“Pow! Right in the Kisser”: Ralph Kramden, Jackie Gleason, and the Emergence of the Frustrated Working-Class Man

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The rotund comic takes one taste from the pot boiling on the ancient stove, bugs his eyes, spastically waves his hands, and bellows, “He’s not coming Alice!” He storms across the set and again yells through a prop door marking the left boundary of the soundstage, “He’s not coming Alice! He’s not setting one foot in this house.” Alice (Audrey Meadows) slides through the door and enters into yet another argument with her husband, the bellowing Ralph Kramden (Jackie Gleason). The unwanted guest turns out to be Alice’s brother Frank, who Ralph resents from a quarrel reaching back twenty years. “I never forget,” he tells his wife as she turns away from him, “I’m just like an elephant.” Alice wheels around, looks at the hefty Ralph, and opens her mouth as if to speak. Before she can say anything, the studio audience bursts out in uproarious laughter, and her husband warns, “Don’t say it Alice.” To affirm his right to bar Frank from the house, Ralph angrily points to his role as breadwinner and asks Alice what she would have if he took away the table, ice box, and stove for which he has paid. Alice quickly outflanks Ralph’s attack. “I don’t know,” she muses, referring to the meager, rundown furnishings, “But it sounds like an improvement.”

The scene described above comes from an episode of The Honeymooners titled “Brother-in-Law.” This episode highlighted, as did most of the shows installments, Ralph Kramden’s struggle to maintain power and authority in a postwar America increasingly defined by consumption. Judging from the reactions of studio audiences and the
show’s perennially high ratings, many Americans enjoyed these squabbles over consumer durables, Ralph’s weight, and domestic power. *The Honeymooners* debuted in 1951 as a sketch on the Dumont television network’s *Cavalcade of Stars* variety show hosted by Gleason. He jumped to the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) and a much more lucrative contract for the 1952–53 season to host *The Jackie Gleason Show*, bringing the sketch with him. By the 1953–54 season, Gleason’s show had become one of television’s most broadly viewed programs, and *The Honeymooners* sketch its most popular bit. Indeed the sketch had become so popular that Gleason pushed to make it a half-hour episodic series independent of the variety show for the 1955–56 television season. The sketch returned to *The Jackie Gleason Show* for a final season in 1956–57 (Simon).1 Throughout its run, the sketch focused on the domestic dramas and squabbles of the working-class Kramden couple with their ramshackle Brooklyn tenement serving as its primary set (see Figure 1).

This article, through analysis of *The Honeymooners* and star discourses surrounding Jackie Gleason at the height of his television fame in the 1950s, demonstrates that the show’s popularity and its major themes were not merely coincidental. Rather it resonated with postwar audiences because it addressed important concerns over working-class masculinity in what Lizabeth Cohen has termed “A Consumers’ Republic”—a postwar America in which national and personal identities were increasingly defined by the ability to produce, purchase, and accumulate consumer pleasures. Pointedly, Cohen chooses the word *republic* rather than the simpler “nation” to describe postwar America. In doing so, she indicates that the postwar consumer society built upon the republican political and social traditions sewn into the fabric of American history. Stretching back to the revolutionary era, the ideology of republicanism glorified the financially independent, politically virtuous family head. The original republican man was conceived as a farmer, whose land allowed him to produce what he would consume and to consume only what he could produce. Thus, he possessed virtue, an economic and social independence that servants, slaves, women, and children lacked. Given his financial and social independence, he could govern in the interest of the republic rather than in his own economic self-interest. He was at once individualistic—cultivating his own economic and social status—and self-sacrificing—serving the interests of the republic and his dependents. In the postwar era, the ability to
wisely and generously provide consumer goods established men as family heads and members of the polity. To be a citizen of the consumers’ republic, the individual man needed not only to maintain an income, but to spend it wisely on big-ticket consumer items, thereby affirming his role as head of household and fueling the production–consumption cycle on which national well-being depended.

