

KHC 450

Professor Cannon

December 2019

Keystone Project Proposal

Abstract

“Well behaved women seldom make history.” – Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

Throughout much of the 18th and 19th century, women in the United Kingdom were subject to laws of coverture, which is to say that when they married any and all property that was theirs prior to marriage is now their husband's. While some period dramas have addressed this in some capacity, simply addressing the issue does not bring to light the true impact of the laws and how, what we would call in modern times, ridiculous they were. The aim of my keystone is to use comedy and satire to bring to light the inequality of coverture laws as well as address the inherent sexism of the period through the modern lense of a sitcom.

The period sitcom I am writing is about women living in 1860s England subject to coverture laws, misbehaving as they attempt to navigate operating an illegal enterprise. The show itself will derive comedy from the situations these women find themselves in, as well as the cast of characters to be developed. Another part of the comedy will stem from the use of anachronistic music, particularly music from the 1960s and 70s which would be out of place in the 1860s setting. The sitcom itself would also be used to create diversity in narrative, as the two women would slowly fall in love over the course of the series, which also helps to create an emotional pulse to the show.

For my Keystone, I will be writing one full pilot script and a leave behind document with settings, costuming, a few episode ideas, and things of this nature so those who read the pilot script have a working idea of the show's vision. By using the lens of coverture to tell the story, I think it is possible to create a new, funny, and engaging TV show.

Introduction

I have always had a deep love of British television. From the antics in *Wallace and Gromit* to the skits in *The Catherine Tate Show*, time and time again my humor and appreciation of television has been developed from across the pond. I would wager that no type of show sells better to the United States than British dramas. From *Call the Midwife*, to *Harlots*, to *Downton Abbey*, shows like these continually find success in the American market, and it is truly no wonder why. The dramas are gripping and pull you back into another time and place, tackling the issues we take advantage of today.

While the show I will be writing is a comedy, one aspect of the British Period Drama I particularly appreciate is the focus on narratives featuring women. Women have always played a role in history, one that is largely excluded from history books. It is through period dramas that I believe people are able to see the struggles women endured throughout history, whether that be the miracle of childbirth in 1950s Poplar or navigating the 1910s socialite scene in Yorkshire. Having narratives that focus on women allows for greater insight into a seemingly untold or ignored history (and of course a chance for a little romance to keep the story interesting).

When I look at the vast library of period drama content from the United Kingdom, I could not help but ask myself one thing; why no period comedies? I am not talking about the tongue-in-cheek humor that finds its way sprinkled into every drama to lighten the tension, I

mean the deep, dry humor that the English are known for. Is it not possible to tell these stories in a funnier way? A way that has you rolling around in your seat, barely able to breath because you can barely believe how funny that joke just was? The goal of this project is to create a period *comedy*, rather than a period drama. I want to take all the elements from British humor and genre conventions of the drama and merge it to create something new and interesting.

Specifically, I want to make a period comedy focusing on the lives of women and using humor to accentuate to the audience the injustices of the period and their impact on our understanding of women on television and film today. While it is not going to be a show about coverture, I think the aspect of coverture in the narrative allows for a way to have a discussion about how women have been historically treated in society and written about on television. It seems to me that the underlying sexism in period pieces is generally glossed over and ignored, or maybe dealt with in a special episode or story arc. By having these womens' lives completely controlled by it and showing them have to navigate a patriarchal system (while also being funny), I think there is a possibility to make people aware of how these outdated historical practices are still impacting women to this day.

Background

The type of show I would like to write does not really exist as I imagine it. There are a few shows that broach the type of topics I would like to discuss, but do not exactly approach the concept I am going for. One such show, one that helped to jump start this concept in the first place, is Sally Wainwright's *Gentleman Jack*. *Gentleman Jack* is a period drama revolving around the life and times of Anne Lister. Anne Lister is a historical figure and an avid diarist, with the show based largely around her millions of diary entries. Anne Lister is a notable

historical character as both a property-owning woman during which coverture was in effect in England and as a historical lesbian, though before the terminology was commonplace.

Gentleman Jack as a series contains several of the themes I would like to explore in my show, specifically coverture. The show helped to provide a basis for my understanding of what coverture was and how it affected women of the period. Coverture is the act of a woman's property becoming her husband's upon marriage. According to Dolan,

“Under common law in the early modern period, an unmarried woman... had approximately the same legal rights and responsibilities as a man... In consenting to marriage, a woman conferred many of these rights and responsibilities onto her husband who exercised them for her, presumably in the best interests of both, and with the assumption that they would never conflict. Marriage thus transformed two independent legal agents into one agent—the husband...” (Dolan 255).

