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# THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL AND THE FANTASY OF BECOMING

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## ABSTRACT

This short, reflective essay considers various incongruous premises at the heart of the television show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, particularly regarding protagonist Midge Maisel's motivations and character development. It does so in the context of some 20th century touchstones of Jewish American women's comedy, after which the show was, on some level, modeled. The essay argues that the series is best appreciated as fantasy, and that its fantastical outlook is on some level consistent with the unwieldy, troublesome nature of reducing an overlooked and complicated collective history to an individual, fictional story.

KEYWORDS: Jewish American comedy, Jewish television, Jewish women, Joan Rivers, Fanny Brice, Barbra Streisand

No one who thinks they're pretty ever becomes a comedienne.

—JOAN RIVERS (quoted in Nachman 2004, 596)

A memorable scene takes place early in the second season of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, between aspiring comedienne Miriam Maisel (played by Rachel Brosnahan) and her agent, Susie Myerson (played by Alex Borstein). It's the late 1950s, and, following a series of mostly well-received stand-up performances in a

number of little-known New York City nightclubs, Miriam's just had a short piece written up about her in *The Village Voice*—a crucial stepping-stone to success—but she hasn't yet told most of her family and friends about her new venture. She is fearful of its consequences on her personal life: "You can't just go around talking to the press without telling me." Susie, as ever the pragmatic realist to her rising star's whimsies, shoots back: "I am your manager. It is literally my job to talk about you" (*Marvelous* 2018a).

The exchange, which takes place at Miriam's kitchen table, builds to a crescendo, as many scenes between the two do, with a closing quasi-monologue from the oft-incredulous Susie: "Do you want to be successful? . . . Most people who go on stage want to be famous 'cause it means they get to play better theaters. They get better gigs. They go on TV. They go to Morocco with Bob and Bing. And here's the best part: they give you more money." Susie emphasizes that last factor, as she does at various points throughout the series. She does not mince her words: "Money is my main goal."

Money is not Miriam's main goal, certainly not in the way it is for Susie, who has an urgent, unequivocal need to keep herself fed and housed. In contrast, raised in a sprawling apartment on Riverside Drive, with a live-in maid and a room just for her colorful wardrobe of dresses, Miriam rarely seems to consider how her own material essentials—and inessentials—are met. (Case in point: it's only upon announcing her separation from her husband, Joel, that she learns the apartment they shared was owned by his parents.) But the scene about the write-up in the *Voice* does more than reinforce the class division between Midge (Miriam's nickname) and her agent, a subject that threads through the show. In opposition to Susie's clear-cut incentive—one that persists, though it is revealed to be more complex—a nagging question emerges from this exchange. What is Miriam's motivation? Why comedy?

Miriam's origin story—the one she tells on stage and off—is that her life fell apart when her husband left her (for his secretary), and before she knew it, she found herself on stage, telling, and retelling, her story, picking her life apart in public as a way to take charge, to reclaim herself as the heroine of her own life. But the way Miriam's story unfolds, it never really *feels* like anything has gone to pieces—certainly, there is nothing that has fallen apart that cannot, with some charm and guile, be put back together, good as, usually even better than, new. To mix metaphors: there are safety nets, and the nets always seem to catch Miriam still perfectly, gleefully poised, smiling and fully made up in a bright swing dress.

True, Miriam's husband leaves her, but the secretary turns out to be something of a dud, and by the end of Season 1 he's come crawling back; "I never left," he woefully proclaims (*Marvelous* 2017c). He will always, as we are assured later on in Season 3, love her more than anyone else (*Marvelous* 2019).

Miriam moves back in with her parents—and the live-in situation means she generally has 24/7 childcare. She can sneak out to do her comedy, or whatever else, whenever she feels like it.

The fictional Mrs. Maisel shares a number of characteristics in common with women comics who started out in the 1950s, including Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller (see Poniewozik 2017; Nussbaum 2018). In the *New Yorker*, for example, Emily Nussbaum describes how Mrs. Maisel's rise to fame seemed modelled on Rivers in particular—a Jew who grew up in Larchmont, an affluent suburb in Westchester, New York; was educated at Barnard, a Seven Sisters school like Midge's alma mater, Bryn Mawr; considered Lenny Bruce a mentor; and had an early marriage that ended badly. The resemblance, Nussbaum laments, ends there. Midge is always, and ever, a winner; she “starts *and* ends as a swan” (2018).

“You never lose,” a fictional version of Fanny Brice's husband, Nicky Arnstein, played by Omar Sharif, tells his wildly successful celebrity wife (played by Barbra Streisand), in the 1968 musical film *Funny Girl*. This declaration—a line that easily could have been uttered by Joel Maisel—drips with resentment, and Fanny's rise to fame will come, as it did for Rivers, at a personal cost. But the account of Brice's rise to fame in the early twentieth century, on the Vaudeville stage and, later, as a radio star, opens with the same ugly duckling origins story as shared by many of the characters Streisand would become famous for playing. “No, Fanny, darling, I'm not wrong,” a family friend, Mrs. Strakosh, tells (sings to) a young Fanny as she looks wistfully into a mirror in an opening scene. “For a girl, for average, you're a pleasure. But when people pay good money in the theater, especially the male element, they want something extra to look at” (Wyler 1968).<sup>1</sup> The scene inhabits a crucial moment in the film, the first time we see Fanny before her fast rise to fame. Her early motivation to seek out the stage seems at least partly propelled by a desire to prove Mrs. Strakosh—and others—wrong. And she does. Soon after, it's her brashness, her humor, her refusal to stick to the status quo, that propels her rise into stardom.

