circulate widely, are closely related to the stories told by *Strong Medicine* and *The Division,* and suggest possibil-

ities for the representation of women in workplaces even when female characters do not dominate these spaces. The multiplicity of female characters in *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* allows these series to reflect vast differences among women, this diversity is less evident in mixed-sex workplace series, which remain dominated by a fairly monolithic view of femininity and female perspectives.

Family Law

The CBS series *Family Law* (1999–2002) came the closest to bringing a female-centered ensemble to a generally targeted broadcast network. This series debuted alongside *Judging Amy* and *Once and Again* and originally seemed part of the female-centered trend emerging in the late 1990s. It begins from a similar narrative premise as *The Trials of Rosie O'Neill:* Lynn Holt's (Kathleen Quinlan) husband and law partner leaves their marriage and takes the couple's legal clients with him. Lynn opens a new firm that specializes in family law and subleases office space to three other lawyers, with whom she forms a partnership in the second season. *Family Law* focuses on the stories of the families who come to Holt's firm for representation, although the lawyers and their legal maneuvering remains central to the narrative. The series explores situations similar to the court cases in *Judging Amy,* such as dilemmas of family, child crime, and custody in a society complicated by divorce and crimes perpetrated by and against children. One of the original four characters and two of six in the second season are male, which allows the series to create a primarily female workspace, but one that affords more space to men than *Strong Medicine* or *The Division.* The series' home on CBS, however, makes its stories more widely circulated: *Family Law* drew four to five times the number of viewers as the Lifetime series.

Family Law ambivalently depicts the legal structure governing families and children. Viewers' sympathy frequently aligns with losing interests, which also corresponds with *Judging Amy*'s complex and pessimistic portrayal of justice. This creates a tone similar to that of *Strong Medicine,* where patients often die, and the episodic resolution frequently denies a happy ending. These narratives challenge viewers. The stories provide persuasive evidence on both sides of an issue, as in an episode that puts a face on teen male violence, gives him a mother who loves him, and also depicts the families of his victims. Such ambivalence is certainly not unique to series with an atypical number of female characters; *Law and Order* also features such stories. The centrality of a multiplicity of female characters enables the series to explore women's varied perspectives and beliefs in an attempt to understand and negotiate complicated social problems. The female characters in *Family Law* often clash be-

cause of disparate ideological positions, despite the uniformity of upper-middle-class, white, female characters (at least in the first season).

Among the broad array of female-centered dramas appearing in the late 1990s, *Family Law* most closely replicates the reconfigured workplace drama on a mainstream, general-interest broadcast network. As the analysis of *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* illustrates, this type of series provides important innovations to working-woman characters by allowing them self-determined spaces. *Family Law* offers audiences not specified as female a narrative that examines issues through multiple viewpoints and emphasizes a diversity of female perspectives. The emergence of reconfigured workplaces on Lifetime indicates a preliminary adjustment in the stories told about working women on television, but for such stories to move to a general-interest broadcaster suggests further gains.

Third Watch

NBC's *Third Watch* (1999–2005), a series about a group of police officers, emergency crews, and firefighters who work third shift, provides one of the most unusual and noteworthy representations of and distinctive stories about a female worker. Officer Faith Yokus (Molly Price) is a New York City beat cop, the primary provider for her family, and she is partnered with a racist and sexist male officer. The series' depiction of less-glamorous civil service roles is atypical in 1990s television; *Third Watch* lacks lawyers or detectives in expensive suits and is populated with "anyman" and "anywoman" characters who did not go to college and refer to their workplaces as jobs rather than careers. Yokus is one of three women in the series (one each in the police, fire, and emergency teams throughout most seasons), and she is characterized with rich depth. After a first season of narratives organized by the action of the teams responding to emergencies, *Third Watch* began its second season by focusing on one character in each episode, which allowed previously lacking characterization. In the second season, the series explored Faith's character in two episodes in which it told dramatic stories about a working-class woman—a type of story long absent from U.S. television screens.[16]

