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# Women Near TV's White House: Power, Gender, and Race on US Narrative Television

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**WOMEN NEAR TV'S WHITE HOUSE:  
POWER, GENDER, AND RACE ON  
U.S. NARRATIVE TELEVISION**

by

**TERESA CAPRIOGLIO**

**B.A. IN ENGLISH, STANFORD UNIVERSITY 2014**

THESIS

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**B.A., English, Stanford University, 2014**

**M.A., Comparative Literature & Cultural Studies, University of New Mexico, 2018**

**ABSTRACT**

CBS's drama *Madam Secretary*, USA's miniseries *Political Animals*, and ABC's drama *Scandal* all debuted between 2012-14, each with a female protagonist working closely with the executive branch in Washington-based political circles. Each displays, however, a different engagement with political activity and its relationship to personal life and relationships and to personal identity and presentation. By examining the configurations of gender and power in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, both of which portray female Secretaries of State, this thesis addresses the visual and behavioral expectations for TV women's access to power and visibility as women and political actors, using Judith Butler's ideas on gender, Carolyn Johnston's covert power, and Nancy Chodorow's codes of gendered behavior. Further analyzing these two diplomats permits re-reading Gayle Rubin's sex-gender exchange economy in diplomatic contexts. However, both series deal with white women working in white-male-led administrations, whereas *Scandal* stars a political fixer behind the scenes, who exerts power through others and remains the "other woman" throughout *Scandal*'s first season, refusing her an official position in a similar administration. While all three series seem to suggest new possibilities for re-signifying traditionally-male political authority, each operates from existing codes that do not let them establish a new image of feminine identity in TV politics.

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**INTRODUCTION**  
**WOMEN NEAR TV'S WHITE HOUSE**  
**POWER, GENDER, AND RACE ON US NARRATIVE TELEVISION**

Television drama offers a fruitful ground for the exploration—in fiction—of real-life trends and issues. With juggernauts like ABC's *Scandal*, Netflix's *House of Cards*, and HBO's comedy *Veep*, as well as primetime and cable staples like Showtime's *Homeland*, CBS's *Madam Secretary*, and FX's *The Americans*, political television seems to be carving out a large space in the American television landscape. The increasing attention to politics on narrative television, however fictionalized, may represent what Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally call an effort to “comment on controversial political issues,” both within the frame of more conventional network television (ABC and CBS, in this case) and in cable networks' (like USA, HBO, Showtime, and FX) more prevalent “creative freedom” for “writers, directors, and actors” (“Introduction” 12). Kaklamanidou and Tally also note increasing focus in television on “US international relations and terrorism,” as well as a tendency toward “seeing more women playing a prominent role in the fictional stories about Washington, D.C.” (“The political TV shows...” 23, 24), based on roles played by women particularly in *Madam Secretary* and *Scandal*, but further echoed by the female-led drama miniseries *Political Animals*, which aired on USA Network.

CBS's *Madam Secretary* (2014-present) stars Téa Leoni as retired CIA analyst and college professor Elizabeth McCord, called reluctantly to the position of Secretary of State by sitting president and ex-CIA director Conrad Dalton. USA's six-episode *Political Animals* (2012) presents Secretary of State and divorced former First Lady Elaine Barrish (Sigourney Weaver) as a consummate diplomat and presidential hopeful. ABC's *Scandal* (2012-present), the other female-led drama tied to Washington, D.C. politics, stars Kerry

Washington as Olivia Pope, political fixer and president's mistress with interests and ties all over Washington and the US government. *Madam Secretary* and *Scandal* are produced by female showrunners (Barbara Hall and Shonda Rhimes, respectively), while *Political Animals* is produced by Greg Berlanti, a gay man who works as a prolific primetime and cable producer. Notably, all three female protagonists (McCord, Barrish, and Pope) are presented as powerhouses in the Washington political environment, but none of them occupy the Oval Office.<sup>1</sup>

While women in the Oval Office are not anathema to primetime dramatic television, theirs is often a short tenure. Geena Davis's Mackenzie Allen in ABC's *Commander in Chief*, who assumes office as VP when her running mate and preceding president dies, held her position for only one season. Alfre Woodard plays the nation's first black female president, Constance Payton, in *State of Affairs*, which also ran for only one season and kept Woodard's Payton, although democratically elected to her office, in a supporting role to female CIA advisor Charleston Tucker. The presumptive masculinity of government and especially the presidency and its contingent offices are based heavily in the assumption that "strength, determination, and decisiveness" are "conventional masculine attributes" and essential to assume the office of president (Sykes, 761). The idea of a female president on television seems almost invariably to result in the reaffirmation of stereotypes about women seeking and women working in the White House. Allen's onscreen presence as a "sexualized, feminine being without military experience" disqualified her from the

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<sup>1</sup> *Madam Secretary* proves the only exception, and only briefly. McCord holds an emergency appointment to the presidency for less than one day in Season 2's premier, "The Doability Doctrine"; she fills the chair for the day but gladly relinquishes this authority at the close of the episode.



presidency based on “informal credentials” (Vaughn and Michaelson, loc. 3097), despite her apparent comfort “leading not only the government but also the military” (Sheeler and Anderson, 45). Furthermore, her attempts to be a mother and a president result in constant “struggl[ing] with the work/family balance” (Vaughn and Michaelson, loc. 3383). Payton’s lauded military experience, on the other hand took a backseat to her maternal rage at the loss of her son as the series increasingly cast her as unstable and vindictive. The apparent message that women in office are emotional, focused on their families, and/or unqualified for the presidency without the backing of men sets the stage for women in executive political positions, and establishes some of the conditions leading to the portrayal of political office and power as experienced and exercised by McCord, Barrish, and Pope.

The present thesis examines the construction of political and diplomatic power exercised and controlled by female protagonists in recent television drama series set in the US political scene, namely the first season of CBS’s *Madam Secretary*, USA’s miniseries *Political Animals*, and the first season of ABC’s *Scandal*. The first two of these shows depict the work and family lives of white, female Secretaries of State, Elizabeth McCord and Elaine Barrish, while the third characterizes the operations of a black, female political fixer, Olivia Pope, an outsider who works closely with the White House. While each of these women is employed by the administration of a white male president, their own activities necessitate an effective navigation of norms and expectations of gender, femininity, and authority formed and exercised in relationships. I contend that the white female protagonists of *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* utilize gendered—and often feminine—behaviors to allow their use of political authority, particularly given the intensely relational “parlor” nature of diplomatic relations and power structures. The

analysis will show, however, that Elizabeth McCord proves more able to navigate this system of conditions and of relationship-based power without causing changes to the script, while Barrish is more prone to actions that upset the presumed balance of appropriate feminine, maternal behavior in diplomacy. In introducing *Scandal*, with its single black female lead working similarly from within but without the White House, the analysis will further examine the constraints that operate on women in the political sphere by comparing Pope to the protagonists of *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, with an eye towards bell hooks' work on the construction of black femininity in popular culture.

### **Power, Gender, and Refraction: Establishing Terms**

Power and politics provide a fertile ground for serialized television, and engaging with these concepts in relation to gender within the realm of televised representation will raise the central questions for this analysis: How is power exercised from an office led by a woman? In what ways must the woman who exercises it behave, dress, and relate to others? These questions drive, in complex and contradictory ways, the three series I analyze, particularly with reference to the gendered nature of their protagonists. Because the protagonists of these three shows are marked, both in outside critique and within their own narratives, as gendered subjects, and Pope as a racialized subject (even if this identification is often hidden in the narrative), a further question is raised: To what degree, and in what ways, does gender affect the assumption and exercise of positions of concentrated political or diplomatic power in these representations?

As series marketed by means of their leading ladies, gender and gender performance become central to the activity of the female Secretary of State and of the female fixer in

*Madam Secretary*, *Political Animals*, and *Scandal*, even when not directly addressed. Judith Butler's concept of performativity addresses the citational nature of gender construction, which establishes the norms against which presentation is judged ("Performative Acts" 522); it is exactly this judgment and circumscription of gender norms and gender presentations that these "empowered" female protagonists must navigate while acting in a sphere largely controlled by male authority figures. Behaviors and dress linked to gender may seem fluid in nature, although the norms that govern their attribution to positions and powers are much more confined, for protagonists, like these, whose enactments of power often depend upon and are dictated by their gendered positions.

The nature of power as discussed in this thesis will often turn more to the category of influence, the ability to manipulate and leverage power relations as they run through the different spheres in which the leading ladies of these series move. Political and diplomatic power as characterized throughout this work is largely understood through relationships, as an interconnected web of conduits that both forms and is formed by those who work within it. The actors, then, in this sense of power (the leading ladies of the three series), do not necessarily possess it, but rather occupy positions from which they are able to manipulate its web in their favor or in the favor of the institutions for which they work. This idea of manipulation and control of relationships as the central form of power in these series continues to foreground the question of gender, as the often-emotional labor of maintaining interpersonal relationships is often (although, to be sure, not exclusively) connected to ideas of nurturance and thus of femininity.

Carolyn Johnston's historical analysis of the woman's position in the American family in *Sexual Power* addresses the notion of "women's covert power" as wielded within the

family (ix). In the context of McCord and Barrish's positions as the diplomatic arm of the White House, this covert power offers a lens through which to view diplomatic power as perhaps a feminized component of political power. Moreover, in Johnston's characterization of women's socialization, the nurturant "power of love," or that of relationships and caring, is valued over a "love of power," an ambitious force that seeks influence for self-aggrandizement or advancement (ix), a dichotomy which provides space to investigate differences between McCord and Barrish's motivations in their respective series. Diplomacy in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, as well as political maneuvering in *Scandal*, work frequently along "backchannels" and systems of favors where back-and-forth hierarchical exercises of relation-based power, powered by gift exchange and the manipulation of influence, are the currency of the game. Indeed, Johnston's concept of covert power finds echoes in political scientist Joseph Nye's work on "soft power" and its use in diplomacy: soft power, here, represents a power, linked to diplomacy especially in a neoliberal era, that involves "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" (Nye 5) by presenting exemplary behavior and gifting recognition.<sup>2</sup> The soft and covert power machinations of diplomacy links it to ideas of gender and of gendered concepts of exchange as detailed by Gayle Rubin.

Rubin famously discusses the "traffic in women" as a function of the gift-giving economy, which "confers upon its participants a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid" (43)—a concept familiar to foreign policy characterizations of diplomacy.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the recent emergence of soft power as a concept into discussions of diplomatic exchange (in the 1980s) are linked, then, to the increasing valuation of feminine-gendered perspectives and actors in political and diplomatic spheres more generally—although this is not a claim this thesis seeks to prove!

However, in Rubin's analysis of the (Western, patriarchal) sex-gender system, "woman [is] a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner of it" when exchanged in marriage (44). How, then, does the gift-giving economy, still intensely central to the creation of social organizations, allow for a woman to become the gift-giver, rather than the gift, in constructing relationships of social power? Rubin's theory of the marriage-based kinship economy (and its historical ties to diplomacy) will provide the starting framework for chapter two's analysis of *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, although both series make moves to step beyond the restrictions to feminine authority and action that Rubin establishes. In so doing, they create diplomatic gift-giving economies that, while retaining echoes of Rubin's system, manage to flip the script in interesting ways to facilitate their appropriate exercise of authority.

Stephanie L. Gomez and Megan D. McFarlane, among other scholars, have examined Pope's position within the periphery of the Oval Office but outside its official operation as a "refraction" of race and gender, a "both/and tension that ultimately depoliticizes race and gender while seeking to conceal that depoliticization" (363). The concept of refraction and its ability to question norms while nonetheless representing them further provide not only an interesting analysis of the role of race in *Scandal*, which Gomez and McFarlane address, but also the role of power and its institutional authorization, which the third chapter of this analysis will address in detail with reference to *Scandal*'s staging and presentation of its protagonist.

### **Analyzing TV's Gender(ed) Politics: Thesis Trajectory**

The first chapter will engage *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* in their representation of their protagonists' gendered behavior, costuming, and positioning within the show, with particular reference to the spatial construction of these behaviors. Both *Madam Secretary's* Elizabeth McCord and *Political Animals's* Elaine Barrish deal with pressures related to their appearance, while Barrish also deals with a backlog of in-universe publicity of her proposed 'masculinity' and 'bitchiness.' With a particular focus on the premier episode of each series, I will explore the imposed confines of femininity and moves toward masculinity, and the way that these concepts are invoked to depict the protagonists as women, particularly vulnerable to issues of appearance, and as authority figures, assertive of their own identity. Nancy Chodorow's discussion of Bakan's agentic/communal divide between masculine and feminine personalities (Chodorow 56), as well as traditional perspectives regarding "separate spheres" ideology restricting women to the private sphere of the home, establish proposed private/public, agentic/communal divides in space and behavior against which to read the contradictions in Barrish and McCord's representations of feminine-gendered executors of masculine office. Chapter one will address the ways in which nurturant and conciliatory actions, as well as more authoritarian actions, taken by the protagonists in their political roles and in public spaces place them in contradiction or in rapprochement to the politics of their supervising fictional presidents and to the expectations of gender that accompany their work in the public sphere.

The second chapter addresses the concept of the family and of marriage in the construction of feminine diplomatic authority. Barrish and McCord are presented as mothers, McCord as a happily-married wife with three teenagers and Barrish as the

divorced ex-First Lady with two adult sons. Instabilities presented in the family are often echoed in political storylines, and in fact destabilize Barrish's narrative throughout *Political Animals*. In addition, each works under the supervision of a white male president whose wife is largely absent from the diegesis of the show, and never present on-screen. The female secretaries of state are then presented through their relationships, personal and political, with men and with their nuclear family. Their marital relationships also bring the questions raised by the application of Rubin's exchange theory (Rubin 43-45) to the fore: is the presence of a marital bond what allows woman to manage exchange, rather than being exchanged or seen as a gift-object rather than a gift-giver?

*Scandal* enters this analysis in the third chapter, to evince by comparison the hidden element of race in Barrish and McCord's white bourgeois feminine positions. While Olivia Pope is not the Secretary of State, her representation in *Scandal*, much like the representations of Barrish and McCord, utilizes relational politics and the idea of covert power to influence and to direct the public actions of a presidential administration. However, Pope's position as a covert fixer within the administration requires that her activity be kept to the sidelines, a place she also occupies as the president's mistress. This chapter will primarily read Pope against Barrish and McCord, placing her narrative position and her filmic construction in contradiction to theirs. Chapter three addresses the strictures and tropes that govern the construction of Pope as the black mistress to a white president in order to facilitate her authority in *Scandal*'s Washington. Pope is not and cannot be part of the official administration despite an insistently-depicted devotion to the "power of love" (Johnston ix) and the importance of moral uprightness in Pope's constant invocation of wearing the "white hat." In this analysis, I will problematize the capacity of critics to

claim *Scandal*'s Pope as an exemplar of bell hooks' concept of "mov[ing] beyond boundaries" (237) and the "margins" as "sites of repression and sites of resistance" (240), citing Gomez and McFarlane's refraction, particularly in the framing of Pope as sidelined or marginal in her work with *Scandal*'s presidential administration and her lack of access to a public sphere of authority that she controls.

This tripartite analysis will contribute to an admittedly-minimal body of work on fictional female political authorities on television by addressing two recent series that themselves address, if sometimes obliquely, the currently-embattled figure of the female diplomatic executive. I will also put *Political Animals* and *Madam Secretary*, which have not been addressed in academic criticism, in conversation with *Scandal*, which has, on the other hand, been subject to a large body of nuanced critique. Hillary Clinton's cultural image as woman and as political figure has been the subject of much discussion. Dramatic television, however, offers its viewers a mediated position from which to examine the political positions accessible and "appropriate" to women, through its representation of both the current climate and proposed progressive approaches to changing it.



## Chapter 1

### “Masculine Energy,” Feminine Execution

#### *Producing Woman’s Diplomatic Acumen Across Public/Private Divides*

Women in positions of political power on television are often depicted first as woman—and, yes, typically wife and mother as well—and then as political actor<sup>3</sup>. President Mackenzie Allen’s off-the-shoulder black dress at the state dinner with Russia, in the fourth episode of ABC’s short-lived *Commander in Chief*, was simply one of countless costuming nods to its lead’s femininity in her office as the American president. However, when combined with her tendency to negotiate rather than commit to military action and her execution of diplomacy in traditionally-social spaces, the ball gown became the costume for her waltzed negotiation with the series’ fictional Russian president. This recasting of diplomacy and foreign policy from the masculinized meeting room to the ballroom floor, a social space more associated for the average viewer with Disney love stories than political machinations, served, for Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, to “present[] Allen as most effective when participating in more feminine settings” (52). The importance of location, behavior, and costuming to the construction of a character becomes more central when this character appears in a position or a setting that seems to contradict existing suppositions about their identity. Allen unsettles conventional modes of depicting the president as normatively masculine precisely because, as a woman

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<sup>3</sup> The same expectation of family orientation is not as fundamental for male politicians on television. *House of Cards*’ Frank Underwood is married, but childless; while his wife plays a big role in the series, the Underwoods are not presented as a traditional family. President Jed Bartlet in *The West Wing* deals with his family life infrequently—only in moments of crisis. Even within *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, the two male presidents’ families are rarely seen or mentioned, although both are married with children.

in the Oval Office, she cannot quite fit the mold and must somehow merge the expectations of normative femininity, to which she often does conform, with the masculinized concept of the president of the United States.

