

‘Rose’s Turn’: Female careers in the life (1908–1984) and portrayals (1940–1959) of Ethel Merman

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Abstract

This article discusses the construction of images of female careers through a case from musical theater, with a particular focus on following the life and roles of Ethel Merman – ‘The Grande Dame of Broadway’ – both on and off the stage. By focusing on an individual performer, we wish to highlight how we can achieve a more complex understanding of the constructions of female career-possibilities than we can by studying representations or biography alone, and how analyses of gender and popular culture tend to overlook the importance of the performers and instead focus solely on the representation.

Key words • career • Merman • methodology • musical • popular culture • representation

SOLDIER: (Admiring Merman’s legs) Boy, look at those drumsticks.

MERMAN: How would you like a kick in the teeth from one of those drumsticks?

SOLDIER: How do you like that? And this is the womanhood I’m fighting to protect?

MERMAN: And this is the womanhood I’m fighting to protect!

Introduction

We will in this note discuss how we can use an intertwined methodology of studying biography and representations in popular culture in order to inquire into how images of female careers are constructed and performed, and the necessity to understand this issue in regards to inquiries into the gendered images of working life are constructed (see Coltrane and Adams 1997; Czarniawska 2008; Czarniawska and Gustavsson 2008). Seeing as contemporary working life is increasingly affected by popular culture representations (see Beard 1994; Parker 2006; Tyler and Cohen 2008), it is notable

that research into management history has not made more of such representations. This is particularly so when we look to the time-period that is the subject of this research note, the 1940s and 1950s, which represent both a time when an increasing number of women entered the corporate world (see e.g. Blackwelder 1997; Goldin 1991; Scharf 1980) and a time when mass culture developed at an astonishing rate.

Consequently, this article will discuss the construction of images of female careers through a case from musical theater, with a particular focus on following the life and roles of Ethel Merman – ‘The Grande Dame of Broadway’ – both on and off the stage. By focusing on an individual performer, we wish to highlight how we can achieve a more complex understanding of the constructions of female career-possibilities than we can by studying representations or biography alone, and how analyses of gender and popular culture tend to overlook the importance of the performers and instead focus solely on the representation. We will show how tracing the parallel development of Ethel Merman’s own career and the images of female careers that we can find in her *oeuvre* creates a more complex image of gendered achievement than studying any one aspect alone, and further highlight how specific tropes of opportunity played out in the highly charged environment of musical theater.

The debate regarding and theorization of gender in organizational settings has been lively, rich and intellectually powerful, and can justifiably be called one of the biggest advances in the development of contemporary organization theory. Despite this, there remains a need to inquire into how the modern formation of ‘organization woman’ was achieved, and how the current ideal of the career-minded, by gender unfettered female worker emerges, particularly as several commentators (see e.g. Alvesson and Billing 1992; Evetts 2000; Tyler and Cohen 2008) have remarked upon the way in which this in fact idealizes and reproduces a particularly male notion of career and working life. This bias is arguably intensified through the fact that popular culture commonly repeats and strengthens ingrained stereotypes and thus acts as a mechanism to naturalize and enhance a patriarchal ideology (Hollows 2000; Roman et al. 1988; Whelehan 2000). Here, by using the case of a female career spent portraying female careers, we wish to address both these points by highlighting several complexities in the analysis of how such careers were historically and culturally constructed. As contemporary organization studies are increasingly looking to how popular culture affects activities in and understandings of organizations and work therein (see e.g. Czarniawska and Rhodes 2006; De Cock and Land 2005; Rhodes 2001; Parker 2006), there has already been several analyses of fictional careers. However, as has been argued elsewhere (Rehn 2008), in order to create a more solid understanding of the linkages between popular culture and organizational life, we must also push for an understanding of more hybrid, intertwined forms of representation (cf. García Cancilini 1995; Taussig 1993).

Thus, this note first presents Ethel Merman as an icon of musical theater, and then presents an analysis of three roles that she established as classical performances. All three roles represent a particular comment on the career possibilities of women and the ways in which specific portrayals of female achievement are made acceptable or curtailed. By comparing these three roles to the career of Ethel herself, we are arguing that in the

interplay between her working life and her iconic performances we can find interesting juxtapositions as well as a complex narrative of what the 'female career' entails.

The Divine Ethel

The hero of our note was born Ethel Agnes Zimmerman in Queens on January 16th, 1908 (material on the career of Merman culled from Flinn 2007; Kellow 2007; Merman 1978). Her family had no ties to show business, and she was originally destined to be a secretary and stenographer. However, she worked as a freelance signer and performer, and started using the name 'Merman' in order to improve her image, deciding that the shorter name was more media-friendly. As many others at the time, she worked hard at getting her first break, auditioning for a number of plays and taking on many smaller gigs.

