Throughout the 1970s and 1980s it was service comedies, both as films and on television, that most routinely showcased the military woman. The stereotypes developed in the 1950s and 1960s, from the military woman as a compelling sign of strength and independence to her iteration as a sexy nuisance, persist in this period. So too does the narrative concern with her impact on military men. Yet this was a period of immense change for military women in the U.S., changes that are registered in contradictory ways within the formulas of service comedy. In 1976 the service academies admitted female cadets for the first time, explicitly acknowledging that military women had a leadership role within the military. (The first women would graduate from the academies in 1980.) In 1978 the Women’s Army Corps was disestablished, its members integrated into the Army to work alongside male soldiers, although a significant number of roles remained closed to them. At a policy level there were significant developments throughout the 1960s, yet as military reliance on female labor became increasingly evident these high-profile changes to the status and opportunities offered to military women were also framed by the more visible feminist activism of the 1970s. As a result of such social changes, the kinds of comedy elaborated around the figure of the military woman also begin to shift in this period. The comedies considered here are marked by an increasing degree of acceptance and respect for military women,
in effect their normalization, and an intensifying misogyny, suggesting a move from themes of comic male confusion at women’s presence to a rather more hostile rejection and exclusion.

This chapter centers on two commercially successful films, *M*A*S*H* (1970) and *Private Benjamin* (1980), as well as the television series that each generated. Though both films were significant box-office successes, the television series of *M*A*S*H* was far more successful than that based on *Private Benjamin*. *M*A*S*H* is the longest running television series to feature a military woman as a recurring character, Loretta Swit’s Maj. Margaret Houlihan. The show demonstrates the continuing cultural anxieties associated with the figure of the military woman, often mobilizing an explicit disdain for female personnel. I look first at the film’s presentation of military women within its overall anarchic, sexualized comedy. I then consider how the television series adapted the film’s premise, particularly its staging of military women within a hybrid format combining situation comedy and drama. In both cases the female soldier is a figure of fun.

While *M*A*S*H* was pioneering in its combination of drama and comedy in the sitcom format, the *Private Benjamin* series is a more conventional coupling of sitcom and service comedy, avoiding the contentious topics dealt with in *M*A*S*H*. In a scathing summary of *Private Benjamin*’s political subtext Enloe observes, “Goldie Hawn was telling us cinematically that joining the military didn’t mean killing Asians or even defending democracy from the communist menace: *Private Benjamin* instead showed a new American way for a girl to cope with youthful widowhood, escape clinging parents and stay physically fit: go to boot camp.” While Enloe’s concerns are justified—both the film and the television series *Private Benjamin* echo contemporary recruitment materials more or less explicitly, portraying the Army as a healthy, character-building institution for women—my argument foregrounds the way military women are an accepted part of the Army in these comedies, exploring the extent to which they are represented in both new and familiar ways. The fact that both the film and the series *Private Benjamin* were produced during peacetime is of course significant. The early years of *M*A*S*H* were framed by the Vietnam War; *Private Benjamin*, by contrast, a show which situates military women as an established feature of Army life, is more decidedly the product of a postdraft era in which attempts to recruit larger numbers of women into the military were firmly in place.
Released in early 1970, M*A*S*H the movie was a significant box-office and critical success for its director, Robert Altman. An adaptation of Richard Hooker’s novel, published in 1968 and based on his experiences as an Army medic during the Korean War, this raucous comedy was widely read as a commentary on the contemporary Vietnam War. The film is set in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital unit, the 4077th, which operates a few miles from the front line, primarily treating battle casualties. It centers on a group of disaffected Army surgeons who perform their medical duties effectively while disdaining military authority. At odds with this group is the film’s only prominent female character, Maj. Margaret “Hot Lips” O’Houlihan (Sally Kellerman). The characterization of O’Houlihan as a military woman renders her a figure of fun on two counts: first in terms of the comic contradiction posed by any woman who attempts to assume authority, and second as a representative of the military authority against which the anarchic humor and carnivalesque qualities of the film’s world is directed.

M*A*S*H begins with Capt. “Hawkeye” Pierce (Donald Sutherland) stealing a Jeep to take him to the 4077th; it closes with his departure in the same Jeep, marking Pierce as the film’s key character and our point of entry into the world of the MASH unit. Pierce’s anarchic attitude sits well with the ineffectual camp commander, Col. Henry Blake, and fellow doctors “Trapper” John McIntyre (Elliott Gould) and Duke Forrest (Tom Skerritt). Throughout the course of the film the group thumb their noses at a series of military authority figures, culminating in a somewhat disorganized football match between the 4077th and the 325th EVAC. Within the camp two characters serve as the principal foils: O’Houlihan and Maj. Frank Burns (Robert Duvall). Religion, sport, military regulation: these regimes of masculinity are thoroughly mocked in the antics of the male protagonists. While the protagonists’ indifference to war suggests a distance from conventional ideals of masculine achievement (heroism, bravery), their constitution as a lecherous, misogynistic group underlines a continuing investment in male privilege. Moreover, although they are opposed to the business of war, in standing up to military martinets (male and female) the doctors show their courage and integrity. They embody the long-standing type of the “good doctor,” always ready to apply their caring skills. More generally their drinking and womanizing sug-
gest a combination of fraternity humor and the authorized indiscretions that, as Carl Freedman notes, have long been sanctioned for active-duty servicemen.³

Noting the historical context in which it was produced (i.e., before the most significant impact of second-wave feminism on writers and performers, among others), Freedman claims that one of the key revisions the film \textit{M*A*S*H} makes to Hooker’s novel is the introduction of “a violent hatred of women.”⁴ He is not alone in drawing attention to the mixture of ferocity and contempt with which women are treated in the film. The humiliation and effective marginalization of O’Houlihan is the most striking instance of this process. As a woman with authority in a military system that the film, and its male protagonists, reject, O’Houlihan is a comic foil for both its strong misogynous and anti-authority impulses. Thus when she introduces herself to Pierce in \textit{military} terms (“I like to think of the Army as my home”), he rejects her in \textit{sexual} terms, dubbing her both “a very attractive woman” and “a regular Army clown.” Pierce thus places her firmly on the other side of the film’s “us versus them” structure in which the good doctors battle regulatory forces symbolized by the military.

