

# “I’ll Be Home for Christmas”: Misrule and the Paradox of Gender in World War II-Era Christmas Films

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In the present circumstances many people are asking, ought we celebrate Christmas at all? There can be no doubt that this is the very year when we should think, not less, but more about Christmas—not only as an escape from the horrors of war, but as a remembrance of nobler ideals.

—Stefan Lorant,  
*Picture Post*, December 1939.

“Christmas isn’t just a day. It’s a frame of mind.”

—Kris Kringle in  
*Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (1947).

In *The Battle for Christmas*, Stephen Nissenbaum argues that nineteenth-century middle-class culture recreated Christmas as a genteel celebration of the family home to contain and “civilize” a much longer tradition characterized by an unruly, carnivalesque celebration of disorder. Historically, at this time of year, traditional social categories had been inverted and mocked, and “ordinary behavioral constraints . . . violated with impunity” (6): “During the Christmas season those near the bottom of the social order acted high and mighty. Men might dress like women, and women might dress (and act) like men. . . . A peasant or apprentice might become ‘Lord of Misrule’ and mimic the authority of a real ‘gentleman’” (8).

By the early nineteenth century, the spread of wage industries, organized labor movements, and the threat of layoffs and unemployment meant that the “Christmas season, with its traditions of wassail, misrule and . . . ‘street theater’ could easily become a vehicle for social protest” (Nissenbaum 52). Nissenbaum suggests that nineteenth-century middle-class writers and artists sought to contain such carnivalesque appropriations of power, reimagining Christmas as a private home- and family-centered celebration of middle-class domesticity, effectively relocating the holiday from the street to the parlor, from the public sphere to private life.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the development of modern Christmas celebrations exemplifies what historian Eric Hobsbawm calls “the invention of tradition,” the cultural production of new customs and celebrations, like Valentine’s Day, as traditional, even ancient, observances, obscuring their contemporary construction by projecting their origins into the past. As Daniel Miller observes in “A Theory of Christmas,” new media have continued to re-present this nineteenth-century invented tradition, “as we see with Christmas films or Christmas pop music” (4).

In the 1940s—a decade that produced many of today’s most familiar holiday songs, films, and images—the invented tradition of a family-

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centered Christmas took on heightened significance as World War II disrupted American women's traditional roles as homemakers and wives, requiring them to act as wartime wage earners and heads of households, as well as combatants on a newly formed ideological "home front."<sup>2</sup> This article traces how American popular culture negotiated and contained the resulting cultural tensions and conflicts within the mediating space of Christmas by examining four holiday-themed films that span the war era: *Remember the Night* (1940), *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1942), *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (1947). As popular examples of the popular genre of romantic comedy, these films invoke the cultural logic of Christmas as what Fredric Jameson has called a "strategy of containment" (53) symbolically delimiting and defusing the norm-challenging "misrule" necessitated by an economy and society mobilizing for war, when women were suddenly called upon to set aside social and sexual norms by entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. By asserting the invented domesticating traditions of Christmas, these films function as a means of "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (Jameson 79) between the accepted female identity defined by domestic ideology and the long-term consequences of American women's wartime experiences in which they assumed traditionally male roles and responsibilities in both the private and public spheres.

### **As Lately We Watched: Women's Social Roles and the War Effort**

Most of the songs and films that fill contemporary music and video stores and play endlessly on commercial broadcast media—the sounds and images that embody Christmas for most of us today—represent World War II-era appropriations of a nineteenth-century Christmas mythos. The war effort brought about massive dislocation in the lives of many Americans, particularly women,

resulting in wrenching discontinuities with the past and with established norms which the nostalgic traditions of Christmas helped to mediate. Families were separated when men and, for the first time, women joined the armed forces. Married and single women relocated from rural areas to urban production and military centers such as Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago to take on war-related jobs, often far away from friends and family.

