CHAPTER ONE

No End to Her: The Place of Soap Opera as Screen Fiction

A narrative form associated primarily with women, soap opera tends to provoke the same mix of desire and disdain that femininity itself produces in our culture. As with women, so with soap opera: one cannot speak of desire without ambiguity, since both the enjoyment of soap opera and the comforts and delights of intimacy associated with women and celebrated by soap opera have been defined mainly by their detractors.

Not long ago, Freud synthesized science and Sophocles and came up with an address to men that assigns the Oedipal narrative a central place in understanding the role of the maternal: however alluring, closeness with women threatens the integrity of the adult ego, unless it is policed by the father—the patriarchal. But some two thousand years before Freud, classical literature had already provided masculine narrative contexts for riding herd on the attractions of femininity: the "heroic" mastery of Circe and Dido, for example. Contain the delights of the feminine, say the new and old wise men of the West, or be thrown into division and degradation. Soap opera, a discourse quite at home with the comforts and intimacy associated with women, must inevitably be a renegade discourse. Given the traditions of our culture, it would have been a miracle had soap opera met with easy acceptance.

Thus it is no wonder that soap opera, imbued with the very sense of feminine importance that culture warns against, has sometimes been defined as dangerous. For example, Dr. Louis Berg conducted a crusade to convince the public that radio soap opera was hazardous to the

listener's health, of which more below. More often, however, soap opera has simply been discredited as trivial. People who watch soap opera are expected, in casual conversation, to defer in silence to those who hold forth confidently on its negligibility while proudly stating that they have never watched a full episode. Similarly, academics who enjoy soap opera are hesitant to enshrine their fascination in print. In so doing, they acquiesce to the prevailing opinion of critics, who view any extended discussion of the topic as unnecessary, preferring to register disdain in parenthetical asides. Molly Haskell's famous, if unfounded, dismissal of both the woman's picture and soap opera in one fell swoop (see below) is a good example of the "learned" way of vaporizing the daytime serial form.

Unfortunately, then, silence characterizes most of those partial to soap opera, whereas language belongs almost exclusively to its critics. This study is therefore dedicated to discovering a discourse capable of expressing the achievements of one of America's few original art forms, a form that has suffered from a persistent, a priori rejection by the intellectual and power establishments, even the establishment that produces soap opera.

Trivialization of the genre is built into the very term *soap opera*—a name the industry did not give itself: stories that sell soap—which supports the erroneous belief that the form is little more than an elaborate kind of broadcast advertising that uses narrative to entice the potential consumer. Historically, of course, soap opera did come into being at the same time that broadcast advertising began to experiment with the dramatic scenario. But the daytime serial is not about selling.

In 1923 Ivory soap initiated an entirely new concept of marketing in the form of a newspaper campaign designed by Mark Wiseman. Wiseman created, in comic strip format, a "selling drama" about the Jollyco family, composed of Mr. and Mrs. Jollyco and their three children, whose lives revolved around soap. Narrative conflict was provided by an Oedipal distrust of the sensual fascinations of a certain Mrs. Percival Billington Follderol, who used (adulterated) perfumed soap rather than pure Ivory. On the strength of marketing studies conducted by Proctor & Gamble which suggested that a broadcast campaign using narrative could be equally successful, a young woman named Irna Phillips was then asked to reproduce the Ivory success on radio. She accordingly created a serial narrative called *Painted Dreams*, a daily fifteen-minute episodic show that aired briefly in 1930. Like the Ivory campaign, it

focused on a family, this time called the Suddses, in hopes of attracting the Super-Suds Company as the show's sponsor.[1]

Yet Phillips's *Painted Dreams* is not, as it is sometimes called, the first soap opera. The most that can be said is that it encouraged an existing belief that radio technology could produce such a thing as daily drama. The direct descendants of the Suddses and the Jollycos are dishwashing liquid's own Madge the Manicurist and Mrs. Butterworth, the talking pancake syrup bottle—figures who conform to the Western tradition that guards against feminine sexuality. Madge and Mrs. Butterworth, however, are a far cry from the Lords and the Woleks of Llanview on *One Life to Live*, or the Bradys and the Hortons of Salem on *Days of Our Lives*, or the Hugheses, the Stewarts, the Dixons of Oakdale on *As the World Turns*, or the Capwells and their friends on *Santa Barbara*. While these characters may have emerged from the same basic conditions as did narrative advertising, they were destined to inhabit a unique form of screen fiction that privileges a feminine perspective. The remainder of this chapter will explore the history and theory of how soap opera, as opposed to narrative advertisement, originated and evolved, a story that—although linked briefly at its beginning to the Jollycos and the Suddses—has its own particular twists and turns.