The concept of coverture will be what drives the central motivation of the show. Because the married woman does not have control of the property she owned before the marriage, she is reliant on her husband for everything. As she becomes dissatisfied with the lack of agency she now has as a married woman, this is ultimately what will drive her to break the law and run the business.

One television series which is similar in form and content is *Another Period*, which aired originally on Comedy Central. *Another Period* is a satire set in early 20th century Newport, Rhode Island at the lavish summer resort of a wealthy family. The show itself is set up like modern day reality television, featuring interviews from the members of the family and the staff of the house. *Another Period* relies heavily on physical comedy and the blatant satire of the

treatment of women, poor people, and people of color during the period. While it is not set in the same period or location that I plan on setting my show, *Another Period* demonstrates that it is possible to do a thirty minute sitcom format for a period comedy on today's cable networks and that a period comedy has the potential for modern commercial success, as it had a three season run on Comedy Central.

The series that I create will not be as blatantly satirical as *Another Period*, but much more subtle in its commentary on society and the social implications. The writing will overall be more in line with traditional sitcom format. The most successful example of a "period sitcom" is likely *M*A*S*H*, which made a commentary on the Vietnam War through the combined elements of comedy and drama within the sitcom format for eleven seasons on CBS. I believe that the type of sitcom I am creating is in line with the way *M*A*S*H* utilized the sitcom format, but tailored to suit the type of content and situations with the show's concern with coverture.

Rationale

Upon watching *Gentleman Jack* this summer, I felt for the first time that a show truly understood what I wanted to watch; a period drama featuring a woman defying all gender conventions of the time. I thought it was witty, fun, and exciting, all the way down to the extensive coal storyline that consumes the entirety of the first season. It didn't have the side-splitting comedy aspect that I wish it would have had (probably because of the extremely dry coal narrative), but it was one of the first times I realized the potential for what television can be in today's age of "Peak TV." I loved that it was historical and that Anne Lister was a real person who the audience could relate to through the use of her diary entries. With as much as I loved the show and appreciated what it had done (and will hopefully do in the future with the

airing of its second season next summer), I realized that I did not have to wait for great television to find me or for me to find it. If I know what I would want to watch, I have the power to make it myself.

By looking at what I would have liked to change about *Gentleman Jack*, I was able to come up with my own idea loosely inspired by the story of Anne Lister. I want to take the elements I appreciate from *Gentleman Jack* and expand upon them for my own show to make something new, but still catering to the existing and hungry market. Specifically, *Gentleman Jack* largely appealed to the underrepresented lesbian community which has had its fair share of disappointments with media over the years (Bradley). I want there to be more shows for lesbians like *Gentleman Jack*, shows that tell the stories of lesbians throughout history, doing it in a touching and meaningful way. And I do not think that touching and meaningful means drama, I believe that there should be more works of all types written about the LGBTQ community, which is why I am setting out to write a comedy. In an article written by Samantha Bañal, she writes,

“By taking a woman from the early nineteenth century who lived “according to her nature,” then transmuting her into a television character in the twenty-first century, Sally Wainwright has somehow adapted the fast, female sexuality of the nineteenth century and combined it with the fraught relationship that lesbians have with movement, either literal or figurative, in public spaces throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first” (Bañal).

I want to do what Sally Wainwright did for the character of Anne Lister and speak to lesbians of modern times through the concept of historical narrative (that women loving other women have always existed) and through humor. It is time for a lesbian-centered period sitcom.

Overall, I want to write a show, or rather a series pilot and show bible, that I want to watch. I have seen many BBC and ITV series that have left me wanting more. I am tired of waiting for the right show to come along and I am ready to grab life by the horns and make something I would want to see. I believe there is an inherent necessity for media to represent the viewer in some way, to relate them to the stories on screen and have them connect with the characters. By being truthful to myself while writing, I want to create compelling characters that are honest in their on-screen depiction. I want to make something new and worth watching. I will be creating a television series of an unknown name about two women in 1860s England who get into shenanigans when one of the women intercepts a letter to her husband designating him the heir to a criminal underworld. The two women decide to run the enterprise right under his nose and the adventure begins, with the women slowly coming to realize that they have been falling in love with each other the entire time.