With the exception of *Any Day Now*'s Mary Elizabeth, the female characters discussed throughout this book are all privileged with at least upper-middle-class lifestyles that are signified by a lack of attention to financial matters and the depiction of characters' material goods, a representation common on U.S. television.[17] Working-class stories with female characters have emerged occasionally, but only comedic series have survived more than a few airings (*Roseanne, Grace Under Fire*). Even dramatic workplace series

that emphasize a character with a working-class background (such as *Strong Medicine*) predominately offer stories about her career or focus on her transition into a new class status rather than highlighting working-class struggles. Stories linked to Faith's class status expose narratives otherwise unavailable and give voice to the realities faced by many of television's viewers.

Faith's family's survival depends on her paycheck, denying her the dilemma of whether or not she should work. Her husband is the children's primary caregiver by default; he is laid off early in the series and struggles to find work. Later, he has a nearly fatal heart attack that necessitates more home rest, again exacerbating the family's reliance on Faith's income. Her class status requires that she confront issues through a different lens than her upper-class counterparts. In the second-season episodes that focus on Faith, she faces an unwanted pregnancy and decides to have an abortion, and later she experiences an identity crisis in frustration with the lack of options in her life. Particularly in the abortion episode, *Third Watch* tells the story of a woman negotiating a limited set of possibilities and an economic reality that leaves little "choice" at all.[18] Faith elects not to tell her husband about the pregnancy because he would want to have the child, and she knows they can barely afford their life with two children. Rather than the typical depiction of an unwanted pregnancy (which often saves the woman from making a decision by having her miscarry or not really be pregnant after all), *Third Watch* portrays a woman who has neither options nor a support system during the crisis. Her partner refuses to consider abortion as an option, which necessitates that she lie to him and tell him she lost the baby due to an injury sustained in the line of duty. The episode closes with Faith alone in a sterile and impersonal clinic. She keeps the decision to herself until the truth emerges two seasons later to complicate her relationships with her partner, husband, and daughter. Their anger and distrust further punishes her.

Third Watch anchors its stories and representations of female workers in a gritty realism of struggle rather than a liberal fantasy of achievement and equality. The series depicts women in nontraditional fields where they must deal with sexism and a testosterone-dominated environment. There is no room for impassioned feminist speeches or legal maneuvers to secure equality; the series depicts women coping with challenging realities with few options but to survive. *Third Watch* contributes a vital perspective to the stories told about women in the late 1990s and early twenty-first century. Its acknowledgment of working-class struggles—even when not focused specifically on a female character or gender issue—exposes a set of stories and gender relations that are vital to creating a diversity of stories about women and their lives.

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit

Another workplace ensemble series that deserves specific mention for its contribution to telling stories about or for women is a spinoff of one of television's most successful workplace franchises. Despite its naming and association with the long-running *Law and Order* (1990–), *SVU* (1999–) breaks from its originator's dual police procedural/legal drama form to primarily explore procedural narratives. As was vogue by the 1990s, the series includes female cast members—one of the primary detectives, the assistant district attorney, and the medical examiner assigned to the unit are women. It is principally relevant to this discussion because of its emphasis on crimes against women. It depicts a police division trained to investigate crimes against "special victims," who are most often women and children who suffer sexual crimes. The narratives emphasize the crime and the process of investigation but offer limited examination of the officers' personal lives. *SVU* primarily tells the stories of its victims rather than the detectives. The inordinate number of women victims whose stories are told makes *SVU* worthy of mention in this context.

