

Anatomy of the Image of the Nurse: Dissonant and Ideal Models*

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All professions, including nursing, rest on a cultural base. Berger and Luckman argue that the sociology of knowledge concerns itself more with common sense than with theoretical abstractions.¹ Everyone must exist within some kind of structure, some kind of ordered world, and so people create a "reality" for themselves about nurses and nursing which is based on things they "know," regardless of the ultimate validity or inaccuracy of their "knowledge." The cultural lag implicit in current public "knowledge" about nursing will exist until, and unless, it is directly challenged by new "knowledge." For example, the generally accepted "knowledge" of male/female interaction of the 1950s has become unacceptable to the culture of the 1980s; a new "knowledge" has replaced the old, perhaps only substituting one set of stereotypes for another, but definitely altering the tone.

Socialization, the process of learning basic values and orientations that prepare individuals to fit into their cultural milieu, contributes to the cognitive system a collection of interrelated items of knowledge and beliefs about the profession of nursing. A predominant consistency between the knowledge, ideas, and beliefs about nurses and the actual role, work, and nature of nursing yield an ideal or consonant image. The absence of such consistency and the ensuing internal contradictions provide a cognitively dissonant image of nursing. When this theoretical model is applied to a perceived incongruity between a person's attitudes and his or her behavior, there is evidence that people tend to reduce such dissonance by making appropriate changes in their attitudes and beliefs.²

The mass media are instrumental in the image formation process. Originally, mass media research did not put much stress on the socialization function, because it was thought that this was primarily performed by parents and the schools. Studies conducted in the 1970s finally put the spotlight on the media as a primary factor in socialization, showing that a

large proportion of information that children acquire about the nature of their world comes from the mass media. It reaches them either directly through exposure to the electronic and print media, or indirectly through mass media exposure of their families, teachers, acquaintances, and peers. This information presents specific facts as well as general values. The media indicate the elements which make for power, success, and happiness in society and provide models for behavior.³

Public opinion polls show that most of the new orientations and beliefs that adults acquire during their lifetime also are based on information supplied by the mass media.⁴ People do not necessarily adopt the precise attitudes and opinions that may be suggested by the media, but the information provides the ingredients they use to adjust their existing attitudes and opinions to keep pace with a changing world.⁵ One must therefore credit the mass media with a sizeable share of continuing socialization and resocialization about all aspects of life including nurses and nursing.

The media have an enormous impact on the formation of images. Kenneth Boulding names the basis for human behavior the "image" in order to emphasize that it is a subjective knowledge structure, not necessarily reflecting actuality in all of its components. Images are mental representations that influence how people see all aspects of life, including nurses and nursing; they help people in achieving tangible goals, making judgments, and expressing themselves. Public images are the basic bond of any society and are produced by sharing messages. Persons exchange images between each other by using symbols in both interpersonal and mass communication. According to Boulding, behavior depends on the image; and in his view, messages change images, which in turn account for changes in individual behavior patterns.⁶

Social construction of reality is a result of the process of image formation, stimulated by messages transmitted by various forms of communication. In effect, the entire public perception of truth about nursing is a paradigm based on a socially created legitimacy. When used as tools for advancing interests, public images create and reinforce distinctions between groups. As evaluative standards, public images create and reinforce distinctions in occupational prestige and entitlement to certain scarce resources. When nurses are constantly portrayed in negatively stereotyped ways, these images affect their lives and their aspirations as well as delimit the scope of their work.

Mass media products seethe with myths and heroes. They guide decisions, inform perceptions, and provide examples of appropriate behavior. For example, most Americans' current image of health care owes its origins to the heroic and self-perpetuating media messages about the miracles of modern medicine of the 1930s and 1940s, in which any health problem could be cured if only the victim could get the assistance of "doctors" at some place like the Mayo Clinic. This general belief was reinforced by the miracles of medical intervention; broken bones were mended, eyesight

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restored, infections cured, and miraculous surgery performed. Nurses, however, are well aware (even though the public is not) that rates of morbidity and mortality have little relationship to the quality and quantity of the amount spent on health care. Life expectancy is not the longest in the country with the most advanced bio-medical research or even in the country with the greatest per capita expenditures on health care. Instead, a growing part of the health care community has come to conclude that general health, morbidity rates, and life expectancy are more influenced by genetic heritage, life style habits, and environmental factors, which receive far fewer dollars.

We initiated the study of the image of the nurse in the mass media in search of the evolving social perception of the nurse and the accompanying symbolic system that expresses the implicit concepts of what nursing means. We have regarded the products of mass media as cultural indicators of the commonly accepted themes, symbols, concepts, styles, and sentiments associated with nursing in the mass society of the past century. In investigating the treatment of the nurse within the context of mass culture, the concept of genre provided the best point of departure. It refers to a central organizing conceptual category by which all media representations of a similar form, type, structure, function, kind, or style may be grouped for comparison, contrast, evaluation, or study. The generic mass media tradition of nursing, therefore, consists of all those media products which display conventions, themes, motifs, stereotypes, or archetypes pertaining to nurses and their work. The resultant study of the meaning of the various images within the social context yields the "iconography of nursing."⁸

Tracking the sometimes fugitive mass media products of the past century and a half that pertain to nursing yielded evidence from the print media (200 novels, 143 magazine short stories, poems, and articles, and 20,000 newspaper clippings) as well as the newer non-print media (204 motion pictures, 122 radio programs, and 320 television episodes). Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in a content analysis of the data which facilitated the reduction of this evidence into five dominant image types that are fundamentally characteristic of the five successive periods of time—(1) the Angel of Mercy [1854-1919], (2) the Girl Friday [1920-1929], (3) the Heroine [1930-1945], (4) the Mother [1946-1965], and (5) the Sex Object [1966-1982].⁹ These images epitomize the mode of thought and feeling about nurses that was inherent in the prevailing mass media entertainment and information messages of the day and as such constitute the nurse stereotypes fundamentally characteristic of their particular periods. As iconographical indicators, these nurse image types fall at several intervals within the range from "ideal" to "dissonant" and proved to be of varying effectiveness for their particular eras in molding popular conceptions about nurses and nursing within their unique cultural milieus.