Her breakthrough was in *Girl Crazy* by the Gershwin brothers, which premiered in 1930. Here, she was given the rousing song 'I Got Rhythm' and sang it with such bravura that she in the media was immediately presented as one of the new stars of Broadway. Throughout her career, she was particularly noted for the power of her singing, and her capacity to both project and hold even trickier notes for a long time and at full volume. During the years to follow she was to dabble in both smaller, less successful productions as well as some work in Hollywood.

Throughout the 1930s and the 1940s Ethel Merman played in a string of hit Broadway shows, including *Anything Goes* (1934, denoting year of premiere), *DuBarry Was a Lady* (1939), *Panama Hattie* (1940), *Something For the Boys* (1942), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946) and *Call Me Madam* (1950). During this period she became the highest paid performer on Broadway, and developed a signature style characterized by a powerful voice and a 'brassy' demeanor. In other words, she became the 'Brass Diva', and her public image was one of a highly capable and independent woman – her second husband, Robert Levitt, seems to have been quite chagrined to be called 'Mr. Merman'. Studying her exceptionally medialized life history, we can in both the roles she played and in the media attention lavished upon her (meticulously collected and analyzed in Flinn 2007) see how the duality of Ethel Merman as performer and as performance were increasingly intertwined throughout her career, starting from her very first roles.

She continued to work throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and played on Broadway in, for example, *Happy Hunting* (1956), *Gypsy* (1959) and *Hello Dolly!* (taking over the lead in 1970). During this period she also contributed to a series of films and TV-shows, but with her star in partial waning and her health suffering from the harsh demands of musical theater, she diminished her workload. During the 1970s she could be seen in various entertainment contexts, including work on TV, such as playing the Batman-villain 'Lola Lasagna' or making a memorable appearance on *The Muppet Show*, undertaking a series of concerts, playing in movies and recording the classic *The Ethel Merman Disco Album*. Working on-and-off right up until 1982, she finally died of a brain tumor in 1984.

Looking over her entire career, we can see her representing both the archetype of the 'bright new thing' with her rapid ascent after *Girl Crazy* and the archetype of the Broadway diva that played big, extroverted roles with rousing solo numbers. In many ways, Ethel Merman *was* the archetype of the female Broadway star. She never became a de facto Hollywood-star, as the business preferred more classically beautiful actresses with somewhat more demure personalities. Despite being one of the most talented entertainers of her generation, in Hollywood she was hindered by the same brassy demeanor that made her a fixture on Broadway, suggesting that the creation of a specific 'star'-character that was accepted in the latter sphere broke with gendered notions prevalent in the former, making Ethel something of a prisoner of her own career – astonishing as it was.

In order to analyze how this narrative, the story of the career of Ethel Merman the Musical Actress, can be re-read through some of her most famous roles, we will now look to three of the performed careers that Ethel made hers, after which we will analyze these careers as hybrids that can help us discuss the complex phenomena of the female career.

Panama Hattie

On October 30th, 1940 the musical *Panama Hattie* opened at the *46th Street Theatre* in New York. It would run for 501 performances, starred Ethel Merman as the eponymous Panama Hattie, last name Maloney. Written by Cole Porter, the musical was a spectacular success, partly due to an improving, post-Depression economy, but also thanks to a powerful performance by Ethel, who at this time was already an established star.

In the play, Panama Hattie is both the owner of and star performer in her own nightclub, *Tropical Shore*, located in the Canal Zone. The fact that she is a singer and dancer in the musical also creates the situation where a performer is playing the role of a performer, thus creating a kind of meta-meta-performance that was to be a recurring theme in Ethel's career. Hattie is portrayed as a rough-and-tumble kind of character, who can both be a feminine performer but still have hard, 'male' qualities. Some of her best friends are sailors, suggesting that the nightclub is frequented by a boisterous clientele and that a certain hardness is required of Hattie in her professional role. Throughout the play Hattie manages to be both clumsy and professional, able and massively insecure, thus playing up the female stereotype of being ambivalent and vacillating.