The sentimental images and customs associated with Christmas represented ideals most threatened by war—peace, family, abundance, tradition—and the retail and entertainment industries were quick to recognize and deploy Christmas as both a narrative and a marketing strategy to attract war-weary consumers in need of escape from self-denial and turmoil, and eager for a nostalgic glimpse back to an idealized rural past predating the separation and deprivations of war. Sarah Street has pointed out that in many ways, "Christmas performs the function of satisfying the desire to repeat past pleasures, recapture past memories with the assurance that they can be replayed again next year" (78). Indeed, Christmas films, like these replayable rituals and memories, have become an integral part of the ways that we represent and experience Christmas.<sup>3</sup>

The wartime economic boom and a home-front labor shortage created a social climate more supportive of women's participation in the public realm and more aware and appreciative of women's abilities, ambitions, and careers. Although the decade of the 1940s, particularly the critical events of World War II, set in motion developments that would challenge traditional social and sexual norms and radically alter American women's lives, scholars are divided on the impact of these changes on gender ideologies. Specifically, opinions differ as to the long-term effects of these dislocations on educational, economic, marital, family, and reproductive roles and relationships during and after the war. William Chafe has argued that the 1940s "marked a watershed in the history of women at work" that "radically transformed the economic outlook of women" (136, 135). Karen Anderson, however, describes the war

years as merely “a temporary retreat from prevailing notions of women’s capabilities and proper roles” (4). Elaine Tyler May concurs that advances for women during the war were temporary, pointing out that new professional and educational opportunities, “combined with the increasing availability of contraception, might have encouraged women—as they did in the sixties and seventies—to postpone marriage and motherhood in order to pursue educational or occupational goals. Why, then, after World War II did they rush into marriage and childbearing instead?” (155).

Other scholars, such as Susan Hartmann and Jackie Byars, however, find in women’s wartime experiences characteristics of both progress and resistance to change, a paradox expressed in ambiguities and indeterminacies that I will examine in these films’ endings. Byars argues that while wartime work experience both heightened women’s aspirations to continue working after the war’s end and helped to legitimate extrafamilial employment for all women, this change happened “not as the result of a feminist challenge to the male-dominated, patriarchal society, but initially as a patriotic and pragmatic response to the threat of war” (80). For Hartmann, “the complex nature of female roles and the variety of war-related factors which affected them preclude sweeping generalizations about war and social change” (209). While the mobilization for war created lasting opportunities and “a climate of opinion more cognizant of women’s worth and capabilities . . . , World War II also contained powerful forces which put checks on women’s aspirations and options” (210–11).

Although women were not subject to the draft, World War II certainly presented new opportunities to take on important civic roles both as citizen volunteers and, for the first time, regular members of the armed forces. As early as 1941, the US Civil Service Commissioner Lucille Foster McMillin declared in a report on women’s participation in the war effort that

there will be a growing need for [women’s] participation in those activities on the governmental and industrial fronts which are paramount in the national effort totally to

arm and to defend our country morally and physically . . . . Great events have always carried women forward in their quest to find a secure place in the fields of labor. (5)

The demand for female labor between 1940 and 1945 validated the efforts and needs of women workers and made employers and labor unions more willing to consider issues such as child care, enabling and encouraging both single and married women to enter the workforce in unprecedented numbers (Hartmann 21). The percentage of women employed outside the home grew by over fifty percent, from approximately twelve million to nineteen million working women, representing approximately thirty-six percent of the total civilian workforce. Indeed, Susan Hartmann suggests that these yearly statistics probably understate the extent of women’s participation in the wartime labor force because women were more likely than men to change jobs or move in and out of the workforce. For example, she notes that in 1944, “37 percent of all adult women were reported in the labor force, but nearly 50 percent of all women were actually employed at some time during that year. Paid employment, then, constituted a part of the wartime experience of more than half of adult women” (77–78).

Writing in 1943, Susan B. Anthony II noted the importance of the media in constructing popular gender norms:

At present, the majority of you men think of women as either sex machines or glorified domestic servants whose job it is to feed you, wash for you, and nurse you. I must be fair and acknowledge that it is not deliberately your fault that you think this. You have been subjected to the same movies, the same books, the same newspapers that we have since childhood. (204–05)

Clearly, the mobilization for war required that the cultural image of women be transformed, and government-sponsored propaganda and the popular media celebrated American women taking on new public responsibilities as workers, soldiers, and citizens. Government agencies such as the Office of War Information (OWI), the War