FIGURE 1. Ralph and Alice bicker while neighbor Ed Norton (Art Carney) looks on. Courtesy of Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.
In his analysis of real and fictional middle-class men in postwar America, the historian James Gilbert argues that, in contrast to the conventional belief that Americans reaffirmed a traditional, breadwinner masculinity in the postwar era, the period actually saw more fluid gender boundaries and the emergence of myriad masculinities. Both Cohen and Gilbert demonstrate that rather than simply bringing home the breadwinner’s paycheck, postwar men were expected to take increasing responsibility for spending it, particularly in consuming household durables in order to care for dependent families in the postwar world. This article will build from Gilbert’s notion of multiple masculinities and the demonstrated importance of consumption to postwar masculinity, while expanding the framework to examine what happened to gender discourses when they focused on working-class men. Unlike most middle-class television patriarchs, Ralph Kramden never embraced his role in the consumers’ republic. *The Honeymooners* repeatedly stressed both the burdensome nature of the material obligations of family life and Ralph’s inability to meet them. When Ralph did participate in consumer culture, he did so to purposefully distance himself from his wife and home, thereby creating more marital strife. At the height of his fame, Gleason also vented his dissatisfaction with family life and went through a messy, well-publicized separation from his family. James Gilbert and other scholars have found continuity between the myriad middle-class masculinities of the 1950s and the more fluid gender boundaries of the late 1960s and beyond. Ralph Kramden and Jackie Gleason also reveal the roots of an important strain of American masculinity that emerged full blown in the late 1960s and has remained a powerful ideological symbol ever since—the frustrated, lonely failure.

“The Brooklyn Bum of Comedy”

Jackie Gleason’s star image was intricately intertwined with the character of Ralph Kramden and the *Honeymooners* sketch. Therefore, to properly relate *The Honeymooners* to its social and historical context, one must also understand the nature and development of Gleason’s star image. The film scholar Richard Dyer has written the most provocative and systematic work on the relationship between media stars and society. According to Dyer, because our conception of stars is
at once intimately personal and infinitely public, star discourses root general ideas about society within the individual performer. Constructions and interpretations of stars both reveal and are part of the process of shaping such fundamental social categories as class and gender.2

Ralph Kramden was in many ways an autobiographical character, simultaneously celebrating Jackie Gleason’s self-proclaimed virtues and flagellating him for his vices. The two characters, the star—or “The Great One” as he fashioned himself—and Ralph Kramden, were not identical, nor would it be instructive to simply tease out every parallel between the two. Rather, this article seeks to analyze the early Honeymooners sketches in the contexts of Gleason’s star image and the broader cultural history of the postwar era. As for the basic parallels, Gleason and Kramden were both quintessential working-class Brooklyn boys. In addition, frustration and sadness lay at the heart of the Kramden character, public discussions of “the Great One,” and, as much as can be determined, Gleason’s own personality. While Kramden was a serial financial failure and Gleason was a conspicuous success, the character’s and the performer’s anger were tied to their respective failures to live up to the standards of the consumers’ republic. Kramden’s frustration stemmed from a yearning for the material accouterments of the postwar consumer culture and the status they would afford him. He vainly wished for the ability to purchase such things, not out of personal greed or shallow materialism, but because he yearned to serve as a provider for his wife and home. While Gleason had earned his way into and beyond the material mainstream and could consume conspicuously, he lacked the consumer republican’s foundation for psychic and cultural legitimacy—a loving and dependent family. He consumed with selfish, reckless abandon, rather than as a responsible patriarch and citizen.

Jackie Gleason has been the subject of a number of biographies, the best of which is William Henry’s, The Great One. Of Gleason’s biographers, Henry takes the most critical approach to the star’s life and career and offers the most insight into his character. He picks through the morass of contradictory themes that emerge from statements made about Gleason by his colleagues, by Gleason himself, and in the mass of publicity material that swirled about him throughout his career. Ultimately, Henry determines that Gleason’s mind was characterized by a fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, he recognized the ob-
ligations of domesticity and valorized the idea of breadwinning. On the other, he found these obligations a stifling detraction from his love of public conviviality and the charms of wowing the crowd. Add to this contradictory mind-set and personality the difficulty of separating out the real Jackie Gleason from the hype and self-promotion, and we are left with an enigma, a set of simultaneously overlapping and contradictory star discourses.