Method/Design

I will not be the first person to ever create a television show; however, due to my inexperience in the field of screenwriting and screen language it is important to set out specific tasks in order to make the whole project more manageable. I am planning to write a single pilot script between the length of twenty-five and forty pages. While I originally envisioned the show as a six episode mini-series, I believe the formulaic writing style of the sitcom will enhance the

humor of the series. By knowing the form of the show, I am better able to plan the synthesis of major components of the series.

Writing and planning an entire season of a sitcom is too much to do in the span of one keystone project. Writing even a single episode or pilot is a massive undertaking, because the development of characters in the pilot sets the stage for the rest of the series. To make the project possible to complete, the final product will be a show leave behind with the ins and outs of the series (setting, costuming, characters, etc.), an episode guide for the first five or so episodes, and a scripted pilot episode that lays the foundation for the series.

In order to get to the point where I can write a pilot, research is necessary. Several books have been recommended to me over the course of the project thus far. Some books include *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era* edited by Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thomas, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* by Syd Field, and *The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller* by John Truby. Because I have never taken a screenwriting course, these books are essential to my understanding of how screenwriting should look, what narrative beats I need to hit, and the very basics of constructing a compelling narrative. Without doing the proper research anything produced, whether that be an episode summary or the full pilot, will fall short of the goal. These books are all available online and in the library which makes reading them a matter of time and commitment rather than cost and access.

Research will also have to be done on the era I am writing in, which is 19th century England, in order to have an understanding of the period. Ultimately it is more important that the story, in its final form, works well rather than is historically accurate, but I want the project to

have some level of authenticity in order to draw viewers in and use the time period to comical advantage. I want the show to be funny, but through laughter enable the audience to understand that the antics the characters are getting up to are ridiculous because of the history behind it. In order to effectively satirize the romanticization of the period that many dramas focus on, I have to have a baseline understanding of what it was like for women to live in that era. One book I have found on crime in the era is *The Victorian Underworld* by Donald Thomas.

Because most of this project is the synthesis of my thoughts and ideas, beyond doing research there are not many materials necessary for production. One software I will require to continue with the project is Final Draft, which is a screenwriting program that allows writers to format scripts cohesively. The Adobe Creative Cloud, which is available to students, is also required for the production of materials like the leave behind. Adobe PDF and Photoshop would allow me to make stylish and cohesive materials towards the end of the project to fully explain its concept in a visual way. Some video editing through Premiere Pro might also be necessary so as to create a “proof of concept” to those who don’t fully understand the vision of the show through paper products alone. A limiting factor with all of these programs is my ability to successfully use any one of them. While I have a baseline knowledge of how these programs work and what their capabilities are, I have no formal training in their use and will have to rely heavily on online tutorials.

The current timeline for the project began this Fall and will continue until Spring 2021. In January 2020, I will be staying in London and will continue to conduct even more in-depth research during my stay. I plan on visiting Shibden Hall, the historical home of Anne Lister, which is what originally sparked the idea for the show. I would also be able to take advantage of

in-person historical archives I do not have access to Stateside. The overall season arc draft being completed by the end of September 2020, with the first pilot draft and first five episode description drafts due by the end of October. From there I would be able to work with my project advisor to clean up and revise all materials. The second drafts would be due in December 2020. The start of 2021 would be the time for further revisions and the compilation of the deliverables, including the look book/show bible which expands on the show completely in a way that the narratives alone do not.

Significance and Conclusion

I firmly believe that a show like the one I plan on creating would benefit a greater population than myself and would be extremely cathartic creatively. I have no experience in screen or creative writing, but I have not had a story to tell until now. I want to make a show that serves the lesbian community, but also is just generally a fun and interesting sitcom. While whatever the final product may be may not be the best thing ever written, it will have a lot of heart to it, because I am passionate about why I am writing and what I am writing about. Overall, I think it will be a fun experience that I will learn a lot from. I think television can do better to tell more diverse storylines, stories that challenge people to think about the past and invite them to consider their context to the future. If I want to see women defying expectations and loving each other on TV, I have the ability to write that. My show aims to close the gap between what I and others want to see and what is actually available and to create content that normalizes these representations on TV while expanding the sitcom genre.

Budget

The total budget I am requesting will be approximately \$700. Please see attached budget for a line item breakdown.

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