Manpower Commission (WMC), and the War Advertising Council (WAC) marshaled the media and advertising industries to recruit women for jobs in the service and manufacturing industries, as well as the military. The WMC's print and broadcast "Womanpower" campaigns in 1942 and 1943 were designed to sell the idea of working to reluctant women. These Womanpower campaigns were based on the idea that "jobs will have to be glorified as a patriotic war service if American women are to be persuaded to take them and stick to them. Their importance to a nation engaged in total war must be convincingly presented" (qtd. in Rupp 94). The WMC issued special pamphlets with titles such as "America at War Needs Women at Work" to aid government officials in areas with worker shortages and designed advertising campaigns with slogans such as "The More Women at Work, the Sooner We'll Win," which emphasized to women the patriotic and financial rewards of working (Rupp 96). Indeed, according to a 1943 OWI campaign, a woman without a job risked being compared to a draft dodger: "Eventually the neighbors are going to think it very strange if you're not working. In fact, any strong, able-bodied woman who is not *completely occupied* with a job and a home—is going to be considered a 'slacker' just as much as the man who avoids the draft" (qtd. in Rupp 97).

The OWI also encouraged popular magazines and radio programs to feature women workers and urged the advertising departments for popular women's products to use war-related themes in their billboard, print, and radio advertising. The OWI's own campaigns directly challenged women to rethink traditional roles: "Are you being old-fashioned and getting by just by being a 'good wife and mother'?" (qtd. in Rupp 97). Articles and stories in popular magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, *The American Home*, *Independent Woman*, and *Good Housekeeping* heralded the dawn of a new working heroine who, in the words of Elizabeth Field's October 1942 *Independent Woman* article, "makes a movie clothes-horse heroine look as moth-eaten and shoddy as an old surrey, and just about as exciting and out of date with the times. . . . The Glamour Girl is going

out. The Working Girl is coming in!" (296). In a speech that same year, Mary Anderson of the Women's Bureau observed that "[a]lmost overnight women were reclassified from a *marginal* to a *basic* labor supply" (qtd. in Chafe 137).

Popular women's journals from this period also suggest, however, that the transformation in cultural attitudes about appropriate roles and work for women was both complicated and unstable. In her *Independent Woman* article, Elizabeth Field debates "the future of the American home as a result of the new freedom for women" and profiles Suzan, a female factory worker, who admits that she "found factory life 'very exciting' after the limited four walls of a house. . . . In fact, she believes that our entire concept of what constitutes 'a good home' will be changed by this war. 'We may even grow out of the homemaking habit, who knows?' she said" (297). However, only a year later, in *The American Home*, Ethel McCall Head asserted emphatically that, in the words of her title, "It's Harder to Stay at Home!":

I think that too many women with families are today defining patriotism as "money-making activities outside the home." There is another kind of patriotism, less glamorous and more difficult, but upon which rests the future of the country. It is the patriotism practiced daily by those mothers who turn down the attractions of a man's job to stay at home and do a woman's vital work! . . . [D]emocracy stands or falls *with the home!* (4–5)

A 1944 article from *Independent Woman* concurs with this more conservative view. In "Will You Be 'So Nice to Come Home to'?" Sylvia Hahn frames women's contributions to the labor force as a temporary public service that would ultimately not disqualify women from returning to traditional roles as wives and homemakers: "If you've worked at one of those un-glamorous 'necessary civilian services,' or merely worked longer and harder at your old job, you'll still register strongly with him because he knows that, in so doing, you have helped to keep the home front strong" (88). The ideology of gender in the 1940s paradoxically embodies both conflict and

continuity, separation from the past and resistance to change: “Americans had fought for a dream,” observes Jackie Byars, “but the very defense of the dream had altered it” (78).

## If Only in My Dreams: The Conflict between Work and Home

Daniel Miller suggests that during periods when a community perceives itself as under threat,

we may find a much stronger desire to objectify a strong sense of the social [through] . . . some immediate form such as the house or family . . . . The bright lights within the home illuminate and gradually dispel the dark cold and austere outside, making it bow to the sociality within. (32)

Though they displace or suppress the war as a necessary cause for female employment, *Remember the Night*, *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, *Christmas in Connecticut*, and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* all present women protagonists who are to some extent deprived of home and family because of the work they do, left alone in the “dark cold and austere outside.”<sup>4</sup> In *Remember the Night* (1940), the earliest film, Lee Leander (Barbara Stanwyck) is a shoplifter who has been released on bond from jail for the holidays because the young assistant district attorney, Jack Sargent (Fred MacMurray), in a moment of mistaken compassion, has had her trial postponed until after Christmas. Penniless and homeless, Lee is dropped off at Jack’s apartment by the bondsman, who thinks that Jack is “sweet” on her. When they discover that they are both originally from Indiana, Jack offers Lee a lift back to her hometown of Eltonville on his way to visit his own family in Wabash. Lee makes it clear that she hasn’t been home in years, having run away as a teenager after being accused of stealing. When they finally arrive, Lee’s mother, whom Lee describes as “living about a mile on the other side of the tracks,” turns her away. In the film’s darkest scene, Lee sobs,

“I’d forgotten how much I hate that woman . . . and how much she hates me.”