SVU treads a fine line between drawing awareness to crimes against women and exploiting these crimes. Stories about rape provide one of the most frequently explored topics for this series, although rape stories had established a place in cop, doc, and legal franchises long before *SVU*'s debut.[19] The series offers valuable narratives validating the experience of female victims, depicting systems of support for those who suffer domestic abuse or rape, and reiterating that these crimes are not her fault. However, weekly explorations of gruesome and horrific crimes (the combination of sex and violence that often attracts high ratings) repeatedly victimize women. *SVU* uses an episodic organization that commonly isolates the women's stories to forty-eight minutes of narrative time, which prevents in-depth exploration of the character or her process of recovery.[20] In this way, the series does not so much tell a diversity of stories about women who recover from deplorable crimes so much as it repeatedly tells a variation of their victimization.

Like *Strong Medicine* and *Family Law, SVU* opens a space for stories about situations that predominately affect women. *SVU*'s narratives and storytelling context, however, are distinct from other series discussed in this chapter, as is its contribution to introducing women's stories to the cultural forum. Unlike *Strong Medicine,* which uses stories about female patients to educate audiences about a variety of ailments commonly suffered by women, the crimes depicted in *SVU* serve only a limited educative function. Unfortunately, news coverage often depicts crimes against women, and most women are well aware

of their frequent status as victims, which makes *SVU*'s repeated depiction of these stories a less significant contribution. Additionally, *SVU* does not treat social issues in the complex manner accomplished by *Family Law.* Where *Family Law* depicts the judicial system struggling to negotiate children's best interest in custody situations or in establishing a face and context for the crimes increasingly committed by American children, personalizing a rapist or sexual predator is of more questionable utility. *SVU* has provided thought-provoking stories about how those convicted of sex crimes bear an irremovable stigma as an indication of the limitations of the U.S. penal system for rehabilitation or retribution, but this is the exception rather than the norm. Because of its special-victims focus, crimes suffered by women achieve more regular and detailed examination than in "regular" police dramas such as *Law and Order* or *NYPD Blue.* The stories *SVU* tells provide an important contribution to dramatic stories about women; however, a detailed analysis of the series is necessary to thoroughly assess its ideological significance.

The West Wing

The political drama *The West Wing* (1999–) indicates the limitations and possibilities for female characters in mixed-sex ensembles. I include it here to address how mixed-sex workplace narratives of the late 1990s and 2000s continue to undermine female characters, even in contexts that superficially appear supportive of their increased career status.[21] Women occupy two of eight opening-credit cast positions in this series—press secretary C. J. Cregg (Allison Janney) and assistant Donna Moss (Janel Moloney).[22] Although her status provides C. J. with some authority in the workplace, the dominance of men in this space and occasional tertiary-level plot devices often undercut her competency and indicate the subtle ways a series dominated by male voices (in cast and writing) contains the female empowerment it wears as a proud mark of its alleged progressive politics.[23]

The Seattle television columnist John Levesque highlighted a prime example of the subtle narratives that diminish C. J.'s status (in a way that does not motivate the narrative and is consequently unnecessary) and noted that the *The West Wing* auteur Aaron Sorkin's tendency for such depiction emerges in his series *Sports Night* as well.[24] He cites an episode in which C. J., as well as the recurring character Ainsley Hayes (Emily Proctor), sit in wet paint, requiring them to spend the episode (in which C. J. does a live broadcast from the White House) walking around without pants. Other similar embarrassments befall C. J.; perhaps the most significant case is a repeated device of making her the last to know important information (a running joke that makes it impossible to do her job well). In another unnecessary narrative mo-

ment, deputy chief of staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) returns a pair of underwear to his assistant Donna after meeting with a foreign dignitary. Donna met with the dignitary the previous day, and a pair of underwear fell out of her pants, presumably after being caught in the pant leg from a previous wearing. A promotion for the third season provides another example. In an extended opening for the episode that addressed the events of September 11, each of the characters promotes an upcoming plotline. The male characters address the grand jury investigation of the president and his reelection bid, while Donna announces, "And I get a boyfriend."