As the 4077th’s new chief nurse, O’Houlihan arrives a little way into the film’s action. As she steps out of a helicopter and salutes, the audience is offered a view of suspenders and stocking tops. This image reprises the film’s opening sequence at the motor pool, where (in the background) three Army nurses must negotiate a truck’s tailgate and the muddy ground in their inappropriate (but regulation) skirts and court shoes; these women are both rule-bound and out of place. The first images of O’Houlihan economically sum up the role that she will play in the film’s narrative. Her smart uniform and attention to military protocol (signaled here by her saluting) is in stark contrast to the male protagonists’ refusal of both military attire and hierarchy (figure 37). Moreover the suggestion that underneath the surface O’Houlihan is a sexual woman (the fetishistic glimpse of stocking tops) prefigures the ways her character’s uptight military attitude serves as a false appearance to be stripped away. An attractive and sexually active woman, she appears to wear her military demeanor as a disguise. The fact that she is keen to hide her sexuality facilitates the comedy subsequently constructed around her. In a film that stages, in William Paul’s terms, “hip vs. square, the sexually liberated vs. the sexually uptight,”⁵ O’Houlihan’s condemnation of sexual activity
as depraved seems to invite the sexualized humiliations that are visited on her.

While the opposition between Pierce and O’Houlihan implies a gendered “us versus them,” many of the 4077th nurses are as anarchic as the male draftees, enjoying the revelry and participating openly in sexual relationships with the doctors. In rebelling against standards of appropriate sexual behavior, characters such as Lieutenant Leslie (who we see in bed with Colonel Blake) and Lieutenant Schneider (who Pierce persuades to have sex with the suicidal dentist “Painless” to give him back his sexual confidence) nonetheless occupy an appropriate female place as supporting (auxiliary) characters. Ultimately O’Houlihan too will be relegated to such a supporting role. Female characters who adopt a defiant attitude with respect to the male protagonists are dismissed with aggressive language, threatening behavior, and pranks. Such women are shown to be motivated by a petty commitment to regulations.

In a narrative economy that seeks to distance men from the category soldier, a comic commitment to regulations on the part of certain military women has a quite different effect from that in other comedies. The military woman is not mocked primarily for her misplaced ambitions, but rather for her conformity. For instance, the series of military women who challenge the authority of Pierce and McIntyre in the Japanese hospital scenes are finally deflated by McIntyre’s crude demands for food and for “at least one nurse who knows how to work in close without getting her tits in [his] way.” This aggressive naming of troublesome female body parts signals a departure from the comedy sustained around Crandall’s “intrusive” breasts in the earlier Operation Petticoat or Stirling’s comic consternation on the parade ground in Francis Joins the WAC. No longer
even desirable, women’s nonconforming (nonmale) bodies are simply a nuisance. The pilot episode of the television series restates this physical animosity, with Pierce telling Houlihan in the OR, “If you don’t move I’m going to have to cut around your B cups.” Ultimately the fact that the Army gives authority to a woman (O’Houlihan outranks the core male group) serves to underline its absurdity.

The humiliation of O’Houlihan as a defiant military woman allows what Paul terms the “celebration of the animal in man” and thence a narrative of (male) “liberation from social constraints.” In the film’s episodic structure there are two scenes in which O’Houlihan is publicly humiliated. Both involve jokes that make her body or sexuality public, and both involve nurses as silent participants, suggesting that these women’s allegiance is to the male group rather than to each other. The first of these humiliations involves the broadcasting of O’Houlihan’s lovemaking by the camp’s loudspeakers, establishing the nickname “Hot Lips,” which effectively undercuts her authority. The second has her exposed naked in the shower, the doctors seated before her as if for a performance, reinforcing their pleasure in mocking and taming her unwelcome presence through sexualized punishment. Although scenes in which men spy on naked (or seminaked) women are a staple of sex comedy (Charlie’s voyeurism in *Petticoat Pirates*, say), *M*A*S*H*’s shower scene is, as Paul writes, significantly motivated by control and revenge rather than voyeurism. Thus O’Houlihan is turned into a public spectacle as a way to undercut her claims to public status through her military identity.

Both scenes are framed by an effective collapse of military authority. The broadcasting of O’Houlihan’s passionate encounter with Burns takes place in the absence of the camp commander, following a carnivalesque nighttime scene in which members of the MASH unit engage in drunken revelry. McIntyre is carnival king, carried aloft into the mess tent wearing an Uncle Sam hat as the gathered men and women sing “Hail to the Chief.” O’Houlihan’s rejection of this anarchy is effectively undercut by her subsequent sexual liaison with Burns; she appears to be a hypocrite. The shower scene extends this logic in telling fashion. Following her exposure, O’Houlihan storms into Blake’s tent, where she finds him naked in bed, drinking wine with Lieutenant Leslie; overcome with emotion (itself played for comedy since it suggests an unmilitary lack of control) O’Houlihan screams what to her is the ultimate threat, that she will resign her commission unless action is taken against the doctors. While
her status as a military woman is valuable to her, Blake’s response is a scathing, dismissive acceptance that leaves her reeling: “Goddammit Hot Lips, resign your goddamned commission.” Thus at the moment of her most extreme humiliation and distress, O’Houlihan is ultimately unable to make her rank count for anything. Protest ing hysterically, her body wet, her hair soapy, and her robe disheveled, she is divested of both uniform and authority. In contrast to Lieutenant Leslie, whose sexual liaison with the camp’s commanding officer places her in a position of both subordination and safety, O’Houlihan’s status is ignored. For the remainder of the film she is a subordinate character, unable to command authority, space, or barely even a voice.

M*A*S*H, MILITARY WOMEN, AND SERIAL TELEVISION

Following the success of Altman’s film, M*A*S*H was adapted into a long-running sitcom which would continue well past the Vietnam War. The show first aired in 1972 and ran for eleven seasons; the final feature-length episode was watched by an audience of 125 million in 1983. The series retains a popular following today and continues to play in syndication around the world. The film and television versions of M*A*S*H are, however, quite distinct. Altman’s M*A*S*H was rated R, while the series reshaped the film’s narrative trajectory (which followed Pierce’s arrival and departure from Korea) and broad sexual comedy to both a continuing format and the constrictions of network television. As I have argued elsewhere in relation to M*A*S*H,9 the sitcom is generically defined by a return to the same, a reiteration of the situation that brings together an often unlikely mix of characters and generates comedy; here that situation is a seemingly endless war and the absurd workings of military bureaucracy. In that context the unit’s constant exposure to injured bodies and the absurdities of Army life generates and also explains a distinctive mix of humanistic outrage and adolescent male behavior, such as heavy drinking and practical jokes. The intense misogyny of the film, centered on O’Houlihan (now named Houlihan and played by Loretta Swit), continues into the early series of M*A*S*H but is increasingly qualified in terms that can be attributed in large part to the seriality of television and also to the attitudes of production personnel, the demands of particular performers to see their characters develop, and the more general impact of contemporary feminism. Nonetheless there remain firm continuities: the series pilot picks up from the film in establishing Houlihan’s officious
attitude with her comic expression of frustration at the male doctors’ attitude: “Those two—they’re ruining this war, for all of us!” In the early seasons, too, Houlihan’s insistence on her rank produces only laughter, as when she complains, “They’re making a mockery of my majority.” For Swit, “one of the great challenges of playing the part of Margaret Houlihan” lay in keeping “her humorous, because Margaret is, more often than not, humorless. She is, in fact, the butt of the humor on the show.”