The concept of the female Secretary of State is certainly not an unfamiliar one for American audiences—Madeleine Albright, Condoleezza Rice, and Hillary Clinton are all still present in our cultural consciousness, and Albright even guests on the second season opener of *Madam Secretary*. In Albright's cameo, she delivers a line that perhaps best characterizes the gendered norms surrounding *Madam Secretary* herself, Elizabeth McCord: "Look, there is plenty of room for mediocre men. There's no room for mediocre women. And so you have to lead" (Season 2, Episode 1, "The Doability Doctrine"). While the line itself refers to Elizabeth's political acumen in its in-show context, Albright may also be pointing out the extent to which Elizabeth McCord is expected to perform womanhood alongside her office as Secretary of State. *Political Animals*' Justice Diane Nash, played by Vanessa Redgrave, regretfully tells Secretary of State and presidential hopeful Elaine Barrish, "I know it's not fair, but ambition looks better on men" (Episode 3, "The Woman Problem"). Although Barrish and McCord are not "pioneers" in the same sense as Allen, their execution of their diplomatic office still rests, at least in part, on their ability to concomitantly fulfill the expectations of their gender.

The first (pilot) episodes of both *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* work to establish codes for their protagonists' behavior in office, as well as modes of resistance to those codes, that inflect performances of diplomatic authority as well as performances of gender. In their depiction of administrative order in their fictionalized executive branches, of appropriate attire in public and private situations, and of behavior in both political and

personal diegetic spaces, each series provides an accounting of a female Secretary of State that seeks to characterize their subject's qualifications for the office, as woman and as individual, through the use of space and of gendered expectations attendant on spaces. Perhaps the most striking examples of these characterizations come in the pilot episodes of each series, which work quickly to establish the tone of their protagonists' authority and position, as well as depicting gender and femininity, whether directly or indirectly invoked, as a fundamental building block of their character.

As I hope to show in the following explorations of both *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*' workplace construction, gendered costuming, and spatialized codes of behavior, norms governing gender presentation are alive and well in these series, and seen often in their navigation of space. Though the navigation of both gender and workplace is shown to be excellently carried out by their respective protagonists, cracks in the apparent progressiveness of her approach to authority (in McCord's case) and the effectiveness of control and ambition (in Barrish's case) serve to mitigate the extent to which these women can leverage their gender and their experience in their roles as Secretaries of State. This allows both series to demonstrate the still-existing codes of femininity while exposing fault lines in their absolute translation to the execution of political office, providing a space, if small, for Barrish and McCord to destabilize conventional perceptions of appropriate, gendered-masculine political activity. *Madam Secretary* tends to hide this destabilization in convention and the use of private familial—domestic—relationships and spaces, while *Political Animals* sees this destabilization take over the possibility of a private domestic space, largely through the use of political ambition.

While each episode invokes the trappings of gender within the framework of a political administration, their approaches differ in the ways they address the femininity of their protagonist. In the opening episode of *Madam Secretary*, questions of appearance and of gendered ‘energy’ are raised directly, as members of the Dalton administration seek to manage the new Secretary’s appearance and Elizabeth McCord examines the home-environment consequences of her new position. *Madam Secretary* thus bridges openly-stated concerns about femininity related to McCord’s position of authority across private and public spheres that are kept separate. *Political Animals*, however, contends more obliquely with the intersection of traditionally-male political authority and the woman (Elaine Barrish) who wields it. While Barrish’s gender is foregrounded in the opening scenes of the series, where she bows out of the primary elections in a campaign loss seen largely in flashback, her femininity comes into play more clearly in the implication of her family in her political work and the collapse of the distinction between domestic, private, and public spaces. McCord and Barrish’s costuming and appearance are both connected to gendered expectations of beauty as well as to diplomatic and political acumen or experience, establishing feminine gender performance as part of the narrative and part of their protagonists’ toolkit.

Judith Butler describes “gender as a performance with clearly punitive consequences” for refusal to conform (“Performative Acts” 522), consequences which help create a difficult line for McCord and Barrish to walk. In addition to addressing the performance of feminine and masculine gender and consequences experienced by the protagonists, this analysis will also explore the gendered codification of caring vs. authoritative behavior explored by David Bakan and Nancy Chodorow. In the agentic/communal divide between

masculine and feminine personalities that Bakan proposes and Chodorow expands, agency is defined as “self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion,” as forming separations, as “the urge to master,” as the “repression of thought, feeling, and impulse”; communion is defined as “contact, openness, and union,” and “noncontractual cooperation” (Bakan, qtd. Chodorow 56). While the two series appear to make the case that their protagonists are uniquely suited to their office and capable of manipulating the assumptions and expectations that surround their feminine gender, they also reproduce the division of masculinity and femininity expected in the public eye and political workspace. The question of space, and of public and private boundaries, has long been linked to gender—the “separate spheres” ideology firmly entrenched in Western culture rests on a gendered division of space and of available actions. Caroline Heldman’s analysis of cultural barriers to women in the White House defines “separate spheres ideology” as the “gendering of the public and private spheres of life,” a persistent check on the ability of women to operate in the public sphere outside the domestic, home environment (Heldman 26). Spaces like the workplace belong to the masculinized public sphere, while the home, places of worship, and many leisure spaces belong to the feminized private—although chief among feminine-gendered private spaces is the domestic space of the home. While the atmospheres of these series ostensibly exist in a framework of gender equality, the gendered expectations of certain spaces remain, and become a fruitful lens through which to examine *Madam Secretary*’s and *Political Animals*’ codes of behavior, as well as constructions of power. As historian Carolyn Johnston notes, the political and social influence afforded women has historically taken the form of “covert power,” a power that “relies on persuasion, manipulation,” and the use of sexual influence or the ability to affect dependent children

or domestically-dependent male partners (ix); this formulation of feminine power as one based in the manipulation of personal relationships, rather than overt public actions, can still be seen to mark the power moves available to women in an era of more overt political and social influence. As McCord and Barrish define and are defined by their workplaces, their gender performances, and their relationships to others, ideas of authoritative and caring behavior, as well as traditional concepts of relationship-based power manipulation, formulate their navigation of the presumed private and public spaces in their lives, calling into question the divide between public and private life presumed for male political figures and making their co-imbrication a source of power for both women.

### **Sex Appeal, Affection, Power?: Depicting Women on Television**

Are Elaine Barrish and Elizabeth McCord just two more hyperfeminine women on TV? Women on television still find themselves especially confined to conventions of dress as related to their gender. In their quantitative accounting of women currently on television, Alexander Sink and Dana Mastro address the tendency of “portrayals of gender” to utilize and indeed foreground “hypermasculinity” and “hyperfemininity” (7). They define hypermasculinity as “the exaggeration of macho characteristics”, including the acknowledgement of physical violence as “an inevitable feature of male nature” and a “desire for action and adventure,” seen in male characters who are “dominant and in the prime of their lives” (Sink & Mastro 7). Hyperfemininity, by contrast, emphasizes women’s “dependence on and submissiveness to men”, as characterized by more provocative dress, more emphasis on feminine (often “ultra-thin”) bodies, more appearances in romantic or sexual contexts, and more emphasis on youth and beauty (Sink

& Mastro 7). Female characters appear, in Sink and Mastro's accounting, "more affectionate and nurturing than male characters" (8), and positively characterized as feminine through their "family orientation, likeability, and kindness" rather than men positively characterized due to their "motivation, determination, and intelligence" (Sink & Mastro 9). While they cite *Madam Secretary* as one example of shows "featuring powerful female leads," they also note that this sort of portrayal is "the exception and not the norm" (Sink & Mastro 18), setting the television stage as one still caught up in these notions of femininity, masculinity, and the roles of dominance as opposed to caregiving.

Television's politically-active women, if they do seem to be "exception[al]", do not exist separately from expectations of femininity, sexuality, and nurturing behavior. Caroline Heldman begins her examination of cultural barriers to women in the White House by asking if Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice are "'man enough' to be president of the United States" (17), itself a question of power, dominance, and control. As Heldman continues to unpack what she calls the "marriage of masculinity and the presidency" (20)—itself an interestingly sexualized metaphor—she denounces *Commander in Chief* for "reinforc[ing] beauty culture ideals that fit poorly" (36) with the conventions of the presidential office held by its protagonist, as well as its insistence that "President Allen would be a parent first and president second" (35). Justin S. Vaughn and Stacy Michaelson continue to examine the ways that these structuring principles for the title character dogged *Commander in Chief* in the form of "sexist coverage by entertainment journalists" as well as "decisions by screenwriters and producers" (loc. 3095). These decisions include a mid-season change in showrunners from Rod Lurie to Stephen Bochco that ushered in an even more family-centric and hyperfeminine direction

to the short-lived modern melodrama, which Sheeler & Anderson describe in exquisite detail (cf. Sheeler & Anderson 52-3). While *Commander in Chief* precedes *Political Animals* and *Madam Secretary* by the better part of a decade, I contend that neither of the newer series entirely sidesteps the pitfalls noted in characterizing President Mackenzie Allen's life as they present female Secretaries of State.

It was this very tendency to focus on the demands of motherhood, Heldman argues, that made Geena Davis's portrayal of President MacKenzie Allen on ABC's *Commander in Chief* short-lived (35). Sue Thomas and Jean Reith Schroedel further state that "American society perceived significant divisions of public (especially political roles) and private labor along gender lines" (44), visible in the distinction between "women's issues" and general "issues", with no corresponding "man's issues." This colors Betty Kalamandidou and Margaret Tally's analysis of *Madam Secretary*'s Elizabeth McCord as a Secretary of State who "works on issues of international diplomacy at the same time she is portrayed as trying to navigate her family life" and is chosen because she "wouldn't be a regular 'politician'" ("The political TV shows..." 29)—a reading that does not hold up for *Political Animals*' Elaine Barrish, who appears as a presidential candidate before she appears as the Secretary of State. However, Barrish, alongside McCord, cannot escape the dual expectations attendant on women in politics that Chapman Rackaway describes in his examination of female voters and candidates, who are "expected to be tough military leaders [associated with masculinity] while at the same time nurturing mother figures" (loc. 1983).

The idea that a woman in politics is necessarily a "woman in a man's world" ("The political TV shows..." 29) describes the gendered expectations of authority, expectations



that seem borne out by gendered expectations on television. The position of Secretary of State has been held by women, as noted above, and is not as married to masculinity as the presidency that Heldman describes. The diplomatic workings of this office seem, in these series at least, to be more concordant with expectations of feminine behavior, particularly in its formation of relationships and of communities. However, the deployment of gender presentation and traditional gender roles as a tool to accessing and controlling power relations in *Madam Secretary* and in *Political Animals* offer a way for both series to both maintain strictures of gender while simultaneously questioning them, an approach that rests heavily on the blurring of lines between traditionally-private, feminized spaces and the behaviors that accompany them, and more public, authoritative, and traditionally masculine offices and routes to power.

### **Hierarchical or Horizontal: Establishing Administrative Order**

Authority and political capacity are largely coded as masculine within the environments in which Barrish and McCord work, although not always within their respective State Departments. Each Oval Office is male-led, be it by *Madam Secretary*'s Conrad Dalton or *Political Animals*' Paul Garcetti, and given a male Chief of Staff and Vice President. While McCord and Barrish both show certain instances of hostility toward their corresponding (presidential) Chiefs of Staff, Barrish's oppositional relationship to this male-led power structure is far more sustained, largely because of her own Oval Office ambitions. McCord, having "no such ambition," as Dalton says in the opening minutes of the pilot, is characterized as uniquely suited to the State Department. The question of ambition thus becomes tied up in the structure of authority within both the overall administration and the

State Department of each series, and thus in each protagonist's performance as Secretary of State and as wife or ex-wife, mother, and woman.

While neither secretarial portrayal under examination here is entirely nurturant nor entirely agentic, *Madam Secretary's* emphasis on communion and on nurturant environments contrasts with *Political Animals's* continual references to and depiction of Barrish's ambition. While this ambition is frequently described as a deep desire to effect positive change in the government, Barrish still wrestles with the consequences that this ambition has in the familial sphere, the sphere of Bakan's feminized communion.

The depiction of the State Department itself varies dramatically between the two series. In *Madam Secretary*, the staffers that make up McCord's executive team are primary cast members, making the series much more of a workplace drama than *Political Animals*, despite very similar diplomatic storylines. Amanda Lotz defined the female-led workplace dramas of the 1990s as "series focused on the struggles encountered by [...] female protagonists in locations highlighting female experiences" (Lotz 34). While *Madam Secretary* is hardly a series of the 1990s, its State Department setting allows for this exploration of female experience in a traditionally non-feminine space. This plays out, to a certain degree, in the day-to-day operations showcased by the quasi-procedural, case-of-the-week format on *Madam Secretary*. The executive team meets largely informally, and its members are shown throughout the series to be friends as well as colleagues, who tend to address each other (although not McCord) informally. The presence of McCord's female Chief of Staff, Nadine Tolliver, and her female press coordinator/secretary, Daisy Grant, also balance the workplace's primary cast to an even gender split with three male staffers (executive assistant Blake Moran, policy advisor Jay Whitman, and speechwriter Matt

Mahoney). This “workplace drama” environment serves to establish personal connections between State Department employees, and thus fosters similar environments in the workplace setting as in the home setting, allowing for continuity between storylines and between domestic-public spaces.

However, *Political Animals*’ State Department appears onscreen very rarely. The majority of Barrish’s political machinations take place outside the department itself, and often far from any State employees, save her son Douglas Hammond, who serves as her chief of staff. While we do also see here family-like dynamics in the workplace, Douglas’s inclusion in the workplace constitutes direct familial involvement with Barrish’s public action, one that Barrish’s ex-husband Bud Hammond also embodies, albeit in a less sustained, official fashion. Barrish’s State Department is not crewed by a named supporting cast of close friends, but rather by her son and a group of largely-unnamed staffers who drift in and out of her office at her command the few times we see her in the State Department, while her actions are backed by her maverick ex-husband. Her family’s connection to her work continues to be their actual direct involvement in the work she carries out, in Bud’s Middle East negotiations in the second episode, son TJ’s implication in press and policy, and Douglas’s direct participation in her everyday workplace. Perhaps in keeping with the presence of her family, the State Department that Barrish runs seems, at some turns, to be more informal than even the friendly *Madam Secretary* office; Douglas rants at length about perceived slights dealt the State Department by the president and his chief of staff and is indulged by Barrish. However, Barrish’s other staffers barely speak, suggesting that Douglas’s ability to act as such in the workplace is contingent on his relationship to his boss.

Barrish's office, then, despite its quasi-informality, seems more closely aligned with the sort of rigid hierarchy in both *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*' executive branches overall. The placement of the secretary and her chief of staff as significantly more important (with their extensive speaking roles and given names!) present a clear leadership nexus, and the familial relationship cements Douglas's position as Barrish's (primary) subordinate. *Madam Secretary*'s more nurturant atmosphere, where McCord becomes at turns encouraging mentor, demanding boss, and inquiring student of protocol, allows for less rigidity in hierarchy and may serve to underscore the lack of cutthroat ambition to which Dalton gestures when he asks her to fill the position. The connections that storylines draw between her home life and her work life also cast McCord in a more positively feminine light, as she is also seen to be an attentive and caring mother and wife, just as she is an attentive and caring diplomat, and hardly a politician. The more hardline, ambitious nature of Barrish's authority and of her overall workplace storyline encourage viewers to perceive her as an authority figure whose position in a male-led environment is gained by her denial of many aspects of caring, nurturant femininity—or at least a figure whose feminine nature is colored by qualities considered improper, if not specifically unfeminine. This characterization is underscored by frequent self-references to her reputation for being a “bitch” both within her family and in her broader professional circles, as well as constant references to her dissolved marriage, to her election loss because “the country didn't want to sleep with [her],” and to her elder son TJ's wild reputation as potentially a parental failing. Barrish is a consummate politician, who displays an attentive and caring side in her politics only when she can afford to do so without weakening her position, as she does when she makes condolence calls in the pilot and later champions a Chinese submarine

rescue that secures her a campaign bargaining chip. McCord, by contrast, sits rather squarely on the side of caring diplomacy, evoking the masculine trappings of authority only when required by other characters.

In placing both of these political powerhouse female characters in the position of chief diplomat at State Department, *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* both address themselves to this question of the value of communal skills and perception in a political environment. The characteristics of diplomacy, particularly as displayed by the first diplomatic issue of each series (a hostage crisis in the Middle East) and its resolution (backchannel negotiations), are rooted in the relational and in the emotive throughout. While authority remains a male-dominated sphere in both series—all of Barrish's and McCord's foreign and presidential office contacts in the pilot are men, save for McCord's stylist hired by the president's chief of staff and the Situation Room briefer in Barrish's first on-screen meeting with the president—the diplomatic authority that the State Department represents seems suited, at first, for its execution by a feminine personality. However, there do appear to be conditions for this power's exercise based in image and the commingling of public and private boundaries as often constructed between the home and the workplace.