I. Angel of Mercy, 1854-1919

In the mid-nineteenth century, two opposing conceptions of the nurse image were epitomized by two media-created "nurses": Sairy Gamp, the alcoholic hag immortalized by Charles Dickens in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Florence Nightingale, the real-life heroine immortalized by newsman William Howard Russell in his articles in the *London Times*. Indeed, both figures contributed to the rapid revision of nursing's public image of the 1850s; Miss Nightingale's service to the profession is self-evident, but the caricature of Mrs. Gamp helped to clear the way for Nightingale's seminal contribution to nursing. S. Squire Sprigge, a physician author of Dickens' own day, noted that:

With regard to the nurses, Dickens . . . helped in a very pronounced degree to rescue society from the ministration of the hopeless class into whose hands the calling of nursing was committed. Society owes Dickens a double debt, for having buried the nurse-hag under indistinguishable laughter.¹⁰

Sairy Gamp embodied the nurses of the day who lived and worked in appalling surroundings; whose work was considered a particularly repugnant form of domestic service for which little or no education and special training were necessary; and whose living was meager indeed. Young ladies of the middle classes were revolted by the idea of becoming nurses, a reaction easily understood in view of the conditions of the time.

The major transformation in the new image of the nurse was of course due to the work of Florence Nightingale. No other nurse—perhaps no other woman—has so quickened the imagination and gratitude of a people as did Nightingale. Her achievements at Scutari Hospital were astounding, and her later career, though somewhat less dramatic, was no less innovative or significant for the fields of nursing, health, and hospital planning. Her effect upon the profession of nursing was immeasurable; indeed, for decades the names were, and in many ways still are, synonymous. Nightingale gave to the nursing profession both an unprecedented degree of public respect and acceptance and a new and abiding symbol of excellence.

Unsurprisingly, she often found herself a subject for creative artists, and poets in particular drew inspiration from her work. Most of these poets wrote specifically of Miss Nightingale; yet her influence was so pervasive that one invariably finds a close correspondence between the direct poetic image of Nightingale and the generally more implicit image of nursing. In 1857, American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a personalized tribute to Nightingale in his well-known poem "Santa Filomena," published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Here the poet speaks explicitly of the "lady with a lamp," and, by identifying her with Saint Filomena, Longfellow makes use of the popular conception of Nightingale as the "saint of the Crimea."

The poem opens with a statement of the inspiring and enlightening

quality of "noble" deeds and thoughts. The presence, real or imagined, of "deeper souls" lifts the spirit from mean notions and superficial cares. This seraphic imagery is emphasized by the reenactment of a scene which had been popularized for British readers through a celebrated newspaper account of Scutari Hospital:

And slow, as in a dream of bliss
The speechless sufferer turns to kiss
Her shadow, as it falls
Upon the darkening walls.

We are told here that she passed like a vision, as if a "door to heaven," left momentarily ajar, were suddenly shut. Longfellow calls Nightingale "A noble type of good, Heroic womanhood"—a woman fit to carry the symbols once borne by Saint Filomena: the palm of peace, the lily of Christian love and mercy, and the spear of courage and determination. Longfellow's symbols of saintliness serve to reiterate the metaphors of nobility, heroism, and self-sacrifice.¹¹

Modern nursing owes its origins to Florence Nightingale's work and the attendant "Angel of Mercy" media image which provided an effective ideal in garnering public support for the first nurse training school at London's St. Thomas' Hospital in 1859. The *Saturday Review* of January 21, 1860, for example, expressed undiluted praise for Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing* ("it is pre-empted by power and wisdom and true goodness"), for her nursing work (her expedition to Scutari is called "the single bright spot in one of our gloomiest national reminiscences"), and for Miss Nightingale's character (as readers are told that Englishmen will always remember "with pride and gratitude how the exigencies of a great crisis were bravely and successfully met by her genius, experience, and resolution").¹²

Nightingale's struggles to define the nursing profession took place against the background of intense mid-nineteenth century debate over the position, rights, and potential of women. Victorian women were exemplified by what has been called the cult of "True Womanhood": this so-called Victorian code drew upon the almost universal conviction that women were weaker than men physically, emotionally, and intellectually, and were dependent on males for social position, security, and direction. Many a daughter of a Victorian family, however, covertly scorned the domestic docility of her mother and, in her own quest for freedom and excitement, secretly envied and identified with men. Thus at a time when the masculine professions were all but closed to women, entry into the profession of nursing itself represented an attractive step toward emancipation from the confinement of the domestic sphere and well-intentioned but often ineffectual "good works."