Houlihan was to remain the butt of the joke for some time, although this shifted as she became more integrated into the group and notably more involved in the core group’s competitive practical joking.

Analyzing the film and series together highlights the complexities of viewing a long-running series as a single entity; during a long run an ensemble show develops in diverse ways, as production personnel, performers, and characters come and go. Perhaps what is most striking about the series is that over the course of its eleven years Houlihan’s military woman was gradually incorporated or at least accepted into the boys’ club that is the M*A*S*H unit. Although the emphasis remained very much on the male doctors, the commitment and talent of the female nursing staff, as well as their good-natured acceptance and rebuttal of repeated sexual advances, show the development of a sort of work-family unit.

The changing character and position of Houlihan is routinely acknowledged in popular and fan materials surrounding the series. David Reiss describes Swit’s lobbying to end the comic relationship between her character and Frank Burns (Larry Linville) and the work of writers interested in developing the backstory of the Houlihan character. Reiss identifies two writers in particular, Linda Bloodworth and Mary Kay Place, who worked with Swit to develop her character’s story “from childhood through boot camp.” Reiss attributes the season 2 episode “Hot Lips and Empty Arms” (15 December 1973), which reveals Houlihan’s loneliness, to this kind of collaboration. The transformation at issue here works on at least two levels. First, a character who functions primarily as a figure of fun due to her status as a military woman is developed in more complex and emotional terms; second, there is a discernable shift away from comedy when it comes to M*A*S*H’s perspective on military women, Houlihan in particular. Tropes associated with the comic presentation of military women—such as masculinized female authority, frustrated sexual desire, and romantic isolation—remain but are treated differently.

The comedy centered on Major Houlihan has two gendered dimen-
sions. On the one hand she is funny because her military identity suggests gender confusion: she is a woman associated with manliness and heavily invested in military authority, which she seeks (inappropriately) to impose on the male doctors. Her commitment to the minutiae of military life seems surreal and out of place given the work of the camp. On the other hand she is funny because her sexual desires and her sexiness are seen to be at odds with her military status and military life. The two are connected of course, since much of the humor sustained at her expense centers on her overinvestment in military procedures and protocol, an overinvestment supposedly belied by her nature as a sexual being and as a woman. There is something inherently humorous, it seems, about a conventionally attractive white woman so invested in an implicitly masculine military authority.

The comic contradiction that characterizes military women in numerous postwar comedies is played out in M*A*S*H through the tension between Houlihan’s “masculine” and “womanly” qualities. When she aims to be womanly, alluring, or feminine, her more forceful, masculine, military persona frequently resurfaces to comic effect. Thus in “Soldier of the Month” (28 November 1975) she nurses the feverish Burns back to health, then slugs him. (Fearing death, he has made a will leaving his money to his wife and his clothes to Houlihan.) In her military persona, Houlihan’s claims to authority often give way to her characterization as a shrew; one confrontation with Blake gives us the colonel’s point of view through an extreme close-up of Houlihan’s lips as she lectures him (“There Is Nothing Like a Nurse,” 9 November 1974). The invocation of a nagging, loud, and dominating woman is familiar comic terrain, with Blake here inscribed as a cowering male. Houlihan’s military demeanor regularly slips in episodes which show her not only nagging but hysterical, sexually demanding, furious, sad, sentimental, and drunk. A season 3 episode in which Burns, temporarily in charge, attempts to ban alcohol (“Alcoholics Unanimous,” 12 November 1974) shows her torn between her allegiance to her lover and her secret store of liquor; her late-night search for drink brings her together with the male principals, who are defined by their social dependence on alcohol. Nonetheless as late as season 5 Houlihan is seen backing Burns in an overly rigid (in the show’s terms) enforcement of regulations (“The Korean Surgeon,” 23 November 1976).

Female masculinity serves as a put-down, frequently played for comedy in relation to Houlihan. There is the usual play with “Sir” and “Ma’am”
designations. When Burns observes with glee, “This outfit is finally going to have a real man in charge,” Pierce moves to shake Houlihan’s hand in mockery of Burns’s pretensions to manliness and Houlihan’s inappropriate masculinity (“The Trial of Henry Blake,” 3 November 1973). In the season opener that year, “Divided We Stand” (15 September 1973), when she rebukes McIntyre, saying “You are no gentleman,” Pierce immediately chimes in with the observation “Good thing you are.” In another season 2 episode Pierce and Houlihan are forced to work together (in the process laying the basis for the friendship that will develop between them) when their colleagues all succumb to flu (“Carry On Hawkeye,” 24 November 1973). Houlihan, who outranks Pierce, attempts to assert her authority to no avail; furiously she protests, “You have emasculated me for the last time.” Her anger is funny because it underlines both her aspirations to and inability to achieve masculine authority.

*M*A*S*H* also employs a quite distinct characterization of Houlihan as masculine in ways that are closely bound up with her military status and professionalism. In “Aid Station” (11 February 1975), for instance, she insists that she rather than Pierce should change the tire on an Army Jeep since, as he is a surgeon, his hands are an asset to be guarded. (The sequence positions Pierce as a delighted bystander rather than as unmanned by her capability.) Her professionalism echoes the more general representation of military nurses which, as we saw in chapter 2, is often framed in vocational terms, a dedication to the patient constructed as maternal and pure. It is through this aspect of Houlihan’s character that *M*A*S*H* begins to move away from constructing her solely as a military martinet. This professionalism is explicitly coupled with her personal bravery, in turn reinforcing rather than undermining her status as military woman.

There are certainly scenes in which comic effects are achieved by Houlihan’s shrill panic at the prospect of capture, rape, and death. However, the series also conveys her professional calm under fire and her willingness to place herself in danger in the service of her patients. We’ve seen that the location of the military nurse at the front positions her distinctively in relation to the commonsense opposition between woman and soldier. *M*A*S*H* exploits this distinctiveness, situating Houlihan’s career Army bravery against the more reluctant attitudes of the drafted male doctors. For instance, in “Aid Station” she volunteers for a dangerous assignment near the front; Pierce, who accompanies her, has by contrast drawn the short straw, in line with his characterization as reluctant draftee. A simi-
lar pattern occurs in the two-part “Comrades in Arms” (6 and 13 December 1977), which stages a brief affair between Houlihan and Pierce under fire. Initially antagonistic, the pair develop their intimacy in episodes that either take them out of the camp altogether or force them to work together by some other means.¹⁴