Women in the other films are also portrayed as having been uprooted or denied a permanent home by their lives or careers. In *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Maggie Cutler (Bette Davis) has been living out of suitcases for years, following the hectic travel schedule—and whims—of her demanding employer, the noted lecturer Sheridan Whiteside (Monty Wooley, in a brilliant caricature of *New Yorker* writer and bon vivant Alexander Woolcott). Elizabeth Lane (also played by Barbara Stanwyck) is first depicted in *Christmas in Connecticut* working diligently at her typewriter, creating a fantasy of domestic bliss for the wartime readers of *Smart Housekeeping*. While the camera pans across her tiny studio apartment, littered with discarded clothes and dirty dishes, and pauses to look through her small, grimy window at urban rooftops criss-crossed with clotheslines, she spins a fantasy in voice-over for her readers of a “gleaming kitchen” in her “New England farmhouse,” where she prepares a gourmet meal for her equally fictitious husband and eight-month-old infant. In *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Doris Walker (Maureen O’Hara) is single like Elizabeth, but is a divorced mother living in a small apartment in New York’s upper west side while her small daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood), fantasizes over a magazine picture of “a real house . . . [with] a backyard and a great big tree to put a swing in.”

The heroines of these four films all lead work- and money-dominated lives that remove them from traditional home and family and that are represented as materialistic and artificial, if not downright dishonest. Lee Leander is established immediately as a cold-hearted thief in the opening scene of *Remember the Night*, stealing a diamond bracelet from Meyers and Company and then sweeping purposefully past Salvation Army Santas as she hurries off to pawn it. Indeed, the film’s opening shot is a close-up of Lee’s wrist being clasped with a wide cuff-style bracelet by a male store clerk’s hand, which looks disconcertingly like a policeman securing a handcuff, emphasizing the antisocial nature of Lee’s materialism, especially in the context of wartime rationing and

deprivation.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Lane's livelihood in *Christmas in Connecticut* is based entirely on deception, and her and Maggie Cutler's lives are also portrayed as decadent, and in many respects, childishly dependent: Maggie lives vicariously through Smart-Set impresario Sheridan Whiteside, while Elizabeth is dependent for both life and livelihood on her Uncle Felix (S. Z. Sakall)—who feeds her meals and the recipes for her column—and on the misplaced trust of Alexander Yardley (Sydney Greenstreet), her publisher, who believes her to be the model wife and mother of her column. Indeed, when Whiteside asks Maggie why she wants to marry Bert, she explains that New York life has been great but that it's "time to grow up." Both Maggie's and Elizabeth's status as self-indulgent career women is suggested by their clear love of luxuries such as fine dining—Maggie thinks that sweet potatoes are "what they serve at Twenty One with pineapple glacé"—and the mink coats that they have bought for themselves. "It's very important to keep promises," Elizabeth declares when her coat is delivered at the beginning of *Christmas in Connecticut*, "especially to yourself. You don't know what a mink coat does for a girl's morale." Despite their wartime-era settings, none of the films other than *Christmas in Connecticut* acknowledges the war, and none of the films' heroines does work that is war related.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, each of the films' heroines is more "glamour girl" than "working girl": Lee Leander in *Remember the Night* is a well-dressed thief who specializes in expensive jewelry; Maggie in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* is the efficient and sophisticated assistant to one of the world's best-known writers and personalities; Elizabeth Lane in *Christmas in Connecticut* is the woman behind an invented Martha Stewartesque "fine-country-living" column in *Smart Housekeeping* magazine ("smart" clearly emphasizing style more than frugality); and Doris Walker in *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* is an executive at Macy's with a great deal of authority. Even her daughter, Susan, is aware that her mother's job represents the real power behind Christmas: "My mother is Mrs. Walker," Susan reminds Kris Kringle reprovingly, when he asks why she doesn't

believe he's the real Santa, "the lady who hired you."