Soap Opera, Femininity, and Desire

Soap opera is about women and desire. If the earliest interpretation of that desire was the sponsor's narrative of women's purported passion for personal and domestic cleanliness, this masculine affront to feminine aspirations was soon forced aside by the heroines who emerged from the special conditions governing soap opera production. The chronicle of what worked and what did not in soap opera's development demonstrates that the concerns of the heroine, rather than those of the sponsor, evoked the greatest response in the audience that first listened to and then watched soap opera.

In the career of Irna Phillips, widely known as the mother of the genre, we see in microcosm how the commercial establishment came to fund the development of a narrative that, root and (especially) branch, challenges the social definition of femininity. In 1933 Phillips wrote a memo about her plans for *Today's Children*, the successor to the fleeting

Painted Dreams and an early precursor to soap opera in its own right. In this memo, which clearly indicates that at the time Phillips still saw herself not as dramatist but as advertiser, she details her strategy for embedding advertising for La France bluing, a washing product, into the script of *Today's Children*. Phillips had worked out a two-week "story build" to the climactic moment when Mother Moran, one of the show's characters, would appeal to the listeners to "help Terry," a character in distress. Mother Moran was then to be told by the announcer that the show's sponsor, La France, would come to Terry's rescue, thus motivating the audience to buy La France in gratitude—and also to take advantage of the special premium offer bound up with the story's plot line.[2]

Today's Children managed to remain on the air from 1933 to 1938, but it just barely survived. Although during that period it changed its address to the audience significantly, relegating contests and special offers that tied the sponsor to the characters to the periphery of the soap opera's emotional story, the series remained too close to its predecessor, the selling drama. Such advertising was doomed as a central feature of daytime serial.

Phillips's early collusion with the sponsors, then, was not rewarded by notable success. For several years, she was eclipsed by Frank and Ann Hummert, who dominated radio with the first daytime serials that were distinct from selling dramas, including *The Romance of Helen Trent*, *Mary Noble, Backstage Wife*, and *Our Gal Sunday*. The Hummerts had not only taken the ball from Phillips but run with it in a different direction. If there is a simple way to say what the Hummerts had done with soap opera, it is that they told stories about how women feel. But Phillips eventually caught up with the Hummerts. In 1936 she created *The Guiding Light*, her first major soap opera success. This serial, which established her new, purely emotional approach to daytime drama, marked the beginning of what was to become the longest-running soap opera of all time. Phillips was no longer confusing marketing strategies with daytime serial.[3]

Indeed, Phillips's changing priorities are documented in her own voice. In 1941, when Phillips proposed a soap opera based on the successful film *Kitty Foyle* to a potential sponsor, Lady Esther cosmetics, toward the end of her memo she belatedly assures the sponsor of revenues. However, at no time in the memo does Phillips suggest any subordination of story to product. Instead, Phillips's approach to Lady Esther soars on the wings of emotional rhetoric: Kitty's story, she says, gives a name and a narrative to the invisible woman who "attends to

those hundred and one details you don't even know exist." Phillips in fact insists that the movie for which Ginger Rogers won her Academy Award does not fully tell Kitty's story. Only the endless soap opera format can do Kitty justice. All we women, she says, "have something of the Kitty Foyle in us. We go on living, and why shouldn't she? Not only between book ends—not only on the silver screen—but on the greatest of all vehicles for human drama . . . the air waves. Why shouldn't she?"[4]