The growing friendship between Pierce’s antimilitary doctor and Houlihan’s career Army nurse is shaped by the shared terrain of professional commitment associated with representations of doctors and nurses and by the emphasis on comradeship so characteristic of military narratives. The television series based on *Private Benjamin* follows a similar pattern, drawing together its chief female antagonists into an unlikely friendship. Although Pierce does not volunteer to go to the front in “Aid Station,” once there he is calm, efficient, and caring. They work well under intense pressure and enemy shelling, Pierce encouraging Houlihan to begin a surgical procedure without him, appealing to her knowledge and ability. Indeed before their arrival back at the camp Pierce stops the Jeep to confide his affection, praising Houlihan—“my favorite officer in the whole U.S. Army”—and kissing her on the cheek. The interactions between them serve to bring her character more centrally into the fiction. Although mapped in terms of developing respect, the relationship is also comically antagonistic; his suggestive comments are matched by her mugged expressions of outrage. When the nurses leave camp (“There Is Nothing like a Nurse,” 19 November 1974) Houlihan formally salutes each of the officer doctors; Pierce’s response is to sweep her off her feet in a kiss. Stealing kisses from Houlihan when she is at her most military is a regular motif, one that is reprised in the lengthy goodbye kiss between the two in the feature-length finale. The joke works comically by underlining the sexual possibilities of women and men working side by side, but it also foregrounds the particularity of the military woman in these fictions as, variously, comrade, antagonist, and sexual object.

Unsurprisingly it is through Houlihan’s relationships with men that many of these themes are worked out. The open secret of her sexual relationship with the inept, selfish, and cowardly Frank Burns makes her a ridiculous figure in seasons 1 through 4. The pair are intensely committed to the signs and rituals of military life, repeatedly expressing outrage at the unmilitary appearance and behavior of the principals. Burns so clearly falls short of the mark that her attentions toward him make her seem both comic and foolish. A similar dynamic is at work in her vari-
ous comic encounters with senior male officers: visiting dignitaries allude to past sexual encounters, and she fawns over military men, whether for their seniority or their muscular physique. Consider: Houlihan and Burns are overcome with passion as they sit together on the bed intended for use during General MacArthur’s visit (“Big Mac,” 25 February 1975); in “Quo Vadis, Captain Chandler” (7 November 1975) she swoons over the ludicrous Colonel Flagg; in “Iron Guts Kelly” (1 October 1974) the war hero dies in her tent; in “Margaret’s Engagement” (28 September 1976) she announces her ill-fated engagement to Lt. Col. Donald Penobscott with the comic line “I couldn’t love someone who didn’t outrank me.” Houlihan’s fascination with weaponry is repeatedly played for comedy as she swoons over tanks and guns.

Houlihan’s commitment to duty is elaborated in a comic monologue during which she packs her bag while Burns watches quietly, a range of expressions passing over his face. The monologue begins with her excusing him for not volunteering for dangerous duty, as she has done, acknowledging his marriage and (in passing) his mercenary reasons for remaining committed to it. She goes on to speak, in comic, self-aggrandizing fashion, of her own life and motivations:

Well, I’m a married man too Frank: married to the Army. I don’t want the future you offer—meeting behind garbage cans, and behind laundry trucks. When the war’s over—and nothing good lasts for ever—you’ll go home, home to your wife’s bony arms. I’ll still be in the service. I’m an Army brat, Frank: my father was a colonel and my mother was a nurse, and I was conceived on maneuvers. The Army’s in my blood. I need its discipline, its traditions. I thrill to the sight of a precise parade. I could faint from looking down at my own brass. That’s why I volunteered, Frank, to serve the Army I love. And don’t you worry—I’m coming back, coming back to you for whatever time we have left together, because I’m not just Major Margaret Houlihan, Army nurse. I’m also Margaret Houlihan [her voice begins to quiver] frail, vulnerable, sensitive female—and if you touch one nurse while I’m gone, I’ll cut your hands off! (“Aid Station”)

This last passionate threat is sealed with a kiss, a moment held briefly in a freeze-frame that juxtaposes her physical and sexual aggression with his fear and passivity. The monologue reveals much about the way her character is a source of comedy in the early years of the series: her pas-
sionate nature coexisting with a commitment to discipline; her perverse pleasure in the opportunities of war; the sexual innuendo of military maneuvers; a self-proclaimed frailty backed up by the threat of violence; her self-designation as both a “married man” and a “sensitive woman.” The sexualization and institutionalization of her relationship to the Army is also significant here, since in both comic and dramatic narratives involving Houlihan it is suggested that her material career has meant personal loneliness and loss.

Houlihan’s coding as a sexually active and desiring woman is a recurrent source of comedy, as in the season 6 episode “Last Laugh” (4 October 1977), which sees her desperate to visit her husband in Tokyo. She projects her sexual need onto him, maintaining that he has “yearnings,” when it is her own frustrations that are most evident. When the hapless Radar O’Reilly (Gary Burghoff) interrupts her attempts to convince Colonel Potter (Harry Morgan) to give her leave, she screams in his face, “Will you butt out, this is man talk!,” before returning rapidly to her honeyed tones. Later she will again take out her frustration on Radar, pulling over shelves in his office and even kicking him; in self-defense Radar himself persuades Potter to grant her leave. The potent combination of military woman as sexually demanding and tough draws on an imagery of eroticized domination that is extensively prefigured in her relationship with the comically inept and cowardly Burns. The double episode that opens season 4, “Welcome to Korea” (12 September 1975), has Burns nominally in charge, though it is clear that Houlihan actually has the authority. Indeed he whines, “Oh gee, ever since I’ve been commanding officer, you don’t let me do anything.” Later that season, in “Dear Mildred” (24 October 1975), Houlihan sits on a table in her tent fixing her lips while Burns cleans her boots, an eroticized image of the woman on top. Most spectacularly, in “Lt. Radar O’Reilly” (12 October 1976), Radar delivers a gift from Houlihan’s fiancé, a leather whip; she whoops with delight as she cracks it around her tent, causing Radar to flee in panic (figure 38).

This imagery of erotic authority draws on long-standing stereotypes of the sexy nurse. As Anne Karpf writes, “Apart from being good, bad, or background, screen nurses are also frequently sexy. In comedies especially, waddling precariously, their uniforms revealing curvaceous figures, nurses exude sexual availability, and use their access to the body of the male patient for erotic purposes.”15 Although Houlihan’s professional capabilities are never questioned, her sexual and emotional im-
pulses are repeatedly played for comedy, laying the ground for an under-
current of suggestion that she has used her sexual attractiveness in order
to secure advancement.  

Here is a typical exchange from the season 3 episode "House Arrest" (4 February 1975). Houlihan has made a rare error in the OR (she is distracted due to the impending visit of a senior nurse) and Pierce has ordered her out. They discuss the incident as they wash up:

Houlihan: I know my job. I didn’t get to be major by just sitting on my duff.
Hawkeye: Well, somebody did.
Houlihan: Just what did you mean by that? [Laughter] I demand satisfaction!
Hawkeye: [turning to Burns] Tired lately, Frank?

