"America’s Boy Friend Who Can’t Get a Date": Gender, Race, and the Cultural Work of the Jack Benny Program, 1932-1946

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Jack Benny’s comedy program was one of the nation’s most popular radio shows from its inception in 1932 until the late 1940s. The widespread appeal of the show, during the period of radio’s greatest influence, suggests that it may reveal a great deal about mainstream culture of that period. Operating from the assumption that the show takes positions on pressing issues of the time, this paper will explore the question of what “cultural work” the Benny program was doing. I shall argue that the show’s popularity derived from two interrelated ways it dealt with its subject matter. First, the show reflected its social context by representing anxieties that were widespread in depression America, including concerns about consumption and the economy, family dynamics, gender roles, and racial difference. Second, the show attempted to shape listeners’ attitudes and ideas by offering temporary ideological resolutions of many of those social anxieties. The show modeled a fantasy world where work and consumption were unproblematic; where white male dominance in the family was unchallenged because married women did not exist; where the chaos and disorder of society were projected onto African-American communities; and where masculinity and a man’s status in the family did not necessarily depend on his economic situation. Because this vision conflicted with cultural values celebrating family life, companionate marriage, and (eventually) racial justice, it was partly obscured by a consistent use of foils (contrasting characters) and of ambiguity, which allowed listeners to interpret the show’s meanings in various ways. Such structural ambiguity helps explain the show’s tremendous popularity; it allowed listeners positioned differently in the culture to choose their own understandings of the show’s meanings and to identify with the characters in multiple ways.

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Scholars have long recognized the tremendous importance of radio in American culture of the 1930s and 1940s but have only recently begun to analyze radio's history and programming as primary evidence about American culture during those decades.¹ By the advent of Jack Benny's show in 1932, the radio industry had taken a definite commercial structure, the result of decades of conflict about how best to develop the medium. At issue was whether radio broadcasting would be funded and controlled by the government or by private corporations. During the 1920s this question was resolved, and privately owned radio stations were joined into national networks that used telephone lines to transmit programming across the country. These networks submitted to federal regulation, in return for being allowed to sell airtime to advertisers. This partnership of commercial broadcasters and advertisers shaped the kinds of programs broadcast over the new networks, as advertising agencies took the initiative to develop, write, cast, and produce shows for sponsors.²

Serial programs featuring recurring characters met the needs of producers trying to secure the largest possible audience for advertisers. This format could keep costs relatively low, allow identification of the stars with sponsoring products, and ensure that commercials became a routine part of listeners' family and leisure activities. To keep a large audience tuned in, producers turned to familiar, popular performers and writers from vaudeville, musical comedy, and films and reshaped material from these culture industries to suit the new medium. Unlike vaudeville, where material was frequently tailored to the audience of a specific locale, radio shows were designed to avoid content that might offend any particular listener group or region of the country. Instead, shows presented what producers perceived to be the mainstream values of the nation's consumers, namely the white middle class.³


³ Producers did not always succeed in pleasing everyone. For example, in 1931 the African-American newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched an unsuccessful campaign to drive "Amos 'n' Andy" off the air, because the editor thought the show offered degrading images of blacks. See Ely, *Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 173–86. MacDonald argues that producers were not very concerned about offending African Americans, who owned relatively few radios and were not thought to have much buying power. MacDonald, *Don't Touch That Dial!*, 332–34. Producers could only guess what would appeal to most listeners. On the ways television producers overestimate the conservatism of the viewing audience, see Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York, 1983). On the competing forces in the production of radio programs, see Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, 78–115.
The Jack Benny show's tremendous popularity derived in part from representing and celebrating these mainstream values, even while appearing to subvert them. The show allowed variously positioned listeners to experience shifting and multiple identifications—both mainstream and resistant readings of the program's content—and thus had wide appeal to all races, sexes, and classes.

My interpretation of the messages and the appeal of the Jack Benny show draws on the work of theorists of mass culture, who have developed ways to analyze the relationships between mass cultural texts and the social and political contexts in which they are produced. The work of these theorists can help historians approach popular texts as an important source of evidence about American culture.

A useful starting point for historians is Fredric Jameson's theory that mass cultural texts perform the ideological work of legitimating the social status quo (or some new order) by representing social and political tensions and anxieties; it is those anxieties that draw the audience to engage with the text. Having represented real tensions, texts defuse, repress, or "manage" them by constructing imaginary narrative resolutions or visions of social harmony, offering the utopian hope of a different world in order to gain acceptance of the existing one.4 In serials such as the Jack Benny program, however, the resolutions must be only partial or temporary, so as to return the audience to the same tensions (and to the sponsor) over and over.

Stuart Hall theorizes that mass cultural texts do the ideological work of sustaining a "dominant cultural order" by transmitting "preferred meanings" that appear to be "natural, inevitable, taken for granted" representations of the social order. Hall suggests, however, that these preferred messages are often not received intact by audiences, who actively participate in the creation of the meanings of texts through a process of "negotiation." That is, audience members may accept the preferred meaning (a dominant-hegemonic position), accept parts of the message and reject others (a negotiated position), or entirely reject or "misinterpret" the text's message (an oppositional position). The positions audience members take on a given text derive from their specific social identities, locations, and experiences. Similarly, John Fiske has argued that in order to be widely popular, cultural texts must be "polysemic," or susceptible to multiple readings by a diverse audience.5

The tasks of the historian using these theories are to explore the relationship between mass cultural texts and their historical contexts and to attempt to retrieve the discourses to which the producers and consumers of texts had access. Ideally, this effort allows one to see the meanings possible for individuals in different social loca-

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tions. This essay seeks to uncover the preferred meanings of the texts of Benny's radio show and to suggest ways that the program enabled listeners to resist those meanings.

The Jack Benny program was first broadcast on CBS in 1932, sponsored by Canada Dry Ginger Ale. Between 1933 and 1935, Benny and his writer Harry Conn created the characters and the format that were used throughout the twenty-three-year history of the Sunday night show. The primary characters were led by Benny, who played a penny-pinching, vain, selfish, effeminate, and insecure man frustrated by most features of modern life. Supporting him were Mary Livingstone, who was cast as a competent, wisecracking working woman, and a bandleader, a tenor singer, and an announcer. The bandleaders, singers, and announcers were "types" widely found in radio. Bandleaders were often wisecracking smart alecks, tenors childlike and naive, and announcers the calm, intellectual voices of reason amidst the comic chaos. In 1937, the character of Rochester Van Jones, Benny's black servant, joined this group. These six people, ostensibly co-workers, constituted a fictional family in which various cultural anxieties about the family could be humorously explored. Benny understood that the cast represented a family. He explained in his autobiography, "The radio audience totaled approximately thirty million, but it really consisted of small family groups. I felt that now I understood the medium. I would play to those family groups and get them to know me and my family (the cast) as real people with real problems."