Once Florence Nightingale brought respectability to the nursing profession, a new image of the nurse began to appear. Nurses were portrayed as noble, moral, religious, virginal, ritualistic, and self-sacrificing. A majority

of late 19th century authors contrasted the newer "trained nurse" with the discredited and older familiar "Sairy Gamp" type of nurse. For example, in *St. Bernard's: The Romance of a Medical Student* by Edward Beresford (1887), the refined and sensitive nurse heroine is contrasted with a thoroughly ignorant and weak-willed nurse who unashamedly persuades her patients into going through the tortures of amputations and other surgery they do not need in order to give the medical students the opportunity to practice their skills. The heroine is depicted by the author as one of those "gentlewomen who have adopted the noble profession of nursing from the love of God and their neighbor." Her innate sensibility eventually forces her to leave this hospital, but she goes on to establish a Nightingale School of Nursing.¹³

Between the early 1890s and the First World War, the durable but adaptive nature of the "Angel of Mercy" nurse image was successfully incorporated into a major shift in the feminine image of the day. This "New Woman" was typified by the popular "Gibson Girl," the creation of the artist Charles Dana Gibson in a series of drawings in *Life* magazine in the 1890s. That the Gibson Girl was the image of women which captured the imagination of a generation of Americans is evidenced by the proliferation of artifacts, plays, and songs which accompanied her popularity in *Life* magazine. Staring coolly into the distance, only rarely gazing at her reader or pictorial admirer, she conveyed a mysterious elegance. Physically, her presence not only dominated Gibson's drawings, but she literally dwarfed her male counterparts. Statuesque, long-limbed and long-necked, her physical bearing conveyed authority; her thrown-back, upright carriage and lowered eyelids projected power and control over self and others.

Nursing was the only occupation identified with this lofty female ideal (as based on our visual analysis of several hundred of Gibson's still extant drawings), attesting to the acceptability of the profession for well-bred women in a time when women working outside of the home was viewed negatively and solely for "misfortunates" who did not have a man to take care of them. Positive imagery surrounding "trained nurses" contributed to the rapid growth of the profession as the census bureau found that the 1,500 professional nurses of 1880 rose to 4,600 in 1890, climbed to 11,800 in 1900, and soared to 82,000 in 1910. The characterization of nursing during this era emphasized the noble, self-sacrificing angel of mercy component of nursing's image and its expression of the quintessence of femininity.

World War I saw the last glorious outpouring of the "Angel of Mercy" imagery that had persisted as the predominant mold since the time of Nightingale. The nurse was the envy of all American women as rampant media-inspired patriotism instilled the desire to play an active role near the fighting front. Hundreds of society women sought to pressure Congress to allow them to go overseas to serve as nursing aides at their own expense. In the media, nurses were consistently presented as noble and heroic. An inspirational, saintly, other-worldly aspect of nursing the wounded was seen in countless portrayals. For example, several recruitment posters and

magazine covers featured nurses imposing themselves between recumbent, wounded soldiers and the threatening, robed figure of Death lurking in the foreground. A typical drawing, inscribed "The Angel of Life in the Valley of Death," featured an ethereal, illuminated nursing figure standing and pointing the way for a group of fallen soldiers in no-man's land.

Nurse Edith Cavell, executed by a German firing squad on October 12, 1915, became the first popular martyr of World War I. Canonization occurred not through the time-consuming Roman curia, but more immediately, through the press and the several films Hollywood quickly made about her life and death. Not incidentally, Cavell's media fame created so strong an impression on the popular imagination that her sacrifice strongly influenced the many fictional accounts of heroic nurses in war-theme films. In many ways, the Cavell case reinvigorated the "Angel of Mercy" image with a heavy dose of "moral purity" symbolism. So powerful was the moral aura surrounding the work of the nurse that many vamps and other fallen women characters depicted in the entertainment media of the day regained their virtue by becoming nurses.

The typical World War I film told of how a young American male volunteered for service in the war, how his nurse sweetheart joined up to be near him, and how, fortuitously, the hero was wounded and found by his sweetheart-nurse who restored him to health. Furthermore, the strong propagandistic attitudes of filmmakers usually guaranteed that there would be a few scenes of a brutal and animalistic German officer threatening to rape the nurse.

In these World War I media portrayals, a model of an "Angel of Mercy" with new values was depicted. The nursing identification provided one effective way to mask the novelty of female independence with traditional female values. These nurse portrayals gave the viewing public the needed encouragement to accept an expanded sphere of female efforts. Nurse characters demonstrated, countless times, that women could provide enormous wartime support and make their own decisions, without jeopardizing the pre-war social arrangements. They prefigured a transformation that was to take place for American women as a whole. Almost all the nurse characters came from sheltered, prosperous backgrounds; and the decision to become a nurse emerged consciously. Perhaps the greatest change in female standards to be observed in these portrayals was a consistent devaluation of other women who were providing no useful war service.

II. Girl Friday, 1920-1929

The 1920s proved to be a transitory period in the reshaping of the public image of the nurse. World War I had made it possible for women to enter new areas of activity, and 1919 brought the passage of the Woman Suffrage Amendment in the United States. By 1920 the number of working

women had virtually doubled since the turn of the century so that women represented more than one-fifth of the total working population. A quest for private fulfillment, motivated by the new advertising industry and national prosperity yielded an upheaval in social mores, often called "The Flapper's Revolution." The shedding of Victorian inhibitions led women to abandon clothing taboos and proscriptions on social behavior as the female ideal of the 1920s, popularly known as the "Flapper," wore bobbed hair, decorative cosmetics, and short-skirted, shapeless clothing. This woman was so drastically different from her predecessors that she seemed practically new-born. She was delineated as one who enjoyed all kinds of sports, who danced regardless of her age, who dieted to maintain the slim figure currently in fashion, who sometimes smoked cigarettes, and who went to beauty parlors regularly.