### **(Publicly) Spectacular Secretaries: Gendered Costuming and the Gaze**

From an early 'makeover' subplot in *Madam Secretary* to a pointed use of dress to invoke past romantic relationships as well as past diplomatic experience in *Political Animals*, both Elizabeth McCord and Elaine Barrish contend with expectations of femininity in their costuming. While, in some respects, their conformity to these codes of

feminine dress subordinate them to an existing gendered order, each show also gestures toward dress (and particularly feminine dress) as a source or a marker of political capacity, allowing McCord to complete her diplomatic objective and providing Barrish with credible experience in the world of international diplomacy. However, each protagonist's reframing of pretty, feminine attire, makeover or otherwise, cannot quite allay concerns about the propriety and the extent of their femininity, with *Madam Secretary* directly addressing the masculinizing effect of the Secretary's office and *Political Animals* leaning into accusations of 'bitchiness' and what we might term 'improper' or aggressive feminine exercises of power. McCord and Barrish must confront gendered behavioral expectations in public and private spaces, although *Political Animals* tends to merge and intermingle these spaces more freely, while *Madam Secretary* charts apparently-clear divisions between them and consciously arranges McCord's movement between them around story beats.

When Elizabeth McCord appears on scene in *Madam Secretary*'s pilot episode, she is neither a politician nor a diplomat. Dressed for comfort in jeans and a sweater, she is a relaxed, casual college professor trading banter with an oversharing student who shortly thereafter goes to greet her similarly-relaxed, casual college professor husband. This introduction recalls tropes of the academic, unconcerned with fashion over learning, and later suggests the soccer mom (although the McCords keep horses at their rural-suburban home, not a rigid soccer schedule). Even as the president of the United States, Conrad Dalton, arrives to press her into diplomatic service as his Secretary of State, McCord is mucking out horse stalls in comfortable working clothes with two disheveled braids framing her face. In short, Elizabeth McCord is presented as an active, intelligent, and

hardworking wife, mother, and professor from the beginning of the show, but *not* as a political actor, nor as the spectacular object of a fetishizing gaze. Dalton calls her to the show's titular office due to her international experience as a CIA analyst and, presumably, her intellectual credit that allows her to serve as a university professor—specifically because she is “not a politician.” The clearest way for the introductory episode to show us this seems to lie in providing the image of a casual-yet-focused intellectual who loves her children and her husband and is notably reluctant, in these opening scenes, to accept the political position she is then offered.

McCord's original reluctance seems framed as a positive aspect of her qualifications for the post as a woman—after all, she is cognizant of her family's wants and needs, and as such embodies the working mother for whom ‘mother’ is the primary organizing principle of her life. This focus continues in later scenes, particularly as she repeatedly asks her husband Henry if they have made the right choice for their children. However, her continuing reluctance to leave behind the academic or the practical mother in her clothing may be the clearest gendered portrayal of her resistance to politics and to the spectacle of positions of public political authority. There appears to be far more emphasis placed on the physical appearance of a female political operative or authority than on her male counterparts, although not to the same spectacular degree as seen shortly thereafter.

After McCord has accepted the State position, the male-led administration appears almost instantly to provide a check on her appearance as a female Secretary of State. Russell Jackson, the president's Chief of Staff, establishes his desire for McCord's “make-over” nearly in the same breath as he establishes his superior position in the staff hierarchy. Jackson's check on the acceptable costuming for a woman in politics seems to be an

example of Butler's "punitive consequences" ("Performative Acts" 522)—Elizabeth's ability to appear in the public sphere as a woman *and* Secretary of State is contingent on her ability to perform her gender to his (and presumably, the media's) standards. His insistence on the stylist and the importance of McCord's image is linked throughout the pilot to Jackson's claim to superiority and to the hierarchical organization of the administration. This will not, however, hold out, either for Russell's claims to be an unimpeachable mouthpiece for the president or for a presumably insurmountable dress-and-style code for the female politician.

Laura Mulvey proposes that woman's position in classical Hollywood film is anxiety-inducing, raising fears of castration (844). Woman thus has the power to stall a narrative, an object of the gaze who draws focus from (presumably) the logical, male-centric plot. While *Madam Secretary* is not classical Hollywood film, the script proposed by Mulvey—that a woman must either be subordinated to the patriarchal order or turned into a fetish object to allay fears about her power onscreen—provide a rich framework for understanding the use of the makeover trope in *Madam Secretary*'s pilot. In a striking attempt to reframe the Mulveyan paradigm, *Madam Secretary*, through McCord, allows the makeover to occur late in the episode, ostensibly not to conform, but rather to "freeze the flow of action" (Mulvey 841) surrounding her early tenure and to distract from the pilot's storyline about two "stupid kids" falsely imprisoned by the Syrian government. The episode uses the makeover to recalibrate the in-show narrative, focusing on McCord as a woman with a feminine appearance, fitting her in to existing gendered tropes of "makeovers" focused on physical attractiveness in a heterosexual framework.



This use of the female body as spectacle—and, to a certain degree, the male monitoring of appearance—is not confined to *Madam Secretary*'s first episode, nor to the overtly public space of Washington, D.C.'s streets. Before *Political Animals*' first-episode 'salon' at Barrish's Washington home, Barrish comes home to change for the event and finds that her son TJ has already selected a dress for her to wear that night. TJ, who is gay, is assumed due to cultural codes surrounding homosexuality to be more of an authority on fashion than his politically-minded bluestocking mother ("I didn't get all the gay genes, but I got the style one," he tells his mother). However, this dress is introduced as one she wore to a "state dinner for the Saudi royals," a decade or more in the past depending on the age of her sons. Though the costume change is framed as a tactic to appear more attractive to her ex-husband Bud as well as a recognition of their past relationship struggles, both TJ and Bud's specific recollection of the diplomatic-political context inherent in the dress also serve to recast the dress as a job qualification, as if to indicate the length of time that Barrish has been serving the US in an official capacity. As First Lady, governor, and Secretary of State, Barrish has held titled positions working and/or participating in government. While the dress reiterates a certain amount of dependency on her husband for the position of First Lady in the past and for recognition as a romantic partner now, it also places her in control of their encounter—she causes him to recall a particular memory from their White House tenure. While she sets up the costume change as an attempt at spectacle, the show itself uses the dress to reiterate her experience as a participant in foreign policy, dependent or otherwise.

When Barrish, clad in the glittering golden dress, appears at the salon, she and her ex-husband make eye contact and the scene stalls for a moment to emphasize her appearance,

placed as she is at the top of the stairs on a sort of pedestal, before she moves to be the caring hostess. But even as she embraces Bud and greets his new girlfriend Eva, who compliments her dress, the Saudi state dinner is again brought up, reminding both the family onscreen and the viewer that Barrish has been involved in politics for a long time. This does, however, serve as something of a response to Barrish's mother Margaret's comment just before the salon that Barrish shouldn't see her (ex-)husband again dressed in her work clothes; Barrish thus bows to this check on her conformity to gendered expectations of dress and behavior as presented in *Political Animals*. This conformity is further colored by TJ's reframing of the Saudi state dinner and Barrish's hyperfeminine dress as a way to "look [her] best" when "feeling [her] worst." Recasting this costume change as Barrish's "best" both reinforces her femininity and establishes the importance of appearance for *Political Animals*' female protagonist, both in the public eye and in her allegedly-private home.

In *Madam Secretary*, the scene where the 'made-over' McCord steps out in D.C. provides clearer cues to the ideal of acceptable, public Washington D.C. femininity the series proposes, one that McCord tends to eschew in domestic life. The scene is McCord's first in a skirt—prior to this scene, she appears only in slacks, jeans, and sweatpants, coded slightly masculine. In fact, in many workplace scenes, she wears collared shirts and slacks not unlike her male colleagues', moments where Barrish is almost exclusively seen in blouses and skirts. Post-makeover, however, McCord takes to the capital's streets in a red dress, coat, and heels, the brightest focal point of the scene and one trailed by many in-show media cameras—she is literally the object of the gaze within and outside the diegesis, as the camera frame and the viewer's attention follow McCord through the streets of

Washington while she encounters tourists and press, dressed in a color oft used to evoke female sexuality. Also notable is her more visible makeup, in comparison to earlier, more 'natural' looks. She is clearly dressed to be an intentional spectacle, connected to both Hollywood ideas of celebrity and entrenched codes of feminine desirability. This is only reinforced by the news coverage shown and discussed in the McCord home the following morning, where a series of news and talk show anchors discuss the 'makeover'; McCord's freshly feminized look is authorized by women in the pop culture sphere and a male anchor in the news media as enjoyable and desirable, and as "modernized," in apparent contrast to her earlier bluestocking apparel. In comparison to her red ensemble, her prior clothing is moderate, muted, and most strikingly masculine; the showmanship of the change she makes is more powerful for it.

However, this power move comes with caveats. The episode firmly insists on McCord's control of this change, attempting to recast Jackson's check on her gender performance as an opportunity for McCord to access an apparently feminine power of appearance and its capacity to distract. Nonetheless, this move of apparent power requires her to conform to the gendered expectations that she vigorously eschews earlier in the episode, as well as the popular culture narrative of the "makeover" that makes the protagonist more noticeably popular. She is also not quite allowed to contravene Jackson, as she seemed to early on, with impunity; she eventually acquiesces to the makeover and must admit to (and obliquely apologize for) sidestepping him to take her main diplomatic action at the end of the episode. Her semi-masculinity as well as her weaponized femininity do not remove her from the male hierarchy that structures the overall administration, just as Barrish's effort to "look [her] best" re-inscribes her in a classical Hollywood position as

spectacle even as a diplomat with extensive qualifications for her work. Barrish's position as an older woman and a former first lady may further complicate this comparison, as her more feminine attire may also be connected to traditional expectations embodied and oft discussed by her aging mother, and also inscribed in flashbacks to her tenure as first lady.

### **“Masculine Energy” in the Bedroom?: Spatializing and Classifying Behavior**

*Madam Secretary's* and *Political Animals'* navigation of gender and specifically of the confluences of femininity and masculinity as a function of space are not limited to clothing and visual presentation, but are also staged through dialogue and setting as the episodes continue. McCord herself overtly expresses worries about the masculinizing effects of her new, very public position of power. This scene notably precedes her move to feminize her “look,” as she and Henry discuss her new job and their family's move in their bedroom. A familiar scene setup as the series continues, the private, domestic space of the bedroom (and the family home) becomes linked to, although not entirely intermingled with, Elizabeth's new responsibilities in the public sphere and concerns about her work become an integral part of the McCords' marital and family dynamic.

In this first exchange in the bedroom, Elizabeth expresses doubt in her sex appeal because of her “masculine energy,” thus evoking the “performative” aspect of speech used by Judith Butler to characterize gender performance. Butler states that “one does one's body” as one formulates one's gender (“Performative Acts” 521) through actions—here, Butler includes, especially in later writings, the speech act. The performative speech act is a “discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names” (*Bodies That Matter* xxi). Claiming an identity is, in many ways, to agree to possess it—as Elizabeth does when

she claims “[her] masculine energy” in the pilot. “Some men,” Elizabeth says to Henry, “are turned off by women in positions of power,” positions which apparently confer the masculine energy she claims. This masculinity, then, is seen as an impediment to her full private life as a woman, but somehow its necessity for her life in the public sphere cannot be left out of their bedroom interaction. Gender performance cannot be ‘left at the door’, but must cross boundaries between the workplace and domestic space.

The staging of Elizabeth’s statement thus rearticulates her and Henry’s bedroom as a place of public and of private concerns, framed by the structure of the nuclear family, situated in a discussion of children and of family dynamics and placed in a marriage bed occupied by two working parents (literally; both Elizabeth and Henry bring their work into the bed during the scene). Moreover, this conversation about sex is not framed as “sexy” but rather as familial, private, and yet frank and practical and conducted in comfortable pajamas—as are many scenes in the McCord family home of the first season, where Elizabeth’s post-makeover heels and skirt suits are scarce. This sexless sex conversation is instrumental in providing the undertones of their marriage, which overturn certain heterosexual norms by placing McCord in a somewhat sexually-demanding position, while her husband becomes more acquiescent. This is not to say, of course, that similar dynamics are not promulgated by other cultural representations, but the tone of their interaction as well as the evocation of masculinity construct marital and family dynamics that trouble a traditionally patriarchal framework in Western cultural consciousness. Henry McCord’s role in authorizing Elizabeth’s work in the public sphere complicates the McCords’ marital and parental dynamic in establishing Elizabeth as a particular kind of Madam Secretary, the kind who accepts her masculinized position but is determined to both retain and make

use of the constraints and hallmarks of her femininity within the confines of appropriate and desirable family involvement.

Similarly, Elaine Barrish's personality—and in particular her public and private deportment as woman, ex-wife, and mother—is a central organizing factor to her political projects and actions throughout the series. She is characterized from her first appearance as someone for whom public and private faces cannot quite be the same—she departs the stage from her still-triumphant concession speech with a broad smile and an uplifted countenance, only to drop into exhausted and somewhat bitter frustration once she and her family are behind closed doors. This ability to shift between public and private faces seems, at first, to be a tool that allows her (and her public face) to be a politician outside the private space (and private face) of the secluded room, but as Secretary of State, she seems to use both private and public faces to achieve her ends. The brief sequence of establishing encounters of Barrish as Secretary shown in the pilot characterizes this sharp shift between reconciliatory, diplomatic, public-facing Secretary Barrish and sharp-tongued, strong-willed, behind-closed-doors Elaine Barrish as an important function of her work as a diplomat.

Consider as an example her scene with Russian Foreign Minister Victor Porchoff, where she is careful to maintain her diplomatic façade in public, before reporters and cameras, despite his sexual harassment, but immediately shifts to a more directly confrontational mode to reassert her control over the situation once they leave the press conference. This feeds into their second encounter in the pilot, where she uses the precedent set by their first encounter to address a bathrobe-clad Porchoff in the same biting,

confrontational tone even as she moves their exchange into a more proper, tea-sharing scene for the arrival of Iranian ambassador Amir Jobrani.

To be clear, and perhaps pointed, this behind-closed-doors private space (seen in Barrish's demand for a divorce as well as in her hotel scene with Porchoff) is not the same as domestic space. Although the family is present in the first "private" scene of the pilot, the determined presence of the State (literal in the case of the Secret Service officers, and figurative in Bud's continued reference to his own tenure as president as well as constant references to Elaine's candidacy) troubles the establishment of any truly domestic space, which continues to de-privatize the Barrish household throughout the series. *Madam Secretary's* secluded, separate bedroom that provides domestic space for the discussion of public and private issues is not present on *Political Animals*—every space that hosts the Barrish-Hammonds is open to intrusion and moderation by concerns of state and of diplomacy.

While Barrish is shown in public to respect the traditional constraints of appropriate femininity—conciliatory and polite; ladylike—she also works in an area that is clearly male-dominated, as noted above, and often responds in privately-aggressive fashions. Expectations of her and of her office clearly inform the way in which her character is constructed as a political actor in view of the cameras, the press (with the occasional exception of Susan Berg), and often the president. However, the private face and aggressive persona that is shown in her scenes with Porchoff and others during the series serves to undermine the picture-perfect presentation of ladylike diplomatic encounter seen at the beginning of her first scene with Porchoff, using the destabilization of public/private divides in Barrish's comportment to expose the inner workings of *Political Animals'*

American diplomacy and of Barrish's ambition. Barrish is consistently in charge of the points at which she expresses her sexuality and engages her femininity in political exchanges (like her one-time affair with ex-husband Bud and her unconventional negotiations with Porchoff and later with Serkan), typically leveraging them for political gain, but we catch many of the male characters in the series with their "pants down," or at least in more compromising positions, to provide her with the opportunity to do so.

The intermingling of public and private spaces and the difficulty of separating out a definable domestic or personal sphere become ever clearer as the series reveals the degrees to which Barrish's family is implicated in her work, both as actors and as influences on her conduct. During the pilot episode's first scene in the Situation Room to discuss the captured journalists, Garcetti's chief of staff refers directly to the well-publicized story of Barrish's son's engagement party as a reason they "didn't want to bother" her with the diplomatic crisis that dominates the first two episodes. In this first episode, Barrish easily brushes off his suggestion that her focus appropriately belongs in the private sphere with her family concerns, as the nation's chief diplomat, but shows that her connections to private, familial spaces are an asset later in the scene. Barrish's navigation of motherhood may fail in the domestic space she can't quite manage to protect and control, but it aids her in the public sphere, where she is able to leverage her apparently natural caring side to help manage the first two episodes' hostage crisis. It falls to Barrish, after all, to attend to the ramifications of the hostage crisis and call the families of the journalists—because "no one has done that [...] of course" (season 1, episode 1, "Pilot"). She also delivers the statement to appease (and distract) the press; she is shown as conscious of the intrusion of these public actions



onto private spaces even as she must act the most publicly of any Sit-Room participant (perhaps due to her consistent commingling of the two spheres).