Jack's family joined with a cast of recurring secondary characters in comic sketches punctuated by commercials and musical numbers. These sketches mostly concerned preparing for a radio show, outings by the group, and Jack's domestic life, though spoofs of popular books and movies were also frequent. Included among the important secondary characters were the Nasty Man, the phone operators Gertrude Garshift and Mabel Flapsaddle, the vault guards Ed (a human) and Carmichael (a polar bear), the hot dog seller Mr. Kitzel, the violin teacher Professor LeBlanc, the Racetrack Tout, and the Railroad Station Announcer.

Much of the program's humor derived from long-term development of the characters and from a series of running jokes continually reshaped by the writers. Among these were the cast's merciless lampooning of Jack's worst traits, Jack's vault, his 1927 Maxwell car, his awful violin playing, his thirty-ninth birthday, his frustrating phone calls from Rochester, and Mary's letters from home.

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6 An extension of Benny's vaudeville stand-up comedy performances, the show intermixed comic monologues with music by a singer and orchestra. Late in 1933, Benny switched sponsors and networks, becoming the host of the "Chevrolet Program" on NBC. Subsequent sponsors were General Tire in 1934, Jell-O 1935-1941, Grape Nuts 1941-1943, and Lucky Strike 1944-1954. The show's name often changed as its sponsor changed, but it was commonly called, on the air and off, the Jack Benny program.

7 Mary Livingstone was Benny's real-live wife. Jack Benny and Joan Benny, Sunday Night at Seven: The Jack Benny Story (New York, 1990), 41.

8 This summary is based on Milt Josefsberg, The Jack Benny Show (New Rochelle, 1977), 465-81; and Wretheim, Radio Comedy, 131-47.

The Jack Benny character was the most developed and bore many similarities to the male protagonists of the "screwball comedy" films popular from 1934 to 1942. Like those movie "comic anti-heroes," Jack lives a life of apparent wealth and leisure, residing in a Beverly Hills home and taking long vacations. His leisure is intermittently interrupted by his work as a radio actor, which gives him an ambiguous relation to productive work; this allowed listeners to interpret him as employed or not and to identify with him either way. Jack is also quite childlike; he is selfish and vain, he throws temper tantrums, and he requires the care of Rochester and Mary. His childishness is reinforced by his claims to youth and the family's constant teasing about his age, toupee, and false teeth. For example, when Jack reminds the Nasty Man that he is not as young as he used to be, he is told, "You're not as young as anybody used to be!" Further, technology and the urban world (particularly large
institutions like department stores or mass transportation systems) routinely frustrate Jack. He is unable to communicate with Rochester by phone and is baffled by simple items like Christmas tree lights. Jack is also completely apolitical. He claims to be a Whig, insisting, "If it's good enough for Millard Fillmore, it's good enough for me!" Finally, Jack is frustrated by nearly everyone, especially Mary. His "family" teases him mercilessly, reducing him to shrieking, "Now cut that out!" and to making ridiculous threats.

Jack's frustration makes him seem powerless and effeminate, expressing the way many people (especially men) felt during the Great Depression. To laugh at him was to laugh at things the listener most feared in himself or herself. Jack remains, however, a very sympathetic figure, suggesting to the audience that even the most feeble person can still be loved and accepted. The complexity of the multiple identifications available to listeners means that one can identify with Jack's plight, then immediately identify with other characters' deflations of his worst traits. In other words, people in the audience could laugh at their own fears while reassuring themselves of the importance of certain norms of behavior by laughing at Jack's violation of those norms.

Each episode of the Jack Benny program was carefully constructed. This care reflected Jack Benny's long career as a vaudevillian; years of refining comic material through trial and error in a wide variety of formats had taught Benny how to amuse the widest possible audience. (Broadcasting before a studio audience similarly allowed Benny to stay in touch with listeners' preferences.) Though after 1935 the program was written by teams of from two to six writers, Benny was well known for his brilliant editing and for acting as a "fifth writer." By all accounts, he had an unerring instinct for what would appeal to listeners and insisted on fine-tuning scripts until they were exactly right. In preparing for the Sunday evening broadcasts, the writers would produce drafts early in the week, which were then rehearsed and revised extensively until Benny was satisfied with every detail. Benny also made all casting and technical decisions, acting personally to ensure the high quality of the program. This extended and precise process of crafting suggests that the complexity and multiplicity of meaning to be found in the show were quite deliberate.

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10 For examples of Jack being cared for, see Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1; May 10, 1942, tape R79:0182, Jack Benny Collection; and April 11, 1943, tape R88:0644. ibid. For age jokes see Nov. 3, 1933, tape R77:0077, ibid.; May 3, 1942, tape R79:0182, ibid.; 1940, Jack Benny Show, disk 3, sides 1 and 2; Joe Seibert, Jack Benny Show, 20; and Max Wylie, ed., Best Broadcasts of 1940—41 (New York, 1942), 140—58. For conversations with Rochester, see Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1; Dec. 31, 1944, tape R79:0185, Jack Benny Collection; and 1944, Jack Benny Show, disk 4, side 2. For other technology, see April 11, 1943, tape R88:0144, Jack Benny Collection, and Dec. 24, 1944, tape R79:0184, ibid. For train or store encounters, see Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1; 1940, Jack Benny Show, disk 3, side 1. For Jack's frustration, see 1933, Jack Benny Show, disk 1, sides 1 and 2; and Irving Fine, Jack Benny: An Intimate Biography (New York, 1976), 130.

11 For information about Jack Benny's early life and vaudeville career, see Mary Livingstonne Benny and Hilliard Marks, Jack Benny (Garden City, 1978), 13—58; Fos, Jack Benny, 24—60; Joe Seibert, Jack Benny Show, 25—44. For the production process, see ibid., 95—100, 148—49; Benny and Marks, Jack Benny, 90—91; Wertheim, Radio Comedy, 316.
The Jack Benny show became nationally popular several years into the Great Depression, a massive social and economic crisis that provides an important context for understanding the show's production and reception. Because millions of un- or underemployed men were unable to be productive and to support their families (both crucial aspects of male identity), the depression helped cause a widespread crisis of masculinity and a related crisis of male authority in the family. Many men's self-images and sense of authority over their wives and children derived from their economic roles as providers; thus they experienced their inability to provide adequate family support as a failure of masculinity. Among men whose wives were able to earn wages and contribute to maintaining the family, those feelings may have been exacerbated. More married women worked in this period than ever before. This loss of male economic control caused what seemed to many a crisis in family life. Men felt their dominant position in the family to be threatened, while women wrestled with the difficulties of sustaining families in financial and emotional straits. Those married women with jobs also faced widespread condemnation of their waged work. All family members struggled with the consequences of these new roles and with changing dynamics at home.12