The play focuses on the problems of Panama Hattie who wants to marry the upper-class Nick Bullett, but who needs to become friends with his daughter from an earlier marriage (cut short by death, not divorce). Cue screwball antics, Nazi spies, and an admiral's spiteful daughter. As Caryl Flinn (2007, 117) points out, 'The show was a classic piece of lowbrow fare.' Even though Hattie is successful as a bar owner and a performer, it is heavily implied that her life is incomplete without a man, and for all her accomplishments she needs to be schooled in grace and style before she can truly

'have it made'. The career of Hattie as portrayed in the show is to be less focused on the business and instead find her true nature in her relationship with her beau's daughter and living up to society's demands on a woman who is to marry into a higher social class – Hattie is originally portrayed as a crass creature from the lower classes whereas Nick has an English butler and refined ways.

In a move that was to become almost a hallmark of Merman's career, *Panama Hattie* was later made into a Hollywood movie, but without Ethel. Instead, the role went to Ann Sothorn, and one can assume that the erstwhile Hattie was quite disappointed, seeing as how she at this time tried very hard to build a career in movies. However, in an odd twist, in 1963 Ethel was to repeat part of the premise of the show in the pilot for a TV-show called *Maggie Brown*, which sadly was never picked up by any of the networks.

Panama Hattie was not a pivotal moment for Ethel Merman's career, but there are interesting things to note in the relationship between the two. Hattie was a working-class girl made good first through hard work and graft and later through a good marriage. Ethel was a working-class girl who succeeded through hard work and later became known for both living up to the stereotype of a loud, brash woman and playing them on the Broadway stage. In this, Hattie is the more conservative figure of the two, even if she is the made-up one. Still, this portrayal was to be only one of many for 'La Merm'.

Annie Oakley

Whereas the notion of the female career in *Panama Hattie* is exceptionally traditional, lightened only by the fact that the titular character is presented as a strong personality, the same cannot be said for the role of Annie Oakley. Ethel Merman played this role as the semi-titular heroine of *Annie Get Your Gun*, written by Irving Berlin, which premiered at the *Imperial Theater* on May 16th, 1946. The musical was to become one of the most successful Broadway productions ever, it played for an astonishing 1147 performances and became a perennial favorite of musical theater.

The role of Annie Oakley is based on a real-life character from the Old Wild West, a female sharpshooter who bested men, claimed there was little outside of heavy lifting that women could not equal or beat men at, yet opposed women getting the vote. In the play, she is a brash, unpolished and aggressively direct; and, displays a number of characteristics that make her seem mannish and unfeminine – in many ways conflating the historical Annie Oakley with another female character who also performed as a sharpshooter in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, namely Calamity Jane. However, in the play she partly laments the facts of her nature, as they stand between her and that most stereotypical idea of the good life, which obviously includes a man. This confused relation between the feminine and the masculine is played out to marvelous effect in the key song *You Can't Get a Man With a Gun*:

The gals with 'umbrellars'
 Are always out with fellers
 In the rain or the blazing sun
 But a man never trifles
 With gals who carry rifles
 Oh, you can't get a man with a gun.

Still, even though 'you can't shoot a male/in the tail/like a quail', the character of Annie Oakley as played by Merman never quite undergoes the same transformation Panama Hattie does. Whereas the latter 'learns' to be more gentle and docile, Annie Oakley retains much of her character even as she makes the career-change from a backwoods hunter to a celebrated showbiz star. Much of the energy of the musical comes from the romance between Annie and the stereotypical male Frank Butler – who is characterized as womanizing, proud, arrogant, pompous and worse – and the fact that it is always Annie who has the upper hand. Much of the subtext of the musical actually discusses gender-roles in a fairly sophisticated way. As an example, the *duetto* between Frank and Annie entitled *Anything You Can Do (I Can Do Better)*:

FB: I can jump a hurdle.
 AO: I can wear a girdle.
 FB: I can knit a sweater.
 AO: I can fill it better!
 FB: I can do most anything!
 AO: Can you bake a pie?
 FB: No.
 AO: Neither can I.

Looking through this sung banter we can in fact see a playing with gender stereotypes and gendered accomplishment. When Annie comments she can wear a typically female piece of clothing, Frank retorts by claiming he can knit – suggesting that in order to 'win' the argument he will even own up to doing stereotypically female chores. And when Annie challenges him in this, she finds herself having to own up to not necessarily being able to defeat Frank in the womanly arts. Similarly, in the *dénouement* of the story, Annie chooses to loose a shooting competition between herself and Frank in order to be able to marry him and retain the (show) business, thus creating a tension between the notion of female sacrifice and career and more traditional ideas of femininity.