Houlihan’s claim to experience and authority is undercut here by sexual innuendo, against which she can only express rage, reinforcing her ridiculousness and lack of authority. Her outrage is a great source of comedy in the series; her loud (even unruly) protests at individuals and objects that get in her way play out the comedy of a military woman who is simultaneously sexualized and womanly, tough and masculine. In this instance she appeals to Burns to defend her honor, which, predictably, he is unable to do.

Yet Houlihan’s sexual demands are not exclusively played for comedy. Indeed as her character becomes more complex and more closely integrated into the group, her desires are granted a degree of legitimacy.
For example, in the season 7 episode “Major Ego” (6 November 1978), a feminist-informed narrative based on her emerging sense of self, she is seen delighting in a one-night stand with a visiting Army journalist but refusing to take the romance further. “Now that I’ve found a little freedom, I want to stay free,” she declares. Her difficulties in finding a suitable partner ally her more closely to Pierce, but also confirm the incompatibility (for women) of military life and romance, a recurrent theme of military dramas. A subsequent episode, “Hot Lips Is Back in Town” (29 January 1979), explicitly turns on an association between sex and Houlihan’s career. Having received her divorce decree, she determines to focus on her career. Though she is offered a promotion to colonel it is clear that this is contingent on sexual favors, a deal she is not prepared to make. No longer a grotesque figure, the show emphasizes the great personal cost of Houlihan’s military career. And crucially, in becoming a more credible character, one who negotiates complex demands facing professional women, Houlihan is no longer primarily a comic figure.

**COMEDY AND TRANSFORMATION: PRIVATE BENJAMIN**

*M*A*S*H’s Margaret Houlihan is an “Army brat,” combining an investment in military masculinity with elements of unpredictability and desirability marked as feminine. The film *Private Benjamin* articulates the comic contradiction of the military woman in a different manner; using a “fish out of water” formula, the film centers on the militarization of a hyperfeminine, spoiled (soft) young woman who seems entirely unsuited to military life. The image of Goldie Hawn as Benjamin, dwarfed by helmet, cape, and pack, drenched by the rain, wearing an expression somewhere between sullen and dazed, her makeup running, sums up the comedy of her inappropriately feminine character (figure 39). *Private Benjamin*’s tagline, “The army was no laughing matter until Judy Benjamin joined it,” equates her enlistment with comedy. Like Jo in the comedy *Never Wave at a WAC*, Judy Benjamin’s privileged background renders her a legitimate comic target. Her initial misguided attempts to secure an advantage over the other recruits—telling Capt. Doreen Lewis (Eileen Brennan) that she joined not this Army, but the one with the “condos and the private rooms”—set her up as a figure of fun who needs to be shaken up. The film recalls earlier movies of military women in other ways too, notably in its operation as a (comic) narrative of transformation in which military life and discipline result in the strength of character, toughening, and matur-
ing of a youthful, hyperfeminine female. Benjamin’s hyperfemininity and naïveté is in turn pitted against the film’s monstrous military woman, Captain Lewis. Marked as vengeful, militaristic in a small-minded sense, and inappropriately sexual—inappropriate due to her age and implicit mannishness—Lewis is a caricature of misplaced female authority.

While service comedy derives humor from individuals who play the system and from the absurdity of the larger institution, boot camp narratives are concerned with the formation of a military unit. Training camp films show men (and women) fighting each other and learning discipline, typically under the tutelage of a tough sergeant. Ultimately the recruits come together as a team, setting aside differences and civilian antagonisms. The genre, that is, stages transformation, a process for which women are regarded as having a particular affinity.17 Private Benjamin’s comedic presentation of boot camp begins with the new recruits being introduced to tough drill sergeant Ross (Hal Williams). Ross drags a sleepy Benjamin off the bus and demands push-ups from her. When it is clear that she is in no condition to comply, he holds the waistband of her dress, pulling her up and down like a rag doll. Her petite frame, affluent background, and preoccupation with appearance all render her an outsider in the barracks; her presence is resented by the other recruits because her incompetence gets them all into trouble. Her initial disillusion culminates in a fight with the tough Pvt. Maria Gianelli and her decision to go home. When she is
given the opportunity to leave with her parents (who are mystified by her enlistment), Benjamin is confronted with the promise of an infantilizing, carefully policed existence at home and resolves instead to stay, departing the scene with a brisk salute. The basic training section of the film charts her individual transformation, effectively into adulthood, and her incorporation into the group. The Fort Biloxi sequences include two contrasting montages of basic training: in the first Benjamin is out of place, ineffectual with her rifle, and tackling the assault course in an uncoordinated manner; in the second, following her decision to stay in the Army, we see a new sense of purpose: she polishes her boots under the blankets, runs in formation, handles her weapon proficiently, and engages in hand-to-hand combat.

Like the Esther Williams training camp musical *Skirts Ahoy!, Private Benjamin* begins with a wedding. Judy Benjamin is an affluent young Jewish woman who is about to marry a divorce attorney in fulfillment of her consumer-led dreams. But unlike the three female protagonists of *Skirts Ahoy!, Benjamin* goes through with her marriage (her second) at the film’s outset. (She will reject a third marriage at the end of the film.) When her new husband dies on their wedding night, the distraught Benjamin is approached by an Army recruiter who has heard her bemoaning her fate on a radio talk show. Somewhat naïvely taken in by his promises of an adventurous life, she joins up. Her mistaken ideas about Army life provide the film’s comic premise. Her vapid superficiality is emphasized in these opening scenes, setting up the comedy that will follow as she undergoes the rigors of basic training. Her perky femininity is a recurrent source of humor; when first handed her uniform, for instance, she inquires, “Is green the only color these come in?”

Militarization quite explicitly does not equate to masculinization for Benjamin. Indeed Linda Ruth Williams notes how effectively Benjamin “survives the rigors of her Mississippi training camp by marshalling the attributes of femininity in innovative ways.”¹⁸ In keeping with her comic successes, it is ultimately the Army that must adapt in the culture clash between Benjamin’s consumer-led femininity and the austerity of military life. Thus during the war games (“the Super Bowl of basic training”) Benjamin employs her initiative to fool the opposing team into surrender. The war games also provide the setting for scenes of female bonding; sent to guard a swamp, Benjamin and her unit sit around the campfire smoking a joint, giggling as they swap sexual histories.
The narrative focus of the basic training portion of the film is firmly on Benjamin’s incorporation into the female group. Alongside this process the film enacts the expulsion or punishment of the two women (Captain Lewis and Private Winter) who most evidently embody the combination of military masculinity and hypocrisy held up for ridicule in a show like *M*A*S*H*. Private Winter is exposed half-naked after being caught with the opposing team’s co during the war games, a sexualized humiliation that recalls O’Houlihan’s exposure in *M*A*S*H*. Benjamin’s triumph in the war games is capped with a reprimand for Lewis and a thrilling flight with camp commander Colonel Thornbush. In the conclusion to the Fort Biloxi section of the film the group acts together to take their revenge on Lewis, the sort of anarchic reversal of hierarchy, with the triumph of enlisted personnel over officers, so characteristic of service comedy.