### **No Crowded Eastern Street: The Wedding Journey to "Small Town USA"**

A Christmas-inspired marriage is the means by which all four transgressive heroines are reinscribed into domesticity. Elizabeth Lane's "pretend" marriage to John Sloan (Reginald Gardiner)<sup>7</sup> in *Christmas in Connecticut* proceeds in comically fast motion, both exemplifying and parodying the domesticating closure of all these Christmas films. Within minutes of Elizabeth's arrival at the Connecticut farmhouse—where she has been coerced by her *Smart Housekeeping* publisher, Alexander Yardley, into creating the "perfect" Christmas for wounded war hero Jefferson Jones (Dennis Morgan)—she transforms herself into the fictitious country homemaker of her column by acquiring a temporary husband and an infant, the gender and hair color of which changes each day as babies are dropped off by different local mothers before their shifts at wartime factories. Indeed, for three of the heroines—Lee, Maggie, and Elizabeth—the experience of playing the role of a fictional wife or family member directly leads to real marriage.

Elizabeth's whirlwind Connecticut Christmas marriage and motherhood embody a larger trajectory staged by these films, which moves from the city—represented in all these films by New York, and signifying, as Andrea Walsh observes, "[f]emale independence . . . economic success, and personal autonomy" (157)—to rural small towns that exemplify the mythic cultural values of pre-war America. In the 1940s, women were not only called upon to leave their homes for war-related factory and office work in unprecedented numbers, but many were also required to leave rural areas and small towns for production and government centers in far-off cities. Some twenty-seven million Americans moved a distance of at

least one county during the war years, and William O'Neill notes that most moved from rural to urban areas (249). Over seven million of these individuals were women, a third of whom joined the labor force (Chafe 139–40). Yet all four of these films reverse this migration, rescuing urbanized female characters not only from their metropolitan professional lives but also from what is depicted as the isolating, if also superficially liberating, culture of the Big City by sending them on a nostalgic journey to the small-town America of an idealized agrarian past.<sup>8</sup>

Lee and Jack's Christmas trip from New York City to Wabash, Indiana, in *Remember the Night* echoes the rhetoric of an Office of War Information booklet called *Small Town USA*, which employs visual and textual images of daily life in a fictional small town called "Alexandria, Indiana" (Polan 49) to construct an American mythos of equality and fairness. This symbolic journey to Small Town USA is depicted as transforming both of them. Jack grows more sympathetic to Lee's motivations for surviving as a professional thief, becomes more willing to put her welfare above strict adherence to the law, and is less quick to condemn her: "You're good enough for me," he tells Lee at the end of the film, as she prepares to serve her sentence. Lee, in turn, becomes convinced that she must make restitution for her crimes so that she is "all square" with those from whom she has stolen. The visit to Wabash includes not only rural holiday pastimes of singing in the parlor, baking popovers, and stringing popcorn for the tree, but also an old-fashioned New Year's Eve barn dance that literally celebrates a return to the cultural past rather than future possibilities. Indeed, Lee has brought modern slacks to wear to the dance, but Jack's Aunt Emmy (Elizabeth Patterson), appalled by such unfeminine attire, laces Lee into a turn-of-the-century corset and party dress. It is Jack's reaction ("My word!") to Lee's appearance in this old-fashioned costume that clearly shows that he is smitten by her transformation into a Victorian angel-in-the-house.

Each of these holiday-themed films offers not so much a journey into the past as a self-

conscious, celebratory journey into invented tradition, as the characters travel to and experience the rural, quaintly old-fashioned scenes depicted in Victorian Christmas cards. In both *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and *Christmas in Connecticut*, journeys into a small-town American past end in romance and marriage, for both Maggie and Elizabeth, with men named "Jefferson" (Bert Jefferson and Jefferson Jones, respectively)—a name emblemizing patriotic integrity and America's agrarian past. In *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Maggie Cutler—whom her employer Sheridan Whiteside says "has had the great served up to her on a silver platter," only to fall in love with a "second-rate, small-town newspaper man"—tells Whiteside that she's fallen in love with small-town life as much as with the newspaper man: "I'm discovering the moon, and ice-skating, and I keep laughing to myself all the time—but there it is." When asked why he remains in small-town Mesalia, Bert Jefferson himself invokes the past, reminding Whiteside that "William Allan White could have got out of Emporia, but he didn't." In both *The Man Who Came to Dinner* and *Christmas in Connecticut*, scenes in which the romantic couples fall in love are staged to look like quaint tableaux from old-fashioned glass snowglobes. In *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Bert takes Maggie ice skating (wearing a bobble-topped hat that looks wonderfully odd on Bette Davis) and buys her an old-fashioned "hot sweet [potato]." In *Christmas in Connecticut*, Jeff and Elizabeth ride slowly home from a country barn dance in a Christmas-card-perfect one-horse open sleigh. *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* also ends by relocating its heroines, Doris and her young daughter, Susan, from urban New York City to a Long Island cottage with a "real backyard" in what Valentine Davies's original novel describes as the "countryside" (118).<sup>9</sup> Like Victorian Christmas stories and songs, these films stage Christmas as a repudiation of public female individualism in favor of private domesticity, nostalgically repositioning the celebration from city street, apartment, or office to domestic rural parlor.