Looking at the trajectory of the play, Annie has a spectacular career. In the beginning of the narrative, she is little more than a backwoods survivalist, whereas she in the end is the person who saves a major business endeavor (and snags her man through guile). Further, she achieves all this through her own means and (mostly) on her own terms. Thus, the role of Annie is definitively more complex than that of Panama Hattie, also mirroring the societal changes that take place between 1940 and 1946. Annie might in fact be a kind of proto-feminist, a reaction to the changes in American industry that were spurred by the war effort of the female populace of the USA. In the same

way as Rosie the Riveter, Annie highlighted the capacity of female work and made the idea of female careers more palatable. The humorous way in which gender roles are dissected and played out in the show could further be seen as a way to enable discussions regarding the capacity of female work in post-WWII America. Annie is obviously ‘just’ a character, a representation in popular culture, but at the same time she stands as an icon of female capacity and possibility, played out in front of sold-out audiences. She is a consumable notion of female career, inhabited by one Ethel Merman, and wolfed down by adoring crowds. Annie has become an icon, a generally recognized symbol of what a woman can achieve, and to claim that the fictionality of the character would diminish the historical effect thereof would be quite odd (cf. Rehn 2008).

For Merman, Annie became both a classic and iconic performance and something of a repeat of her own career. Both were ‘naturals’ who became great stars through conscious stage-setting. Both showed what a woman could achieve, even if she was forthright and brazen. And both achieve success through unlikely means – one by being a great sharpshooter, the other by playing women in the throes of emancipation when this was seen as risky and troublesome. Regardless of the reading, the role became an astounding success for Ethel. Annie and Ethel became one, and both were universally loved and admired, not to mention very well paid (the latter, rather than the former). With her performance, Ethel Merman cemented her place as the Queen of Broadway, and after it she could basically write her own ticket.

Still, the role of Annie brought an odd reminder. When the decision was made to turn *Annie Get Your Gun* into a Hollywood movie, the role was given to Judy Garland. When she had to be taken off the lot due to her numerous issues – interestingly a case of one actress damaging her career due to insecurities brought on by ‘damaging’ that of another, namely Ethel’s – she was replaced by Betty Hutton, who had played the role of Florrie in the Broadway version of *Panama Hattie*. In other words, Ethel had to see the role she made into a sensation played by an actress who had earlier played a smaller part in her former Broadway smash. Even though she never publicly commented on it, one can assume that this was a grating snub. But, unfortunately, this sequence of success and spurning was to be played out once more in the career of the Brass Diva, and this time in the most insulting way possible.

Mama Rose

No role in the world of show business, before or after, is quite as intimately connected to the very nature of a performer as that of Mama Rose is to Ethel Merman. The role as the dominant and fiercely ambitious showbiz mother to the famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee is not the titular role of *Gypsy*, but it is still the central, pivotal role, and Ethel Merman’s portrayal has been called the greatest performance in the history of musical theater. The show, and above all the portrayal of Rose, became a massive hit immediately at its premiere on May 21st, 1959 at *The Broadway Theatre*. However, the rigors of playing a central role with no fewer than seven major songs, for eight performances

a week, wore Merman out, and even though she would work for 20 more years, Rose was the last musical role she originated.

Mama Rose is a complex role, a loving mother who drives her daughters ruthlessly and tries to control every aspect of their lives. She is sometimes presented as a monster, an assignation not particularly rare in descriptions of ambitious women, but is in fact a deep character who is capable of both tenderness and remorse. In the play her life circles around the careers of her two daughters at the expense of everything else. She manages them as they try to make it as child performers on a vaudeville circuit that is slowly dying, and is adamant about making one of them into a star. Originally this is her favorite, June, but after she elopes Rose starts to groom Louise into a star – something she finally achieves by pushing Louise into stripping, turning her into a star of the burlesque. However, the play ends with Rose's realization that she has sacrificed her life and not really achieved much for herself, and the final song indicates that she might have become quite insane in the process.

Merman's portrayal has become the stuff of legend, and aspects of it have seeped into countless other performances of driven women. The key to understanding Rose is her blind ambition for her daughters, which may at times make her seem monstrous, but Ethel also imbued her with an indomitable energy that made the character oddly attractive. This was clearly helped by the fact that the two, the singer and the song, did share more than a few similarities. Both were paragons of *chutzpah*, talented women fighting in a world that did not quite allow for their kind of breaks with tradition. Neither Ethel nor Rose would accept artificial barriers to their careers:

Goodbye to blueberry pie.
 Good riddance to all the socials I had to go to,
 all the lodges I had to play,
 all the shriners I said hello to.
 Hey, L.A., I'm comin' your way!
 Some people sit on their butts;
 got the dream, yeah, but not the guts.
 That's living for some people,
 for some hum-drum people I suppose.
 Well, they can stay and rot!
 But not Rose!