The idea of woman-as-distraction utilized by the Garcetti administration to divert attention from the hostage crisis seems to continue McCord's use of appearance in her own series, and points to a tongue-in-cheek, hidden aspect to the kind of feminized power that both these protagonists utilize in their first documented-in-series actions as Secretary of State. This affective, rather than direct and rational, power seems to echo Carolyn Johnston's use of "women's covert power" in her examination of the woman's historical position in the American family (ix). While this covert power is tied, in Johnston's historical account, to the idea that women might influence politics by influencing their husbands and other male family members, rather than by direct political action, the echoes of this kind of influence-rather-than-action seem to be central to the diplomatic power available to McCord and to Barrish. After all, Barrish delivers statements to distract the press and then influences the president to send her ex-husband to negotiate, and McCord uses her appearance to distract the press and then leverages her relationships with both the president and her Russian attaché contact to negotiate a deal through the direct action of Dalton and the attaché, not McCord herself. This manipulation of conduits of power, rather than the direct intervening action we might more directly connect to political authority, makes the exercise of diplomacy one that is suited for an affective covert power that seems uniquely available to McCord and Barrish as female Secretaries of State, albeit a covert power backed by the trappings of political and social institutions.

However, in both series, the intrusion of women into male-coded and male-occupied spaces must be accompanied by a willingness to conform to their behavioral codes as well.

In *Madam Secretary*'s second-episode, McCord must demonstrate her athletic prowess on the golf course to gain respect from a male politician who seeks to deny her request for increased diplomatic security in Yemen. *Political Animals*' second episode requires that Barrish demonstrate her commitment to peace talks and hostage rescue by entering the male-only space of a Turkish bathhouse to get diplomatic concessions from a male ambassador. These appearances and actions in masculine-coded spaces, rather than a reference to masculine energy, provides both women with a particular currency of capacity that the series use to propel their storylines, as McCord and Barrish enact the direct power afforded them by their position and ability to interact with domestic and world leaders.

## **Conclusion**

While both series make use of the idea of covert power and of overt demonstrations of capacity, *Madam Secretary* consistently gentles the extent to which McCord's overt, more masculinized moves toward control and determination are allowed to contravene male characters' authority and decisions. Her motivated, intelligent decision to adhere to the hyperfeminine model in the makeover plot, while a destabilizing moment, is gentled by the continuation of that costuming shift in her attire as Secretary, and by its reintegration of Russell Jackson as a superior (if an adversarial one) into her work. McCord also continues to play the role of nurturant boss and caring diplomat, as well as loving private mother. *Political Animals*, on the other hand, makes Barrish's moments of brusque, unladylike diplomatic engagement a hallmark of her work, even as she engages in projects fundamentally based on caring. Both series seem to allow their protagonists only an uneasy negotiation of masculinity in the moment while insisting on nurturant femininity as a

central mode of engagement; however, Barrish's mode of feminine self-presentation in her political office is permitted to remain far more adversarial and insistent on her own ambition.

This is not to say, of course, that *Political Animals* does not address itself to consequences ensuing from Barrish's particular execution of public life. While family life and motherhood emerge as organizing principles for both *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, Barrish's work results in far more extreme consequences for her ability to maintain a domestic life and space than does McCord's, due to her adherence to more of Sink and Mastro's "hypermasculine" qualities than the more obviously nurturant hyperfeminine markers that McCord tends to use more frequently. Both *Political Animals* and *Madam Secretary* mark the extent of their protagonists' "ambition": Barrish has lofty ambitions, while McCord has only the ambition to do her job well, with as much *care* as possible. As she navigates the norms of her gendered position as mother and as (ex-)wife, Barrish's ambition places her in direct contradiction to expectations of femininity and the ability to juggle separate work and domestic spaces, whereas McCord's lack of personal ambition allows her to contradict expectations more indirectly, implicating her more in traditional structures while also giving her (and *Madam Secretary*) the opportunity to link expectations of femininity to power moves in a masculinized political sphere. We are more able to see the directly confrontational Barrish as a political actor, but less inclined to view her as able to execute this office as well as her position as woman as her struggles in the series go on; McCord, on the other hand, is presented first as woman and mother, and then the audience is encouraged to see her as a reluctant but consistently effective political actor. Despite *Madam Secretary's* and *Political Animals's* apparent departure from the norm of

submissive hyperfemininity in female characters on television, both series serve to reify physical and behavioral codes of femininity. However, their moments of departure from strictly-defined tropes and expectations associated with femininity and its appropriate spheres allow both series to introduce new codes of gender performance in political office. Specifically, McCord and Barrish represent, to differing degrees, an emphasis on the iron-clad control of femininity and deployment of related tropes as a tool to the female official. Embodying sexual attractiveness and performing motherhood become public political tools, connected in different ways to the actual sexual and familial lives of the two shows' protagonists. This then serves to unite their masculinized positions of authority and their associated public workspaces and identities with their physical and social presentations as women and the family lives they lead as wives and mothers.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“I Married the Nation”: Rubin’s Sex-Gender System in TV’s US Foreign Policy**

Foreign diplomacy, as an exercise in negotiation and relationships between countries, is premised on exchange. This exchange, whether of action, products, or influence, forms the basis of peaceful relationships between countries. Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women” sets up a corresponding paradigm of exchange-based relationships, not that of international diplomatic ties through political concessions and gains but of domestic, reciprocal kinship ties through women (Rubin 44). Rubin sets up an anthropological and psychoanalytic account of the structure of kinship as based on the exchange of women between their male kinsmen (largely brothers, fathers, and husbands) within a patriarchal system. In this sex-gender system, women become the conduit of relationships of reciprocal gift-giving and thus of power, serving as the symbol of the power to create relationships and connections without themselves being able to directly access or wield that same power (Rubin 44). In what Rubin terms the gift-giving economy of marriage and kinship, drawing from Marx and Engels in delineating kinship through exchange-based economy, woman is the gift but not a full partner in her own exchange. Gifts, once exchanged, “confer [...] a special relationship of trust, solidarity, and mutual aid,” while also providing a register for “competition and rivalry” (Rubin 43).

In analyzing *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*’ approaches to the diplomatic work of their protagonists, Rubin’s concept of a gift-giving economy becomes fruitful in both aspects of gender politics and of foreign policy itself. McCord and Barrish manage both official and unofficial diplomatic exchange as the highest-ranking diplomats in their respective White House administrations, and as such are given access to and control over diplomatic power and its workings in the state. However, both are also subject to a chain

of command within the administration whose legal constraints sometimes come to reflect the structure of the family and thus of Rubin's kinship-based exchange theory. Moreover, their very position in diplomacy as implicitly-atypical women in politics calls to mind the historical implication of kinship economies in constructing diplomatic relationships, where intermarriage built ties between nations. What changes, then, when the women involved in diplomacy become the managers of exchange, rather than the exchanged gift? If women in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* are not themselves solely transacted, but still form a fundamental part of relationship-building exchange, how is Rubin's gift-giving economy reframed? Rubin's sex-gender system implicates the marital relationship as a fundamental piece of the kinship economy; here, it is rather the appearance of marriage and the link to a male-led administration that might be said to provide McCord and Barrish the capacity to manage diplomatic power and exchange. I intend to show, through the following analysis of McCord and Barrish's positioning as female Secretaries of State in male-led administrations, that both women come to serve as quasi-wife and -mother to the nation in their roles as Secretary, particularly alongside presidents whose first-lady wives are barely mentioned, let alone seen. The formation of this relationship is markedly different for each woman. McCord's position as wife-mother is more tied to her out-of-office role as domestic wife and mother of three, which colors her policy moves and connects her to executive power through her supervisor Dalton; she can move outside the marital exchange system because she is married outside of her public life, but can also make use of her connection to Dalton because it appears to be strictly in service of his political agenda. Barrish's relationship to the country, as a former First Lady, seems mediated not through her supervising president Garcetti but through her former position and thus her ex-husband

Bud Hammond, a relationship which is not as stable as McCord's own out-of-office marriage and thus casts Barrish's relation to the Oval Office authority in a more flexible light, although her connection to the country itself is foregrounded. McCord finds herself serving largely as a conduit of Dalton's power, seeking constant and consistent authorization for her actions, despite her public initiatives and occasional moves to buck the system. Barrish, in contrast, chafes constantly at the idea and is more prone to exercising power directly in service of her own (largely humanitarian) agenda, with or without direct authorization from Garcetti. She is also Garcetti's political rival, whereas McCord has no political ambitions of her own; the contrasting thirsts for power construct very different economies of gift-giving and modes for exercising diplomatic power.

Rubin's exchange originally offers little to no power to the woman who is exchanged; however, these women clearly operate from a position of control, mediated as it may be. The portrayal of women in diplomacy, then, seems to necessitate a reformulation of traditional ideas of gift-giving economies. McCord takes on a managerial role in the exchange of gifts of money, influence, or arms, as well as exercises of what political scientist Joseph Nye terms "soft power," an "appeal to a sense of attraction, love, or duty, [... or] shared values" (7), leveraging not only her position as Secretary of State but also her personal relationships to achieve her goals. In so doing, she even positions her husband within the gift-giving, but as a sort of gift himself—a thorny position where he must rather reclaim his authority over the gift he gives, although this authority is still mediated and possibly publicly erased. Barrish moves similarly in the world of diplomacy, managing diplomatic exchanges, but finds herself as a woman—and particularly as a desirable body—more directly implicated in the exchange. Her response is to negotiate her own

exchange, alongside a storyline where her husband's presence at a diplomatic negotiation is viewed as a gift in itself, one that she (with his encouragement) arranges. Both women thus make use of the idea of gift-exchange economies, often ones linked directly to the presence or absence of bodies, in an unconventional manner that provides them with more direct control over the exchanges. However, neither is permitted to escape entirely the framework of marriage, Rubin's original exchange system, if they intend to make use of their authority.

### **In the Position to Negotiate: Navigating Soft Power as a Woman**

In titling this chapter, I drew from the second-episode scene in *Political Animals* where Elaine Barrish-Hammond claims to have married the nation as first lady. First Lady, notably, is the first position of political influence that women in the US were capable of holding, and it carries with it its own echoes of both Rubin's marriage-based exchange system and Johnston's concept of covert power.<sup>4</sup> Expectations, social and institutional, guide the conditions for exercising power that exists in this "covert" framework, and gift-based exchange seems to echo some of these expectations, particularly in reference to Rubin's structure of exchange. This power of exchange depends at least in part on the manipulation of "soft power," Nye's term for "getting others to want the outcomes that you want" (5). While the inducements native to diplomacy form part of carrot-stick "hard power" negotiations, soft power as an "attractive" power becomes particularly useful in

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<sup>4</sup> See chapter 1 for further discussion of the concept of covert power.



analyzing the gifting of presence or recognition that forms part of the diplomatic exchanges in *Political Animals* and *Madam Secretary*.

Expectations of First Ladies as privileged women in politics and limits to the extent of their involvement in politics came into conflict with the public and political life of Hillary Clinton, whose work forms the basis for both Barrish and McCord's characters to differing degrees. Mary Ellen Brown's analysis of the media images that informed public perceptions of First Lady Clinton engages Amy Richlin's concept of the "first lady icon," which suggests that, for women afforded privileged positions, there is a "hidden bargain" that they should wield their power only when disguised and limited (262-3)—Clinton, for Brown and the people she interviews, bucks this trend in exercising power more directly than first ladies—wives of the (leader of the) nation—are meant to do. Soft power and the manipulation of attraction and aspiration offer a lens of sorts to view the politics of exchange that is then afforded women who seek to exercise power in a frame that has heretofore disallowed it when not disguised. Soft power, after all, is a mode of disguising the execution of power in the interpersonal work of cooperative human relations.

In a piece titled "Call it the Hillary Effect," Margaret Tally explores different portrayals of women in politics that draw, in her opinion or in their own estimation, from the story and the public image of Hillary Clinton as a former First Lady and Secretary of State. The series she examines "channel" Clinton in different ways—Tally traces "personality traits, narratives they are following and how these narratives reflect the public perception of Hillary Clinton, good or bad" (Tally 122-3). *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* both merit a mention in this category, as does *Commander in Chief*, mentioned earlier in this thesis. Tally establishes three variations on this channeling of Clinton: the "frustrated

striver,” the “political wife,” and the “unlikely winner” (125). In her analysis, *Madam Secretary’s* McCord emerges as the unlikely winner and possibly “the most idealized portrait of Hillary,” portrayed as “not driven by self-interest” (Tally 131); this lack of personal ambition separates McCord from the “frustrated striver” and offers her a way to embrace the power afforded a Clintonesque position without encountering the negative perceptions of her ambition. While Tally is correct in affording McCord a sort of ideological position as “winner,” the overall requirement that she conform to multivalent expectations of maternal femininity displays exactly the constraints that continue to form and often damage public perception of Hillary Clinton and other women in politics. *Political Animals* is mentioned only briefly in the piece, noting the deep similarities between Elaine Barrish’s marital backstory and Clinton’s own tenure as First Lady, but it would not be out of the question to place Barrish firmly in the “frustrated striver” camp. Barrish has given up being the political wife by the time the series begins, and she never quite emerges as the winner in the way that McCord, who “wholeheartedly inhabit[s] the role of wife and mother while never [...] being anything but completely professional and competent” as Secretary of State, does (Tally 132). This expectation of motherhood and of marriage, again, colors the conditions for feminine participation in power in restrictive and problematic ways, and especially in the diplomatic exchanges that soft-power diplomacy demands—but perhaps provides access codes for McCord and Barrish as they seek to discharge the office of Secretary of State.

Perhaps the most interesting moves that *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* make in this arena is their reframing of Rubin’s strictly-gendered exchange economies to place McCord and Barrish in atypical positions of control. To differing degrees, McCord and

Barrish emerge as transactors within the confines of diplomatic exchange, and both must flip the script on their husbands in order to provide the proper ‘gifts’ to their diplomatic partners on at least one occasion. Flipping the script, in this case, does not allow them to move beyond the expectations of their office, but rather gives each woman a different kind of access to soft power as well as gift-based power that channels attendant expectations of femininity, marriage, and covert forms of authority in order to leverage diplomatic concessions and gifts.

### **The Married Manager: McCord’s Politics of Exchange**

Elizabeth McCord, as a woman in fictional political office, faces the double standard that Chapman Rackaway notes in his examination of female voters and candidates, “expected to be tough military leaders while at the same time nurturing mother figures” (loc. 1983)—i.e., expected to inhabit both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine roles. However, *Madam Secretary*’s primary interest in the diplomatic sphere of politics gives the leadership aspect a different context, one that may be seen to align more closely with nurturant motherhood, foregrounding her capacity for caring. As addressed earlier, diplomacy is a sphere built on the concept of exchange and of negotiation, resting firmly on the importance of relationships. From the main plotline of the pilot episode, functional US foreign policy in *Madam Secretary* rests on a reciprocal exchange (in the pilot, the exchange of aid for American hostages), one that is constructed and authorized, apparently, by Elizabeth McCord in her capacity as Secretary of State—she negotiates and gives the gift.

However, McCord cannot make this move alone. On a purely narrative level, she must first cajole her own authorization out of President Dalton in order to use her carefully-cultivated relationships to maneuver in the arena of international politics. In addition, McCord emerges into this diplomatic economy as a “woman in a man’s world” (Kaklamanidou & Tally “The political tv shows” 29); in Gayle Rubin’s framework, her very gender places her naturally as “a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner of it” (Rubin 44). Rubin, here, speaks primarily of the marriage economy, and the exchange based on kinship systems, but the narrative of the pilot episode dances on the line of a kinship economy in its continued implication of McCord’s personal, domestic life in her public, workaday life<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, if we consider Elizabeth’s need for authorization and the extent to which she simply arranges for the passage of gifts and acknowledgement given by Dalton, her male superior, Elizabeth does, in fact, become the conduit of this relationship. How, then, might she be able to make the move from transacted-as-gift, which we would expect in a traditional kinship economy, to purveyor-of-gift?

As Henry McCord’s happily-wedded wife, Elizabeth is effectively removed from any risk of marital or romantic entanglement, and thus from direct, continued implication in a kinship economy as Secretary of State (something which is not echoed by Barrish’s position in *Political Animals*). Henry is not, after all, a direct actor in the diplomatic sphere, and Elizabeth is not ‘available’ to be transacted in the traditional sense of Rubin’s marital

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<sup>5</sup> Given *Madam Secretary*’s pilot’s structure, the two “stupid kids” that Elizabeth must rescue function as the organizing story of the episode. Her position as mother is thus centralized in both her domestic life (where her children appear) and in her work life (where she references her maternity to forge connections with the parents of the children at risk, and to cast her eventually-successful negotiation as a function, in part, of her maternal instinct).

sex-gender system, but must still work in a sphere where the presence of her body as representative of diplomatic office may function as a ‘gift’.<sup>6</sup> Henry’s remove from the machinations of diplomacy and of politics, as well as his clearly stated approval for his wife’s position, allows Elizabeth to move in a political sphere as a woman who controls transactions of gifts and thus relations of power. Henry’s tacit acquiescence to his wife serving in a more directly powerful role, in addition to his teaching in a more privatized sphere of religion for the first season, provides Elizabeth with the necessary ‘credentials’ of being a married woman with children to accompany her capacity to work in a male-dominated system. She is not the spectacle at the center of the show, to be desired and eventually ‘won’ by the male lead, but the married woman with a diverse skill set and demonstrated intellectual ability who enters onto a male-led scene (accompanied by her husband’s last name) and provides a maternal, feminine voice in a difficult situation—we see her reference her motherhood directly in resolving the “stupid kids” crisis of the pilot.