In this proposal we see Phillips's dedication to soap opera as a unique form for talking about the unspoken lives of women. By 1941 she was well beyond Mother Moran and her putative emotional relationship to La France bluing. Rather, Phillips was intrigued by the figure of the career woman, and by her ambiguous social position as both extraordinary and anonymous. And she saw soap opera as the best dramatic form for putting that narrative on record. Of course, the career woman in question, Kitty Foyle, was already a cultural fact, with a Hollywood story behind her. It is significant, however, that Phillips chose Kitty over the standard "woman alone," a character purveyed by Hollywood in movies such as *Back Street. Back Street* portrayed a long-suffering woman who, having set her heart on a socially prominent married man, dutifully remained his mistress, refraining from committing to plans or relationships that would give *her* social standing in order to accommodate his passions and needs. In short, feminine desire was painted as irretrievably marginal to morally upstanding society. By rejecting a similar proposal, however, Kitty gallantly affirmed a place in society for her desire, even if it was not as fashionable as that of the socially prominent man who wanted her at his beck and call. In short, Phillips had developed not only a commitment to daytime serial but one that had great affinity with feminine resistance to social definitions of the woman's place. Nevertheless, Phillips had not yet gone as far as she would.

In 1956 Phillips created *As the World Turns* for television. Indeed, we may say that with it she created television soap opera. Where previous attempts at television soap operas had merely thrust the fifteen-minute radio-designed format in front of a camera, Phillips's *As the World Turns* was conceived specifically for television and, revolutionary for soap opera, for a half-hour time slot. Homing in on the possibilities of the new medium, Phillips altered dramatic conventions of time and space to create the now old-fashioned but then radical soap opera style, employing thoughtful, elongated moments and a multitude of close-ups.[5]

It was on this show in 1973—some thirty years after she had taken on the task of preventing society from excluding the Kitty Foyles of the

world—that Phillips pushed her commitment past what her sponsor, and the public, were ready for. She had begun to develop a narrative for *As the World Turns* about a new character, Kim Reynolds, an independent and aggressive young woman. All was going well until Reynolds went Kitty Foyle a few better. Whereas the innocent Kitty had been wooed by a philandering suitor, Reynolds herself seduced Dr. Bob Hughes, one of the serial's "ideal" husbands. The audience reacted with shock and surprise—not to Reynolds's manipulativeness (she was, after all, an "independent" young woman) but to her success. Phillips, however, was determined that the liaison remain intact and that Reynolds be given the life denied Kitty Foyle—that is, sole possession of the man she wanted, and on her own terms. Proctor & Gamble viewed Phillips's story as public sanction for immorality; Reynolds, they said, must be punished and the affair terminated. Phillips refused to accommodate the demand, and she was fired.

Phillips died shortly after the termination of her contract, and some commentators believe that losing her battle played some part in her death, although this cannot be documented. The relationship between biography and creation is always a source of curiosity. Irna Phillips dying of a broken heart because her fictional alter ego was as thwarted in desire as Phillips was in life makes a "good story." Yet there is reliable evidence that Phillips *did* contribute to the form she worked in by imbuing it with the truth of *her* desire.

Agnes Nixon, initially Irna's protégée and ultimately a major force in determining the direction of soap opera, was also Phillips's good friend (fig. 1). She recalls her mentor's idealization of family life and her belief that, had she married, she would have been a happy woman. Nixon doubts that Phillips would really have gained by trading her professional success for family life, suggesting that imagination overruled experience in Phillips. Phillips had not grown up in a happy family. Indeed, Nixon asserts that Phillips created the idealized Dr. Bob Hughes of *As the World Turns*, together with Chris and Nancy Hughes, his ever-solicitous parents, in the spirit of Emily Dickinson's insight that success is always sweetest to those who ne'er succeed.[6] Seen in this light, the fantasy of the erotic intruder Kim Reynolds insuating herself into Bob Hughes's life as his rightful love might be credibly construed as Phillips's fantasy of herself looking in on the idealized Hughes tribe and acquiring a place at the patriarchal table by imagining a world of gratified female desire.