Despite the contradictions in the publicity surrounding Gleason and the major shifts in his persona, one constant spanned his career; he was always marked as working class. Jackie Gleason was a “Brooklyn Bum,” born and raised in the borough’s Bushwick section. Reporters and publicists who covered his rise to fame repeatedly stressed his Brooklyn roots. For example, a 1951 article appearing in the entertainment section of the *New York Times* pointed out that each of his regular sketch characters on *Cavalcade of Stars* was based on a “life-long friend . . . residing in Brooklyn” (Adams). The myth of Brooklyn as a wacky, bustling, all-American working-class city reached its zenith in the early 1950s and coalesced around the idea that Brooklyn’s ethnic pluralism and good-natured bustle made it both a microcosm of and the ultimate testament to American democracy. Ralph Weld encapsulated the Brooklyn myth in his 1950 book *Brooklyn is America* where he argued,

> Democracy has many sources for its nurture that the textbooks have never heard of . . . . It is fed by the chance contacts and byplay of the streets. The teeming beach at Coney, on a hot Summer day, is congenial to it. And it finds expression—unconscious, robust and utterly sincere—in the great commingled shout from 30,000 Brooklyn throats at Ebbets Field when the Dodgers score a run.

(13–14)

Weld believed the cacophony of Brooklyn’s streets and gathering places evidenced not urban disorder, but a spirit of “practical co-operation and tolerance” that allowed for and appreciated the contributions of so many individuals and social groups to such a “great democratic community” (Weld 248). By 1954, when Gleason was reaching the height of his wealth and fame, a publicity piece in *Look* magazine still argued, “Gleason brings shudders to the carriage trade, which he finds just peachy; he is aiming for the bleachers. He is the Brooklyn Bum of comedy, and inspires the same kind of loony affection” (Rosten 23).
Thus, these discussions of Brooklyn drew on common perceptions of the borough to characterize him as a zany, yet down-to-earth working-class star.

According to publicity articles, Gleason’s background as a working-class “Brooklyn Bum,” shaped his performance style. He pursued laughs with a reckless physical abandon. For example, a 1952 publication noted Gleason’s uniquely rough version of physical comedy could “convert the studio into a shambles in nothing flat.” In the same article, Gleason himself pointed out why he approached his comedy so aggressively: “I have a theory that the public likes a guy better when they can see him taking a beating to earn a buck. The average guy works damned hard for his money, and when he sees another joker getting roughed up on the stage, I think he feels a certain kinship with him” (Minoff 13).

In fact, the ability to absorb physical punishment became a signature part of the Gleason act throughout The Honeymooners run, and frequent expressions of physical anguish became a signature part of the Kramden character. Gleason’s on-camera injuries prompted him into wild and protracted expressions of anguish that frequently received the most enthusiastic audience response of any verbal or physical gag in a given sketch (see Figure 2). In one such bit, in a scene from the 1953 Honeymooners skit titled “Vacation at Fred’s Landing,” Gleason as Ralph Kramden ducks beneath the hood of a broken-down automobile. As he tries to repair the car, Ed Norton accidentally presses the horn. Gleason leaps from the car grasping the ear that had been pressed against the engine, pounds his head with his other hand, and half waltzes, half staggers across the set. After regaining his composure, he reaches under the hood again, only to grab a live wire that forces him to repeat the same agonized dance, all to the boisterous amusement of the studio audience.

In addition to his working-class Brooklyn background, Gleason and his handlers also incorporated his family into his early star image in an effort to mark him as a “regular guy.” Most notably, Gleason ended each of his early Cavalcade of Stars broadcasts by saying “goodnight” to his wife and two daughters. Thus, after an hour of cavorting on stage with New York’s entertainment elite, Gleason reframed his performance as labor done in the interest of his family, watching and waiting at home, seemingly fashioning himself as the model of filial responsibility in the consumers’ republic.
In 1952, Gleason moved from Dumont’s *Cavalcade of Stars* to his own variety show, and a much more lucrative contract, at CBS. Publicity material made note of the star’s upward mobility—literally into a Manhattan penthouse—and his increasingly visible wealth seemed to present a challenge to his working-class star persona. Yet despite the enormous salaries and opulent spending that characterized Gleason at the height of his career, he remained working class.