These anxieties about masculinity and the family were part of much larger and ongoing cultural concerns, which were brought into particular focus by the economic crisis. The development of an urban, mass, industrialized society made many Americans feel that the world was badly out of balance. A primary concern was preserving the autonomy and rights of individuals in the face of a large, impersonal, industrial state and a growing mass culture. An increased focus on what seemed to be the irrationality of the world also developed, as did a corresponding interest in gambling and games of chance. A fear of (and fascination with) technology and its impact on daily life and employment was also widespread. Finally, the shift from a production to a consumption ethic begun earlier in the century left many feeling caught between two value systems. All these anxieties and concerns are represented in the Jack Benny program, but a particularly strong theme of the show was this shift from a production- to a consumption-centered economy.13

The program's focus on this and other depression-related economic issues is demonstrated by the characterization of Jack as, above all, cheap; he will not spend


money. Over the years the show offered ever more ludicrous instances of Jack's miserliness. For example, Jack stays in fleabag hotels where guests have to be lowered to his room in a bucket and where the other guests are the pets of people staying at expensive hotels. He steals Christmas trees from hotel lobbies, makes Rochester wear a red cap and carry his bags to avoid tipping at train stations, and has his dates pay for themselves. He also charges friends for dinner at his home, keeps a lock on the refrigerator, has a pay phone in the living room, and installs a meter on the lawn mower he loans to neighbors.14

Just as Jack refuses to consume services, he resists consumer goods. Instead of buying a hearing aid, he has Rochester cover the toaster with a towel and place it in his sickbed. He refuses to trade in his ancient Maxwell car for a new one, even though the horn is a perfume atomizer, the spare tire is a life preserver, and the steering wheel comes off in Rochester's hands when he hits a bump in the road. Jack's unwillingness to buy consumer goods such as cars and appliances expressed many listeners' anxieties about their inability to consume or about their temptations to overconsumption. But Jack's cheapness is an ambiguous quality. He may be read as an impoverished consumer trying to get by in hard times. Or his refusal to share with family and friends and his resistance to consumption may be read as a form of upper- and middle-class acquisitive individualism that the show satisfyingly lampoons.15

Anxieties about consumption are expressed even more dramatically in skits in which Jack as the consumer is victimized by salespeople or service providers. In a 1938 show, Jack and Mary go Christmas shopping but end up buying nothing. At the perfume counter, Jack finds a large selection, but no brands that are appropriate. Offered an expensive French perfume, one made by the whiskey distiller Haig and Haig, and one called "Springtime in the Bronx" ("Yes, it's lovely then with the bagels all in bloom"), Jack cannot choose. The saleswoman finally snaps, "Why don't you run some violets through a wringer and make it yourself?" This retort might refer to the fact that economic hard times had caused many women to resume home production of items they might earlier have bought in stores. It is thus a marker of Jack's feminization. It might also hint at homosexuality, as the violet was widely associated with lesbians and gay men.16

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14 See April 25, 1948, Jack Benny, tape 2; 1936, Jack Benny Show, disk 2, side 2; 1940, ibid., disk 3, sides 1 and 2; Dec. 24, 1944, tape R79:0184, Jack Benny Collection; and May 5, 1942, tape R79:0182, ibid.

15 See, for example, 1940, Jack Benny Show, disk 3, side 2; Jodefsberg, Jack Benny Show, 101. Jack's keeping the car is significant. Studies showed that during the depression Americans were reluctant about remaining car owners despite the expense. Many people kept old cars on the road longer, instead of trading them in for newer models, as had been common. See Wundersee, Women's Work and Family Values, 37, 41–43. On contradictory attitudes toward consumption in this period, see George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis, 1990), 39–73; Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal, 100–138; and Daniel Howes, The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940 (Baltimore, 1985), 134–65.

16 The discussion is based on the show broadcast Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1, Ware, Holding Their Own, 2–6. On violets, seeKate Cuttin, "We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians": The Emergence of Lesbians and Gay Men on the American Stage (Boston, 1987), 50–51.
When Jack goes next to the men's department to buy a dollar necktie, the clerk there is as unhelpful as the perfume seller. Jack is offered a tie with an American flag on it, allegedly made by Betsy Ross, that costs $62.50. Jack storms from there to the overcoat department, where the clerks physically restrain him and bundle him into coats that he does not like and that do not fit.

_Clerk_: There you are, a perfect fit.
_Jack_: Perfect?
_Clerk_: Absolutely! Do you want the sleeves lengthened or are you going to wear gloves?
_Jack_: I don't like this coat at all. It's too long. It drags on the floor.
_Clerk_: Not if you walk on your toes... It looks marvelous on you!
_Jack_: I've been in shower curtains that fit better than this! Take this off, I don't like the weight or the color.

The pace of the scene continues to accelerate as Jack becomes increasingly furious and as the clerks manhandle him in and out of inappropriate coats. When Jack and Mary attempt to leave without buying a coat, the clerks open fire on them.17

In this increasingly ridiculous encounter, Jack is literally the victim of an intended holdup; two clerks overpower him and try to force consumer goods on him at gunpoint. As in Jack's other attempts to buy things, the apparent choices he is offered are not real; he cannot get what he wants. In part, the scene may suggest that because consumption was increasingly seen as a female prerogative, Jack, as a man, is an ineffectual consumer. Indeed, Mary's collusion with the salesclerks who are trying to get Jack to buy suggests that women are part of the economic system that victimizes men. But most important, Jack is portrayed as the prey of a large, impersonal capitalist enterprise determined to get his money but uninterested in meeting his needs.

In a fairly common doubling technique used in the show, Jack encounters Rochester, who is also shopping at the store. Rochester explains, "I ran into some money with a pair of dice and my girl friend brought me down here to liquidate." Unlike Jack, Rochester has no difficulty consuming. He and his friend have more packages than they can carry. Rochester's race may explain why he is able to consume straightforwardly; he is purportedly irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, and uninhibited by the serious concerns that make other consumers hesitate. By contrast with Jack, a compulsive saver, Rochester spends all his money as soon as he gets it, thereby reflecting another cultural tension about the proper balance of spending and saving money.18

The clerks' physical assault on Jack is particularly noteworthy because, between attempts to consume, he is the intended victim of an incompetent pickpocket. This suggests that department stores are places where innocent people will be robbed, one way or another. But the pickpocket scenes also contain an erotic subtext that suggest that losing one's money is connected to the loss of manhood, through an

18 Ibid.
implied homosexuality. This subtext is set up as Jack and Mary enter the store. Jack shrieks in a high-pitched voice, “Oooh, ooh madam! Would you please watch your umbrella!” then says, “Better stick close to me Mary, don’t get lost. And take your hand out of my pocket.” Mary replies, “That’s not my hand.” The scene proceeds:

Jack: Then whose is it? Hey buddy, what are you doing with your hand in my pocket?
Pickpocket: I dunno. I guess I’m an optimist.
Jack: Let’s get out of here . . .