Moreover, Henry’s scholarly acumen only slightly precedes his physical attractiveness in his very first scene, where Elizabeth implies that his students are so attentive because he is so “cute.” He is presented as something to be looked at, to return to Mulvey’s work on classical Hollywood paradigms, even before his wife is. This subversion of the woman-as-spectacle trope continues the destabilizing effect of the makeover plot centered on his wife. She, as spectacle, is a clear tactic—he is instead established as “cute” in his first

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<sup>6</sup> *Madam Secretary* refers frequently to concerns about the use of state dinners and official state trips to provide recognition to allies and other nations; the invitation of the State Department or the presence of its top diplomat, in keeping with ideas of soft power as well as more traditional diplomatic power plays, provide both a gifting of influence and an exemplar of ideal politics.

introduction and placed in a particular private, domestic, and emotional sphere, in his place in her family and in his choice of academic field. In addition, he becomes a component of Elizabeth's diplomatic negotiations in "The Operative," the third episode of the first season, where the final three-way negotiation between Russia, Pakistan, and the USA rests on Henry's willingness to change a student's grade in his Ethics class (the student being the daughter of the Russian foreign minister). Here, Henry's influence becomes the transaction's American gift to Russia, in exchange for the Russians' gift of a defensive weapon and the Pakistani gift of the titular captured CIA operative. While Elizabeth manages the transaction (eventually capitulating to Henry's impassioned defense of his own ethics by getting the foreign minister and her husband to accept an incomplete rather than an A), Henry provides the gift, becoming, in his estimation, the inducement itself.<sup>7</sup> As such, he is assigned the feminine position in a gift-giving economy aligned with Rubin's theory, although he is given the atypical capacity to refuse to be the gift, one not granted in Rubin's model and a masculine sense of power that he must continue to assert as he becomes further implicated in *Madam Secretary's* fictional government and foreign policy.

Henry's ostensibly-feminine position as the provider of a gift that he equates with himself establishes a troubling paradigm for the series which must later be addressed by emphasizing his past military service and his intellectual and investigative prowess, and by removing him further from his wife's role as diplomatic gift-giver. His secondary position

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<sup>7</sup> While Henry may seem to provide a gift, and not to be the gift himself, the dialogue accompanying his original refusal casts the gift as his "entire career" and "integrity"; in other words, the gift comes to signify a much greater portion of Henry's "self." This does, of course, lead to his refusal, but also emphasizes the extent to which he feels he is being transacted, and thus how the audience is expected to view Elizabeth's request.

within the narrative creates anxieties about his masculinity, power, and centrality in the family as father, placed into subtext rather than direct performance. “Blame Canada,” the sixth episode of the first season, deals with the consequences of framing Henry McCord as a “trophy husband” in detail, both in his relationship with his son and the perception of his marriage in Madam Secretary’s media landscape. The emasculation implied by his relegation to a feminized position as spectacle and as a sort of gift is combated, literally, by writing his military service into a scene where he is physically aggressive and proves his physical acumen to other military men as well as his son, who observes admiringly from a distance. This is, perhaps, his “masculine energy” moment, although it does not appear in the marriage bed but rather in a homosocial scene with his son, and eventually provides him with the power to control his own narratives and exchanges within the realm of foreign relations (although not to the same degree as his protagonist, Secretary of State wife). Henry begins to provide increasing input on diplomatic situations and becomes implicated in the intelligence apparatus, moving further toward traditional, active-participant expectations of male leads in political and foreign policy-focused dramas.<sup>8</sup> Expectations of such participation for male leads thus do not seem to be confined to series where the male lead is also the protagonist. Consider the roles played by Bud Hammond in *Political Animals* (discussed later in this chapter), President Fitzgerald Grant in *Scandal*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Examples of male-led series involving their masculine protagonist actively in politics are *House of Cards* through season 5, *The West Wing*, whose ensemble cast is skewed toward male leads and female supporting cast members, and *Designated Survivor*.

<sup>9</sup> See chapter three for a further investigation into the role of Fitzgerald Grant in relation to protagonist Olivia Pope, specifically his position as the head of institutional power (and a provider of Pope’s own covert power) while she moves in hidden, relation-based spheres of influence.

and Nick Vera in *State of Affairs*, the CIA briefer lead character's love interest and a central figure in the series' intrigues. All three characters play second fiddle to a female lead, but are nonetheless central to the proceedings of government, politics, the intelligence apparatus, and diplomacy as portrayed in the series. Perhaps it is Henry McCord's singular position as Elizabeth's husband (the other three examples are unmarried and/or divorced) that allows him to act largely separate from the political machine early in the first season; however, this does not last, as expectations of the masculine role in both the exchange economy and in the family cannot be entirely contravened. Henry also does not continue to form part of diplomatic exchange as a gift or a secondary gift-giver, something the audience may expect after his negative reaction to the "arms-for-A's" arc in "The Operative."

Elizabeth McCord, however, does emerge as a gift-giver in the third episode and in many of the State Department storylines, taking an active role in exchange that suggests a separation between the gender-based exchange economy of kinship and the presumably genderless (although, in fact, far from genderless) exchange economy of diplomacy. *Madam Secretary's* attempts to remove gender from the diplomatic equation, however, are complicated by the structure of the administration and Elizabeth's relationship to President Dalton. *Political Animals*, by contrast, does not make the same move to separate gender from Barrish's execution of diplomatic exchange, instead incorporating the two.

### **Leveraging (Ex-)Marital Status: Barrish's Self-Exchange**

Barrish, in sharp contrast to McCord, is not married—she is divorced, mother to adult twin brothers, and her ex-husband re-enters her life in the first episode after a fairly-



nebulous amount of time apart. Clearly, the authorization that Henry McCord provides his wife will not operate in the same way in the construction of Barrish's authority; however, ex-husband Bud Hammond does not appear as separate from Barrish's life nor from her position as Secretary of State. Hammond is present throughout the series, as both political actor and as Barrish's relationship partner, but the remove characterized by his status as ex-husband is very clearly remarked upon throughout the series as well. This allows Barrish to move as an unmarried woman through a gift-giving economy, while still using her husband's political capital and his perceived authority as a man and as an ex-president to achieve her own political aims. Barrish leverages her position as single to gain access to particular concessions and spaces that feed her ability to conduct power, but takes control of this power in a way that McCord is not quite capable of doing. McCord's consistent participation in traditional frameworks of authority and her constant returns to a domestic space of motherhood and wifeness are not present in Barrish's characterization; she is a divorced woman, a mother of adults, and a personally-ambitious character, all character traits that McCord avoids inhabiting (despite her adult daughter).

Barrish's willingness to utilize her personal capital as unmarried woman is perhaps nowhere clearer than in her visit, in the second episode, to the hamam to find the Turkish Ambassador Serkan. Barrish strides confidently into the male-only space of the Turkish bath, framed first by the shot of her heels nearly sliding on the wet floor, and proceeds to negotiate for the opening of a secret space for intensely public diplomatic actions with the towel-clad Serkan. He capitalizes on the confusion of public and private negotiating spaces to insist upon a 'date' with the Secretary, but Barrish makes her focus on the Iranian negotiations painstakingly clear. She emerges as a no-holds-barred public servant who is

capable of securing concessions through her manipulation of a gift economy predicated on sex and gender because she is a woman—and an unmarried (divorced) woman. Although this use of her gender and the date is not her preferred tactic, she is successful in leveraging the Turkish ambassador only by participating in the normative, heterosexual ‘marriage’ economy in a largely traditional fashion—a tactic not available to her married counterpart, Elizabeth McCord. Worth noting, however, is the fact that Barrish manipulates this exchange herself. She is both transactor and transacted in the moment of this exchange; although she negotiates her own conditions, she is also the ‘gift’ that Serkan will receive for his cooperation. This sets up an uneasy relationship between Barrish and the sex-gender system that Rubin explains, one that is echoed by her not-easily-defined relationship with her ex-husband.

The audience never sees her purported date with Serkan. However, during the scene with Serkan and the immediately following argument with Douglas, Barrish’s divorce and her marriage with Bud Hammond loom large in the dialogue (Serkan having sent her flowers afterward, and Douglas noting that his mother has recently been with his father). Together, these references to Bud reinforce the pervasive characterization that Barrish is not married, but also not entirely separated from her past relationship—not entirely single. Although Bud is not her husband, he is still key to her ability to manage, market, and engage with diplomatic activity, as is clearly shown by his intervention (and negotiation) with Iranian president Hakam masterminded by Barrish. Intriguingly, here Bud becomes the transacted figure in the overall structure of the crisis—his presence is what authorizes the negotiations—but only as a negotiator himself, who makes use of the mysterious feminine figure of head-scarved Susan Berg to underscore his capacity to negotiate. In this

frame, Bud appears (to Hakam) to have no real capacity to negotiate, only to purvey the desires and concessions of his ex-wife and of the “special envoy” that Berg impersonates. If Barrish moves in her private, bath-house negotiations as a single woman who transacts herself, then Bud moves in the quasi-public hostage negotiations as a divorced man who relies on his ex-wife to place him at the negotiations and on another woman placed at the negotiations by Barrish to allegedly dictate the terms of his negotiation. This is problematized by the reality of the situation (of which Hakam is unaware), wherein Bud makes the actual decisions regarding concessions and gifts; however, the ostensible appearance of the negotiation within the fictional diplomatic environment is one managed and dictated by women, one that results in the gift of Bud Hammond’s physical presence at an important life event. Bud, here, fills a feminized role as transacted-gift, much as Henry McCord’s ability to provide an ‘A’ (or, eventually, an incomplete) to the Russian ambassador’s daughter becomes the gift in Elizabeth’s negotiations with Pakistan and Russia in *Madam Secretary*’s third episode.

The narrative, it seems, must place the male member of the marital (or ex-marital romantic) relationship in the position of transacted gift, at least in the public eye, to facilitate Barrish and McCord’s participation in the diplomatic sphere. Bud Hammond performs his role with gusto, however, while Henry McCord resists his imbrication in his wife’s work. These differentiations in attitude may be due to the two men’s expectations of ‘gifts’ to them within the exchange: Hammond stands to gain political and social capital, while McCord must sacrifice his sense of integrity. This reiterates the inextricable relationship between good political fortune and good family dynamics for the Barrish-Hammonds that doesn’t exist in the same way for the McCords. While positive political

outcomes do aid the overall tenor of the show and thus of the familial relationships within, the McCord family does not tend to form part of the fabric of political action and discourse itself, allowing Elizabeth McCord more space to perform her domestic role as mother without infringing on her navigation of diplomacy and politics. This is not a tactic available to Elaine Barrish, who must confront family drama and political drama often in the same settings. This helps dictate the degree to which McCord and Barrish are able to separate their political roles from their gender in navigating an exchange economy—that is to say, they cannot separate it completely, but can at least manage not to be transacted themselves, without rights in their own exchange.

### **Gift and Gift-Giver: Separate Roles in a Diplomatic Exchange Economy?**

In the “masculine energy” scene of *Madam Secretary*’s pilot, Elizabeth McCord, anxious that she has made a decision that negatively impacts her children, seeks confirmation that she and Henry have “do[ne] the right thing,” reestablishing her devotion to being a loving mother and wife who seeks a balance between her family and her work life. Elizabeth’s reluctance to accept Dalton’s nomination to the State department—her “hesitantly accept[ed]” authority—is positively coded both in her removal from career politics and in her devotion to her family (Tally, 131-2). Anxieties about family are a common theme in working-woman television shows, as Amanda Lotz shows in her examination of workplace ensemble narratives: stories about women ‘breaking into’ masculine spheres “emphasize female characters’ difficulty balancing their careers with romantic partnership and child rearing” (147). Here, Elizabeth’s anxiety about family dynamics shows her as at least desiring to “wholeheartedly inhabit” her role as mother as

well as serving as a “completely professional and competent” Secretary of State (Lotz 147), a fundamental balance for women in American politics, and one that echoes the doubled nature of her role in a traditional gift-giving economy, transactor and transacted in different moments of diplomatic action.

Elizabeth tends to embody these roles at different times—during a state visit, she serves as the transacted presence, a gift in herself, and during negotiations she works as transactor, never forming part of the exchanged gifts. She does not serve as both simultaneously, as Barrish does in her exchange with Serkan. This is echoed by Elizabeth’s largely separate domestic and workplace spheres; while her storylines in the State Department may be echoed by conflicts and reunions at home, her family is rarely a direct part of her political life and related stories. Her eldest daughter, college-aged Stephanie (“Stevie”), is the only child who forms part of workplace discussions in the opening few episodes, and then only in episode two because of her own political actions (protesting at her college, which she quits in the same episode). Stevie’s introduction is also part of a public relations plotline, as apparently her desire for privacy left her out of much of the McCord family’s publicity.<sup>10</sup> Stevie aside, however, Elizabeth’s family is only obliquely referenced during much of her workplace scenes, unless her husband (and, very infrequently, her younger children) accompany her to diplomatic and/or official events and trips. The ability to keep these spheres separate seems to provide the foundation for her ability to execute her role as

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<sup>10</sup> Stephanie McCord, unlike her younger siblings Alison and Jason, doesn’t appear in the first episode, and Elizabeth says she has “two teenagers” of her own while talking with the parents of the pilot’s “stupid kids.” Information on IMDb (origin uncertain) indicates that the role of Stevie was added and cast later, and thus wasn’t part of the pilot.

mother and her role as Secretary, both of which implicate her in gift-giving economies, without troubling her marriage and her family life.

This is not the case for Barrish and her family (ex-husband Bud and adult sons Douglas and TJ), who constantly appear in the public eye and even in Barrish's work life. As established in the previous chapter, the Barrish-Hammonds never quite achieve the separation of their domestic sphere from either the public eye or the space of the State Department and Barrish's work, which may provide some insight into Barrish's ability to juggle her position as transactor and transacted simultaneously. Women in Rubin's framework "are in no position to give themselves away" (45), a position which Barrish directly counters; moreover, the idea of women's "more residual" rights in themselves and in their children (Rubin 46) seem challenged by Barrish's relationship to Bud and to her children as well as her ability to claim those rights to herself as well as to her children's public images almost without question. In addition to being divorced—and thus single and again a potential gift in Rubin's sex-gender system of kinship exchange—Barrish is not the mother to dependent children in the same way as McCord (although her adult sons do appear dependent on her, if in differing ways than McCord's younger children). Because her children are adults, their ability to act in the public and political eye is clearly made a part of the story, and due to their own imbrication with the White House as former First Children, they are not permitted to leave the public eye entirely, existing instead in a frame that Barrish doggedly seeks to control. While the issue of Stevie's "invisibility" in the pilot is an undercurrent in one episode of *Madam Secretary*, the unfolding of Douglas's engagement and of TJ's struggles with sobriety and mental health become central concerns for both the family plotlines and larger issues of publicity and public presence. Douglas's

direct insertion into Barrish's workplace further establishes the contiguity of these two spheres, making Barrish's "marriage to the nation" one that affects her entire family, a fact foregrounded by her family's reactions to her bid for office. Here, Barrish's ambition is a threatening factor to her domestic situation, which carries through the series. While this allows her to make sweeping and important moves in diplomacy—the Iranian hostage negotiations and the rescue of the Chinese submarine being our primary views of her diplomatic exercises—she is not able to stabilize her family's situation, nor is the family able to address in an effective way TJ's mental health struggles or Douglas's relationship problems. The family only reunites and coexists peaceably in the wake of Garcetti's plane going down, when they retreat to the farmhouse for Douglas's elopement with fiancée Annie, who struggles herself with her own inclusion in the Barrish-Hammond whirlwind.

For Barrish, then, the roles of transactor and transacted become as commingled as that of private woman and public Secretary, refusing her the domestic, quieter space that McCord returns to frequently and complicating her role in the gift economy set up by *Political Animals*' fictional diplomacy. The continuing reference to her ambition as a destabilizing force for her family and for the administration for which she works sets Barrish up in direct opposition to McCord's conciliatory position in her corresponding administration, and also creates Barrish as non-conforming to expectations of domestic wifehood and motherhood. Her ability to move beyond the expectations set up by Rackaway—that women be mothers first, and then actors in public spheres—brings complications for her family, but permits her different kinds of direct action than McCord is able to access, actions that establish her as an independent actor and provide credibility to her ambitions.