Only in hindsight can we see the real meaning of the controversy generated by Phillips's bold authorial stroke. Kim Reynolds wanted a

Fig. 1. Agnes Nixon, protégée of Irna Phillips. In creating *One Life to Live* and *All My Children*, Nixon led daytime serial writing into the modern era.

man but was not content to be contained by social conventions, including marriage. Like Reynolds, Phillips construed that desire to be at least as authentic as the socially sanctioned sexual involvement of Bob Hughes. In contrast, the production executives enforced the venerable prohibition on female desire when they insisted that Bob Hughes be contrite about allowing an "enchantress" to lure him from the straight and narrow. Phillips's clash with the network was not just an anecdote about selling floor wax.

Mother Moran to Kitty Foyle to Kim Reynolds: these transitions in a sense encapsulate what happened to feminine desire in soap opera narrative during its formative years. Even though feminine desire had always driven the soap opera form, it was increasingly articulated in terms of the resistance it met from social constraints. Hindsight suggests that had Proctor & Gamble permitted Phillips to proceed as she wanted to with the character of Kim Reynolds on *As the World Turns*, she would have continued to be the most innovative force in daytime serial.

Indeed, in that moment of defiance in 1973, when she infuriated fans and hurt ratings by championing Kim Reynolds's seduction of Bob Hughes, Phillips was also, for whatever motives, pushing soap opera toward its destiny. No more "Ms. Nice Girl." Soap opera heroines were now on their way to redefining proper feminine comportment. True, for the time being, a serious encounter between the desires of soap opera heroines and public definitions of feminine propriety had been averted. But it could not be put off indefinitely: the soap opera heroine could not be forever denied. In this first major skirmish, the Kim Reynolds saga, the woman only *seemed* to be vanquished. As a generic figure, the soap opera heroine was about to seize the reins of her destiny with a dramatic flourish. Years later, even Kim Reynolds finally got what she wanted—as we shall see.

The fight over the Kim Reynolds story line heralded a major transition for the soap opera heroine that finally took place in the 1970s. As a result, the soap opera heroine no longer had to bear the guilt for any conflict between her wishes and the institution of marriage. In the late seventies, on ABC's *General Hospital*, the character of Laura Webber made a reality of the story of active feminine desire that Phillips almost told. With Laura, the soap opera heroine stepped forward as part of a media form that was becoming increasingly emphatic in its feminine challenge to the entrenched masculine narrative perspective.[7] Now marriage—a ritual ordinarily defined by the transfer of woman from father to husband—might be considered guilty of transgressing female desire.

Between 1978 and 1980, *General Hospital* focused on Laura Webber, a young woman with a determination to discover her own desires and pursue them. She captured the national imagination, quickly passing the point of expressed desire at which Kim Reynolds was stopped. Moreover, Laura's fidelity to her passion, rather than to her conventionally perfect marriage, inspired public approval, not outrage. The enthusiasm aroused by Laura's defiance of the bonds of marriage meant that the moment had finally come for soap opera to keep an appointment with the American public, one it had had from the beginning. It was permitted the open display of female fantasies about feminine erotic energy.

In 1978 Laura was brought to full bloom by Douglas Marland, who, having become head writer for *General Hospital*, terminated plans for a projected story line that he insisted would violate all credible emotional reality. The plan was that Laura's mother, Leslie Webber—recently married and thoroughly committed to her husband—be "storied" into an affair with David Hamilton, whose introduction into the *General*

Fig. 2. Douglas Marland, protégé of Harding Lemay, who was a leading light at Proctor & Gamble. By rewriting the direction of a love affair on *General Hospital*, Marland made soap opera history.

Hospital community was intended as a routine device to keep the plot moving. Unable to imagine such a chain of events, Marland was challenged to invent an alternate story that would give the characters something to do for the next days, weeks, months—years, if possible. Marland realized that, while the idea of desire incubating in the otherwise passionately committed Leslie was highly implausible, Leslie's vulnerable teenage daughter, Laura, might be just the ticket. Despite a reigning industry prejudice against foregrounding teenage romances, *General Hospital* went with Marland's story (fig. 2).[8]

Marland's story called for fourteen-year-old Laura to be initiated into sex by Hamilton, a man she would later come to understand had used her as a substitute for the actual object of his desire, her mother. When it became clear to Laura that her seducer had no intention either of loving her or of relinquishing his claim to her, she protested against further sexual involvement. Hamilton, however, thoroughly insensitive to the gravity of Laura's feelings and completely intent on using Laura for his

own pleasure, sought to override her resistance with a violent sexual assault. Laura defended herself by killing him.