That women who aspire to military masculinity are misguided is further evidenced by Benjamin herself in her short-lived assignment to an all-male airborne unit. As the sole female member of Thornbush’s elite parachute unit, she presents an impressive military demeanor, yet when required to jump from an airplane she panics, reverting to chaotic comic femininity. She finally overcomes her fear and jumps only when Thornbush reveals his passion for her, declaring, “There are other ways in which you can serve.” Sexual harassment, even the threat of rape, is played for comedy here, underlining both the untrustworthiness of officers (a generic staple) and the danger of stepping too far outside gender norms. The confrontation triggers the end of Benjamin’s engagement with military masculinity, her reassignment to SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe), and a role in procurement, which she dubs “the one job I’ve trained for all my life.” This knowing comic equation of supply work with the feminine pursuit of shopping as leisure signals the film’s return to a reassuring version of the military woman who functions largely in an administrative capacity.

Following the teamwork exhibited in the war games, female comradeship is effectively absent from the remainder of the film. Benjamin is the only woman in the airborne unit and is subsequently stationed in Europe, where she is undercut by the vengeful Lewis and struggles to keep a sense of self in her developing relationship with Henri Tremont (Armand Assante), a French gynecologist. Forced to choose between her lover and her Army career, she chooses marriage; ultimately, however, she slugs her fiancé and walks away from the wedding (and her parents) in the film’s
final scene. Still wearing her bridal gown, Judy Benjamin moves into an unspecified but presumably nonmilitary future. The trajectory of the film thus suggests that military service has changed her to the extent that she resists being defined by marriage.

In mapping Benjamin’s emergent sense of self with the acquisition of a military identity, *Private Benjamin* effectively contrasts her relationship with civilian men and with her family to her relationship with the Army. Her husband and later her fiancé are represented as ultimately repressive figures, as are her loving (but infantilizing) parents; in projecting their desires onto her, her parents and the men with whom she is romantically involved prevent her from developing a sense of self. In the Army, by contrast, her life is governed by the friendships she eventually develops with other recruits and a generically familiar antagonism with Captain Lewis. Thus the sentiment that underlies the comedy of *Private Benjamin* has to do with the transformative effect of military service, thematically coupled to a somewhat diluted popular feminism which suggests that women can be fully human without reference to their fathers or husbands and that the patriarchal institutions of the military allow a woman to evade the strictures of marriage. *Private Benjamin* effectively demonstrates the versatility and applicability of boot camp conventions for the “modern” figure of the military woman.

**Feminizing Service Comedy:**
**Television’s Private Benjamin**

The CBS television series *Private Benjamin* immediately followed the success of the film, airing from spring 1981 (with a short season of just four half-hour episodes) to 1983. The show would take a different direction, one more suited to serial situation comedy. Crucially Benjamin (Lorna Patterson) is not asked to choose between the military and romance, remaining in service throughout the series. Thus while the early episodes retread the basic training scenario, subsequently Benjamin is assigned to and performs effectively within a number of military roles, working alongside Captain Lewis and Sergeant Ross, played here, as in the film, by Eileen Brennan and Hal Williams. The situation which provides the recurring source of comedy in the show is not the place of women in the military, a situation which the show normalizes even as women’s presence is defined in quite particular ways. The basic training episodes reprise the comic juxtaposition between Benjamin’s hyperfemininity and privileged
background and the physical demands of military life. “Benjamin to the Rescue” (2 April 1981) rehearses many of the comic turns from the movie, and Benjamin is once again portrayed as ill-suited to military life: she sleeps late, wears a cashmere sweater under her uniform for comfort, and inadvertently shoots Lewis’s Jeep. However, we also see Benjamin vow not to quit and Lewis openly impressed that Benjamin (whom she terms a “tough disaster”) has lasted so long. The second episode of the pilot season (“Jungle Swamp Survival,” 9 April 1981) still emphasizes Benjamin’s difficulties adapting to Army life. When even her friends counsel that “the Army’s too much” for her, she expresses her determination to succeed, telling them, “I’ve gotta do this for me.” As in the war games sequence of the film, here Benjamin and her friends triumph, capturing a soldier escaped from the stockade and rescuing the injured Captain Lewis on their way back to camp. Yet Benjamin is still defined as fundamentally unmilitary and feminine, reluctant to jump from a plane and then comically suspended as her parachute is caught in a tree.

The insistent repetition of Benjamin’s incompetence during the six weeks of basic training doesn’t sit well with the demands of situation comedy. Just as the film shifts from laughing at her incompetence to celebrating her capabilities and the value of female comradeship, the show shifts its focus to Benjamin’s developing relationship with her peers and superiors, establishing comic situations linked to the peculiarities of peacetime Army life. There is certainly no suggestion that she or the other recruits will leave the Army, which is constructed as a sometimes chaotic but ultimately supportive, even familial space. It is not the contemporaneous M*A*S*H (which reached the end of its long run the same year as Private Benjamin was canceled), but The Phil Silvers Show that comes most readily to mind as a reference point for Private Benjamin. Both exploit the comic potential of a peacetime military setting, exploring the hierarchies and absurdities of a stateside posting. Her privileged background means that Benjamin, unlike Sergeant Bilko, is not interested in moneymaking schemes. Like Jo in Never Wave at a WAC, Benjamin’s reasons for joining the Army are not economic; rather they are focused on feminist-informed themes of self-determination. As a result she is a sometimes anarchic but basically positive presence among the absurdities of military life, fixing the mistakes repeatedly made by the officers and managing relations with the press and general public. In “Astro Chimp” (14 September 1982), for instance, the self-serving Colonel Fielding orga-
nizes a parade for a retiring astronaut who turns out to be chimp; when Benjamin discovers that he is destined for a laboratory she intervenes. In “Me, Me, Me” (1 April 1982) only Benjamin and Ross are immune to the hypnotic philosophy of self-interest offered by a visiting charismatic fraudster; together they save the day as self-interest threatens to erode military discipline. Other episodes show Benjamin mistakenly promoted to general (“Judy’s Army,” 21 September 1982) or working to safeguard Ross's future by sabotaging the robot that the brass hope to replace him with (“Ross versus the Robot,” 18 October 1972).