This narrative and ideological trajectory from urban to rural, public to private, and professional to domestic in many ways follows the pattern described by Mark Glancy as a “Dickens model” based on *A Christmas Carol*:

Lessons are learned as the characters embark on journeys of discovery similar to Scrooge’s own dark journey. . . . Christmas then serves as the occasion and solution for these ills, as humanism overcomes materialism, disunity gives way to unity, and nearly miraculous reunions are granted to separated families or lovers. (60)

## Here Comes Santa Claus: The Gift of Domesticity

In each film, a female character is domesticated by the receipt of a gift, and a male character by the experience of giving it. Indeed, the household settings and experiences in which all the women’s transformations to domesticity take place are all essentially Christmas “gifts” given to them (and initially imposed upon them) by male characters. In *Remember the Night*, Jack Sargent takes Lee to spend Christmas in his rural hometown of Wabash, Indiana, after her own family rejects her, because she has nowhere else to go except jail. Maggie spends Christmas in Mesalia, Ohio, in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* because her employer, Sheridan Whiteside, refuses to leave without her. Ultimately, her engagement to Bert Jefferson comes about directly because Whiteside, after a change of heart, manages to trick femme fatale Lorraine Sheldon (Ann Sheridan), who has set her sights on Bert, into stepping inside an empty mummy case so that he can deliver her safely back to New York, literally wrapping her up as a “gift box” for Maggie. Elizabeth’s “Christmas in Connecticut” is a gift from her pretend husband and would-be fiancé, architect John Sloan, who offers her use of his Connecticut farmhouse retreat (built, as he continually reminds his guests, from his own design) so that she can maintain her fictional role as a model home-

maker for her publisher, Alexander Yardley, and war hero Jefferson Jones. The “countryside” cottage that enables the reconciliation and engagement of Fred Gayley and Doris Walker at the end of *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* is also a gift from Kris Kringle to Susan, whose Christmas wish is the “real house” depicted in a picture that she’s saved from a magazine—described in Davies’s novel as a “charming little Colonial home” (47)—with a “backyard with a great big tree to put a swing in.” In these films, the “misrule” of female characters who, like their nineteenth-century working-class counterparts, have inverted or rejected traditional social categories, is contained within the four walls of a rural or small-town home and civilized by male characters taking on the symbolic and mediated role of Santa Claus.

These “gifts” of domesticity and marriage bestowed upon the female characters serve to circumscribe their financial independence, represented in the films by the women’s power (and desire) to buy themselves lavish consumer goods such as clothing, jewelry, and fur coats. Indeed, the redomestication of these independent women exemplifies the gift economy of Christmas itself, which Daniel Miller argues has traditionally served as a means of

“taming” . . . commodities by incorporating them into the sociality of the home . . . thus transforming the potential threat [of materialistic individualism] into the means of social construction. . . . Where the domestic sphere is represented by its ability to retain through thrift then the enemy is clearly lavishness as the clear precursor to what we today identify as the antisocial potential of materialism. (20)

In the context of war-era restraint and communitarian self-sacrifice, the women’s power and desire to acquire luxury goods appear unpatriotic and isolationist. Mary Ann Doane suggests, however, that this apparent economic selfishness signifies sexual desire, autonomy, and power: “Economics and sexuality are inextricably linked in this algebra whereby a wartime economy of lack or scarcity is seriously threatened by excessive female sexuality” (81). Although female desire runs



joyfully rampant in these films, enacting the holiday's carnivalesque tradition of disorder, Christmas also serves as an occasion for reasserting traditions of family, marriage, and home, and ultimately as a strategy of containment for the threat of female independence that is not only financial but also sexual. Elaine Tyler May has observed that, as the war drew to a close,

society saw that the increasing expression of female sexuality and women's entering the paid labor force were two sides of the same dangerous coin. . . . Inside and outside the home, women who challenged traditional roles and restraints placed the security of the nation at risk. (157)