This story, which Marland deemed emotionally valid and which the audience enthusiastically embraced, has not been adequately recognized for its distinctiveness in mainstream screen narrative, a form of mass entertainment notable for its justification, indeed romanticizing, of the use of force against women in sex. The millions of girls who claimed that they loved Laura's story because she was "just like them" were not all upper-middle-class blondes who had been seduced and humiliated by suave sophisticates who were really lusting after their mothers.

Laura was a character in what initially looked like a conventional narrative, but in her case that narrative was recontextualized. Instead of being turned into an object, as would have happened in a typical Hollywood movie, Laura rejected that culturally sanctioned role and in so doing validated the desires of her spectators. Through the power of displacement, Laura's seducer, David Hamilton, could, moreover, occupy the position of father, brother, or boyfriend. Watching Laura's "no in thunder" to Hamilton's violent attempt to appropriate her, the audience was thus allowed to experience, in fantasy, long-submerged objections for which there was virtually no public sanction. It gave permission to rage, at least in private, against the gender implications of Hollywood's master narrative. By her response to Hamilton, Laura—though not yet a fully active subject—struck out against the classical role of the screen heroine.

Laura became a more complete subject in 1980. That is, she became the locus of the organizing intelligence of what is seen and of the organizing energy behind what is done. As her story evolved, Laura again rejected being relegated to the status of an object, this time not by a seducer of young girls but by her new husband, Scotty Baldwin, a model young man in the community. In this arc of her story line, Laura became aware that although she was no longer playing second fiddle to her mother, she was still an object. Her "good husband," Scotty, was kinder and gentler toward her than David Hamilton had been; nevertheless, she was fast becoming the major "thing" in his collection. Her insistence on a truth even more basic to her needs than the marriage vows she had taken would require her to deviate from social norms and expectations. Thus, when Laura ran off with the socially unacceptable Luke Spencer, soap opera heroines everywhere embarked on an active dialogue with social norms.

Soap Opera, Mainstream Critical Discourse, and Desire

The line from Kim Reynolds to Laura Webber could have provoked serious critical interest in the soap opera form, especially with regard to its definition of female desire. The existence of Kim and Laura could also have raised questions about the early years of soap opera, and about the traditions out of which such characters emerged. But that did not happen. In its earliest years, and until recently, soap opera has been systematically misperceived. Consider the 1942 claim of psychiatrist Louis Berg that he had data to *prove* that listening to soap operas caused an "acute anxiety state, tachycardia, arrhythmias, increase in blood pressure, profuse perspiration, tremors, vasomotor instability, nocturnal frights, vertigo, and gastro-intestinal disturbances."[9] Berg soon became the center of a serious crusade to remove soap operas from the air—serious because here at last was scientific evidence to support the vague uneasiness that soap operas caused some cultural observers.

As it turns out, Berg's use of the scientific method was both desperate and illegitimate, for the data on which he based his attack were gathered solely from the measurement of *his own* physical responses while he listened to the radio.[10] The unfortunate Dr. Berg appears to have been thrown into a state of extreme bodily terror, even hysteria, by the soap opera experience—a fair conclusion, given that in presenting one individual's reaction as statistically reliable, he essentially suspended his entire professional training.

The likely cause of Berg's panic, not surprisingly missing from his account, surfaces when we read Molly Haskell's more recent, purportedly feminist dismissal of daytime serial. From her comments we can deduce that Berg became hysterical because listening to soap opera made him "feel like a woman." In *From Reverence to Rape*, Haskell accurately identifies the feminine priority on feeling and empathy in both soap operas and the "woman's film." Yet she views this priority in a very negative light, making it the basis of her harsh criticism of these two mass media forms.