Looking more closely at the play, the subtext is in fact quite depressing. The driven character of Rose is presented as a flawed person, a horrid joke and an abomination. Towards the end, this most human character has a grand finale in which she takes to the stage herself, frantically playing out her dreams and fears for an audience that is not there, indicating madness and that her world had crashed around her. Madame Rose, the lady who would not play according to the rules but who instead was prepared to do everything to advance the career of her girls is shown as a broken shell, and one can in the stage-setting even detect that this descent into delirium is a fitting punishment for the woman who dared to dream. Sad and despondent, looking back at her choices she sings:

Well, someone tell me, when is it my turn?
 Don't I get a dream for myself?
 Starting now it's gonna be my turn.
 Gangway, world, get off of my runway!
 Starting now I bat a thousand!
 This time, boys, I'm taking the bows and
 Everything's coming up Rose!
 Everything's coming up roses!

In a cruel, if fitting, twist the role of Rose in the movie adaptation (again) did not go to Merman, but to Rosalind Russell, in what can only be called a robbery. Fuming, the superstar of Broadway was, as always, held in her place by a patriarchal Hollywood that wanted their stars bland and controllable, and the Grande Dame of Broadway never got the full Hollywood career she dreamed of. Rose and Ethel, two sides of the same coin, both held back in their careers by not playing by the rules and by not quite living up to the demands of docile femininity.

'Everything's Coming Up Roses'

Broadway has been very good to me. But then, I've been very good to Broadway.

Our aim with this research note is quite modest, and we make no claims about having been able to give a full picture of the manifold of ways in which popular culture representations affect our views of female careers. Rather, it has been our aim to show that in order to fully grasp something so complex as how the sociocultural makeup affects our views of social phenomena, we need to consider both 'real' communications and fictitious ones, and that sometimes these two categories cannot be separated from each other.

In the life and career of Ethel Merman, the roles she played and the performances she imbued with life affected the way in which she herself was viewed. At the same time, she stood as an example of what a woman could achieve, and this was strengthened by the fact that she quite often played characters that commented upon the possibilities of female achievement. To study merely one or the other, Ethel or her roles, would simply not give us the same kind of insight into the way in which popular culture and its performers affect the way we see the female career as studying both as aspects of each other.

The early Ethel was often viewed as just another piece of fluff, if one with a quite exceptional voice. With the massive success of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and the subtext thereof, Ethel Merman was rocketed into a new kind of image of what women could do. The role of Ethel was in fact partly formed by the character of Annie Oakley into a symbol of the brash, loud, aggressive woman who dominated a scene. Where Panama Hattie was a classic female role written for the classic musical star, through Annie Ethel became something much more. In fact, Annie might be the mother of

both Ethel and Rose, in that both the latter were iconic images of strong women in show business, the logical next step after the female trick-shot in Buffalo Bill's grand show. Both achieved dizzying heights and reached their goals, while at the same time being held back and caught in their roles.

Generally speaking, the female career could be described as a hybrid, an amalgam of patriarchal ideas of achievement and the gendered idea of women in business. In the case of Ethel, this can be seen in the complex interplay through which her string of strong female roles never quite managed to get her into the movie roles she wished to play, and the way in which her roles all are hamstrung by the demands of controlled femininity. By analyzing the complex construction of La Merme we are presented both with a case of a great female career limited by its own success and a gloomy commentary on the possibilities for women in business, and by playing these cases against each other we can find novel ways of inquiring into how the female career is culturally constructed in a specific historical setting.

Musical theater was a space where women de facto could make a career from the 1930s onwards. At the same time, it was a central place where ideology was played out, and a central location for the construction of gendered images. Ethel Merman had an amazing career, and played out commentaries on the same. Understanding her and the way in which popular culture affects us demands that we look beyond analyzing either the performer or the performances, but instead seeing the two as affecting each other in complex and multifaceted ways. Methodologically, each need to be seen in light of the other, much like gender must always be analyzed through juxtapositions and co-constructions. Gender, and Ethel Merman, contains multitudes.

I had a dream, a dream about you, baby.
 It's gonna come true, baby.
 They think that we're through, but baby,
 You'll be swell! You'll be great!
 Gonna have the whole world on the plate!
 Starting here, starting now,
 honey, everything's coming up roses!
 Clear the decks! Clear the tracks!
 You've got nothing to do but relax.
 Blow a kiss. Take a bow.
 Honey, everything's coming up roses!

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