### **Marrying the Nation—or the Administration: Differing Wife-Mothers of State**

Earlier in this chapter, Hillary Clinton's influence on and connections to the characters of McCord and Barrish set up a paradigm of femininity—particularly first-lady femininity, but also contextually the femininity of women in politics—that engages concepts of appropriate exercises of typically-soft power available in politics to feminine actors. Particularly in Clinton's case, the more overt exercises of power—and of direct negotiating power, rather than affective soft power—enacted by women in politics often find themselves targets of political controversy, prone to be redirected and reexamined in the light of their enactors' relationships to men. This trend is visible Mary Ellen Brown's tracking of Clinton's media perception: if Clinton's open exercise of “illegitimate” power—power gained by her relation to the president—“[does] not do, a more acceptable narrative” is produced, and Clinton bakes cookies (265). Clinton is thus required to embody both the image of wife-and-mother and of political actor in order to exercise her power, a dual expectation attendant on women in the workplace (and, more specifically for this context, women in politics). This expectation follows McCord and Barrish, in many ways linked to their similarities to former First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

McCord, unlike Barrish, doesn't retain certain historical connections to Clinton's story—she has never been First Lady, and she is not married to a politician or divorced from one. However, McCord's position as a married woman continues to be fundamental to her position in both the public and private sphere, much as Barrish's relationship with Bud Hammond functions as a necessary component to her work as Secretary of State. Even in her work as chief diplomat, McCord's imbrication in a male-dominated sphere re-



inscribes the structure of traditional heterosexual marital relationships, particularly in the context of diplomatic exchange, on the hierarchy of the Dalton administration. McCord's marriage may allow her to serve as woman-as-gift-giver, in the sense that she works in a public sphere as a manipulator of power relations and manages diplomacy-related gift exchanges, whether of influence, recognition, or the presence or exchange of actual human bodies. However, her relationship with President Dalton and his staff seems to rewrite her as woman-as-gift, in the sense that the Secretary of State's presence confers a certain amount of recognition, and also woman-as-conduit, in that she conveys power not by her own decisions alone but through the president's authorization, still constrained by gendered expectations of beauty and marital status in her diplomatic actions.

The pilot is one of very few episodes to mention Dalton's wife, the invisible First Lady, directly—and only insofar as she grants McCord direct access to her husband the president. Lydia Dalton does not appear in the first season of *Madam Secretary*. As Dalton and McCord have their one-on-one conversation in a shockingly informal Oval Office encounter (contrasted with prior formal meetings mediated by Russell Jackson, his male Chief of Staff), echoes of the structure of Elizabeth and Henry's bedroom chat are discernible. From the moment Dalton says, "You have my attention," he is seated, unmoving, as Elizabeth in the counter-shot stands and paces through the space with energy and frequent gestures, defending her position, before taking a seat next to Dalton to earnestly explain her position. Earlier, in the domestic setting of the McCord family home, she moved anxiously through the bedroom before settling to sit next to Henry and affirm her choice to assume the office of Secretary of State; the organization of this scene keeps its shots of Henry seated, stationary, on the bed, while Elizabeth appears in the counter-

shot in constant motion, gesturing and fiddling with various accessories until she settles across from him to discuss their sex life. Dalton may thus be said to become a quasi-husband to Elizabeth, albeit one with national authority to complement and in fact authorize her diplomatic position, rather than the private, softer acquiescence Henry portrays. This ‘marriage,’ rather than her relationship with Henry, seems to allow her to move fully into a sphere of diplomatic exchange that she then controls—indeed, it is not until after this scene that she is allowed to move forward from the quiet church meeting with her backchannel negotiations to free the American hostages, released by Dalton’s permission.

The overall story arc, here, of “Operation Stupid Kids” (as *Madam Secretary*’s State Department fondly calls the rescue efforts) feeds into this characterization of Elizabeth as Dalton’s political ‘wife’. If Dalton, as president, is a quasi-paternal figure to the nation, then Elizabeth, preoccupied with saving two young American citizens and doing so bloodlessly, appears to be a maternal figure in her actions and in her positioning relative to Dalton. Moreover, she moves to trade humanitarian aid for the release of the two teenagers; this comes in contrast to the covert military operation that Jackson advocates (and botches) earlier in the episode. Her use of nonviolent, even nurturant negotiating tools reiterates the caring-mother trope that is eventually shown to be the appropriate tool, resulting in the return of the two teenagers and a joyful reunion scene with their tearful parents.

Elizabeth’s work, however, is not done—she returns to the trappings of the State Department for a state dinner with the polygamous king of Swaziland, a scene fraught with expectations of marriage and womanhood where McCord’s presence and willingness to host the dinner is a gift itself given to the Swazi king. The scene at the state dinner opens

with the king hailing Elizabeth as the US's "most beautiful Secretary of State," reinscribing the appearance narrative that runs throughout the pilot and recalling the red-dress scene, as well as establishing McCord as the centerpiece of the diplomatic overture the US is making. Elizabeth, as the center of the scene and of the table, emerges as the powerhouse of the scene, despite—or perhaps because of—the king's pride at being offered this state dinner appearance as a token of alliance and recognition. She is clearly the focal point of the scene, with the king placed secondarily—they are the only two to speak during the dinner scene.<sup>11</sup>

During the scene, McCord capitalizes on the expectation of her role as the nation's wife-mother, established by her relationship with Dalton and her attention to children and domestic problems to ask the king to fund an AIDS-related public health initiative. She still wields the considerable power of the American diplomatic purse and its attendant political acumen in that moment (as well as a visual cue to her previous 'masculinity', in the collared shirt she wears with her long skirt); however, she is present to manage this negotiation because she represents recognition from the Dalton Administration. She also uses this moment to evoke her own capacity as a woman ("a woman's perspective") by forging a connection with the silent Swazi wives (literally naming them) and using that connection to sway the king. This multilayered deployment of femininity offsets the scene's opening awkward joke wherein she claims too directly a masculine position—"I only have the one husband," she says early on, apparently claiming for herself the capacity

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<sup>11</sup> McCord is the speaking white woman who calls the black wives into relief in the scene, who do not speak but serve to authorize the initiative she proposes—a complicated interplay of racial politics largely swept under the enormous dining table.

of polygamy. This flouting of gendered norms, blaming the apparently-diminutive size of her family unit on a lack of male presence rather than of female childbearing, provides a momentary stumbling block—contravening the typical sex-gender framework of kinship—and stalls the scene. Her speech must then be authorized by the Swazi king's laughter and then gentled by the machinations of gendered position that McCord uses to secure his compliance with her public health agenda. However, it is important to note that McCord never leaves the register of mother (of state and of nuclear family) in this scene—even her narrative-stalling joke is premised on the structure of the family and her position within it. In both this exchange and in the scene with Dalton, familiar tropes of motherhood, marriage, and a woman's perspective color the exercise of Elizabeth's power, confining it to a covert, manipulative operation of soft power that emerges as the appropriate register of diplomacy, while still apparently being the primary avenue to which Elizabeth has access.

Barrish, on the other hand, grows less and less tied to the political expectations of her apparent chain of command as *Political Animals* progresses, as she stretches more toward independent action and her own independent role in government. This comes, however, as the current state of her family life begins to form more of an obstacle to her political ambitions. As Barrish comes closer to announcing her presidential run and moves in almost direct contradiction to Garcetti's other advisors to advocate for rescuing a leaking Chinese submarine, TJ overdoses and Douglas sells more and more of his mother's story to reporter Susan Berg. The pressure of Barrish's ambition seems to rest firmly in the not-quite-separate sphere of the domestic—while it does not affect her performance directly, she sees

these consequences develop as particular obstacles to her ability to continue down this path. Her family life is not compatible with her ambition, but is directly tied to her political life.

Barrish's flashback scene in the second episode gives perhaps the biggest clue to her relationship to the White House and the kind of power she continues to engage in her work as Secretary of State. She states that during her husband's inauguration she "became first wife," that she "married the nation." We might consider, in this context, that Barrish married the nation, but in the end only divorced Bud Hammond, private citizen, she and her relatives remaining nonetheless deeply connected to the political machine. Her divorce comes after her first presidential run, and, as we see in the opening scenes of the series, takes place a while after her husband's presidential tenure. Her continued determination to reach the Oval Office may be seen as an extension of this commitment; Barrish, in this case, is wedded not to the administration that occupies the White House, as McCord may seem to be, but rather to the nation itself. Thus, Barrish, rather than serving as a conduit of the president's power, would fit this sex-gender system analysis as the conduit of the nation's power—and this separates Barrish from the Garcetti administration in a way that serves her own political ambitions as well as the work she does as a diplomat outside the confines of Garcetti's authority and the supervision of his chief of staff Barry. McCord never accomplishes this kind of separation, perhaps because she is not so directly connected, in the personal fashion that Barrish evokes, to the office that she serves. Barrish's connection seems to be that of direct 'marriage' to or investment in the nation itself, whereas McCord's connections work largely through implication and the triangulation of relationships to power. While Barrish's link to the Oval Office does come

through her former-president ex-husband, it is an inherited position she claims directly as hers.

In order to make this connection stick, *Political Animals* foregrounds Barrish's continued relationship with Bud Hammond over her bond to Garcetti, even though Garcetti's first lady appears only once in the series and never speaks. Barrish's relationship with Garcetti does not echo the work-wife framework nor the administrative structure into which McCord finds herself integrated. She speaks to Garcetti as an equal and rival more often than as a superior officer, and seeks his counsel and approval as infrequently as we might consider possible—far less than McCord does. Bud provides more advice to Barrish throughout the series than does Garcetti; in fact, the most central scene between Garcetti and Barrish might be considered his offer of the vice presidency, which is the closest the series gets to inscribing Barrish into the same kind of quasi-marital relationship that McCord has with Dalton. This almost proposal-like moment still endows Barrish with the capacity to make the choice to enter that relationship—a choice that Dalton expressly forbids McCord in *Madam Secretary*'s pilot (“I won't take no for an answer,” he says)—while also offering her a different kind of power and access to the Oval Office. It is, of course, not the access she is looking for, and while nothing is clearly stated at the end of the series, viewers may assume she will continue her quest for the Oval Office given her smile and the way her ambition colors the rest of the narrative.

## **Conclusion**

Establishing their respective protagonists as the nation's wife-mother provides an extra layer of authorization to each series' female Secretary of State, who then fulfills a

humanitarian position to which popular Americentric representations of US foreign policy aspire; she is a benevolent, morally-upright figure who then authorizes the fictional administration's actions in their foreign policy. However, it is the extent of each protagonist's ambition which determines the extent to which they are able to perform their roles within existing power structures, or whether they are more inclined to move largely independently of the administration to which they belong. While McCord and Barrish can be said to occupy similar spaces as wife-mothers to the nation, the way in which they obtain these positions are markedly different, as well as the way in which they maintain them and leverage their positions as women in power in a gift-based economy to accomplish their goals.

McCord's specific position as nurturant mother of the state conflates public and private spheres of morality and caretaking that allow her to gain approval from the male power structure she works within—after all, she is “ethical and not driven by self-interest” (Tally 131), and thus cast as an appropriate member of the administration. As a morally-upright, maternal leader, McCord does not willingly embark upon any action she finds distasteful. This frame then follows her throughout the series, if living largely in implication rather than outright structure as seen in the first episode; she becomes the authority behind US foreign actions in a particularly feminized, often unassailable way, working to create an atmosphere of American foreign policy that recalls the machination of kinship, allowed to do so because she is also presented as a warm, caring maternal figure who makes the right choices for her children. McCord's ability to maintain this position as largely separate from her personal life, as well as her ability to manage gift-giving as a representative of the administration seems contingent on her maintaining a distance from political ambition,

something Barrish is never equipped to do. In constructing Barrish's history, *Political Animals* provides its viewers with a more active, aggressive version of the wife-mother of the state: she is committed to serving the country and will aspire to do so in more and more direct ways. While her foreign policy moves echo McCord's ethics, maternal protective and conciliatory instincts, and commitment to the protection of human life, she proceeds at far more of a contradiction to the existing power structure of the Garcetti administration.

While both series present a Secretary of State who serves as a wife-mother to the fictional United States they depict, an attention to ambition separates *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*. If Elizabeth McCord is the "unlikely winner" that Margaret Tally terms her, she 'wins' by moving within the confines of an existing system of expectations and conventions to exercise her authority as a woman in politics—only within the purview of and in concert with the administration she serves, and largely by the authorization of her position as married wife and mother, free from implication in a traditional marriage economy of diplomacy. Barrish, by contrast, continues to strive outside the presumed framework to take charge of her own transaction as a woman and as a figurehead of US foreign policy. The question that emerges from the juxtaposition of these two series—and the short-lived run of *Political Animals*—is whether ambition and determined rights of self can be said to be valued in the representation of feminine politicians over conformity to expectations of motherhood and submission to authority. In the current political climate, no easy answers are forthcoming—and nor are they easily provided by either series under examination.



### Chapter 3 Pope and Associations

#### *Race, Political Power, and the Weight of Expectation in Scandal*

Shonda Rhimes' *Scandal* emerged onto the television scene in 2012, the same year that *Political Animals* aired and only two years before *Madam Secretary*'s pilot premiered. Another primetime drama set in the fast-paced world of Washington politics, *Scandal* tends more toward exploring the underbelly of political machinery than portraying the functioning of American diplomacy. Protagonist Olivia Pope works as a crisis manager or "fixer" in a firm she herself runs, a somewhat ragtag team of cutthroat lawyers and experts who solve problems, political, legal, and personal, for Washington's elite. Loosely based on a "real-life crisis manager" who served the George H.W. Bush administration as press secretary, Judy Smith (Kaklamanidou & Tally "Introduction" 19), Pope herself has ties to the fictionalized U.S. executive branch of *Scandal*. She served the fictional Grant administration as White House Communications Director as well as working on his campaign, and is shown to be in an on-and-off relationship with the president throughout the series. The dynamics of Pope's relationship to the Oval Office, the president, and the White House, as well as her navigation of politically-coded power, provide an intriguing foil to the construction of feminine political authority within the confines of an executive branch represented by *Madam Secretary*'s McCord and *Political Animals*' Barrish, in the contexts of both authorized and appropriate relationships and of race.

*Scandal* presents a black female protagonist and does not hesitate to give her nearly unrestricted access to power. In a television landscape where black women are often relegated to "token black friend" roles or typecast as sultry vixens or twangy-accented mothers, Kerry Washington's Olivia Pope is a gladiator in a suit—in fact, a leader of

gladiators in suits—who stands her ground, does not back down, and asserts her leadership without apology. Her position is not challenged—nowhere in the opening episode is her identity as a black woman addressed or referenced, and she never needs to justify her power. This appears, in many ways, to be a refreshing departure from both stereotype and the stereotypical story of surmounting racial and gender-based “glass ceilings” and institutional boundaries. Olivia Pope’s power, however, is built in a very familiar way for the portrayal of women in general, and women of color in particular.

A runaway hit, *Scandal* has been the object of much critical discussion focused on its attention to—or lack of overt attention to, perhaps—the politics of fielding the first black female protagonist of a network television drama since 1974 (Pixley 30). For many scholars (and casual viewers), Rhimes’ writing and Kerry Washington’s portrayal of Olivia Pope present a society that seems uncomfortably post-racial, prone to eliding concerns of racial politics and of stereotypical portrayals of black characters on television and in media more broadly. This uneasily hidden-but-obvious positioning of race within the narrative feeds Maryann Erigha’s investigation of *Scandal* as crossover television—television that can present diverse casts and narratives, but only when it “submerges race in the televisual landscape, thereby obscuring the presence of race or the persistence of racial inequality” (Erigha 11). In the same vein as Erigha’s indictment of crossover appeal, Utz McKnight states that “the fact that Olivia Pope is Black matters for viewers” (McKnight 191); however, “the success of *Scandal* in fact depends on the absence of race from the screen” (ibid., 192). As Janie Filoteo points out, a closer look at *Scandal* “demonstrates the problematic nature of dealing with race in this society because while the show and its producers may not wish to delve into the world of racial politics, the racial nature of our

society forces the issue to the forefront” (Filoteo 213). The inescapable nature of racialization in the representation of Olivia Pope comes in conversation with representational tropes and expectations of underrepresented minorities on television.

Cassandra Chaney and Ray V. Robertson, in their work on the implications of *Scandal*'s racial politics, state that the show “advances the stereotypical tropes of Matriarch, Jezebel, and Lady [or Sapphire]” through its depiction of Pope’s personal and workplace relationships and activities, particularly the show’s investment in the relationship between Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant (138). For Chaney and Robertson, Pope embodies the matriarch in her control of her workplace, the firm she created, represents the Lady/Sapphire in her single-minded devotion to her career over concerns of family, personal life, and health, and serves as the Jezebel in her illicit, passionate relationship with the married president (142). For Chaney and Robertson, this reiteration of stereotype is not sufficiently interrogated by the narrative, instead it is “masked within a veneer of socioeconomic success,” shifting the narrative so that “the unacceptable [...] is immediately and/or gradually accepted and celebrated as a new, truncated, and skewed version of ‘Black womanhood’” (143). McKnight unearths the same stereotypical tropes as he examines the class consequences of Pope’s position as fixer, and the expediency of eliding her racial identity. Pope serves as “a facilitator to elites,” a character who “recalls the roles of the Black slave woman as jezebel and mammy [...] superimposed on contemporary descriptions of Black social mobility” (McKnight 185-6).