Mary: There’s that fellow again.
Jack: Ouch! Buddy, will you please keep your hand out of my pocket!
Pickpocket: Sorry.
Jack: You’re the clumsiest pickpocket I’ve ever met.
Pickpocket: Well, I’m young yet.
Jack: Well, stay away from me until you loin something.

Mary: As long as you’re here, why don’t you buy an overcoat?
Jack: I told you, I don’t need one.
Pickpocket: You do too.
Jack: (angry) I do not! And take your hand out of my pocket! And come in quicker!
Pickpocket: Good heavens, you’re getting monotonous.19

The thieving salesclerks and the pickpocket are equated; the characterizations of both suggest that there is a connection between the powerlessness of a man being physically restrained or seduced and the loss of his money.20 In a producer economy, men can feel they are in charge by producing. The shopping sketch suggests that in a consumer economy, the capitalist is in charge, and everyone is at his mercy. However, the show defuses the potential ideological subservience of this message by allowing Jack to escape relatively unscathed and to laugh at his salesclerk tormentors. The sketch thereby compels listener identification with Jack, who represents the common man at the mercy of a consumer-oriented economy. His apparent hostility to consumption and his successful escape from the economic imperative to consume was probably very satisfying to many listeners in the depression. Here again, though, Jack’s economic position is ambiguous. The sketch might also allow listeners to identify with desperate clerks, working on commission, who must manipulate prosperous customers to make a sale. The complexity of Jack’s character allows listeners to shift identifications rapidly throughout the show.

19 Ibid.
20 The clerks and the pickpocket are equated, for example, by each appearing three times in a kind of mirroring device, and by the pickpocket’s parallel attempt to get Jack to buy an overcoat. In the second encounter, Jack’s put-on lines evoke Puritans and learn spoons with a New York accent, but it might also be interpreted as having sexual connotations that could be gotten past the censors. “And come in quicker” was an ad lib by Benny, teasing the actor who played the pickpocket for missing his cue slightly on “you do too.”
Jack’s identification as a common man is established by jokes earlier in the show. Jack refuses to buy an overcoat, claiming, “This blue suit keeps me plenty warm.” Mary responds, “It ought to, you’ve got your gray one under it,” evoking images of poor men trying to stay warm by wearing one outer garment over another. Like a hobo, Jack has his money in his sock, and when the bulge at his ankle is noticed, he claims that it is sprained. Mary retorts, “Yeah, well, you’ve got Lincoln’s picture on the bandage.” Mary also reads a letter from her mother, who has been evicted again for being unable to pay the rent. Mary says, “My folks move so often that Mama wears a gypsy costume. . . . And we even had to change the dog’s name from Fido to Rover.” Such brief evocations of economic crisis are generally rare in the show. In this case they allow the audience to identify with Jack as a down-on-his-luck fellow and thus also to identify with his triumph over the big businesses that were thought responsible for the depression.21

These representations of cultural anxieties related to consumption (and by extension to gender roles) are only part of the show’s treatment of contemporary economic concerns. For example, the widespread lack of faith in financial institutions is portrayed in the running joke about Jack’s vault. He refuses to put his money in the bank, preferring to keep it locked below ground in a vault guarded by his pet polar bear, Carmichael. But after Carmichael devours the gas man and vacuums the feathers off Jack’s pet ostrich, Trudy, he is replaced by Ed, a human guard who never emerges into the light of day. Informed in 1945 that the war is over, Ed replies, “Oh, how nice. Who won, the North or the South?” Jack’s compulsive saving is taken to ridiculous lengths; the show’s mockery of it suggests that a better balance between spending and saving must be struck.22

Another occasion for widespread cultural anxiety, the pervasiveness of gambling, was also present in the show. Since normal or “rational” ways of obtaining money by working were not open to people, they often turned to gambling, which allowed them to hope and potentially to obtain some money. The Benny program deals with this issue in three ways. First, references to gambling (including racetracks, dice, and cards) are frequent. Second, the show includes a recurring character, the Racetrack Tout, who encounters Jack in odd places and tries to give him tips. In a famous 1940 show, the tout sees Jack waiting for his train to New York and repeatedly whispers that Jack should take the faster El Capitan train instead of the Chief. When Jack resists changing trains, the tout, punning on racetrack slang for an unexpectedly successful horse, finally tells him, “Don’t noise this around. I found out . . . the Chief is a sleeper!”23

The show’s ideological position on gambling becomes clearest when black people or neighborhoods are discussed. Gambling is consistently associated with Rochester,
whose forays into Harlem or Watts frequently include games of chance. This association of gaming with what was seen as the illegal, chaotic, out-of-control world of African-American communities marks it as something not properly part of white America. In other words, though many white people gambled, the show makes it seem that only black people do, and that white people do not and should not resort to this way of obtaining money. This position is further emphasized when Rochester discusses gambling with white cast members. Asked by guest star Orson Welles to teach him “Central Avenue shuffleboard,” Rochester warns Welles that he should not try to shoot craps with him. He makes it clear that he has loaded dice and is cheating. The association of African Americans and the irrational world is further cemented in this show by tenor Dennis Day’s song “Black Magic.” Welles comments dryly after the song, “It can’t be any more magic than Rochester’s dice.”

Unjust employers who pay inadequate wages, enforce unreasonable contracts, and unfairly fine their employees are also mocked by the show. All the cast members complain about how low their salaries are, even Rochester, who says in one show, “I’d never leave you, Boss. I’d work for you for nothing. . . . I’m working for next to nothing now!” When such comments as “Your wallet doesn’t know the sit-down strike is over” do not work, bandleader Phil Harris resorts to dressing his wife and children as beggars who are sent to Jack to ask for a raise.

The cast also makes fun of Jack’s ridiculous contractual demands. When Jack makes absurd requests and the cast members balk, Mary warns, “Read your contract.” Jack himself often mentions or complains about the cast’s contracts. As he tells a new singer, “We’re all one big happy family around here. Depending on options, of course.”

Jack also systematically fines cast members for such offenses as listening to Fred Allen’s show, being late to work, or getting more laughs than he does. Mary complains, “Fines, fines, rules, rules. I never saw a guy like you. . . . I think that’s awful, don’t you, Phil?” Phil replies resignedly, “I don’t mind the fines so much. I just hate to see the dough go out of circulation.” Though the gang resists, Jack makes it clear that he can and will dock their paychecks. In addition, Jack continually threatens to fine them for their insubordination. For example, he shouts, “Rochester! There’s an old Chinese proverb: ‘When butler butt in on boss, better have other job up sleeve.’” In this way, Jack baldly demonstrates his power over the other family members. They may complain and resist, but he has the power to dictate their salaries, fine them at work, and fire them. Therefore, though he is the butt of most of their jokes, his economic power, and thus his authority over the family, can withstand challenges and remain intact.