The transgressive female sexuality embodied in these films by sophisticated, unmarried professional women in their thirties originates from inversions of gender, marital, and family roles demanded by the mobilization for war and marketed by the government-directed media. Each of the four films begins with transgressions of gender roles and expectations that both dramatize these wartime social inversions and rehearse pre-nineteenth-century carnivalesque Christmas celebrations of social misrule—literally presenting occasions of “Miss Rule.” In *The Man Who Came to Dinner*, Maggie tells Whiteside that she's going to marry Bert Jefferson “if he'll have me” long before he works up to proposing. (Indeed, she's already told Bert that he might make an attractive candidate for marriage if he “threw in a set of dishes.”) In *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, Doris is a corporate boss with her own secretary, a collection of business suits that resemble military uniforms, and the power to hire and fire Father Christmas himself. In one scene, she is depicted in one of her uniform-suits, directing an apron-wearing Fred Gayley in the preparation of Thanksgiving dinner and the setting of the table, leaning against the kitchen counter with a drink while Fred scurries to finish the meal. In *Christmas in Connecticut*, Elizabeth Lane also takes on conventionally male roles, not only buying her own mink coat but living on meals cooked and delivered by her Uncle Felix—Elizabeth herself is helpless in the

kitchen—who supplies her with the recipes for her fictional role in *Smart Housekeeping* as “America's Best Cook.” Just as Uncle Felix is a better cook, Jefferson Jones adeptly bathes and changes the borrowed babies, proving to be a better “mother” than Elizabeth, who repeatedly ignores her supposed offspring in aggressive pursuit of Jeff. Indeed, Jeff is repeatedly placed in a conventionally female subject position: singing at the piano while Elizabeth gazes at him with frank sexual interest and coyly backing away as Elizabeth leans toward him during the moonlight sleigh ride to ask if he has “ever kissed a married woman.” Yet, at the end of the film, when Elizabeth's marriage to Jeff Jones is announced (and the pretend marriage to John Sloan is renounced), she emphatically asserts that she is “tired” of her job in the city fictionalizing the model domestic life, a fantasy on which, in the words of her publisher, “millions of women pattern their daily lives.” Ostensibly she is to become the private ideal that she has publicly constructed in her column. In the endings of these wartime films, paradoxical aspects of women's status, roles, and desires are reconciled in a utopian fantasy of Christmas past, while the threat of female excess—both the sexual threat represented by working women left “single” by the mobilization for war and the economic threat represented by their earning power and professional ambitions after the war—are circumscribed by relocating women within the domestic sphere. Just as nineteenth-century writers like Clement Clark Moore responded to unruly street Christmases by domesticating the holiday (Nissenbaum 84–85), these same invented traditions serve in the endings of these films to symbolically contain the economic and sexual misrule of wartime within parlor walls.

## You Can Do the Job If You're in Town: Loose Ends

Despite the conventionalizing conclusions suggested by the endings of these four holiday films,

their celebrations of female independence, autonomy, and wit strongly resist the closure that they narratively claim to achieve. Indeed, the gaps, excesses, indeterminacies, and paradoxes of these films' endings exemplify what Russell Reising calls "loose ends": "ways in which . . . works construct narrative worlds and evoke narrative themes with historically determined parameters that, as aesthetic constructs, these works cannot bring to successful conclusions" (10). Such loose ends invite viewers to re-evaluate their assumptions about what they have seen or read, thus "problematizing and sometimes rupturing the narratives from which they dangle" (331). Mark Glancy notes that it is hard to believe at the end of *Remember the Night* that Lee, "a woman who could put a man in his place, has learned her place, and that she is even willing to marry her prosecutor" (62). It is equally hard to imagine smart, cynical Maggie in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* finding either Bert or Mesalia interesting for long, or independent career-minded Elizabeth in *Christmas in Connecticut* giving up her mink coat for a frying pan. Indeed, Elizabeth's resistance to both domesticity and a sexually passive role is particularly forceful; she proposes to John Sloan early in the film, then spends much of the narrative ignoring her would-be fiancé, his kitchen, and borrowed babies in pursuit of Jefferson Jones. Even *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*, the latest and most insistently traditional of these films, ends with no indication that Doris, in spite of her impending move to the suburbs, will give up her executive job at Macy's, military-styled suits, or power to hire and fire Kris Kringle himself. Indeed, by 1947, the year *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* was released, married women in their thirties and forties were beginning to re-enter the workforce in numbers far greater than during the war years.