For McKnight, however, the representation in *Scandal* of Pope’s blackness as “a condition that defines her personal identity” (187), rather than something that establishes constraints and expectations on her social mobility, access, and presentation, “allow[s

black viewers] to see the limitations that the material practice of Blackness currently places upon who [they] are” (188). McKnight sees the representation of a black woman who largely counts race as a personal characteristic and not a social discriminator as a space of possibility, and one that reveals the existing constraints on the non-televised population that she, in small or large part, represents. Tara-Lynne Pixley echoes this analysis when she undertakes an investigation of Pope’s trope-based characterization, concluding that the representation that Pope is able to provide to a critical viewing public is overdetermined by an “untenable set of expectations” of black women characters (31). Pixley, like McKnight, turns this to an advantage: as Pope is “not a monolith,” but rather a “sort of *supertrope*,” she is able to transcend, to a certain degree, the expectations and preconditions that limit more stereotypical, trope-based representation (Pixley 32). For Pixley, what is lacking is more varied—and simply *more*—representations of black female characters, but she does acknowledge that in order to accomplish Pope’s “supertrope” status, she and her compatriots must exist in “an unrealistic post-racial world,” or at least a “world more true to the reality many currently strive to attain” (31).

Stephanie Gomez and Megan McFarlane’s analysis of *Scandal* further expands the definition and the representative potential of such a world, describing the show as an exemplar of a conceptual process they term “refraction.” For Gomez and McFarlane, *Scandal* and texts like it “attempt to draw attention away from problematic ideologies [...] through an immediate, often self-conscious, critique of those ideologies” (365). This act of “revealing and concealing,” both concepts operating simultaneously, can serve to “depoliticize the material realities” facing marginalized groups within the framework of existing problematic ideologies, among which the authors name racism, antifeminism, and

postfeminism (Gomez & McFarlane 365). For Gomez and McFarlane, however, refraction can ultimately be productive, problematizing the idea of a post-racial or postfeminist society overall in implication, if not directly (373-4). This evidence of self-reflection and -interrogation on the part of televisual representation provides, in their framework, a space for optimism about an ability to critique existing power structures: refraction can “expose[] the lack of progress cloaked in progress narratives” (Gomez & McFarlane 374). Of course, this raises the question for Gomez and McFarlane: why do the problematic representations circumscribed by stereotypical tropes and expectations still exist? Would *Scandal* have been as successful if it did not represent “a powerful woman in the White House who is also relatively powerless in important ways” (Gomez & McFarlane 374)? This returns to issues discussed by Erigha in crossover television, and also the concerns raised by earlier chapters of this thesis. To what extent is access to power and to powerful spaces afforded a subject who must tread the line of refraction and of the personal/political divide of identity?

Olivia Pope’s position in *Scandal* as a “fixer” is echoed by her position as President Grant’s mistress—she may exercise considerable power in the Washington political environment, but she can do so only in the shadows. Her position on the margins, while established as a position that affords her access and agency in Washington and one that potentially reflects bell hooks’ concept of the margins as a site of power and resistance (hooks 241), is not one that she can transcend, nor is it one that she is shown to seek. Although she participates in similar exercises of soft power and covert power utilized by *Madam Secretary*’s McCord and *Political Animals*’ Barrish, white women depicted in politics, Pope is not given the same authorization as her white female peers to work directly

in government, within the white-male-led administration. Alongside her position as racially-other, she does not, notably, reproduce the same expectations of wife-and-motherhood, being unmarried and childless. Her nonconformity to expectations of appropriate political womanhood keeps her on the fringes of political power, perhaps showing the clearest view of the avenues to influence that she, as a black woman, is permitted to access in a white, heteropatriarchal system that operates not via overt racism and sexism, but by hegemonic perceptions of appropriate behavior and access.

In Gomez and McFarlane's concept of refraction, Pope's position inside and outside the overwhelmingly white and clearly male-led Grant administration (shown in narrative and in cinematography) allows *Scandal* to provide an image of a woman in power in Washington while simultaneously questioning the structures by which women—and especially women of color—are permitted to access such power. However, restricting much of this questioning to implication, *Scandal* relies on its ability to construct and commingle multiple competing narratives, alongside its investment in the almost-but-not-quite separation between overt public relations and covert “fixer” work, to establish a frame for Pope's manipulation of power relationships. By casting her as both a “gladiator in a suit” and a demurely-dressed political mastermind, *Scandal* positions Pope both within the context of aggressive public action and of polite covert power negotiations. Perhaps most importantly, Pope must toe a thin line of refracted narratives and strictures in her personal and professional relationships with President Grant and his administration in order to maintain access to the codes and networks of power that she uses as a businesswoman and fixer, although her refusal of his influence and their relationship is often personally (and not always professionally) advantageous for Pope. What is striking about *Scandal*'s

approach to the machinations of covert power and soft power negotiations is its bald-faced acknowledgement of Pope's (and to an intriguingly lesser degree, her lover's wife Mellie's) specific access to and apparent suitability for its particular exercise in a public relations and diplomacy-based framework. While Olivia Pope does not occupy the White House administration and its cabinet as *Madam Secretary's* McCord and *Political Animals's* Barrish do, she finds a presence in the Oval Office and in the work of government relations. Nevertheless, her presence, however capable it is of refracting the institutions and tropes at work on her exercise of power, cannot afford her a position in the white male administration that leads *Scandal's* White House.

### **Wearing the White Hat: Dressing and Characterizing Olivia Pope**

*Scandal* establishes its protagonist and her relationship with the Washington landscape that she occupies in a number of ways not entirely contingent on narrative. While Pope's managerial work as a fixer is key to her insider-and-outsider relationship with the Washington elite, the choices that code her as a professional and as a woman—particularly as a black professional woman in a political landscape fraught with lying and manipulation—are perhaps first and foremost encoded by her very appearance onscreen. By virtue of *Scandal's* choices in constructing Pope's wardrobe and the implication, beginning with the pilot episode's consistent invocation of "gladiators in suits," of costuming in the formation of identity and of qualifications for work, Pope's appearance emerges as a central part of her character and of her reputation, providing viewers with a visual understanding of Pope's position as a background miracle worker with her hands in virtually every cookie jar in Washington.

Olivia Pope's wardrobe, full of the sleek, sharp lines of jackets and trousers that echo the masculinized attire of Elizabeth McCord in *Madam Secretary*, appears almost exclusively in neutral, sedate colors—tan, beige, blue, and somewhat infrequently darker brown and black. Although Pope is presented onscreen and in publicity shots as beautiful and desirable—often in scenes with Grant—she is not dressed in eye-catching colors, and does not tend to be seen in colors or clothing designed to foreground femininity or sexuality. From Pope's first scene in the pilot episode, "Sweet Baby," we see her speaking against this very style of dress, telling new hire Quinn Perkins that she is showing "too much cleavage" in her low-cut blouse. The sedate, almost demure style of dress that she adopts emphasizes, in some ways, the private, hidden nature of her work as a Washington fixer. In fact, Mellie Grant, the prim and proper Southern belle first lady, appears more frequently in bright colors and feminine ensembles. Where we see McCord and Elaine Barrish utilizing the potential of wardrobe-as-spectacle in their favor—McCord's daring red makeover ensemble and Barrish's glitzy golden dress in the first episode of *Political Animals*—Pope's similar appearance at the State Dinner in "Hell Hath No Fury," *Scandal's* third episode, foregrounds a different aspect of her character through costuming. Pope wears a simple white column dress at the dinner, presaging her later devotion and frequent reference to her 'white hat,' emblematic of her self-made reputation as a moral force for good in Washington. The dress is also an easy call back to her trademark white trench coat, the presence of which reinforces the image of Pope in white and near-white neutrals and recalls the motif of the white hat.

Pope's "white hat" is used to demonstrate her investment in being a force for good in Washington, particularly in conversation with AUSA David Rosen, Pope's friend and rival



who also lays claim to moral uprightness. She takes pride in providing moral political and public action in the Washington landscape, particularly during the first season, often in service of the truth. Thus, her frequent appearances in white (her trench coat and formal dress just two examples) take on a special significance. Her work as a fixer often involves shadier backroom dealings and efforts, so the insistence on her moral uprightness—and on the importance of her “gut”—gives her some leeway in undertaking these darker actions, with the determinedly white costuming choices ensuring that her personal morality is never far from the viewers’ thoughts. If OPA is staffed by “gladiators in suits,” as they frequently name themselves, Pope as its leader seems to be the ‘white knight,’ selflessly and tirelessly working for the goals of those she champions.

The white knight image constructed for Pope often throws her into sharp relief against the other characters in *Scandal*’s Washington, rife with corruption. When Pope confronts the Vice President’s Chief of Staff, Billy Chambers, regarding his attempt to ruin the president with tape of his affair, she appears in her trademark white trench coat in an all-black men’s bathroom, where Chambers is washing up. The camera’s framing and the bathroom set allow Chambers, all in black, nervously and guiltily washing his hands and defending his actions, to look in the mirror at Pope behind him, proto-angel-over-his-shoulder in white and thrown into relief by the dark bathroom and her bright coat. Pope, thus emphasized as a moral authority, calls him on his actions and his conflicted morality. The image of Chambers looking into the mirror as he reveals himself as an ideologue of the religious fundamentalist, right-wing vice president calls to mind his work on in-show TV cameras, but also many of Pope’s other clients’ and rivals’ declarations of innocence or guilt, mediated by glass. Even in this moment, Chambers and Pope are fighting for

control of the story, Pope by trying to undermine it in service of her larger goal. This provides Pope with influential access to policy makers in her guise as white knight, but does not afford her the ability to directly control the unfolding of and the consequences following Chambers' story. Although she emerges with the moral high ground, Chambers maintains control of the story until Pope is able to negotiate for Grant's own appearance on television—an appearance where she floats on the fringes, separated from Grant and from the public eye.

The additional consequence of Pope's white costuming is its emphasis of her physical appearance as a black woman. Often the only black woman onscreen, clothing that sets her appearance into relief reminds the audience of the dimensions of racial politics present in Pope's life that are not discussed and often not portrayed on-screen. This may represent another aspect of refraction that Gomez and McFarlane discuss, in service of Erigha's crossover television. Although *Scandal* does not use this motif to directly address race and racism, the show still provides a coded cue for those who would see it, while leaving it buried enough that it does not directly contradict the ideology of a post-racial atmosphere, one in which *Scandal* seems to operate at least in its opening season.

Beyond the aspects of Pope's costuming, her appearances in press conferences and at state dinners establish her as a public actor, both in the frame of statecraft and public relations. However, she is a fixer who does not seek out her own clients and a lawyer who does not go to court, as OPA's Harrison Wright and Stephen Finch make clear to new-hire Quinn Perkins, and thus is not directly a part of the government or of the public workings of Washington in the workspace that her job would suggest. While Pope is clearly influential in the public sphere—she manages to control the narrative in almost every case

she takes on—she exerts that influence only by remaining separate from that public sphere. Even when she serves at the pleasure of the White House, itself a public-facing entity, as she does to bookend the first season in “Sweet Baby” and in “Grant: For the People,” she does not appear as the public face or public voice of the administration in any capacity. She negotiates one-on-one, in some cases with characters that are not even seen on-screen, and thus provides leverage and a network of influence to turn the tide of the presidential affair crisis. This crisis is of particular note, as Pope herself is at the center of the crisis as a character but still remains largely managerial in her relationship to the crisis narrative itself. Pope is also frequently filmed in settings where her disconnected relationship to the events she manages is foregrounded, even as she becomes a deeply implicated actor in those crises.

### **Glass Doors, Flicker Cuts, and Flashback: Creating Behind-Closed-Doors Politics**

Pope, as a fixer, is not meant to be seen in any crisis, and even less intended to be the face attached to it—a position that the narrative and the filming choices establish for the viewer. Pope and her associates work on the top floor of a largely nondescript office building, solving crises primarily by conversing with each other about evidence they have ferreted out elsewhere (often by nefarious means) and devising a strategy later carried out by faces not their own. This narrative positioning at a remove from the actual results of their work, is reiterated as we see their efforts undertaken in quiet morgues, hidden security-camera monitoring rooms, and other mostly-empty locations. For Pope especially, but also for others in her office, the shots used to depict her work, show her past, and move between the competing storylines and narratives that exist as part of her work emphasize

the complexity of Pope's work as a fixer. Moreover, *Scandal*'s structured frames and cuts drive home the necessity of Pope's behind-the-scenes position, as she must weave and manipulate public narratives in a way that makes thorough use of the kind of covert power Carolyn Johnston describes as women's historic ability to affect change via influence gained through their husbands and male family members, et cetera (Johnston ix).<sup>12</sup>

Many of Pope's early scenes, and often those shot at the Olivia Pope and Associates (OPA) office, show evidence of being filmed through the glass doors that make up much of OPA's internal structure. The lens flare and distortion that accompanies this filming through an extra frame of glass reemphasizes OPA's position as a Washington fixer firm. Their work to smooth over complex political and public relations issues, carried out primarily in the shadows, comes to a head most often behind closed doors (whether at OPA or elsewhere); the choice to film through the glass doors at OPA makes the theoretical separation from the open, public world materially apparent. Of course, these doors are still made of glass—although the staff at OPA may work in the shadows and operate behind closed doors, their work is nonetheless meant to be seen. While they certainly control which narratives are seen, OPA's associates cannot sidestep the fact that their actions are performed to create a public narrative, nor that Olivia Pope and the name of her firm are known to the Washington elite. Pope's business, operating in private, cannot exist without consistent public attention for her clients and the stories she propagates about them. Her

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 1 for an analysis of covert power as it informs feminine-run diplomacy.

presence and the presence of OPA is clearly felt by the Washington scene in which she operates, even though her work is primarily done to obscure her own involvement.

Pope's abilities in narrative creation, however, are also part of the cinematographic choices in *Scandal*, which often boasts multiple narratives, sometimes narratives set up in direct competition. This is further emphasized by *Scandal*'s use of flicker cuts—high-speed cuts between different images, often of competing players in Pope's political scene, typically set to the sound of a rapid camera shutter. The shutter sound, of course, is a *Scandal* motif; in a show so concerned with managing image and narrative, what object is more foregrounded than the camera? Viewers, then, become hyperaware of the camera's presence in filmed scenes, particularly ones we have no business watching. While Pope is never completely able to control the flow of the narrative, she is consistently instrumental, in setting up which narrative will be believed. She does not, however, have the power to create a single narrative that clearly displaces all other narratives—no episode ends neatly enough to give her entire narrative control. The flicker cuts reinforce the presence of multiple narratives, making Pope's job itself the question of bringing together and establishing—via quiet, private work—a narrative that will achieve her own ends.

As a storyteller and as a fixer, Pope operates within the confines of expected and accepted Washington narratives, even as she occasionally moves to destabilize them. Notably, Pope's narratives in the series are rarely her own concern, except when her illicit relationship with the president is involved. Pope, rather, adopts the concerns of her clients, insistent on not allowing her personal, private life to inform the decisions in her professional life. In the pilot episode, "Sweet Baby," Pope's damage-control case centers around the capacity of a retired gay military serviceman to tell the truth—to make public

the private narrative of his love life—in order to provide his alibi for the murder of his fiancée, a woman he did not love. While the serviceman in question (Sully St. James) does eventually choose to come out, his public statement, choreographed by Pope, emphasizes his role as a military man, one that recurs for St. James and his reasons for hiring OPA throughout “Sweet Baby.” While the flicker cuts provide for the audience a hint at the multiplicity of possible narratives that can be provided and explored for a particular scandal (as shown to greatest effect in the season 1 finale, “Grant: For the People”), the narrative which emerges serves an image of Pope as a truth-teller, but only in service to maintaining political climates she deems favorable. St. James, in “Sweet Baby,” tells the truth because it is the way to maintain his standing as a war hero, even if he must step outside the appropriate confines of heterosexuality. President Grant, in “Grant: For the People,” lies and claims his wife to be the other voice on the ‘sex tape’ of him and Pope released to the press—in order, we are told, to maintain his position as president because he is the right man for the job. Again, it is the narrative that Pope wants to be told that undergirds each of these situations, as she wants St. James to prove his innocence and Grant to retain his presidency, but the pressures of expectation exerted by the Washington landscape are plainly present (St. James must be a military man first and foremost, Grant must be happily married to his wife).

The use of flashback further complicates the extent to which Pope is able to control which narrative succeeds in her work. The first season showcases primarily flashbacks to the Grant campaign trail, flashbacks that foreground the private reality of the campaign over its public face, which we see sparingly as it lives largely in implication due to Grant’s presidency. These private moments, between Grant and Pope as well as characters like

First Lady Mellie Grant, provide further context to Pope's involvement in the Grant administration, but do not offer her any real position within that frame either. Just as she is seen on the fringes of the White House, she is shown in the shadows of the flashback-driven campaign. She waits in the wings, converses with then-candidate Grant in dark buses and hotel rooms, and speaks from the back of the room. While her position in the campaign clearly affords her control over the narratives the campaign advances, she is still a figure who works largely in the private space of backroom dealings, and not in front of the cameras.