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24 March 21, 1943, tape R79-0183, Jack Benny Collection. For other examples of Rochester’s gambling, see Dec.
26 Contracts are discussed Dec. 31, 1944, tape R79-0183, Jack Benny Collection; April 4, 1943, tape R86-0144, ibid., Nov. 3, 1935, tape R77-0077, ibid.; 1940, Jack Benny Show, disk 3, side 1; 1936, ibid., disk 2, side 2; and April 21, 1948, Jack Benny, tape 2.
Benny and others associated professionally with the Jack Benny show attributed its success to the fact that listeners saw themselves in the characters and events of the shows. The content of the show reflected the economic anxieties of the listeners with regard to such issues as consumerism, banking, gambling, and employment. But these issues were treated with considerable ambiguity, so that both pro- and anticapitalist messages were offered, perhaps reflecting the audience’s ambivalences, and allowing for “negotiated” readings of the show. However, the show’s ultimate ideological stances are clear. By ridiculing Jack’s fears of consumption and of banks, the show suggests that such fears are unfounded, and that even within a consumerist(9,15),(996,989), credit-using society, one can still be an individual capable of choices. By associating gambling with black communities, the show discourages white people from participating in such “irrational” economic practices. And by representing Jack as really in control of all the members of his family, the show suggests that economic power is indeed the basis for male authority, as even the most effeminate or absurd man can achieve this. Through the subordinate family members’ attempts to resist Jack and his ultimately effective assertions of power, the show models a form of male authority in the home that could well have appealed to people anxious about the economy and its impact on traditional family structures. However, because so many men could not fulfill this breadwinner role, the show offered listeners the possibility that being a man in control entailed nothing more than possessing a congeries of features like age, ostensible gender, and position as a homeowner and manager of family labor. If Jack, who is so ridiculous, can be unquestionably a male in control of his family, then any man with these features can be.

Although much of the dynamic within Jack Benny’s imaginary family involves bickering, teasing, insults, and disagreements, it is also clear that the members of the group ultimately accept each others’ foibles and care for one another. In light of this positive view of the accepting family, one of the most striking aspects of the Jack Benny show is its erasure of married women. At a time of great anxiety about the family, the show represented a family and a world without the wives and mothers whose existence as dependents or breadwinners so threatened men’s self-images and masculinity. The show created a fantasy projection of a basically all-male family, one likely to appeal to men with embattled feelings about women’s expectations of support from them and their ability to provide it. This erasure of women is achieved through the same use of ambiguity and doubling found elsewhere in the show. Though Mary is a main character, she is the only cast member without a clear function or job. Mary originally appeared on the show in 1934 as a fan from Plainfield, New Jersey. She proved so popular with audiences that she was written in full-time as Jack’s secretary, but in the shows she does no secretarial work. Benny’s writers retrospectively stated that Mary had no clear role. She is not Jack’s girl friend, a fact indicated by her discussing her dates with other men with Jack and teasing him.

about his inability to get dates himself. But their relationship was ambiguous enough that listeners could identify Mary as Jack's girl friend or simply as "one of the guys," bonding with the men against the patriarchal figure of Jack.29

Mary exists in the show to mark the place of women within the family and to obscure the erasure of women generally. Yet she herself is frequently erased within the program. Though she is often part of a group, her presence is not noted with cues such as footsteps and sound effects. As new characters enter the show, they usually say, "Hi Fellas!" even when Mary is there. She is not heard in group responses and, often, is not introduced when part of a group. She also joins the men in teasing Jack about his pitiful social life; like them, she can get dates. In short, Mary is allowed to exist as one of the "Fellas," but she is erased as a woman.30

Another way to understand Mary's character is to compare her with female comic characters in contemporary movies. In her imaginative new study of 1930s romantic comedies, Elizabeth Kendall argues that the central figures of these films are self-assured, witty, sensible, morally competent women, capable of being equal partners with men. In Kendall's view, the upheavals of the depression made it difficult for Hollywood to represent an ideal American man; the industry responded by producing gangster and horror movies featuring violent, angry, or defeated males. During this transitional period, the heroines of early depression comedies came to represent the common man, a key type in 1930s culture. It was women characters whose actions advanced the films' narratives and who compelled the audience's identification. Kendall contends that by mid-decade, men had once again become the central figures of romantic comedies. Strong women were still represented, but their power was undermined.31 Mary can be understood as precisely this sort of early depression comedy heroine, a witty, knowing, independent working woman, whose tough exterior does not completely hide her fondness for Jack, despite his failings. To the extent that she represents the "little man," she can be "one of the guys." When Mary is considered as a woman, however, she is subject to Jack's control.

Insofar as the show concedes Mary's individuality, she offers a kind of female discourse, largely in the form of awful poems or letters from her mother in Plainfield. Mary's attempts to read them to Jack constitute an important running joke in the show. Jack often tries and fails to keep her from reading, but though she succeeds in being heard, Jack's interruptions mediate Mary's self-expression. As she reads, he punctuates nearly every stanza or sentence with such comments as "Well!" or "Heavens!" or "Hmmm." Those expostulations may be understood as Jack's "gaze" at Mary; they show he is present and listening, but the audience hears her words through him, not directly from her. In this way, Mary's female discourse is controlled and contained. That discourse competes with and is ultimately contained by Jack's

29 Josef Berg, *Jack Benny Show*, 68. This intimacy between Jack and Mary may well model the "companionate marriage" ideal that emerged in the 1920s. See Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven, 1987), 156–59.
power to control reality on his show. Nevertheless, an alternative voice and a familiar positive female character type to attract female listeners to the show is present.

Aside from Mary, women were rarely represented on the show except as sex objects (including guest movie stars) discussed by the playboys Rochester and Phil and as single working women, including secretaries, phone operators, and salesclerks, who are portrayed as unattractive. Women as wives and mothers were completely absent, and marriage was erased. Male listeners experiencing family stress may have enjoyed this fictional world in which men had no responsibility to provide for others and, by extension, no possibility of failing to provide.

In fact, in this alternative family, Rochester is Jack's wife. He lives with and cares for Jack and accepts board and a minimal amount of money for his services. Together they construct a satisfying homelife without women.