In opposition to much of the Flapper's values, the public image of the nurse and of nurse training in general suffered considerable deterioration during the 1920s. From the time of Nightingale up through World War I, nursing was popularly regarded as a select occupation of noble proportions, strongly imbued with military-religious traditions and distinctive rituals. Increasingly, in the twenties, standards in nursing education declined as far too many hospitals opened and expanded schools, ruthlessly exploited student labor as a means of staffing their wards at the lowest possible cost, and generated a flurry of negative newspaper and magazine articles on the poor working conditions surrounding nurse training.

Accompanying this deprofessionalization in nursing was the shift in American social ideology from one that was rural, homogeneous, fundamentalist, and traditional in point of view, to one that was urban, cosmopolitan, heterogeneous, and adventuresome in viewpoint. Nursing was slow in adapting to the mass ideology and its popular image drifted into a dissonant state vis-a-vis the new female ideal of the "Flapper."

The dominant public image of the 1920s media nurse was the "Girl Friday" type, a transitory representation that grew out of the interface between the variable changes operative in nursing as well as society's moral climate and values. The emphasis was on the nurse as a reliable working woman whose career lasted only until her wedding day as her nursing duties were primarily used to showcase an on the job romance with her future husband. Prince Charming was often her employing physician (as in Sinclair Lewis' 1926 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Arrowsmith* and Mary Roberts Rinehart's 1924 film version of *K—The Unknown*) or the son of a millionaire who happened to be momentarily in need of a nurse, as was true in such films as *The Glorious Fool* (1929) and *Why Worry?* (1923). As working girl companions, these nurses were single and often emanated from a lower class background. For the most part, they were faithful, dependent, cooperative, long suffering, and subservient Girls Friday.

The 1920s, then, saw two female image systems struggle for supremacy and public adherence. Nursing became the victim, willingly or unwillingly,

of the image molders of an older set of values that had become increasingly rigid and sour in the face of powerful challenges to their survival as the dominant, even if ineffectual, communicators to the public. The "Girl Friday" image of the 1920s promoted nurses' professional inequality and sought easy, optimistic resolutions to any personal or professional problems their fictions treated. They were subservient, cooperative, methodical, dedicated, modest, and loyal. But a handful of media products simultaneously reflected, unconsciously or otherwise, the malaise of this role along with the untenably narrow boundaries of the handmaiden nurse role, and also offered a glimpse of a new recommitment to the profession that was just on the horizon.

III. Heroine, 1930-1945

During the abysmal days of the 1930s, an economic paralysis spread, snuffing out the jobs of one quarter of the labor force. Despite this low point in American economic history, the public image of the nurse was in the process of being elevated to an all time high in the embodiment of the heroine representation. The mass media recognized nursing as a true profession which required education and the development of skills and knowledge for its practice. Nurses were depicted as brave, rational, dedicated, decisive, humanistic, and autonomous.

The most powerful medium of the 1930s and 1940s was the motion picture, which held unchallenged sway over the national imagination as 85 million Americans went to 17,000 theatres each week to see the depiction of things lost or things desired. The positive imagery created about nursing by this medium is evidenced by the fact that one of the few nursing films ever to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture was *The White Parade*, a 1934 motion picture based on Rian James' 1932 novel. A reviewer for the journal *Trained Nurse* documented the film's effectiveness as both a work of entertainment and a communicator of accurate information about nursing:

This interpretation of nursing catches the feeling of altruism so characteristic of youth and gives it wings in a form that is harnessed to practical service. Moreover it breaks down the thin wall between comedy and tragedy that is so present in reality until smiles and tears chase across the film and the audience feels itself a part of this life within hospital walls.¹⁴

A similarly positive contribution to the heroine image was A.J. Cronin's popular novel, *Vigil in the Night*, which was quickly made into a movie starring Carole Lombard. This motion picture emphasized the virtues of courage, self-sacrifice, dedication, and compassion. Reminiscent of the scenes of Florence Nightingale in the Crimea, the nurse heroine takes the

initiative of creating a children's isolation ward for victims of a highly contagious and virulent disease against the hospital administrator's wishes.

Stories of such nurse heroines as Florence Nightingale, Edith Cavell, and Sister Kenney became the subjects of extensive biographical treatment. For example, in 1936, Kay Francis, then the most popular star under Warner Brothers contract, played Miss Nightingale in *The White Angel*. The audience was brought to a full awareness of the colossal demands Nightingale and her nurses faced, and how they were successful in surmounting the obstacles that were placed in their way by unappreciate physicians. In *The White Angel*, a woman and nurse is portrayed as a heroic crusader who successfully defeats the forces of convention, and the nursing profession is associated with the highest level of humanitarianism.

Another unique role, the "private duty nurse as a detective," made an impressive debut in numerous magazine short stories, mystery novels, and feature films. In film the popular Hollywood actresses of the new decade who played nurse-detectives were bolder and brassier than the actresses that had portrayed the movie nurses of the 1920s. Starring as nurse-detectives were Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Blondell, Ann Sheridan, and Aline MacMahon, among others. These women were strong-willed, independent types who used their professional abilities with intelligence.