Like Bilko, Benjamin is well able to work the system. But since she is neither self-serving nor avaricious in her scheming, the show insistently foregrounds themes of personal development through military service. Where the film contrasts Army life to marriage—the former liberating for women, the latter oppressive—the series rarely concerns itself with romance. Neither is the effect of military women on military men paid particular attention, unlike almost all other comedies featuring military women. Themes of female self-fulfillment through military service are presented in upfront fashion within each of the show’s three credit sequences, chiming explicitly with contemporary recruitment campaigns directed at women. Credits for the four episodes in the pilot series featured a military locker stuffed with feminine possessions. Benjamin’s voice introduces herself, explaining, “I was a debutante, I traveled all over the world, but I was bored, felt unwanted. The Army not only wanted me, they promised it would be wonderful!” As the image shows recruits falling in behind Benjamin, she explains that she is working on reshaping the Army in her own image: “Things aren’t perfect in the Army yet, but I’m sure with a little time I can get them to do things my way.” The second series credit sequence adapted this format, employing a theme song delivered as a cadence and featuring the line “Join the Army and you’ll see / You will be all you can be,” explicitly referencing the well-known Army recruiting slogan. Benjamin’s intent to reshape the military is retained with the closing line of the song: “Look out, Army, here she comes!” The credit sequence for the final season again foregrounds Benjamin’s military service as an alternative to a feminine career: Benjamin’s voice-over returns, telling us that her parents had given her everything “except a purpose in life.” In contrast to the tradition of anarchic, male-centered service comedy, a tradition in which the absurdity of military life is uppermost, service is here presented as character-forming and even incipiently feminist.
The sort of work-family model deployed in *Private Benjamin* is now a familiar feature of both sitcoms and television drama. Yet the show is unusual in focusing so centrally on women working together. As part of this process it works to distinguish between women, foregrounding the uneasy relationship between Benjamin and Lewis as well as deploying class and ethnic markers to suggest difference within the female group. Alongside the conventions of the sitcom, which depends on a play of seemingly diverse characters who comically interact, *Private Benjamin* makes use of the multiethnic group format familiar from numerous military movies, what Basinger dubs in relation to the World War Two combat film a “democratic ethnic mix.” Besides Benjamin, an affluent young Jewish woman, both film and series feature a white working-class southerner (Pvt. Barbara Ann Glass in the film, Pvt. Luanne Hubble in the series); an African American (Pvt. Moe in the film, Pvt. Jackie Sims in the series); and an ethnically identified white woman, the Italian American Pvt. Maria Gianelli in the first year, who is replaced by a Greek American, Pvt. Stacey Kouchalakas, in the second year. As with *M*A*S*H*, we occasionally learn a little more about these supporting characters, but the focus remains on the central group. Hubble reveals that she joined the Army because there were no good jobs in Tennessee, emphasizing an alternative view of military service than that sketched by Benjamin’s search for a purpose in life. Sims borrows money from a loan shark to pay for an operation for her mother, suggesting the relative poverty of her family (“Undercover Judy,” 3 December 1981). Although the series certainly makes comic use of fairly crude regional and racial stereotypes, these characters represent a minimal gesture to the economic circumstances underpinning women’s increasing military service in the period, and indeed the types of women who were (and remain) most likely to serve.

In many ways *Private Benjamin* takes the presence of women in the Army as a given; it is rarely, if ever, a source of comedy. Following the early boot camp episodes, Benjamin emerges as a level-headed, pragmatic character who is able to master a confusing military world; her self-reliance, quick thinking, and abilities as a communicator enable her to get herself (and others) out of difficult situations. The film situates the newly militarized Benjamin in an elite, previously all-male unit before comically debunking this possibility and moving her to a post in procurement. The series too situates Benjamin as a military woman who struggles in basic training but serves effectively in a wide variety of desk jobs; her function
as a military administrator thus complies with long-standing assumptions about appropriate roles for women in the military. It is worth considering in this context how the series situates Captain Lewis and Private Winter, the two women whom the film explicitly expels on the basis of their inappropriate investment in military masculinity.

Winter is, at times somewhat awkwardly, integrated into the female group, her enthusiasm for military procedures a standing joke (though an increasingly affectionate one as the series progresses). In “Are you Sure Mike Wallace Started Like This?” (28 January 1982) she relishes her new posting as an MP. Her aspirations to military masculinity provide the comic focus of one episode in particular, “Not for Men Only” (14 January 1982). Here the gung-ho Winter volunteers to try out for an elite unit, the Tigers, open only to men; the only male to volunteer does so for the additional money on offer. Angered at the discrimination experienced by Winter, Benjamin and Gianelli take the story to the base newspaper and a sympathetic female reporter, leading to a “Declaration of Grievances by Angry Non-Men.” Despite a chewing-out from Lewis, Benjamin is unrepentant, reminding Lewis that she herself “broke new ground,” before producing Winter, in a rather thin male disguise, as a candidate for the Tigers. Benjamin persuades Lewis to support this gender impersonation, speaking passionately of women’s achievements in the military and asserting that Winter should either be part of the Tigers or have “the right to fail trying.” In the extended comic sequence that follows Winter excels at all the events, taking first place over distance, assault course, push-ups, and terrain navigation; her performance is punctured, however, by her inability to swim. Consequently the feminine military woman Benjamin must rescue the floundering masculine military woman, underlining Winter’s failure to embody the type to which she so desperately aspires. These events lead to the episode’s punch line, in which the sympathetic Ross tells Winter, “You did win the right to fail.” By orchestrating this narrative around the overtly militarized Winter, the series acknowledges contemporary debates with respect to gender exclusions, only to exploit them as a source of comedy. Moreover both Winter’s and Lewis’s repeated failure to effectively perform a more masculine military role—getting lost during exercises, for instance—is frequently contrasted to Benjamin’s capability in the administrative and communications roles that she is assigned to.

It is the shifting relationship between Benjamin and Lewis and the humanizing of the latter that are the most marked innovations of the
series, again largely a consequence of serial form. Lewis’s role is more central, giving free rein to Eileen Brennan’s exuberant performance. Although she and Benjamin are sharply differentiated in age, class, and background, ultimately they end up working together, developing a genuine affection in the process. While Lewis may define herself in terms of military masculinity, she, like Benjamin, is effectively an administrator. Both must negotiate with the ambitions of Fort Bradley’s commanders, notably Colonel Fielding, who lives in the hope that Benjamin’s influential father will help him in his bid to become a general. Although *Private Benjamin* rarely addresses the specificities of American military women’s experience, or the wider debates being staged in the media at the time as to women’s proper role, the series does occasionally fashion feminist-informed comedy from the tensions of a recently integrated military. For example, the formidable Lewis bawls out one Sergeant Muldoon, who is dismissive of women in the military, with the injunction “Stay out of my sight until I can have you reassigned to a place where you belong—the sixteenth century!” (“So Long Sergeant Ross,” 24 December 1981). Such instances deflect the joke away from Lewis to some extent and onto the sexism of certain military men. More generally, however, the series tends to imply that Lewis and Winter are held back as much by ineptitude as by such sexist attitudes.