Rochester is feminized, as are many black male characters in popular culture, such as Bill ("Bojangles") Robinson, Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland, and Willy Best. His status as wife in conveyed in a variety of ways. When questioned about serving Jack's dinner on paper plates, Rochester explains that it is "National Save a Wife Week," sponsored by paper goods companies. Asked how this pertains to him, Rochester replies, "Boss, anyone whose contract reads, 'Til death do us part' fits in that category." Similarly, Jack has Rochester rehearse a movie love scene with him. Mary enters as Rochester is agreeing to marry Jack: she says neutrally, "Hello Jack. What's Rochester doing on your lap?" Jack says only, "Huh?" but Rochester pipes up with, "It's quite all right, Miss Livingstone, he was just asking me to marry him." Jack and Rochester's "marriage" is also represented when Jack calls neighbor Ronald Colman and asks him to stop arguing with his wife, as it is disturbing Jack's violin practice. He confides, "It's nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, it happens in the best of families. . . . Now Ronnie, Ronnie, you don't have to stand on ceremony with me. Even Rochester and I have our little tiffs, but we always patch it up and I'm sure you will too. I mean, it's not hard if you'll just . . ." The potentially subversive representation of an interracial marriage between two men is undermined by the characterization of Rochester as a very successful playboy, while Jack constantly pursues uninterested women. Their aggressive heterosexuality, like that of the other men in the cast, obscures their all-male family and thus makes it acceptable. Further, this ambiguity allows the construction of a family where certain non-threatening women and some feminine qualities in men are permitted, but where no culturally idealized wives and mothers intrude.32

Within this male-centered world, a variety of forms of masculinity are portrayed as acceptable. Although Jack fails to meet the norms of manliness Phil Harris and Rochester exemplify, he remains in charge as the head of the family.

Jack's lack of masculinity shows up most clearly in his inability to get dates with women, a failing that earns him the introduction "America's boy friend who can't get a date." He is extremely jealous of Phil, whose multiple dates in one evening

32 Josefsberg, Jack Benny Show, 134, May 3, 1942, tape R79.0182, Jack Benny Collection; April 14, 1946, tape R82.0032, ibid.
and frequent phone calls from movie stars enrage Jack. The invidious comparison between Jack and Phil is duplicated with Rochester, who also has women calling him and a date every night. Their physical attractiveness is clearly part of their success, while Phil says of a shirtless Jack’s unimposing physique, “Get a load of that chest! It’s the only skin hammock I ever saw!”

Jack lacks another crucial marker of masculinity: the ability to drink heavily. New Year’s Eve shows, in particular, depicted Jack as unable to hold his liquor, likely to become drunk on two fingers of root beer. By contrast, Phil and Rochester are both portrayed as prodigious drinkers. Phil sees pink elephants, and Rochester uses the washing machine to make a punch so alcoholic it blows up the house. Both men go to parties that last for days.

Jack’s lack of masculinity may also be associated with his class position. For many people, Jack’s Beverly Hills home, his tuxedos, and his having a servant would mark him as a member of the effete rich. Poking fun at Jack’s effeminacy might well express class antagonism toward the wealthy. By contrast, both Rochester and Phil use the argot of the hipster and are supposed to be illiterate and ignorant. These qualities are often associated with working-class status, and by extension, with a vigorous, non-elite masculinity.

Although Jack is portrayed as effeminate and linked with men in close affective bonds, his heterosexuality is not exactly in question. The bonds between men in the family are denoted as manly, healthy, and nonsexual by the introduction of “sissy” characters clearly to be understood as gay. For example, the recurring Nasty Man character can be understood as a stereotypical homosexual man. He has an effeminate voice, is pompous and cranky, and holds jobs typically associated with homosexual men, including those of floorwalker and waiter. His sexual nonconformity is marked in several ways. First, there are numerous “fruit” jokes in his interactions with Jack, and he addresses Jack as Dreamboat, Sweet Pea, and Bright Eyes. His effeminacy is reinforced by his retorts: “Of course I’m the floorwalker, Lily Pad. Do you think I’d be in this madhouse if I wasn’t getting eighteen dollars a week and my lingerie wholesale?”

These hints of homoeroticism became much more numerous and explicit during World War II. In one 1943 show, Jack and Fred Allen sing a duet of “People Will Say We’re in Love” from the musical Oklahoma! The last verse is:

Fred: Don’t start collecting things.
Jack: Give me back my rose and glove.

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35 This connection was made in films of the era. See Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies (New York, 1981), 16.

Both: Sweetheart, they're suspecting things.
People will say we're in love.

Surely all of the humor of this did not derive from the fact that neither man could sing. When Jack has to kiss Ann Sheridan in a movie scene, singer Dennis Day asks, "Right after you kiss her, can I kiss you?" The Nasty Man's sexuality is also clarified during this period.

Jack: Are you the floorwalker?
Nasty: Well, what do you think I am?
(long pause)
Jack: That's beside the point. Are you the floorwalker?

With Phil Harris, Jack does a routine in which Phil claims to have been a great lover in his last movie.

Jack: Lover! If you're such a great leading man, how come at the end of the picture, Victor Mature wins out?
Phil: He didn't win, Jackson. He lost.
Jack: What are you talking about? He got Betty Grable.
Phil: I know... but he wanted me!

When Orson Welles replaced Benny as host for several weeks (Benny had pneumonia), Welles's sexuality was the topic of repeated jokes. Asked about his relationship to Mr. Welles's female secretary, his pompous, effeminate male secretary says, "Oh, she's his private secretary. I'm right out in the open." And when Welles cannot see Jack in his bedclothes because the illness has made him so pale, Jack asks, "Can't you see my big blue eyes?" Welles replies, "Yes, they're gorgeous."37

This routine humor about the existence of homosexual men and the flirting between men in the family draws on the tradition of homosexual humor in vaudeville, burlesque, and early films. Female impersonators, "nance acts" featuring effeminate comedians, and stereotypical "sissies" were all common in popular culture and were widely understood by audiences as representations of gay men. Homosexuality was stigmatized, but many Americans were well aware of gay men as a distinct group, supposedly recognizable by their effeminate carriage and behavior. The Benny show capitalized on the widespread popular association of gay men with effeminacy, particularly in the shaping of Jack's character. Indeed, perhaps because of the characterization of Benny as effeminate, he was widely rumored to have been gay himself.38

37 "Command Performance," Dec. 25, 1943, in Benny vs. Allen, disk 2, side 1. The pairing of Allen and Benny was part of an ongoing mock feud that began in 1936. Each man made fun of the other on his show, and they periodically appeared together to trade wisecracks throughout the 1940s. See Wallerstein, Radio Comedy, 181-88. May 3, 1942, tape R79:0182, Jack Benny Collection. Jack responds patronizingly to the question from Dennis, "It's no use waiting. I've got to have a talk with that kid." This reply was a running gag for some time, reinforcing Jack's role as the father figure of the group. "Command Performance," Dec. 25, 1944, in Benny vs. Allen, disk 2, side 2; Fein, Jack Benny, 119-20; March 17, 1940, tape R88:0158, Jack Benny Collection; April 11, 1943, tape R88:0144, ibid.