> In the thirties and forties, the heyday of the "woman's film," it was as regular an item in studio production as the crime melodrama or the Western. Like any routine genre, it was subject to its highs and lows, and ranged from films that adhered safely to the formulae of escapist fantasy, films that were subversive only

> "between the lines" and in retrospect, and the rare few that used the conventions to undermine them. At the lowest level, as soap opera, the "woman's film" fills a masturbatory need; it is soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife. The weepies are founded on a mock-Aristotelian and politically conservative aesthetic whereby women spectators are moved, not by pity and fear but by self-pity and tears, to accept, rather than reject, their lot.[11]

The "woman's film" that Haskell here brackets with soap opera refers to a large body of motion pictures produced during the 1940s, although the term may be used loosely to describe any film centrally concerned with areas that are stereotypically women's domains: the family, children, clothes, the love story, and also stories of illness and madness. Women's films of the 1940s such as *Kitty Foyle*, *Rebecca*, *The Spiral Staircase*, *Beyond the Forest*, *Lady in the Dark*, *Possessed*, *A Stolen Life*, *Stella Dallas*, and *Gaslight* created vehicles for a generation of powerful actresses: Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, and Joan Crawford, among others. Yet with her damning words, Haskell seems to identify these films as the nadir, but one—soap opera—of cultural expression. She then surprises with a lurking ambivalence about the so-called weepies a few paragraphs later, when we learn that she is not as fully committed to the contempt for women's pictures as the above words would suggest.

Haskell's presentation of her ideas about women's films thus reveals some disconcerting shifts in attitude. However, although her opinion of daytime serial is clear—she is so indisputably dismissive that the form does not even rate its own sentence—her contempt for soap opera is more unsettling from the standpoint of logic. Haskell clearly conflates soap opera and the woman's picture: "At the lowest level, as soap opera, the 'woman's film' . . ." Both are then deemed mock-Aristotelian, moving women "to accept, rather than reject, their lot." But there are obvious structural distinctions between television soap opera and women's films—critical distinctions with regard to Aristotle's theory of drama, which demands closure. While the structure of women's films does resemble Aristotelian dramatic structure closely enough to warrant the comparison, the open-ended structure of daily soap opera bears no relation to it at all. Moreover, Haskell's writing is problematic here. Is Haskell actually implying that soap opera is another mock-Aristotelian form, like the woman's picture? Or is she using the phrase "as soap opera" loosely to connote maudlin emotionalism? Whether Haskell imagined soap opera within the Aristotelian framework, or whether she failed to imagine it in any way whatsoever, in this widely quoted pronouncement she rendered a grave disservice to the feminist study of

screen fiction. And like Berg's "experiment," Haskell's conflation suggests a hysterical subtext. These hostile critics appear to react defensively against a narrative in which, as they perceive it, emotions are out of control, a narrative form that refuses to acquiesce in the conventional elevation of reason over emotion. They react, in short, with hysteria—a hysteria produced by a system of education that creates meaning through repression.

Conventional theories of education in one way or another assume a need for reason to control the energy of passion. The roots of this assumption are deep and tenacious. Plato's image of the charioteer and his horses—reason the charioteer, instinct and feeling the horses—has furnished the defining Western metaphor for the relationship among these basic human faculties. Many current thinkers, however, reject the domination/subordination image of reason and passion, arguing instead that emotion forms a meaningful part of feminine discourse and has been wrongly dismissed by classical learning theory as a mode of making meaning. As Carol Gilligan, Jean Baker Miller, Mary Field Belenky and her colleagues, and researchers at the Stone Center at Wellesley have demonstrated, cultural pressure to achieve mature identity by learning to crack the whip over feeling and empathy is not likely to be healthy or productive for anyone, and historically has been positively damaging for women.[12] The theories of these scholars make it easier to imagine the integrity of soap opera narrative as a form of feminine discourse in which the energy of the protagonist comes from expressing feeling, not controlling it.