Midge Maisel does not have this problem, even if she is often, to a compulsive degree, preoccupied by the size and shape of her body, and even if she is further, alongside her own looks-conscious mother, concerned about the size and shape of her infant daughter's head. Instead, starting out, she seems to have something of the opposite difficulty. The worry is that people will not take her seriously, will not be able to picture her as a comic, because she's too beautiful and put together. In a repeating gag, men around her, often those in charge, approach, asking if she's a singer, disbelieving that a pretty woman can make them laugh. “She told me nobody would find me funny,” Midge laments of her powerful mentor-turned-nemesis, Sophie Lennon, in a comedic roast that temporarily sets Miriam back

professionally even as it cements her talents as a comic. “Why do women have to pretend to be something they’re not?” (*Marvelous* 2017b).

Of course, Midge herself is the ultimate pretender, a quality made particularly evident in the scenes (including flashbacks) that precede Joel’s announcement of infidelity. In a silent scene in the pilot, following a shot of Midge and Joel in their nighttime routine, Miriam sneaks off into the bathroom to take off her false eyelashes and slip on her pink curlers and night cream. She returns to the bathroom early in the morning, before the alarm goes off, to remove these nighttime accoutrements and reapply her makeup. Joel, ever ignorant of the ruse, shakes her gently awake in the morning. “I didn’t hear it [the alarm] at all,” she feigns. “You never do,” Joel counters with a grin (*Marvelous* 2017a).

If the sham begins around the same time as the search for a husband does, and continues well into their conjugal life together, two kids in tow, its culmination is seemingly propelled by her husband’s own admission of deception. By the time Midge stumbles onstage, drunk and dressed in a nightgown, at the end of the pilot, the (TV) audience has already been amply warmed up to be charmed and dazzled. Our heroine has packed her banter and light wit into most every scene, from the opening toast she gives at her own wedding; she oozes talent. This is, we are to believe, her destiny, and she falls into it like Esther Hoffman stumbles onto the stage at a packed concert, urged on by the great rock star, John Norman Howard, in the fictional *A Star Is Born*. It’s a prototypical fantasy, and one, it seems, that never gets old (Pierson 1976).<sup>2</sup>

On stage, these women can finally let loose, express some hitherto hidden aspects of themselves, let their talents shine. “I’m a different person now than when he left,” Midge notes, of her separation from Joel, towards the end of Season 1 (*Marvelous* 2017b). In the schematics of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, stardom and performance, however ironically, seem to occasion the start of no longer needing to pretend—or, at the very least, of some kind of journey towards self-actualization. If it’s not money or a desire to be loved that motivates, perhaps Midge bounds into comedy out of a desire to figure out something about herself.

But this potential incentive, too, leads to a dead end: Mrs. Maisel is as much a performer as her originator offstage. And as anyone who has seen the television show recognizes, the protagonist’s character does not develop so much as she springs, from one stage, or love interest, to the next. “More vexing than anything,” writes Sophie Gilbert in *The Atlantic*, in an observation that feels difficult to argue with, “is how defiantly *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* refuses to have stakes. Everything plays out in the same major key” (2019).

In a recent documentary about her life, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* (2010), Rivers admitted, “I was always going to be an actress. Comedy, never. I just knew

I could be a comedian at night, and make the rounds, and pay for being an actress. And that's the only reason I became a comedian" (Stern and Sundberg 2010). It took Rivers several years of false starts, filled with pain and degradation—including stinging insults and rejection from her very disappointed parents—before she found her successful routine, basing her comedy for the first time on her own life. "It was called 'The Diary of Joan Rivers,' a sixties Jewish version of 'Bridget Jones's Diary,' about a desperate unmarried girl" (Nachman 2004, 603–4). Like Midge's ultimately well-constructed mythology about her fall from grace—a routine practiced and perfected onstage—Rivers managed to shape her persona and personal narrative to suit her audience and generate the most laughs. But unlike Rivers, Mrs. Maisel's origin story spills out of her, if haphazardly in the beginning, on her first night onstage.

Unlike Rivers, too, though Miriam is arrested during her first performance for public indecency, she has a rough-around-the-edges but doting first fan waiting to bail her out—her future manager and friend. Susie sees the potential that Midge has yet to identify in herself. "Your shit was totally original," Susie assures her (*Marvelous* 2017a). Miriam is a star waiting to happen: "Look, 15 years I've been working in clubs, okay? 15 years watching every kind of loser get up there thinking he's Jack Benny. Twice have I seen someone deliver the goods." The first time this happened, Susie tells her, was when she saw Mort Sahl perform. "Three words into his act, I fucking knew it." The second time, we know, is Midge.