38 Robert Toll, On with the Show: The First Century of Show Business in America (New York: 1976), 239-63; Russo, Celluloid Closet, 4-59. For a study of homosexual characters on the Broadway stage, see Curtin, "We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians." For an example of the awareness of gay men, see George Chauncey, Jr., "Christian
Jokes about gay men may have become more numerous during the war because of a perceived need to represent positive male bonding and to laugh at the possibility of homosexuality in the military during World War II. Benny did many shows from military bases during the war, a context in which gay humor was not unusual.²⁹

The presence of gay foils and humor in the Benny show allows a homoerotic subtext to be depicted safely. Though Jack is part of a nearly all-male family in which flirting is common, the male bonding represented appears nonsexual because the real homosexuals have been depicted as simpering outsiders. This benign presentation of male bonding is crucial because so much of the show is about relations between men. Also, it suggests that the spectrum of acceptable masculinity is wide, from Phil's hard-drinking promiscuity to Jack's dateless effeminacy. Perhaps the show's tolerance offered a way of redefining masculinity in a time when heterosexual conflict was widespread and when normal masculine prerogatives were not available to many men. That is, the show represents authority and masculinity as deriving primarily from a man's economic position, regardless of his other traits. At the same time, it offers sexual prowess, drinking, and an impressive physique as aspects of masculinity that can be demonstrated by men without economic power.

Jack's servant Rochester Van Jones was added to the primary cast in 1937 and was an essential component of the show's continuing success. Originally playing a cameo role as a train porter on one of Jack's cross-country trips, Rochester proved so popular with listeners that he was added to the permanent cast.⁴⁰ With the advent of this character, the show began an increased emphasis on Jack's homelife, presenting more sketches in a domestic setting.

Rochester's characterization conformed to prevailing white stereotypes about African-American men, caricatures that allowed white listeners to laugh at and feel superior to him. Rochester can be seen as a combination of the Coon and Sambo character types, whose supposed unreliability, laziness, dishonesty, superstition, ignorance, and carnality were well-known to listeners from vaudeville and other popular cultural forms. On routine excursions to Harlem or to Central Avenue in

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²⁹ Homosexuality was a concern of soldiers and military administrators during this period. Alan Besheé states that gay humor was a staple of United States Army entertainments in which all the female parts were played by men in drag. These entertainments were staged by Special Service units, which put on shows all over the world. See Alan Besheé, Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Lesbians in World War II (New York, 1990), 67-97. Jack Benny served in a similar entertainment unit in World War I.

⁴⁰ Rochester was played by movie actor and vaudevillean Eddie Anderson, who was the first black actor to be on a national radio program full-time. Wertheim, Radio Comedy, 151-52. See also Daniel Leab, From Sambo to Superpode: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures (Boston, 1975), 115-21.
Los Angeles, he is extremely active sexually, drinks prodigiously, attends wild parties, gambles, and carries a knife.41

Rochester's servile status is marked in several ways. First, he is called only by his first name, and he addresses Jack as "Boss." Second, he is feminized, as a way of minimizing his power over Jack. This feminization is both homoerotic and evocative of slavery. As noted above, there are numerous references to Rochester being Jack's wife. Not only do the references suggest a homosexual relationship, they also evoke the sexual advances white employers made toward black female domestics; they thus put Rochester in a female position. Rochester also steals and wears Jack's clothes, as female employers often accused their female domestics of doing—another plot device equating Rochester with women. (Of course, it also reinforces the stereotype that black people often steal.) He wears flowered aprons over his suits in movies with Jack and makes constant reference to the cooking, cleaning, and washing he has to do. Those are tasks not usually done by male servants, again suggesting feminization. Rochester also uses the same kind of illogical logic and "irrational" thinking that characterizes female characters in 1930s radio and movies. The experience of slavery is evoked when Rochester recounts his lawyer's reaction to his contract with Jack. Rochester explains ruefully, "He just shook his head and said 'Lincoln wouldn't like this!'"42

Although Rochester exemplifies many negative stereotypes about black men, he also subverts them. He often gets the best of Jack and is in control of his employer's life; Jack is rather helpless and dependent by comparison with his valet. First, Rochester wears Jack's clothes and Errol Flynn's watch, an appropriation of his "master's" power. (Employers strongly disliked domestics they perceived as dressing above their station.) Second, he claims to his girl friends that he owns oil wells with Jack, thus elevating himself to Jack's level. Third, though Jack often becomes furious with him, the anger does not upset Rochester. It is clear that Rochester has a whole separate life in the black community and that he does not identify with Jack. Rochester's deference is only a mask that he dons in the most obvious way, and he is unaffected by and resists Jack's attempts to punish him.43


42 On white attitudes toward black domestics, see David Katzman, Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America (New York, 1978), 183-87, 194-202. Rochester might be compared with the Colmans' butler, Sherwood, who is white and who is called by his last name. He is extremely proper and formal and does none of the domestic work that Rochester does. See Dec. 9, 1945, tape R82:0030, Jack Benny Collection, April 4, 1943, tape R88:0248, ibid.; May 10, 1942, tape R79:0183, ibid.

43 Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1; May 3, 1942, tape R79:0182, Jack Benny Collection. Dec. 12, 1938, Jack Benny, tape 1. Trudier Harris finds the same depiction of black female domestics' separate lives in novels of this period. See Trudier Harris, From Mammies to Militants: Domestic in Black American Literature (Philadelphia, 1982), 29-32, 87-91. See also Judith Rollins, Between Women: Domestic and Their Employers (Philadelphia, 1983), 167-71. It is noteworthy, however, that Rochester's community stays separate. Black women are almost never heard on the show, except briefly as his girl friends. With the exception of Rochester, African Americans barely exist in this show.
The depiction of Rochester's community is also stereotypical and represents white conceptions of and fascination with African-American neighborhoods and culture. Through Rochester, the white listener was encouraged to hear the black world as an unknown, chaotic place of forbidden fun. Parties, gambling, music, and sex are central to this mysterious world, where Rochester is beyond Jack's control. This aspect of the show reflected many white listeners' fears of being unable to control or to contain "irrational" blacks, fears stimulated by race riots in large cities in 1935 and 1942–1943.44

Like the other members of the family, Rochester is a fundamentally ambiguous character. He could be heard as a stereotypical black man or as a hilarious resister of authority, as a subservient domestic or as the indispensable organizer in charge of Jack's life. Similarly, he could be understood as Jack's wife or lover, or as an oversexed heterosexual playboy. Although his resistance, like that of the other characters, is ultimately contained, Rochester's simultaneous exemplification of, and escape from, stereotypes allowed audiences to interpret him in different ways. The show thus gave scope to individual listeners' conflicting and contradictory feelings about African-American people and communities. Aside from reinforcing white listeners' feeling of racial superiority, the Rochester character may have expressed (and defused through laughter) many men's anxieties about changes in sex roles that involved their doing domestic work. His license to express negative feelings about his employer without any consequences may have reflected class antagonisms. On the other hand, his presence may have made white listeners identify more with their white employers.