Two other popular themes which often involved nurse characters in media of the 1930s were adventure dramas about airplane or ship travel. Novelists and filmmakers apparently believed that any crisis, danger, or romance occurring on land would be twice as exciting if it happened in mid-air or in the middle of an ocean. Hence, for a decade, the creative arts community presented numerous films, novels, and short stories with titles such as "Ship's Nurse," "Mercy Plane," "Flight Angel," and "Air Hostess." The fact that the airlines actually hired graduate nurses to augment the pilot and copilot as stewardesses in the early years of commercial flying led to a number of daringly adventurous portrayals of nurses in the media. Most people in the 1930s audience were unfamiliar with air travel, so it is important to consider how these nurse characters must have appeared to the public at that time. There they were, brave women who not only dared to go up in those dangerous flying machines but also handled any emergency that seemed (inevitably) to arise. They delivered babies in mid-air and assisted at emergency operations. If the pilots were disabled, the nurse would land the plane safely. Only slightly less heroic were the ships' nurses who also displayed the same kind of courage, resourcefulness, and romantic attractiveness as they performed emergency surgery and fought raging cholera epidemics. Like other 1930s media portrayals, these representations depicted the nurse as a brave, adventurous, romantic figure, a power for good and an inspiration to others.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and attacked U.S. troops in the Phillipines. The nation mobilized, and as a consequence, the lifestyles of American women were jolted considerably, largely because

extensive new employment opportunities opened up for them. Women were encouraged to fulfill their patriotic duty and enter occupations which before had been considered for men only. As a result, the female labor force increased 57 percent during the war years, boosting the proportion of women in the labor force from 25 percent in 1940 to 37 percent in 1945. This increase was greater than that of the previous four decades combined.

The coming of the Second World War and its social effects both intensified the heroic propensities of the nursing profession and subtly altered the way in which nurses were presented. The popular image of wartime nursing was markedly less sentimental during World War II than had been the case in World War I. Recruitment posters pictured nurses in dignified, serious poses, wearing the much admired uniforms of their profession and the military service. Striking recruitment posters such as one featuring a young nurse in a fatigue uniform with a rifle and I.V. bottle in the background, gave clear recognition of the nurses' essential role and proximity to the fighting front. Publicity given to real life heroism such as that of the nurses trapped on Bataan and Corregidor brought the public to accept the notion of active, physically courageous women, standing side-by-side with the fighting men.

Hollywood accurately captured the sense of the nurse's dangerous work in several memorable films produced during the war. Most famous were the star-studded, fictionalized accounts of nurses trapped in the Philippines. One example is *So Proudly We Hail*, released in 1943, which starred Claudette Colbert, Paulette Goddard, Veronica Lake, and Barbara Britton as Army nurses who endured massive military defeat on Bataan and Corregidor before a last-minute evacuation. The highlights of the film showcased a group of female nurses adjusting to combat situations with equanimity, maintaining their own discipline, providing needed leadership in many situations, and performing feats of physical bravery. The sound of bombs exploding accompanied all the main action. One nurse saved the lives of her fellow nurses by carrying a live grenade in her surrender to the enemy. Another nurse refused to seek shelter during a raid, remaining by the side of the surgeon during an operation; she was killed by enemy fire. Yet a third received severe burns when she tried to rescue a friend; with burned hands she paddled her way out into the bay to take her friend to the evacuation boat. Through it all, the nurses remained confident and optimistic as they took care of their patients.

The same heroic nurse image was broadcast via the newly powerful medium of radio which during the 1930s and early 1940s, provided the intimate, in-home information and entertainment functions now replaced by the television. One of the most durable programs was NBC's *One Man's Family*, a Norman Rockwell creation heard in 28 million homes on Wednesdays at 8 p.m. The announcer always began by declaring that the show was "dedicated to the mothers and fathers of the younger generation and to their bewildering off-spring." Between the time that it went on the air

for the first time in 1932 to the final broadcast twenty-seven years later, *One Man's Family* helped idealize the nursing profession by incorporating it into the lives of two members of the extended Barbour family, one of whom was a World War II Cadet Nurse who subsequently joined the Army Nurse Corps. Through such mass media portrayals, the real work and physical stamina evidenced by military nurses during the Second World War did reach the consciousness of the American people, and the public found no difficulty in accepting these women as heroines.

IV. Mother, 1945-1965

Nothing about the late 1940s, the decade of the 1950s, and the early 1960s was more paradoxical than the role women played in it. After sharing the camaraderie of the fighting services and the hardships of the war on equal terms, surely women would not go meekly back home to function solely as wife and mother? But they did, with a fervor that would have amazed the feminists of their grandmothers' generation. Birth rates soared and career women sank in prestige to the level of drop-outs in the great breeding stakes. In the two years following the termination of hostilities, the number of females in the labor force declined by about two million, or from 37 percent of all women in 1945 to 32 percent in 1950.

For married women, opportunity meant not working in the marketplace. Since the family was credited with being the most important institution in a democratic society, women's caretaking functions were seen to demand their full attention, offering a pleasurable and important role to the wife and mother as well as a benefit to the husband-father and an investment to society. In the early years, the baby boom carried almost all women before it. The vogue for large families—for third, fourth, even fifth and sixth babies—spread. Not since before 1914 had such large families been typical. As a consequence, the United States population increased by twenty-eight million in ten years, at a rate even faster than India's. The marriage age steadily dropped until half of American brides married by the time they were twenty. Why was this? Partly because the Happy Housewife beamed at the world from countless advertisements, looking out of her gadget-lined nest. But more important was the fact that the social climate was imbued with a new Puritan ethic, not the work ethic but the breeding ethic. This was even true for the college educated woman, since the most important task to which a woman's higher education could be put was, by wide agreement, raising the next generation. By the mid-fifties more than half the women at American universities were dropping out of college in order to marry and help their husbands to get through.