Gleason continued to punish himself on camera. In January 1954, Gleason achieved the greatest notoriety to that point in his career when he broke his leg during a live broadcast of *The Jackie Gleason Show*. As Gleason suspected, audiences expressed both fascination with and empathy for the actor in his time of physical trauma. New York City newspapers featured detailed discussions of the break and photographic replay sequences of what they called “the most famous unrehearsed fall in television history.” Immediately following the live mishap, callers flooded CBS switchboards to express concern for the fallen comedian.3

Even Gleason’s well-publicized spending habits served to shore up rather than undermine his working-class image. He made spending on recreation his top budgetary priority. Gleason used to say, “I think...
everybody should make two fortunes, one to blow, to really live it up with, and then the other for security.” “But,” as William Henry points out, “the one for blowing always came first and mattered most” (45). By the 1950s, Gleason made enough to support his taste for the good life as well as his wife and daughters. Yet he reveled most in spending his money buying rounds for the house at Toots Shor’s—his favorite Manhattan nightspot—rather than consumer durables for the family home. Thus, he engaged in a traditional form of working-class men’s recreation that persisted into the postwar period. As the historical sociologist Mark Swiencicki has demonstrated, men had been the primary consumers of commercial leisure services since the late nineteenth century, and those commercial leisure venues had been the primary site for the shaping and assertion of a rough strain of working-class masculinity that contrasted with the more domesticated middle-class masculinity of the “consumers’ republic.” In addition, Gleason also conformed to the working-class, “more-is-better” aesthetic that historian Shelley Nickles has identified as the emergent design philosophy of the postwar era. Nickles convincingly argues that the heavy, chrome-laden kitchen of the 1950s was not a top-down style pressed on consumers by designers, but rather the designer’s response to the tastes of new, relatively well-to-do working-class markets. As Gleason’s biographer states, Jackie’s “tastes were plebeian, if gargantuan. He would order two wagon-wheel-sized pepperoni pizzas and eat both at a sitting. He would have two steaks, each big enough to have been carved off a brontosaurus, for dinner and then tell a stunned waiter that for dessert he would have another steak” (Henry 140). He outfitted his apartments, homes, and offices in garish style only to immediately scrap the design and begin anew. Thus, while on the surface Gleason’s conspicuous consumption seemed to destabilize his blue-collar persona, lavish spending on male-centered recreation and ostentatious display actually reaffirmed his working-class credentials.

Gleason’s “more-is-better,” working-class style carried over onto The Jackie Gleason Show. His jump from Dumont to CBS in 1952 brought not only personal fortune, but a larger production budget. He spent lavishly on his show, a fact that press coverage of his career move repeatedly noted. For example, a 1954 TV Guide article stated, “His opulent TV show is a study in extravagance. Sixteen chorus girls . . . some critics have complained 16 chorines are too many, and that on a TV tube the live dolls look like a row of precision marionettes. But
that is the way Jackie likes it. Give ‘em a lot for their money” (O’Malley 6).

In addition, while Jackie had left Brooklyn in the 1930s, the borough remained an important component of his star image throughout his career and beyond. W. J. Weatherby’s authorized Gleason biography, published in 1992 five years after the star’s death, best illustrates the persistence of working-class Brooklyn in his persona. Weatherby begins his biography by describing a 1961 meeting with the star at which Jackie called for a limousine to take the two from Manhattan to Bushwick. The reporter and the performer drove down Brooklyn’s memory lanes with Gleason narrating the landscape as it had appeared in 1930. The trip culminated with a chance encounter between Jackie and an old family friend still living in the apartment she had lived in thirty years before. “You see how easy it is to lose yourself,” Weatherby reports the star as saying on the ride home, “You need an occasional reminder of who you are” (20). Through the height of his stardom and into the grave, Gleason and those who wrote about him, continued to cultivate his Brooklyn Bum persona.