The complexity of the character was partly reflected in audience response to him. In general, African Americans did not complain about Rochester, though many were fighting to change other images of their race in popular culture. The fact that blacks registered strong objections to only a few Benny shows suggests that, on the whole, Rochester was not nearly as objectionable as, for example, Amos 'n' Andy. But, of course, what was acceptable to black Americans changed significantly in the 1940s, as was demonstrated by the huge protest at the 1950 rebroadcast of a 1940 Benny show; its original broadcast had raised no objections. In this show, Rochester has disappeared into Harlem and Jack tries to find him by calling the numbers in Rochester's address book. Jack reaches a series of black women at brothels and at businesses like the "Harlem-Gin-Till-You-Spin Club." The episode suggests that Rochester has done nothing but shoot craps, drink, and womanize, and that Harlem is full of simple, childlike people entirely driven by physical appetites. The other strong response to the character came from white southerners, who disapproved of

44 McElvaine, Great Depression, 190. As with the projection of gambling onto African Americans, the show's projection of negative attributes onto Rochester and his community might be related to the history of minstrelsy. Scholars have noted that minstrelsy's popularity can be attributed in part to white people's need to project onto blacks attributes that they desire but do not wish to embrace openly. See Nathan Irvin Huggins, The Harlem Renaissance (New York, 1971), 244–91, David Roediger, The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London, 1991), 95–131, Robert Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America (New York, 1974).
what they perceived as Rochester’s disrespect, as well as of Rochester’s status as one of the family. For example, southerners objected to Rochester swimming in Jack’s pool. But the show that precipitated the largest audience response was one in which Rochester helped Jack train for a boxing match with Fred Allen. Thousands of listeners wrote in to complain about a black man striking a white man. These controversies reflected both demands for, and unease with, changing depictions of African Americans in popular culture.45

The show’s structure contributed significantly to its reaching a wide and varied audience, and to underlining its dominant ideological messages. One consistent structural device was the blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction. All but one of the featured actors played themselves as characters and were introduced by name. The exception was Eddie Anderson, who was introduced as “Rochester,” if at all.46 This difference served to undermine Rochester’s status as an equal member of the group. Some aspects of the actors’ real lives were integrated into the fictional characters, blurring boundaries even further. Sketches often took as subjects planning or rehearsing the show; the actors were sometimes depicted as the cast of Jack’s radio show, at other times they were not. The artificiality of the medium was routinely pointed out and made fun of through asides to the audience or the integration of mistakes or “bloopers” into the show.

The show’s structure also allowed the portrayal of Jack and Mary as having tenuous relationships to production and wage earning. That is, Jack pays Mary a salary, but what for? Similarly, it is not clear that Jack works. Sometimes he is a radio host, at other times not; often he is scrounging for any work that will bring him a little money. They can both be seen as either working or unemployed, an uncertain status that mirrored the experience of many Americans in the 1930s.

These examples demonstrate the way the show consistently exploited ambiguities, allowing listeners to identify with different characters or messages simultaneously and sequentially, in the course of a broadcast. Underlying messages supporting white male dominance and consumerism were always present, but they may not have been received intact by the “negotiating” audience.

The format of the show also moved between fantasy or fiction and supposed realism. Most programs followed the same order: commercial, cast repartee, music, commercial, skit, music, skit, commercial, closing. This form was quite predictable

45 Joesfsberg, Jack Benny Show, 81–85; Fein, Jack Benny, 76–77; Wertheim, Radio Comedy, 154–55. Joesfsberg argues that when new writers took over in the midst of a new wartime sensitivity to racial issues, the offensive racist aspects of Rochester’s character were eliminated. He asserts that the show no longer did racial or ethnic humor, operating under the premise that the lines could be given to any member of the cast and would still be funny. A big change in Rochester’s character is not perceptible on the basis of my sample. Joesfsberg, Jack Benny Show, 80–82; Wertheim, Radio Comedy, 154–55.

46 In some shows, though Rochester appears, he is not mentioned in the credits at the opening of the program. Eddie Anderson became so identified with his character that even when he was playing very different parts in films, he was listed on movie credits as Eddie (“Rochester”) Anderson. For example, see Cabin in the Sky, dir. Vincente Minnelli (MGM, 1943); and Topper Returns, dir. Roy del Ruth (Hal Roach, 1944).
and therefore somehow reassuring; it was a stable form within which chaos could be allowed to erupt, because it would be formally contained. The form is exactly like the ritornello form that structures swing music. Audiences accustomed to listening to swing would hear the commercial as a theme that was repeated periodically, as the most important unifying device in the show. Selling the sponsor's product was thus made the most important formal element of the program.

The movement from cast repartee to music to skits disrupted whatever suspension of disbelief was established within the different parts of the show. That is, the listener was drawn into the conceit of hearing the characters interact in a compelling fictional world, but then that world was revealed as fictional, which destroyed the suspension of disbelief. This structure worked to break down the listener's interpretations of particular characters, allowing for shifting identifications. Parts of the show were not plotted, and they relied on running gags, insults, and some topical humor. Other segments were plotted, including the Buck Benny serials (a takeoff on cowboy shows), the annual New Year's plays, and many of the movie spoofs. In the plotted segments, Jack was usually central, and strong identifications with him were established. But in the repartee and transition sections of the show, the listener was led to side with those lampooning Jack and to have little sympathy with him.

Though Jack was the butt of the jokes, he was still in control because he consistently introduced the subjects about which he would be teased. This combination of format, structural devices, and character development designed to allow multiple identifications by listeners resulted in the show appealing to a wide variety of audiences.

The Jack Benny program was extremely popular from its beginnings in 1932 until well into the 1940s, because it reflected, made fun of, and symbolically resolved a variety of cultural anxieties felt by Americans during the Great Depression and World War II. By presenting a group of unrelated people as an unspoken family, the show allowed for the safe and humorous exploration of issues of family life, particularly ones raised by changes in economics and gender roles. The show represented financial fears of listeners and modeled responses that reassured the audience about consumption, gambling, credit, labor relations, and banks. Similarly, the show portrayed a variety of forms of masculinity in a positive light and thereby shored up the self-esteem of men whose family authority was shaken by the widespread economic distress.

The show consistently included ambiguities of form and content that allowed listeners to negotiate with the program's texts to create their own understandings of the characters and their actions and thereby to accept or reject the show's apparent messages. In this way, the Jack Benny show could be enjoyed by a wide spectrum of listeners, all trying to make sense of a world in economic and social disorder.