It is interesting to note that unlike the post-World War I era, nursing remained a high status occupation for women after World War II. The April 1948 issue of the *Personnel and Guidance Journal* reported a study which

was conducted to determine the social status of twenty-nine women's occupations. Responses to questionnaires asking what occupation is "most looked up to," which is second, and so on, were obtained from two groups of high school students and two groups of college students. The tabulated results showed that in median rank order the professional nurse was second; the physician had first place and the teacher, sixth.¹⁵

Reinforcing the regressed role of women were the new fashions of the day. According to fashion publicists, after two decades of the "American Look," marked by slim hips, casual appearance, and reasonably short skirts, Paris couturier Christian Dior brought onto the stage what he called the "New Look"—the long skirted, hourglass fashion. By the early 1950s, these fashions reached their height in the "baby doll" look. It was characterized by a cinched-in waist, a full bosom, and long bouffant skirts held out by crinoline petticoats. Not since the Victorian era had women's fashions been so confining.

On the popular level, the new emphasis on domesticity was everywhere apparent. By the end of the 1940s, most female heroines in the mass media were again happy housewives. Epitomizing society's belief that women functioned best as sweethearts, sirens, or wives, most female film stars of the 1950s were sweet, innocent, and characterless, like Debbie Reynolds and Doris Day. By the mid-1950s, television, which was beginning to beam its message into countless American homes, also portrayed the woman as a contented homebody, often flighty and irresponsible. The emphasis on domesticity was pronounced in long-running, popular television shows, like "I Love Lucy" and "Father Knows Best."

Nurse characters in most television dramas of the 1950s, while never intentionally distorted, more often than not were portrayed as sympathetic as women and dependent as nurses. The qualities lauded almost always came from the traditional womanly treasurehouse of virtue: good nurses were maternal, nurturing, sympathetic, passive, expressive, and domestic. Although occasional references were made to a nurse's education, the actual nurses depicted exhibited very little knowledge and skill. Nurses were never portrayed as uneducated or inarticulate, but neither were they admired for their intellectual competence or professional qualifications. Ann Talbot, of *Dr. Hudson*, appeared to be a thoughtful woman, but her value consisted mainly in her ability to be supportive of the doctor's temperament. Donna Stone of *The Donna Reed Show* and Martha Hale of *Hennessey* manipulated their menfolk with feminine charm and guile and operated on emotional reactions rather than objective assessments. The nurse chosen to personify the profession in *Medic's* 1955 tribute to nursing exemplified the importance of self-sacrifice and generosity required of a truly successful nurse. School nurse Nancy Remington of *Mr. Peepers*, admirable as a young woman, was never shown doing any nursing.

As a sin of omission, producers rarely presented real portraits of up-to-date nursing practice. Lines of authority between nurses never emerged; for

example, on *Dr. Hudson*, reference was made to a nursing director, but Hudson himself appeared to make the real decisions regarding the nursing staff—authorizing transfers, arranging for nurses to quit, disciplining nurses, etc. Nurse characters always gave up their profession for marriage and family. The viewer knew that Ann Talbot loved Dr. Hudson and, had she married him, would have been expected to quit nursing in order to be a full-time mother to his young daughter Kathy. Even without marriage, she performed many domestic, motherly functions for Dr. Hudson. Similarly, Donna Stone had left nursing after marriage. Martha Hale exited the profession after marrying Chick Hennessey, and marriage spelled the end of Nancy Remington's career as a school nurse.

The long-suffering "mother" image of the nurse continued to dominate television images of nursing into the early 1960s. The introduction of *Dr. Kildare* and *Ben Casey* on television in 1961, which began a national craze for things medical, established certain conventions for health care drama that have never been successfully challenged. The depiction of nursing in these shows gave a grossly distorted view of the work of nurses. The nurses largely carried out menial tasks (e.g., running errands, answering the phones, delivering messages, and pushing carts), while the physician characters were shown doing the nursing care (e.g., the administration of drugs, the monitoring of seriously ill patients, and the provision of psychosocial support). Miss Wills of *Ben Casey* personified the typical TV nurse of the 1960s. She was motherly, expressive, sympathetic, and ever-ready to do the doctor's bidding. While she performed no skilled nursing tasks, she did answer the telephone and gave Dr. Casey his messages in a most maternal manner. She also lent enormous support to Dr. Casey's brilliant work.

Among the motion pictures appearing between 1946 and 1965 that strongly equated nurses with the maternal role were such blockbusters as *Jolson Sings Again* (1950), *With a Song in My Heart* (1952), *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *Not As a Stranger* (1955), *South Pacific* (1958), *Operation Petticoat* (1959), *Exodus* (1960), and *Captain Newman, M.D.* (1963). In all these major features as well as scores of minor films, the dominant nurse image was that of "mother" to a man, a husband, or children. Evidence of any professional expertise associated with nursing was almost non-existent in the American cinema of this era.