Tense Marriages—the Kramdens, the Gleasons, and Domestic Masculinity

At first glance, The Honeymooners seemed to demonstrate that a public failure like Ralph Kramden could maintain his self-esteem and manhood by serving as the final authority in the home and over his wife. Ralph’s oft-repeated claim to be “king of the castle” was one of the show’s comic mantras. Yet as Cecilia Tichi has argued in her study of postwar television, the ability to possess, display, and gaze upon consumer goods played a fundamental role in establishing male authority within the postwar home as the representation of the “comfortable suburban interior [paid] tribute to the man as good provider and master of family and property” (17). Thus, Alice frequently undermined Ralph’s claims to patriarchal authority by pointing to his inadequacies as a provider and consumer. For Ralph, the domestic setting was neither a haven from public failure nor the foundation of consumer citizenship. The barren kitchen/dining/living area that served as the show’s primary set constantly reminded Ralph, the show’s other characters, and the viewer of Ralph’s inadequacies as a provider and consumer.
Over and over Alice pointed out Ralph’s inability to provide and outright refusal to purchase household commodities. Implicitly, and sometimes quite explicitly, she pointed out that their sparsely furnished apartment and her husband’s inability or unwillingness to update it had locked the couple in prewar Brooklyn as the postwar world grew around them. Thus, in a 1955 episode titled “A Woman’s Work is Never Done” Alice brags sarcastically about her “atomic kitchen,” referring to contemporary notions of postwar America as part of the “atomic age.” In its postwar context, the idea of the “atomic age” held forth that cutting-edge science and technology could be applied to everyday material life to foster comfort and efficiency. Alice labeled her kitchen “atomic” not for its streamlined technological comfort, but because it looked “like Yucca Flats,” the bleak landscape that served as the site of numerous nuclear test explosions in the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed rather than resembling the typical, celebrated postwar living space, the décor could best be characterized as “early Depression” according to Alice’s sarcastic assessment.

In her rich postwar study of the lives of working-class couples, the sociologist Mirra Komarovsky found similar tendencies among her informants. “The poor providers,” she speculated, offered “their wives too obvious a weapon to be used in a fit of anger” (291). For example, one husband told of an occasion on which he supported his daughter’s refusal to eat dinner, because he agreed with her dislike of a particular dish. According to the man’s recollection, his wife then “hollered at [him] at the table and said if [he’d] make enough money she could get the food they liked” (292). The Honeymooners offered a humorous fictionalization of the contradictions that gave rise to the more poignant real-life stories found in Komarovsky’s work.

While Alice frequently criticized Ralph’s underconsumption of the household furnishings and appliances that could benefit her status and work as a homemaker, she just as frequently criticized Ralph for overconsumption in other areas of his life—particularly in his eating habits. While the fat joke has been a rhetorical standard in all forms of visual comedy from the vaudeville stage through contemporary television and cinema, the numerous fat jokes directed at Ralph Kramden frequently took on a very specific meaning in The Honeymooners’ postwar context. Given Jackie Gleason’s own tendency to spend enormous sums of money on his friends’ and his own entertainment to the well-publicized detriment of his relationship with his family, his most
famous character's apparent tendency to overindulge also raised important questions about his commitment to serving as provider and head of the family. Therefore, just as Alice offered examples of Ralph's underconsumption to stress his inadequacies as a husband and to undermine his claims to patriarchal authority, she used the most striking example of his overconsumption—his weight—to do the same. In a typical scene from the 1954 episode "Songwriters," Ralph and Alice bicker over Ralph's purchase of a piano, which she does not want and claims they cannot afford. Alice had initially thought the crate containing the piano held an electric refrigerator—to replace the couple's aged ice box—and had praised Ralph's generosity. Ralph attempts to end the argument by a bald claim to male authority, stating that he will keep the piano because he "wears the pants around this house." Alice's retort, "Those pants are big enough to fit around this house," draws attention to Ralph's weight and thereby links his gluttonous eating habits to his tendency to monopolize family funds for outlandish and selfish purchases like the piano.