"When I started comedy, I was very wild for the time," a seventy-five-year-old Rivers continues speaking, in her documentary, of her early years. She relays how, one night after a set, her manager pulled her aside. As she describes it, referring to the taboo subjects she had been addressing onstage as well as her use of profanities, he told her, "Jonaleh, you're going into places you shouldn't go. Women shouldn't talk like that" (Stern and Sundberg 2010). Where Rivers found her way, often floundering and clawing, Midge is not only almost wondrously discovered—it's a scene right out of a daydream—but the person who finds her is a kind of rising star herself. As Midge will come into her own over the course of the show, Susie will, too. She was born to be the supporting element, the corner(wo)man to her star. Here, a rags-to-riches narrative cleaves together with the story of an unknown, extraordinary talent who stumbles into her own.

In this consummate feminist fantasy, on display in a show unusually—and often delightfully—invested in presenting women at work, the two women support each other. Over the course of the show, companionship and friendship are tied to mutual professional success and personal fulfillment. (Susie tries to resist but when Midge buys her a friendship ring, she relents.) Susie leans on Midge's talents and successes, even as she propels and buttresses them, and she offers her own constellation of valuable qualities: effusive praise, when it is called for; the

occasional, careful critique; companionship by the pool, behind the stage, and in hotel rooms; and even an intermittent spot of insight into what it's like to grow up on the other side of Midge's world of wonders. "We do have to make money at some point," Susie snaps at her client, in another scene of exasperation, this time while sitting across from each other at the pair's favorite diner (*Marvelous* 2018b). "You understand that, right?" Miriam, poised as ever, assents, then entreats Susie, "Don't worry about me, I'm fine." Susie's acerbity soon turns into an open diatribe "Think about my life for a moment. I'm broke. I'm working less at the Gaslight [the comedy club where Midge is discovered] so I'm falling further behind. I'm begging people to call me 'cause I can't afford to call them."

The scene closes with Miriam admitting to their differences and thanking Susie for opening her eyes. "It's good for me to know," she admits. In this fantasy world, she can learn from Susie how to broaden her horizons beyond the cozy sphere of her own upper middle-class life, as she does when she starts working and socializing with the women at B. Altman. Ultimately, even if Miriam's motivations are not always clear, she can borrow from Susie, as she eventually does, when her parents find themselves without a place to live and Midge swoops in to buy them an apartment. She can make Susie's dreams of financial independence her own.

*The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is not a show primarily invested in verisimilitude. Its dialogue is anachronistic; its sets, wardrobes, and backdrops are part and parcel of a "snow-globe idyll"—a signature of creator Amy Sherman-Palladino's other shows, like *Gilmore Girls* (Gilbert 2019). From the first episode, we experience the show as a kind of daydream, and perhaps that's the best way to appreciate it—as a fantasy.

This is a story told retrospectively—a twentieth-century narrative told from the twenty-first—with all the logic, or illogic, such retrospective telling entails. In this version, Midge Maisel can keep her Jewish-sounding name and can continue, night after night and across the globe, to fill her act with Jewish jokes, without experiencing overwhelming anti-Semitism or misogyny. (Joan Rivers's family name, you may remember, was Joan Molinsky, and she was told she could not take it with her onstage. When her agent, Tony Rivers, insisted she change her name, she took his [Nachman 2004, 602].) Midge can play the Apollo, to great effect. She can alienate and humiliate the great Sophie Lennon—by poking fun of *her* upscale life, the counterfeit persona that brought in success—without experiencing the anxiety of hypocrisy. She can remain naïve about the lives of the (working class, queer, BIPOC) people she displaces, the stories, struggles, and desires she erases, onstage and off, in her own rise to the top.

This is the fantasy of the show, and it is, in its own way, an accurate depiction of the means by which collective, let alone individual, histories are so often imagined as simple stories of progress. "Fantasy is at play in the articulation of both individual and collective identity," writes historian Joan Wallach Scott in a

book examining the role of fantasy in historiography. She continues, “it extracts coherence from confusion, reduces multiplicity to singularity, and reconciles illicit desire with the law. It enables individuals and groups to give themselves histories” (2011, 51). Without fantasy, we cannot envision such a history; but with fantasy, the history is always asked.

The limitations of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* are, finally, outweighed by what such a show makes visible. A common critique of Mrs. Maisel is that her jokes are funny, but they’re not funny enough. But jokes are funny when they surprise or shock us, when they make us rethink our own realities. Perhaps the jokes on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* are as funny as they need to be. Sometimes, the visions of our ‘50s-era-housewife-turned-comedienne protagonist, told in off-the-cuff punch-lined reflections onstage, strike us as silly, outdated. Sometimes, they hit a bit too close to home. And that, precisely, is the point.

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#### NOTES

1. The song, “If a Girl Isn’t Pretty,” was written by Bob Merrill.
2. Indeed, *A Star Is Born* has been remade as a film four times (1937; 1954; 1976; 2018). The 1976 version starred Barbra Streisand as Esther Hoffman and Kris Kristofferson as John Norman Howard.

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