It is not my intention to create a hierarchy of workplace dramas that tell women's stories, but I use these examples from *The West Wing* to indicate how a series that professes liberal politics and offers female characters narrative space still undercuts and minimizes their professionalism. These devices only can be identified by examining the stories told by the series; the characters' status as single women in career roles provides no suggestion of the ambivalent nature of their narrative construction. This series does offer important representations and discourses: C. J.'s management of the press corps and First Lady Bartlet's (Stockard Channing) commitment to women and women's issues in her occasionally depicted duties provide significant perspectives of female work. Additionally, the series regularized the role of Amy Gardner (Mary-Louise Parker) in the fourth season, who was originally introduced as the director of a NOW-like organization and openly identified as a feminist.

This characterization and the stories surrounding Amy relative to the other female characters further indicate the complexity of any one series' contribution to stories told about women. In their rhetorical analysis of the series, Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles note other moments that both value and contain the female characters.[25] *The West Wing* illustrates the difficulty of assessing the progressive or regressive nature of stories told about women and how crucial it is to utilize an appropriate unit of analysis. This series can be seen in radically divergent ways, depending on which episode one focuses upon, and this illustrates the need to consider the entirety of the series. Additionally, the programming context must be considered to understand the significance of its contradictory gender politics.

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Unquestionably, many other workplace series could be mentioned here. Another author may have attended to the stories told by 1990s series such as *Law and Order, NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993–2004), *The X-Files* (FOX, 1993–2002), *E.R.* (NBC, 1994–), or *The Practice* (ABC, 1997–2004). As some of the top rated

dramas of this era, these series offered significant contributions to television storytelling at the end of the century. Many of them depict a deliberately crafted female competence, but the host of contemporaries illustrates that such depictions are not exceptional. More to the point, these series offer little innovation to the telling of stories about women, either about the central female characters or those they encounter during their work as lawyers, detectives, and doctors. The series I mention here offer some specific contribution: *Family Law* nearly brings a reconfigured, female-centered workspace to a mainstream broadcast network; *Third Watch* offers a rare working-class character in dramatic stories about women as workers; *SVU* emphasizes stories about the crimes women suffer to indicate some of the ways that they remain structurally subordinated; and *The West Wing* serves as a caveat about assuming professional characters necessarily yield politically progressive or feminist representations and stories.

The workplace drama remains a crucial site for assessing dominant social scripts and for charting the status of female audiences. Many of the narratives discussed here indicate an increased acceptance of female characters in workplace dramas in comparison with 1980s dramas, while the emergence of workplaces dominated by women on Lifetime suggests the most unmistakable gain. The fact that depictions of professional women are now less openly contested by narrative circumstances may indicate a need for feminist critics to reassess the portrayal of characters with public roles as inherently progressive; the example of *The West Wing* reminds us of the complex nature of representation and discourse and the need for critical interrogation of apparently empowered characterizations.

Like the dramatic types considered in other chapters, the workplace dramas also offer a distinct contribution to the expansion of stories told about female characters in the period following the network era. *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* illustrate the breadth of stories possible, whether through the rarely heard working-class patients of Lu's clinic or the complicated and often melodramatic interpersonal relationships of *The Division*'s detectives. Workplace series possess such a voluminous place in television history precisely because so many stories can be told through their framework. *Strong Medicine* and *The Division* reinvent this time-tested form by placing new emphasis on stories about female characters or situations experienced by women.

Although the pursuit of work outside of the home functions as a structuring presence across all the series considered in this book, the workplace dramas tell different stories about women and work than can be found in any other dramatic form. These two Lifetime series share features similar to aspects of the comedic dramas and protagonist-centered family dramas, but

they are foremost about work and the events that transpire in work spaces. This focus provides these series with a broad canvas for exploring the public or work issues affecting women's lives and how they negotiate them. These series have the most natural narrative motivation for exploring gender issues as part of a large systemic structure of power, rather than the containment to the personal realm that limits most other types of series.