An ideal preparation for marriage and motherhood was popularly ascribed to nursing in the period 1946-1965. For example, among popular magazines, *Hygeia* promised in 1947 that "the girl who is trained as a nurse has several advantages over girls in other occupations when it comes to contact with the susceptible male."¹⁶ The following year the *Ladies' Home Journal* asked, "Who Has Heard the Nightingale?"¹⁷ In 1953 and 1954, the *Saturday Evening Post* announced in one major feature story that "Nurses Are Lucky Girls!", claiming that "nurses have the best chances of marrying" of any professionals,¹⁸ and subsequently ran another story about a maternity

nurse entitled "I've Had a Thousand Babies."¹⁹ In 1956, *Charm* told readers that the "piteous cry of Nurse" brought "to the hospital bedside a trim, efficient, sympathetic woman."²⁰ A shift in imagery was in the making by 1962 when *The Reporter* called nurses "Medicine's Forgotten Women"²¹ and in 1965 when *Science Newsletter* ran an article declaring "More Glamor, Pay, Glory, Needed to Attract Nurses."²²

The "mother" image declined in importance during the mid-1960s. Women, in general, were sensing as never before that they had capabilities far greater than were being used entirely in the traditional feminine role. A major contribution to this development of a modern philosophy of women's role was *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, first appearing in translation in the United States in 1952 but belatedly becoming popular in 1961 and 1962. Women were now inspired by her most famous statement, "One is not born a woman, one becomes one," to conclude that the inferior status of the "second sex" was not a natural phenomenon but a man-made one.²³ Once the contraceptive pill became available and accepted and made any further baby boom unlikely, years of frustrated and dammed-up feminism were ready to burst in the new wave of women's liberation.

In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, a journalistic polemic which dealt with "the problem that has no name"; and while it was not, strictly speaking, a book about liberation and equality, it discussed the discontent and dead-endism that an increasing number of women were experiencing and started the wheels turning in many women's heads. To Betty Friedan, the American home, filled with its creature comforts, was a gilded ghetto, a velvet concentration camp. She wrote: "A baked potato is not as big as the world, and vacuuming the living room floor—with or without makeup—is not work that takes enough thought or energy to challenge a woman's full capacity."²⁴ By 1966 millions of women and thousands of nurses had been changed by the movement, but nurses seemed left behind in media accounts of these developments.

V. Sex Object, 1966 to date

As the "mother" image of the nurse declined in the mid-1960s, the vacuum that it left was filled by the most negative media image since Charles Dickens' pre-Nightingale character Sairy Gamp—the nurse as a sex object. In the majority of media portrayals from the mid-1960s to the present time, an obsession with nurses' sex lives has dominated all other thematic elements and yielded a representation of the nursing profession which is often blurred and twisted to fit bizarre objectives. In these portrayals, nurses are depicted as sensual, romantic, hedonistic, frivolous, irresponsible, and promiscuous. And, unfortunately, the more the nurse is presented as a sex object, the less she is shown being engaged in actual professional nursing work.

The primary plot development in these stereotypical depictions has the nurse becoming emotionally and sexually involved with her patients. A patient's welfare becomes the nurse's private mission, and in the process of aiding his physical and psychological recovery, she readily becomes his sexual partner. Another common representation involves the portrayal of sexual liaisons between nurses and physicians. These almost always cast the nurse in a subordinate and usually demeaning role. For instance, in order to assure that the head nurse will not learn of her medication error, a nurse agrees to have sex with a young physician; another nurse allows a psychiatrist to talk her into believing that she is potentially deviant, and then is seduced by him in the name of a cure.

The nurse as a sex object is the pervasive theme throughout novels and motion pictures of the period 1966-1982. Even the origins of the most durable "nurse" of the entertainment media world of the past generation, Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan, originated as a sex object role in the 1968 novel and the 1970 motion picture *M*A*S*H*. Hawkeye sums up his reaction to the nurse's views when he informs her, patronizingly, that because of her being a Regular Army Clown, he will not favor her with an invitation to his bed. To elaborate their distaste for her prudery and military manner and in an effort to destroy the last of Hot Lips' self-confidence, the physicians stage the humiliating shower scene. The other nurses join in the fun, sharing the physicians' delight in witnessing the head nurse's downfall. The attractive nurse found in bed with the commanding officer epitomizes the concept of what a good nurse should be—sexually attractive and willing to sacrifice herself to a good cause.

The depiction of nurses as the sexual mascots for the medical team recurs again and again throughout the period 1966-1982. At the "sexploitation film" level, nursing has been the most frequent occupational identification utilized in film titles since the mid-sixties. Of 91 R- and X-rated films with occupationally linked titles, "nurse" has been used in 21% of the cases, followed by wife (16%), hooker/prostitute (12%), cheerleader (8%), and stewardess (8%). Furthermore, the word "nurse" in the titles of such films as *The Sensuous Nurse* (1980), *Night Call Nurses* (1972), *Nurses for Sale* (1977), *Head Nurse* (1979), and *Naughty Nurses* (1973) needlessly degrades the profession's image.

Nurses have also been largely portrayed as sex objects on the television entertainment programming of the past decade. For example, early episodes of *M*A*S*H* featured nurses as off-duty sexual playmates while *Operation Petticoat* and *Black Sheep Squadron* similarly featured military nurses. All these series emphasized the sexual attractiveness of the nurse characters. The nurses of *Black Sheep Squadron* were a gratuitous device designed to provide sexual interest as they were all shapely and young and seemed out of place at a front-line air field devoid of medical officers or hospital. *Trapper John*, one of the more successful current series, continues this imagery with nurse "Ripples." Emphasis on the nurse as a sex object would not be so

damaging to the image of nursing if there were countervailing images of nurses as true professionals. But the quantity of nurse characters incorporated into the mass media products each year has continued to decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s as female physicians and other women professionals are now accorded all the glamour and heroic proportions that once were accorded media nurses.