Ralph's best defense against Alice's barbs is to temporarily escape his home and his marriage. Thus, when Ralph agrees to spend money on nonessential purposes, he frequently purchases commodities and commercial leisure outings that pointedly exclude his wife. Like Jackie Gleason, Ralph Kramden preferred to spend his leisure time and extra money outside the home, away from his wife in traditional men's recreational venues such as taverns, fraternal lodges, and sports arenas. For Jackie Gleason, Ralph Kramden, and many of the show's other male characters, men's recreation represented an autonomous sphere, a vestigial strain of rough working-class masculinity, outside the integrated cycle of work, family, and household consumption so fundamental to the postwar order. In The Honeymooners, men's commercial leisure and domestic consumption represented two distinct elements of a zero-sum equation. The time and money that Ralph spent at the pool hall and the bowling alley, the time and money that Jackie Gleason spent in Manhattan bars, constituted time and money withheld or even stolen from the family economy. Both men valued that time and money very much and frequently chose to hoard as much as possible for homosocial recreation.

On numerous occasions, the sketch set up comic scenarios in which the family economy in general, and a wife's desire to purchase household commodities in particular, impinged on men's ability to engage in
independent recreation. Ralph ultimately perceived household commodities as belonging to Alice, rather than the couple together. Therefore, money spent on household purchases represented money lost to him. So, in “Man in the Blue Suit” Ralph hides the money he has won in a poker game because Alice “takes his whole salary.” The “allowance” she gives him will not cover the purchase of the bowling ball and the fishing rod he wants, so he’ll buy it with the hidden poker money before she finds it. In “TV or not TV” Ralph resists Alice’s urgent plea to purchase a television set. He argues that the couple cannot afford one. She points out that Ralph spends considerable money on bowling, lodge fees, and other homosocial recreation. Alice’s control over the family economy and her desire for household commodities conflicts directly with Ralph’s desire to spend money on men’s recreation (see Figure 3).

Mirra Komarovsky found similar marital tension over family consumption and men’s leisure among the working-class couples with whom she spoke in the postwar era. Indeed, Komarovsky believed that

FIGURE 3. Ralph and Alice in yet another squabble. Note the prominent position of his bowling ball on the kitchen table. Courtesy of Photofest.
what she labeled the “pull of the male clique” constituted one of the greatest obstacles to social adjustment among newly married working-class men. She cited numerous young working-class wives who complained that their husbands still behaved as if they were single during their leisure time (28–33). She talked to one male respondent who framed men’s recreation as a fundamental right, and who refused to accept that marriage had circumscribed it. When asked for his reaction to a hypothetical scenario in which a woman complained that her husband spent too much of his leisure time outside the home, the man exclaimed, “The husband earns the money don’t he? He has the right to get away as often as he wants. If my wife tried to butt in like that I’d really let her have it” (321).

As with the Kramdens and other working-class couples in the 1950s, much of the tension in the Gleason marriage boiled down to the patriarch’s inability—in Gleason’s case despite his financial success—to live up to the demands of postwar consumer republicanism. These tensions became public in early 1954, when Gleason lay recovering from his on-air broken leg in a New York City hospital. As reported by New York gossip columnists and detailed in subsequent biographies, Gleason was accompanied by his long-time mistress, a dancer from his show named Marilyn Taylor, when his wife Genevieve came to visit. Genevieve became incensed at coming face-to-face with her rival and chose the occasion to confront Jackie about his infidelity. Even more importantly, judging from the flurry of press coverage featuring lengthy quotations from Genevieve, she also determined to discuss his infidelity publicly. The revelation of this regular Brooklyn Bum’s sexual affair destabilized his star persona in a way that laid bare many of the gender and financial tensions inherent in the consumers’ republic.4

Genevieve linked his sexual infidelity with his inability and outright refusal to serve as an adequate financial provider for his family. For instance, Jackie had dropped the “Goodnight” tag line from the end of his variety show upon his move to CBS in 1952. Although he dropped the sign-off at the time of the couple’s estrangement, Genevieve pointed out that he also made the choice when he finally achieved financial success. She was particularly incensed that she had helped Jackie through earlier troubled financial times, only to be abandoned on his big payday. “He needed me,” she stated, “I got all the tax delinquency settled, paid off all our bills, got all our troubles behind us—and then—he left again . . . I’ve done everything to protect