At the end of the war in August 1945, when *Christmas in Connecticut* had just been released in the theaters, women workers did leave their jobs in large numbers to return home as soldiers came back from overseas and reclaimed their old occupations, as wartime industries lowered their production or went out of business, and as "[e]xperts

called upon women to embrace domesticity in service to the nation in the same spirit that they had come to the nation's aid by taking wartime jobs" (May 159).<sup>10</sup> Yet, within a couple of years, women began returning to the workplace in numbers that increased each succeeding year. According to William Chafe, by "October 1946, women's hiring rate was greater than men's for the fifth month out of six," and by 1952, the number of women holding jobs was over twenty percent higher than at the peak of the war, and "almost three times the number employed in 1940" (181, 182). Chafe calls the war years "a milestone for American women" (195), and Susan Hartmann claims that developments of the 1940s, including the growing importance of employment outside the home and higher education for women, laid the foundations for the feminist movement of the 1960s (216). Yet Chafe also identifies this shift as an example of "the paradox of change" in that, while women's economic roles, particularly in the workplace, grew significantly during and after the war years, public attitudes about women's cultural roles remained largely unchanged: "the world of social ideals existed on one level of reality, the world of economic practice on another" (194). The loose ends, instabilities, and paradoxes of these films express the tensions between the economic and cultural realms, their "resolutions [being] imaginary ones that leave the real [issues] untouched" (Jameson 81). In these holiday films from the 1940s, Christmas serves not as a temporary release of misrule, as in pre-nineteenth-century street celebrations, but ultimately as a nostalgic dream of prewar American society and gender that would come but once a year.

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## Notes

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1. See, for example, G. Weightman and S. Humphries's *Christmas Past*: "The Christmas that we know today was the 'invention' of the relatively well-to-do Victorian middle class, and reflects their preoccupations" (15); or Penne Restad's *Christmas in America*: "events and conditions of the nineteenth century . . . have indelibly

shaped the Christmas we keep and the attitudes we hold about it" (ix).

2. In her analysis of war-era *Good Housekeeping* magazine articles, Susan Ohmer has shown that, "instead of being a refuge from the turmoil raging outside, the domestic sphere was transformed into a militarized zone" in which "the homemaker's daily routine became part of the war effort" (56).

3. Miller credits the influence of American soldiers stationed abroad during WWII with the global reification of what is now considered the modern Christmas (4).

4. The war is mentioned in none of the films except obliquely in *Christmas in Connecticut*. If, as Sarah Street suggests, Christmas "represented a memory of normality" for wartime audiences (77), this suppression of current events may be another example of the films' nostalgic invocation of an idealized past.

5. To the far right of Lee's hand in this shot, a mannequin's leg is just visible, encircled by a corresponding "leg-iron" diamond ankle bracelet.

6. It is worth noting, however, that the uniformed delivery person who brings Elizabeth's coat is female (and African American), another among many images of uniformed working women in the film. For instance, women in military uniforms feature prominently among the people gathered at Uncle Felix's restaurant early in the film, and later at the Christmas benefit dance in Connecticut.

7. Gardiner also appears briefly in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* as Beverly Carlton, a wonderful caricature of playwright Noel Coward.

8. In an interesting parallel, a 1940 *Life* magazine article, "England at War," describes how for urban London-dwellers, "life is too uncertain to read [modern urban] detective stories now. Instead, he [the 'home-loving Englishman'] reads reassuring books by Dickens and Jane Austen" (40).

9. By 1947, the postwar housing boom was already transforming rural small towns into suburbs.

10. William Chafe notes that demobilization "hit women employed in heavy industry especially hard. . . . The aircraft industry laid off 800,000 workers in the two months after V-J day—most of them women—and the auto industry went through a similar transition. Women fell from 25 per cent of all auto workers in 1944 to 7.5 per cent in April 1946" (180).

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