Unlike the sex object depiction of nurses, the media entertainment roles accorded other women did improve in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The films *Julia*, *The Turning Point*, *An Unmarried Woman*, and *Norma Rae* opened within twelve months of each other, and the media exultantly dubbed it "The Year of the Woman." A year later the *New York Times* declared that after "long neglect, Hollywood is fascinated with women—their careers, their individual destinies, their relationships with each other, their passions, and, of course (but no longer exclusively), their relationships with men." By the early 1980s, even television was portraying a few intelligent and independent women in other professions, such as public defender Joyce Davenport on *Hill Street Blues*.

VI. The Careerist—An Ideal Image of the 1980s and 1990s

The fabrication of a more ideal nurse image of the 1980s, the careerist, is essential to persuade the public (as well as many nurses) that how things are is not how they ought to be and that the place provided for nurses in the media is much less than the place nurses ought to have. Let us accept the fact that, for better or worse, mass communications about nursing are a necessary form of social exchange that interact with the environment supporting it. The pragmatic concern of this paper has been with how communication has created nurse images and the values ascribed to these images. Nurse images are a part of the mind-affected world where values, meanings, and purposes are realized or made manifest. To the extent that the mass media serve an agenda-setting function, we are calling for their conscious employment in effecting a transformation of the image of the nurse which emphasizes equality, commitment to career, and renunciation of nursing as a physician-dominated occupation demanding an impossible degree of obedience. Substitution of androgyny for traditional rigid female imagery in media nurse representations would effectively provide alternative role models that would begin to open nursing up as a strong career option for both sexes.

The image implications of the popular opinion that equates the nurse with the quintessence of traditional womanhood has come to the fore largely as the result of the women's movement. A parallel assumption exists that since women have traditionally been subordinated to men, the principal sign of the "new woman's" emancipation is entrance into the "male" world of work. Public support through acceptance of appropriate imagery has

helped promote impressive gains; women in 1981 comprised one-third of the first year medical students, one-third of all business students, and the percentage of female engineering graduates has soared from 1 percent to 10 percent in 1981. Meanwhile the number of school of nursing applicants and graduates continues to decline despite widespread career opportunities. Before the turn of the century and during the first half of this century, a woman's decision to become a nurse represented a blow for independence; but for a woman of today, entrance into the nursing profession is too often regarded as one more surrender to the narrowing of personal ambition and an unadventurous acceptance of the stricture of sex role specialization. This negative effect is due to the perpetuation of the outmoded occupational stereotype that the ideal nurse is dependent and ineffectual in her attempts to direct her own destiny. Such stereotypes deter prospective nurses from entering the field, as well as limiting the aspirations and opportunities available to professional nurses, since employers, patients, other health care providers, and nurses themselves are all influenced by media images. The dearth of viable role models of progressive media nurses serves to perpetuate the traditional images of nurses as angels of mercy, girls Friday, mothers, and sex objects while at the same time quietly disposing of nursing's heroine connotation.

The transition to a careerist nurse image will necessarily be a time of conflict and contradiction, as well as growth and change. When outmoded images begin to shatter, both old and new alternatives compete for ascendancy. As millions of women have moved out of the home into the labor force to comprise a figure of 53 percent of *all adult women* (up from 31 percent in 1950) and total 43 percent of the *total American work force* (up from 28 percent in 1950), they have been accompanied by the creation and diffusion of new female imagery. One aspect of that new imagery has been provided by a host of new magazines. Six of these—*New Woman*, *Savvy*, *Self*, *Spring*, *Working Mother*, and *Working Woman*—set growth records for woman's magazines. It took several years to develop appropriate images for the new working woman. For example, the first issue of *Working Woman* (1976) had not one but nine working women on the cover. How did one stereotype a working woman? With a steno pad? With coveralls? In a uniform? Carrying a briefcase? A housewife-type with horn-rimmed glasses? By the end of the 1970s, however, most of the magazines for working women had settled on an idealized image of a dauntless, attractive business executive in a tailored suit, string tie, and feminine-looking briefcase. Little of this idealized image is appropriate for registered nurses, who comprise the nation's second largest profession.

We have seen, if only through a glass darkly, the fragmented vision of five images of American nursing. Most of us who have experienced socialization as nurses can readily identify parts of ourselves and our social conditioning in these images. We have all played the "Angel of Mercy," the "Girl Friday," the "Heroine," the "Mother," and the "Sex Object." We've

been living with definitions of ourselves and assigned cultural roles in which we have had no hand, yet we have offered amazingly little resistance. Why? This is the real question. At least part of the answer lies in the self-fulfilling nature of stereotypes. Research shows us that members of a group which are stereotyped often subscribe to the stereotype's expectations. Thus nurses, perhaps on an unconscious level, have contributed to the maintenance of dysfunctional stereotypes. It is perhaps a commentary, however, on our lack of professional self-identity and self-esteem that we have so readily adapted our "selves" to images that are so strongly derivative of outmoded military, religious, and female ascribed values. What is needed now is to create a new ideal nurse image for the 1980s and 1990s—the Careerist—an intelligent, logical, progressive, sophisticated, empathic, and assertive woman or man who is committed to attaining higher and higher standards of health care for the American public.

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