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him, to look out for him when he needed me. But he never has looked out for his family. It’s always been Jackie first and us last” (O’Brian Part I, 1). Equally as damaging to Gleason’s hardworking family-man image, the stories reported that he had been seen about town with his current mistress for years and that he had “acquired many Broadway beauties between visits home” to his family (O’Brian Part II, 1). Indeed, the story seemed to reveal a lifelong pattern of domestic ineptitude that transcended this particular event. For example, William Henry calculates that Gleason, despite narrating a number of madcap scenarios placing himself at his wife’s side for the birth of his second daughter, most likely missed the event while promoting a movie in California, establishing a pattern of absenteeism that continued for the remainder of his life. As adults, Jackie’s daughters repeatedly noted to friends and colleagues that they had spent very little time with their father over the years. Gleason himself is reported to have confessed on numerous occasions that he felt himself a failure as a father (Henry 58–59). Thus, just as Jackie’s on-camera break should have proven his willingness as a hardworking performer to lay it all on the line for his family and his audience, revelations of a prolonged pattern of misbehavior indicated an inability and unwillingness to live up to the gender norms of the consumers’ republic.

Family, Consumption, Frustration, and Violence

The threat of domestic violence constituted a recurring theme in *The Honeymooners*. In late 1955, at the sketch’s popular apex, a *TV Guide* piece examined the frequency and popularity of such threats of spousal abuse in the show’s text and determined “viewers apparently keep dialing in to find out if Ralph actually will crank up and let Alice have one ‘Pow! right in the kisser!’” Male viewers in particular got “a vicarious satisfaction out of watching a man prepare to clobber his spouse” (De Blois 14). The writer argued that the show proved so popular specifically because the patriarchal authority Ralph sought to shore up had crumbled by the postwar period, and women had come to occupy a position of relative domestic equality with men. Citing an unnamed psychiatric expert, the writer argued, “*The Honeymooners* would never be popular in France, Germany, Italy, Scandinavia, or the Baltic States, where the man already is undisputed boss of the home”
Indeed, Komarovsky found such violent frustration, linked to domestic squabbles over family finances and men’s ability to provide. She noted that “economic failure is likely to magnify shortcomings. The poor providers are themselves frustrated and anxious. Not many men can handle these destructive emotions without further consequences, such as drinking, violence, irritability, increased sensitivity to criticism, and withdrawal” (291). The Honeymooners confronted these areas of tension within the working-class home and provided an identifiable, humorous, and cathartic outlet in Ralph Kramden’s anger.

The Honeymooners attempted to contain and resolve its depiction of domestic conflicts over the rights and resources of consumption with humor and pathos. Inevitably, the couple ended violent arguments by gradually sliding into fits of uncontrollable laughter and embracing one another. Ralph would look at Alice and utter one of the show’s stock phrases, “Baby, you’re the greatest,” before the scene faded out. Yet, by making Ralph’s desire to escape his tenement, and frequently his marriage, a central component of the show, The Honeymooners nudged at the lid of a Pandora’s box of gendered conflict at the core of postwar consumer culture and domesticity. Furthermore, when read in light of Jackie Gleason’s contemporary star image, the cycle of obligation in which Ralph Kramden found himself trapped appeared even more troubling. As Jack O’Brien of the New York Journal-American noted in 1954, Jackie Gleason’s own marital difficulties paralleled the most venomous bickering of a Honeymooners episode, but lacked both the humor and the happy ending (O’Brien Part I, 1). Eventually, when Gleason began to command multimillion dollar salaries in the mid-1950s, he used his success to buy his freedom with a financial settlement that secured his permanent separation from his family. While Ralph may have only strayed from the home for brief sojourns to the lodge or bowling alley, he returned home as reluctantly as Gleason. He simply lacked the financial resources to stay away for extended periods of time or to secure his permanent emancipation from his marriage and his Brooklyn home. Instead he remained in place—an angry man railing against the Brooklyn tenement and the wife that perpetually reminded him he was a failure.