While Olivia Pope is the face of OPA, and is apparently well-known throughout Washington for her skills as a fixer, she makes public statements as rarely as possible, preferring to arrange for one-on-one meetings or other small gatherings. This focus on direct spheres of influence and her limitations on broader encounters—often stating that she needs the truth directly from her client and seeking to make private deals long before public statements—cement her role as a manipulator of personal relationships. This use of covert power, as Johnston might term it, fits Pope into the stereotypical position of a feminine actor in a male-dominated sphere, even when she is dealing with female clients. What marks her work as noticeably more “covert” than the workings of similar manipulations of influence in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* is Pope's separation, duly and often directly noted, from the actual day-to-day Grant administration, even as she is directly implicated in the personal life of the president and shown frequently in the Oval Office.

### **Mistress, Work Wife, Rival: Pope's Relationships as Access to Power**

Pope's connection to the Oval Office and to the government is often triangulated through male characters, as seen in her position as Chief-of-Staff Cyrus Bean's (ex) 'work wife', Billy Chambers' competitor-turned-comrade, David Rosen's friend-and-rival, and of course Fitzgerald Grant's mistress. These men are consistently unavailable: Bean is married and gay, Chambers is the narrative's antagonist and romantically attached to Amanda Tanner, Rosen typically serves as Pope's foe, and Grant is also married, to a strong-willed first lady. While this might seem to reflect some of the dynamics noted in quasi-marital working relationships in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*<sup>13</sup>, the presence of Bean's, Chambers', and most notably Grant's significant others establishes Pope not as a quasi-wife in the structure of the administration, but as a figurative and literal "other woman" throughout the series. While she is present or mentioned in the Oval Office and the White House in nearly every episode of the first season, she is never offered a codified, authorized relationship to the White House beyond her access pass, which she only openly holds for the first two episodes of the season. Her relationship to the White House and to the power and influence it represents rests and is built in the shadows and in implication.

Olivia Pope represents a familiar kind of power in minority and female representation; relational, situational, and a long time in building. As we learn throughout the first and second seasons, Olivia has cultivated her team and her reputation through relationships and

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<sup>13</sup> See chapter 2 for a further investigation of the role of female Secretary of State alongside a president whose wife is never or almost never seen.



emotional bonds, a rescuer of sorts; her power among the team and in the Washington landscape is constructed through her relationships with them and the reputation she has established. This situationally-created and –maintained power allows her the opportunity to essentially summon Quinn Perkins to a job, to manipulate stories about Sully St. James, and to overpower Amanda Tanner’s resolve. However, it remains a power dependent on Pope’s situation and the knowledge her peers and those around her have about her reputation, her skill set, and the team she has so painstakingly built. While Pope often seems to be the most powerful, in-control person in the room, and carries a fair bit of narrative sway as protagonist, the fact that the Oval Office scenes tend to wrest her control away establishes her influence as a covert, controlled power that withers in the face of institutional power.

*Scandal* often does not, as established by Erigha, McKnight, and others, directly address the institutionalized forces of racism within its diegesis—and nor, I would argue, does it frequently address institutionalized forces of sexism, and particularly of misogynoir. *Scandal* instead relies on the kind of hidden, codes-of-behavior power imbalance that colors much of modern race and gender relations. In the political-sexual relationship between Pope and President Grant, the pilot itself demonstrates a very clear sense of who holds the power—and it is not the person we have come to consider the protagonist and indeed the orchestrator of most of the show’s events, as shown by Gomez and McFarlane, as well as Chaney and Robertson (Gomez & McFarlane 366-7; Chaney & Robertson 143). When introduced into a situation where her connections and confidence are threatened or delegitimized, her power similarly diminishes, which conforms to traditional representations of women and especially of women of color as effective manipulators of

social codes and power balances in interpersonal relationships. Even in her most powerful moments, her power is not based on institutional norms, but rather on the bedrock of the power relationships she has built for and around herself. Grant calls her to Camp David, demands her help, lies to her, and ignores her lack of consent to his romantic advances. Pope, placed suddenly and somewhat startlingly in a situation she cannot control, that shifts every time she attempts to “handle it,” becomes subject to the sort of situational power she has so deftly wielded in earlier scenes, compounded by the institutional power that offered Grant that opportunity. She ceases to trust the instinct—the “gut”—that has guided her in forming her business and her brand. Her relationship with the president (both will-they-won’t-they and were-but-no-longer) provides Pope a means of access to power and to influence, but also poses a clear and present threat to her independence. Her access to the White House and to political acumen appear fundamentally connected to her ability to maintain relationships that are not public but are quite personal with members of a public-facing administration.

Pope vacillates between holding onto her relationship-granted access and relinquishing it, and her moments of relinquishing are cast as far more powerful. Consider as examples her decision to take Amanda Tanner on as a client after she calls Grant on his lie about the affair in “Sweet Baby”, and her later exit from the White House in the second episode “Dirty Little Secrets.” In the second scene she triumphantly hands her press pass over to the White House gate security guard, smiling mysteriously and striding off in her white coat. She removes herself from the sphere of the White House and seems to gain credibility and strength—but she never quite manages to stay away from the White House or from Fitzgerald Grant, who continues to loom large in her story and to facilitate, by means of

his administration or Pope's reputation from her work with him, Pope's larger goals working in Washington. This, as well as the central season one scandal of the president's affair with intern Amanda Tanner, establish a pattern in *Scandal* wherein the majority of stories told and managed by Pope and the rest of the *Scandal* cast are stories told about and by men.

The first season's finale, "Grant: For the People," makes this pattern part of its overall structure, allowing women—specifically First Lady Mellie Grant, Olivia Pope, and Vice President Sally Langston—to manage the male-led narratives about the President's affair with intern Amanda Tanner in ways that give the women great narrative power, but only after the first version of the story has already been told. This relies on the construction of the episode devaluing the first teller (Chambers)'s performance and his story, even at the expense of the absolute truth, and revealing the true conflict of the season and of the show—the conflict between Pope and what President Grant represents for her. Women are not the plot-originating figure in any of the larger stories addressed, although they do drive those stories and become the narrative focal point for the audience. Pope, Langston and Mellie Grant's storylines are all largely dictated by the interplay of Chambers and President Grant's words, actions, and responses—they are sponsorial characters, whose beats represent efforts to gain and then keep control of the Amanda Tanner news explosion. While we see some similar levels of political and legal machination from male members of the cast, for none save the president are the potential consequences so personal. While Cyrus Bean stands to lose his job should Fitz resign, Pope stands to lose professional and personal credibility, Mellie Grant some hopes for political power (although she recoups

with verve in season 2), and Langston likely all of her hopes for later political office and her credibility as a moral leader.

However, the representation afforded these characters gives us a look at the different ways these decisions and their accompanying narrative and political maneuvering are accomplished. As an example, we see two different pictures of a woman offering to step in and “take the blame” for the sex tape—the mistress (Pope) and the wife (Mellie Grant). Kerry Washington’s wide-eyed ingénue Pope, whose big earnest eyes and open face often exude vulnerability even in the moments she most controls (like the orders she delivers to her team when managing a crisis for a client), offers openly and unprompted to come forward as his mistress to mitigate the damage. In this moment, we are led to believe by the writing and by Kerry Washington’s portrayal that she is, partially, doing this out of love for Grant, as his immediately-ensuing insistence that he can resign stops her in her tracks.

By contrast, Bellamy Young’s sharp-featured, crisp-voiced Mellie steps right up to her husband, tells him what the plan is, offers no room for argument, and disappears to finish her plan without waiting for a response. We, of course, get the sense that no-nonsense career politician Mellie is in this for Grant political gain, not for the emotional connection we see even in moments where Pope tells Grant to “be the man [she] voted for.” Mellie’s character and her camera-based portrayal are not framed with the same open vulnerability as Pope, allowing for depth in *Scandal’s* gender representation by showing different images of women working on the fringes of politics. The narrative, by necessity, privileges its main character’s approach; however, Mellie, in this storyline and perhaps in the episode overall, becomes the true power in the narrative. She has wrested control of the story from Chambers, Langston, Pope, and her husband, and essentially makes herself the protagonist

of the news story they sought to control in the first place. While all this manipulation happens behind closed doors, Mellie herself appears in the television interview that represents the public response to this crisis. She, although relegated to a power expressed through her husband in her office as First Lady, is offered the public position of control and of recognition that Pope never quite has access to. Mellie, as a mediator, reproduces the slave-mistress narrative in wielding power over Pope and effectively managing and authorizing Pope's affair with her husband (Gomez & McFarlane 368), but also eventually provides a way for Pope to legitimize her authority as White House Chief of Staff to Mellie's female-led administration in season six. This is not access that Pope can achieve in the male-led administration of *Scandal*'s early season, as she is kept on the fringes by her relationship to the president and her overall relationship to political authority.

## **Conclusion**

Many of the recent political drama series on television have sought to investigate the seedy, underground nature of Washington politics, and *Scandal* certainly sits near the forefront of that, devoted to examining the machinations that make its fictional Washington and fictional USA work. While *Scandal* and Olivia Pope form an important piece of the apparent juggernaut of television dramas featuring women in politics that emerge beginning around 2012, Pope's work and *Scandal*'s overall premise do not place Pope on an equal playing field with her white female peers in primetime fictional politics. Elizabeth McCord, Elaine Barrish, and other exemplars like *House of Cards*' Claire Underwood or *The Good Wife*'s Alicia Florrick all boast a direct, authorized connection to power via their marriages or the political office they themselves hold. Pope, by contrast, holds her position

by association, and while she continues to affect political action from this association, she can do so only covertly and without the appearance of self-interest or of assuming an authorized role in the political machine. This presents Pope as possibly the clearest example of “covert power” in structuring a woman in TV politics, and it is telling that she is the only woman of color and the only black woman represented in this cast of characters.

Critics and scholars of *Scandal* address this representation of a black female protagonist in charge of her own firm in diverse ways, often critiquing the apparent absence of race from the narrative and the impetus to make Pope’s blackness simply a personal characteristic, rather than addressing the questions of racism and restricted access that her character implicitly represents. The extent to which Pope reinforces and represents racialized stereotypes without confronting them directly feed this perception of *Scandal* as post-racial crossover television. However, Pope’s very access to power being predicated on reiterating the covert, relationship-based framework that has been some of the only power exchange available to marginalized groups in the past calls into question the apparently post-racial situation of *Scandal*. After all, Pope’s lack of official standing in the White House is not counterbalanced by the presence of a black female White House official, but her consistent presence is often necessary for the smooth running of the executive branch. Here, the workings of Pope’s covert power become not only fundamental to her success, but also indicative of the way in which she makes herself invaluable and connected to her source of control.

This is not to say, of course, that Pope is somehow more powerful than her white female Secretary of State counterparts in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*. Rather, the contrast between the two series provides a mode of understanding the limits that are placed

on not only political actors in the American consciousness, but also actresses and writers in the television industry's framework. Television is prepared to show female Secretaries of State, and successful ones, even when reproducing the restrictions on appropriate family life and codes of morality and ambition. *Scandal's* black female political operative, however, works outside the confines of propriety and cannot be fully integrated into a familiar-looking, white-male-led administration as an authorized official. Moreover, her position relative to the president ceases to be a partnership wherein she mothers and guides the nation, and instead is shown as an illicit sexual affair.

*Scandal*, to be sure, provides visibility and a level of representation not often available for black TV spectators, as well as representations that contravene our traditional images of white male political figures, but as many scholars and critics note, Pope is not one of the overt actors on the political scene and often appears confined to traditional tropes of black femininity on television. Nonetheless, *Scandal* makes a deliberate choice in representing Pope as a flawed, determined woman who owns her stage when she chooses to take it, one that resonates with many viewers. It is worth considering that *Scandal* and television shows like it can influence the way people perceive politics and who can access power. While Tara-Lynne Pixley rightly counsels against expecting moral, social, and physical perfection from Pope as a black female protagonist, citing the need for "many different stories" and the "televisibility of the flawed/respectable, strong/burdened real black woman" (Pixley 32), *Scandal* still represents within the field of political TV drama a sharp distinction between appropriate access to and use of power relations for a white female political actor and her black female counterpart.

## CONCLUSION STEPPING FORWARD, BUT NOT OUT

*Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* largely fail to represent a reversal of the expectations attendant to womanhood, and particularly to womanhood in the public eye. Elizabeth McCord is a married mother, an attractive upper-class white woman with an excellent education and extensive work experience. Her qualifications for the post she assumes in the show are painstakingly documented, from her intellectual acumen to her capacity to present an excellent figure. Elaine Barrish is also a mother, an upper-class white woman with great education and experience; however, these qualifications pale next to her previous implication in the executive branch and her ambition to occupy the top job herself throughout the series. Notably, *Madam Secretary* does not let the expectations of womanhood speak Elizabeth, but rather makes moves such that Elizabeth can articulate her conformity herself and in service of her own projects, in terms of dress, spatial navigations, and her own interweaving of personal and public marital and marriage-esque relationships, thus taking control within an existing paradigm. While this move does not openly upset the existing codes of behavior and self-presentation that she finds herself confronting, Elizabeth nonetheless exposes fault lines in the acceptable performance of gender and of gender-in-power. This is, perhaps, the clearest feminist project of *Madam Secretary*—not to insist that the norms of gender presentation and the expectations of bourgeois womanhood be upended, but rather that they be deployed to serve a humanitarian, “morally right” agenda (Tally 132).

Barrish’s position on her humanitarian agenda is much the same in *Political Animals*; however, her representation within this frame is far more tied to her ambition than any hint of such political aspirations on McCord’s part. However, she is consistently and insistently



presented as feminine in her appearance and in her maternal instinct as a diplomat. In both series, the absence of the First Lady as well as the staging of the protagonist's role in her own family as well as in the fictionalized US government allow for and even call on the Secretary of State to serve as the wife-mother engaging in diplomatic activity for the enactment of fictionalized US foreign policy. McCord embodies this position alongside Dalton; Barrish is the wife of the nation by her own admission, and seeks to hold its highest office often eschewing the direction and partnership of Garcetti in her own initiatives. Barrish's moves to utilize her femininity and discourses of motherhood, as well as cues toward marriage, tend to appear, like her ambition, more brash and determined than McCord's and thus more likely to upset the balance of masculinized authority positions and feminized ideals of behavior.

The portraits of femininity in *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals* still reproduce gendered constraints on access to power, but exposes the constructed nature of these constraints. In *Madam Secretary*, the viewer is intended, to all appearances, to understand that Elizabeth is using discourses of motherhood and visual lexicons of femininity to establish projects she intended to complete without those trappings. This whisking away of the curtain on gendered norms opens a space for *Madam Secretary's* semi-resistant feminist politics in constructing its lead character while still allowing conservative, classic Hollywood and television paradigms to guide its cinematic language. In *Political Animals*, Barrish's more brash (in its presence, not its execution) approach to political authority, ambition, and manipulations of power cast her response to these constraints as one of contradiction—but not to the point of appearing noticeably masculine to viewers, nor to removing herself from the workings of her family life. *Madam Secretary* deals with the

interplay of public and private spaces, as well as the implications of diplomatic exchange and the positioning of women in politics, in a less sexualized and less adventurous fashion than *Political Animals*, in keeping with the series' more buttoned-down approach to diplomacy and to television drama (the consequence, in part, of appearing on CBS and not USA Network).

*Scandal*, despite its groundbreaking nature as a black female-led and -produced drama, still exists within the same industry and the same framework as *Madam Secretary* and *Political Animals*, and navigates an additional category of race that, while often diegetically unaddressed, still forms an inescapable part of the representations that it offers. Olivia Pope, while a powerful figure within the frame of the narrative, is restricted by the sources of her power and the ways in which she is able to leverage it by tropes of black womanhood and by expectations of the extent of the influence of political, social, and sexual relationships on power in Washington. While she is not presented as any less capable of work in the Washington scene as her white female counterparts, she, unlike them, is never authorized to the same level of control by a white male-led presidency.

Given the pervasive influence of current events on narrative television, the ideologies that ground perception of feminine political figures can be seen and sometimes contravened in these very carefully cultivated and often ostensibly-progressive fictional representations—although none quite manages to escape the constraints that are imposed by expectations of femininity and of feminine political machinations and authority. It seems that if we are seeking new possibilities for the portrayal and the execution of feminine political authority on television, *Madam Secretary*, *Political Animals*, and *Scandal* may offer just as much reproduction of existing tropes as they do potential moves

outside of them; an opening salvo, not a definite answer. Moreover, *Political Animals*, which represents the more pointed efforts to move outside the “appropriate” and “safe” approaches to developing these characters, is the shortest running example of the three. Although this analysis does not seek to prove that this is a direct consequence of *Political Animals* more daring, ambition-laden approach to a female Secretary of State, the continuing run of more sedate *Madam Secretary* does not quite permit the question to be easily laid to rest. *Scandal*’s long run, as a series perhaps more aligned with the tone of *Political Animals* than with *Madam Secretary*, may offer some hope, however, for the series which do not conform to a buttoned-down, appropriately-bourgeois ideal Washington à la *The West Wing*, with its predominantly white cast. That said, the surge in series like *Scandal* and *House of Cards*, with their focus on the often seedy backroom politics in varied versions of fictionalized Washington D.C., may not offer much ‘hope’ for the representation of politics in action, even though they may offer more nuanced and resistive opportunities for portrayals of women (and more specifically women of color) in politics.

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