In the seventies, feminists began pointing out that almost all our understanding of maturation had historically been based on studies of boys, and that no studies included young girls without imposing male standards on them. In 1982 Carol Gilligan published *In a Different Voice*, in which she introduced a new perspective on human development. The studies that served as a basis for that book and others that followed have begun to illuminate the confusion and humiliation young women feel as they first make serious decisions about their roles in the adult world. At that point in their lives, their desire to found such decisions on emotion as well as reason is defined by both the academic and workplace hierarchies as second-rate in comparison to the "logical" way young men make decisions. The priority young men give to abstraction over human connection is traditionally imitated by ambitious young women in order to gain praise and rewards from power brokers. Some feminists contend that this self-destructive message to young women can only be coun-

tered by social recognition that the emotional priorities of feminine discourse are of equal value. From this point of view, it follows that the previously dismissed "emotionalism" of soap opera must, at least, be reconsidered.

Even feminists who do not accept the concept of gendered discourse lay the groundwork for such a reconsideration. Constructionists like Elizabeth Spelman, for instance, would say that while the reevaluation of feeling is necessary, we ought to be thinking in terms of androgyny and a nongendered discourse that will not order human faculties in terms of sexual politics.[13] Constructionists believe that it is only historical conditioning that has led us to conceptualize thought and feeling as gendered constructs—and at women's expense. For that reason, constructionists advocate that those who would revise our conditioning seek to uncouple human traits from such associations, rather than trying to understand discourse as either masculine or feminine. Although my reading of soap opera assumes the existence of a feminine discourse, it is not entirely unrelated to the constructionist school of thinking. For despite the deep divisions between the two positions, both sides oppose the devaluation of the emotional. From a feminist point of view, we are no longer justified in restricting our notions about intellect and feelings in screen narrative to the ones honored by Hollywood.

Character in movies tends to follow the Freudian model of human development, an interpretation congenial with classical Western thinking about and conditioning with regard to emotion. The Hollywood hero or subject is constructed such that the repression of the tender passions and the control of emotional expression define the mature individual. By contrast, the emotional priorities of the soap opera heroine (and sometimes its heroes as well) have appeared "soppy." We are constrained critically to debase such texts in much the same way that traditional academic and professional standards humiliate maturing girls. As we have seen, feminists who explore feminine discourse have provided an intellectual framework for second thoughts about such judgments, and, as we will see, soap opera narrative dramatizes a kind of self in many ways congruent with current feminist psychological theory.

If psychologists had looked accurately at soap opera at any point in its sixty-year history, they would have seen that women and girls were already challenging social gender definitions through devotion to their favorite heroines. Although early soap opera heroines did not openly challenge *their* heroes, their narratives were to a large extent concerned with the problematic nature of masculine identity (see chapter 2). Later

heroines actively countered the adverse way traditional masculinity affected their lives. Kim Reynolds and Laura Webber were part of the transition to a second generation of daytime heroines. In the character of Reynolds, Irna Phillips tried to realize a heroine whose feelings would successfully challenge the logic by which society defines a woman's place, a goal she was not permitted to reach. By the time the character of Laura was developing on *General Hospital*, however, something had changed. Now Laura's feelings could be coded by a feminine narrative; now it was acceptable to applaud her for breaking the constraints of society in favor of her own emotional priorities, and to commend society for permitting this release.

A number of critics have already begun to speculate that soap opera narrative is distinctly feminine. Robert Clyde Allen, in his thoughtful, innovative *Speaking of Soap Operas*, explores the economic history of soap opera and the formal consequences of industry conditions. Through an accurate assessment of soap opera's historical development, Allen raises important questions that focus attention on soap opera as a unique poetic, one that cannot be profitably evaluated in conventional terms. Similarly, in both "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas" and *Loving with a Vengeance*, Tania Modleski breaks important ground by relating the lack of closure in soap opera to its identity as a feminine narrative.[14]

Given these new attitudes toward psychology and soap opera, the lessons of psychoanalytic film criticism, which has examined the issue of gender and subject in screen fiction, become pertinent.[15] In combination, feminist psychological analysis and film criticism challenge us to think about the possible female subject that has been suppressed by mainstream social discourse, whether in film or in life.

Freudian Film Criticism, the Screen Subject, and Desire

When we speak of gender in screen fiction, we use the vocabulary of psychoanalytic film criticism. In such criticism, the desire of the screen subject was initially interpreted as unwaveringly male. Christian Metz's analogy between the film screen and the mirror, and thus between the cinematic experience and Jacques Lacan's mirror stage of human development and the text of male desire, provided the starting