Kramden and Gleason together foreshadowed the iconic frustrated, defeated working-class man of the late 1960s and beyond. As Mark Nicholls points out in his examination of masculinity in the films of Martin Scorcese, while we have traditionally focused on the rage and
violent actions of “Scorcese’s Men,” their emotions and behaviors stem from a fundamental point of inadequacy and self-loathing that earlier appeared in the star discourses surrounding Jackie Gleason and in his performance of Ralph Kramden. In analyzing Travis Bickle’s (Robert DeNiro) dialogue with his mirrored reflection in *Taxi Driver*, Nicholls argues,

For all the manic violence this celebrated scene may suggest, Travis’s mirror rehearsal suggests not action but retreat . . . Placing himself as a morally superior “man apart” from the corruption and confusion of the urban mob, Travis is playing out his fantasy scenario of destroying evil, saving the virtuous, and redeeming the community. A bloody and violent self-sacrifice is central to his mission. Public validation of that mission is implicit. The mirror reminds us, however, that the fantasy scenario is a response to the inadequate self. Travis’s routine thus looks less like a moment of empowering action than a melancholic marker of loss—of that gap which . . . sits at the center of our being. (1–2)

Travis Bickle’s melancholia ultimately provides some justification for his murderous rampage at the end of the film, just as male melancholy often “is frequently used to validate and protect certain forms of male desire . . . particularly against claims of misogyny” (Nicholls xiv). The John Hinckleys and Dylan Klebolds who have followed in Travis Bickle’s footsteps, while ultimately criminal and murderous, have acted from similar feelings of inadequacy in misguided efforts to make themselves over into purifiers. If traced back far enough, those footsteps lead not just to Travis Bickle, but to the staggering paths of both Ralph Kramden and Jackie Gleason. Just as *Taxi Driver* invites empathy for Travis Bickle, *The Honeymooners* and the star discourses surrounding Gleason invited empathy for Ralph and Jackie, two men who failed to meet the demands of mid-century masculine consumer citizenship and who approached the line separating melancholia and violence, without crossing it.

Ultimately Jackie Gleason, Ralph Kramden and *The Honeymooners* are significant because they shed insight into a specifically working-class, mass-mediated masculinity that was angrier and more alienated than middle-class models of masculinity in the 1950s. In addition, like other gender discourses in the 1950s, this angry working-class masculinity marked the historical root of a gender ideology that become more apparent and more prominent by the late 1960s. While scholars
have discovered the roots of the progressive and countercultural 1960s and 1970s in such 1950s popular cultural phenomena as the Beats, James Dean and Elvis, Gleason and Kramden pointed the way toward Travis Bickle and Archie Bunker. Jackie Gleason and Ralph Kramden demonstrate that rather than emerging simply in reaction to the upheaval of the late 1960s, the archetype of the lonely, frustrated working-class man also grew from the battles over gender, consumption, and authority in the living rooms and the popular culture of the 1950s.

Notes

1. Gleason revived the sketch on several occasions in the 1960s and 1970s. This article examines the sketch and its star at the height of their popularity in the 1950s. CBS aired 141 episodes between 1952 and 1957. The author located and viewed 89 of those episodes. All analyses of specific episodes highlight themes found in a significant number of the show’s installments.
2. Dyer’s work in *Stars* and *Heavenly Bodies* has helped to shape the concept of stardom as applied in this article.
3. The January 31 *New York Times* reported on Gleason’s televised fall the previous evening and the public outpouring. *Journal-American* (New York) and *World Telegram* (New York) both offered picture sequences of the fall and break on February 2.
4. The Gleasons’ feud served as cannon fodder in a circulation war between two New York City papers—the *Journal-American* and the *World Telegram*. Genevieve told her story to Jack O’ Brian in the *Journal-American* while Jackie gave his view in an autobiographical piece told to Marie Torre of the *World-Telegram*.

Works Cited


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