The reconciliation between Lewis and Benjamin—their animosity drives the film, recall—begins in earnest in the fourth and final episode of the short pilot season, “Captain’s Helper” (23 April 1981). Benjamin is assigned to be Lewis’s temporary aide as part of a new program. Despite a series of slapstick incidents, Benjamin comes into her own when ministering to the sick captain. Not only does she feminize Lewis’s apartment and arrange a romantic liaison with another officer for her, but she fixes a mean drink. Next morning a contented Lewis is roused by the brisk efficiency of her protégé Winter, replacing the flu-stricken Benjamin and in the process underlining the merits of Benjamin’s less military but caring manner. Lewis subsequently visits Benjamin in the barracks; though she cautions against thinking they are now “buddy-buddy,” a difference in their relationship is apparent. The first full season develops these themes: Lewis makes Benjamin squad leader (with disastrous results) and then her driver and aide (Benjamin drives the Jeep into the pool; “Judy’s in the Driving Seat,” 9 October 1981). This emergent relationship echoes the gradual humanization of Houlihan’s character in the series *M*A*S*H,*
by which she transforms from a representative of military absurdity to a sympathetically drawn core character. Nonetheless Lewis’s character remains an essentially comic one. Significantly, the comedy is linked to the contrast between her ability to perform femininity and her (implicitly masculine) military identity; that is, Lewis articulates the comic gender confusion long associated with military women in film and television fictions.

Captain Lewis’s characterization as a comic foil exploits not just gender confusion but her typically chaotic presence. More often than not the originator of problems, her attempts to fix things at the base usually lead to further complications. Lewis is both unruly and rule-bound (militarized), and her commitment to the military is a source of comedy and pathos. At times she represents a vindictive authority to be fooled and mocked. Indeed the series frequently derives laughs from her inflated sense of her own abilities, her commitment to discipline, and her repeated failure to get things right. In “You Oughta Be in Pictures” (27 September 1982), by contrast, which centers on the production of a film designed to recruit women into the Army, there is a certain power to her comic monologue, which includes the recollection “When I joined up women weren’t even considered soldiers. We were WACS. . . . But I stayed in there, didn’t I? Didn’t I? I clawed my way right up to the middle, and now—dammit, it’s my turn.” But the film director wants to use Benjamin to sell the Army in terms of “youth, glamour, pizzazz,” and Benjamin bristles at the way Lewis is rejected as a role model. Lewis’s humanity and vulnerability are also revealed in episodes such as “The Talent Show” (5 November 1982), which depicts her awkwardness when visiting children (she has them stand to attention) juxtaposed with her compassionate treatment of one troubled youngster, and includes revelations about her own difficult childhood.

In the final episode of the second series, Lewis confronts a future after retirement, and both she and Fielding confide to each other their fears about civilian life (“Real World,” 12 April 1982). Again there is a gendered dimension to the comedy of a woman needing to be taught how to shop and manage a household. Women ought to be good at such things, it is implied, but Lewis simply isn’t.

The series plays out the humor of Lewis’s military woman at a number of levels, drawing on familiar stereotypes of partially repressed sexuality, ill-judged ambition, and manliness. Her characterization owes much to *M*A*S*H*’s Margaret Houlihan, in the evocation of a military woman de-
fined in contradictory terms as excessively military and yet also womanly and passionate. This is literalized in the image of Lewis’s two closets, one filled with olive drab, the other bursting with satins and feathers. At one point she confides in a portrait of Patton that hangs in her bedroom, “I am the perfect female soldier. I’m hard, I’m tough, I’m ruthless and I’m every inch a woman.” Yet while Houlihan is consistently presented as a desirable woman, Private Benjamin generates cruel comedy through Lewis’s inappropriate desire (inappropriate since she is not, in conventional terms, desirable herself). Thus in “Man on the Floor” (22 October 1981) canned laughter accompanies the suggestive line, delivered in medium close-up, “I’m not only a soldier, I’m a woman.” The comedy here comes from the fact that she has misread the situation, but also from her conspiratorial alignment of herself with a sexual activity deemed fitting only for younger women.\textsuperscript{22} Another episode features a running gag as Lewis repeatedly unbuttons her shirt (she is hiding some diamonds), generating comic expressions of surprise and horror from a series of men (“Beauty and the Brass,” 12 February 1982).

Lewis’s uncontrolled curly hair and dramatic red lipstick suggest a sexuality which is in turn played off against her military demeanor. She is described as a “floozy captain” in “Profile in Courage” (29 March 1982), an episode that purports to test the skills she and Fielding have learned at an antiterrorist seminar. Captured and bound, Lewis exclaims, “Do what you will with me physically, mentally, sexually [pause] six, seven, eight times.” That the possibility of sexual violence is played for laughs here is quite in keeping with the casual misogyny of the period but also with the sexualized characterization of Lewis as an embodiment of the troubling and complex figure of the woman soldier. Although her sexuality is repeatedly emphasized, the series also plays with constructions of her military woman as manly. In “Judy Got Her Gun” Lewis and Captain Hickstratten get into a competition following his assertion, “It was a sorry day when they let women into this man’s army.” When Lewis protests that there is “a woman present,” he looks around startled, and remarks, “I never think of you as a woman at all.” An indignant Lewis proceeds to demand that everyone, including a group of male soldiers running past, drop and do push-ups. Her comic fury and her ability to exercise control over the troops is framed by the reassertion of the impossibility of the female soldier. Like \textit{M*A*S*H}’s Houlihan, Lewis is often portrayed as
angry, an anger that comically underlines the supposed contradictions embodied by women in positions of (military) authority.

Many comedies featuring military women treat them as humorous by definition, using sexual imagery for laughs and to emphasize the implausible difference of the female soldier. The framing of women’s achievements and authority in terms of a comic “battle of the sexes” format allows feminist themes to be raised, but not resolved. The comedies discussed in this chapter show military women performing effectively within specific roles: nursing, communications, and administration. Aspirations to move outside such familiar roles always fail and are presented as simply funny. Although it was an enormous success, Private Benjamin was the last high-profile Hollywood comedy to center on military women, though they figure as supporting characters in comedies such as Stripes (1981) and Sgt. Bilko (1996). Both M*A*S*H and Private Benjamin ended their initial run in 1983, the year in which around two hundred women deployed to Grenada. Some seven years later forty thousand women would be deployed in the first Gulf War, significantly shifting the visibility of military women on active duty. Indeed, as part 3 of this book explores, as military women become a more visible presence in popular culture and the news media, the generic location of their fictional counterparts shifts toward dramatic rather than comic genres. The Army becomes, it seems, no laughing matter for men or women in a period shaped by increasing levels of military deployment and an unprecedented media emphasis on scandal and trauma. The provocative presence of the military woman is reframed in genres such as the thriller, which stages narratives of threat, violence, and investigation.