The Women Are the Strong Ones

by Brittany Flaming

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We all know television is a major influence on people’s daily lives. What we see on screen reflects our values and thoughts. Television teaches us how to feel, how to act, how to interact with people, and—especially if we’re woman—how to interact with the opposite and same sex. But how many times have you watched a show and not seen yourself represented on screen? And then how many times have you gone out and been misrecognized as a caricature instead of yourself by others? Televised images of ill-drawn “Mary Sue” characters tell us who we are, who we ought to be, and how we should expect to be treated. They tell us how (and how not) to dress, what to think, what to say, and how to act. Yet these characters rarely have any depth, are usually employed in typically feminine jobs, or stay at home with children—and they’re usually one of two personality types: the beautiful but dumb slut or the mother figure. We know such women all too well from shows such as The Middle, where Patricia Heaton plays pandering, sarcastic mom Frankie Heck, or The Big Bang Theory, featuring Penny (she doesn’t even have a last name) played by Kaley Cuoco, a small-town girl who moved to California to chase her dreams and be constantly demeaned by and demeaning to her nerd next door neighbors. This is not to say these characters lack depth, but rather it is as if TV can only imagine them within this ‘two types of women’ context. Even though bland female characters designed to represent as many women as possible at once outnumber multi-faceted characters such as Robin Sherbatsky on How I Met Your Mother, Allison Argent and Lydia Martin on Teen Wolf, or the lead female characters on Game of Thrones, things are changing. Expanding diversity in TV networks and new viewer demands are now driving television. No longer are viewers passively absorbing images of women portrayed as side characters for male enjoyment. Viewers today use blogs and participate in online forums, all of which serve to bring the fictional world into the real one, building communities centered on the exploration of complex male and female characters, and viewers today are more vocal about how they should be represented on screen. The overly sexualized ‘slut next door’ and completely nonsexual mother characters no longer fit the viewers’ expectations, and they are being replaced by female characters that are strong, independent, and sexually empowered, with their own stories and battles outside of their male counterparts.
The misrepresentation of women on television is a problem because representation tells us the type of people it is okay to emulate in everyday life. For women in particular, representation is a smoking gun. Men still dominate television shows, despite the recent increases in female characters. Often, a female character feels more like she is filling a quota rather than being her own character. Journalist Nina Bahadur found that only 38.9% of speaking characters featured during the 2012 spring prime-time television season were women. And of all fictionalized television characters of the previous two years, women made up only 41% of the characters on television (Azad). Today, Bahader observes, women on television have hovered around the 30% of characters for the past few decades, with exceptions during the 1970s and the reemergence of the women’s liberation movement. Women are often still portrayed as primarily working in the domestic fields, and several long running sitcoms continue to be man-centered and revolve around men more frequently than women. Despite the modest increase of roles for women on TV, shows such as Two and Half Men and The Big Bang Theory tend to feature female characters who are merely versions of the protective, asexual mother figure or the over-sexualized, slutty, girl-next-door figure. When these shows do focus on women’s sexuality, they are dismissive, shaming, and ridiculing to women who are sexually dominant. Female characters who know what they want and how to get it are demonized as ‘bitches’ and swiftly punished for their actions. Such misrepresentation of women, Bahadur suggests, encourages its male and female audiences to believe that what women offer to the men in their lives, either sexually or by cleaning up the kitchen, is the most important aspect of their personality, their job, and their personhood.

Fortunately there are female characters on television that counteract the old tropes, expressing what it means to be a modern, everyday American woman in an atmosphere that is crowded by loud male voices. Thanks to the growing voices of unhappy viewers, an emerging number of female characters on television now are young women who are dealing with their own femininity and what it means in their own ways, instead of being built on pleasing men. Take a look at How I Met Your Mother’s Robin Sherbatsky, played by Cobie Smulders. Originally developed as the ‘one who got away’ love interest for the series main lead, Ted Mosby, Robin has spun off into her own strong independent character in the series. She’s smart, funny, beautiful, and drinks scotch like a man. A successful journalist as well, Robin decides to move halfway across the world to Japan at one point, leaving her friends and family behind. A female character originally intended to be on the pedestal, Robin instead causes fights, screams at her peers, and has trouble expressing her emotions. Robin also loves sex and enjoys being sexually appealing, dressing provocatively repeatedly to draw attention to herself. In an episode last season, Robin embarrassingly admitted to getting off on images of herself anchoring the news while in bed with her partner (“The Pre-Nup”). Her vanity and enjoyment of her own body and sexual prowess are admirable in a televised environment that often tells women such enjoyment is only acceptable at the permission of a man and should otherwise be demonized and punished. Sex positivity, the view that consensual sexual activities are healthy and pleasurable for everyone, is a large facet of Robin’s personality. Refusing to be shamed for her sexual enjoyment of herself and others, Robin takes pride in her body and her work. From one episode to another, she proves again that it is okay for a woman to put her career first, that it is all right to want to be strong and feel weak, and that a woman can be equally masculine and feminine without her peers putting her down or shaming her for having feelings or not expressing those emotions. She represents the contradictions of being a modern woman in America, feeling torn between love and job, family and friends, sex and power. Robin’s
sex positivity and image are a breath of fresh air in a misogynistic network television world dominated by over-sexualized and slut shamed women.

Women on television are still associated with often-negative images of femininity, and teen girls usually receive the brunt force of opposition to sexual images on television. Leading the vanguard against this negativity, MTV's hit show Teen Wolf explores sex positivity in a safe and consensual context. Written, directed, and produced by Jeff Davis, Teen Wolf is a supernatural take on the modern American teenager in a world that is refreshingly absent of racism, homophobia, and sexism. Teen Wolf represents the American teenage girl in Lydia Martin and Allison Argent, played by Holland Roden and Crystal Reed. These girls are frequently shown discussing clothes and fashion together, a traditional facet of their femininity, and never once are they put down for it. In one memorable scene, Lydia figuratively puts on her 'war paint', a full face of make-up, at night, only for herself (“The Tell”). She uses a traditionally aspect of femininity often perceived as weak to make herself feel strong and in control of herself and her environment. Allison, who is introduced as the pretty new girl, quickly evolves from love interest into badass hunter in her own right; she is strong when needed, but also soft and feminine. Allison is a werewolf hunter’s daughter, and her story arc in season one is about being strong: “That night at school, I felt utterly weak. Like I needed someone to come and rescue me. I hate that feeling. I want to be stronger than that. I want to feel powerful” (“Wolf’s Bane”). In season two and the first half of season three, Allison’s arc is about juggling her duties as daughter, girlfriend, student, and leader. Halfway through season 3, she assumes her rightful position as leader of the Argent family. But besides the Allison and Lydia’s individual strengths, their sex positivity and the message they send to young girls is also important. Allison and Lydia, like Robin, refuse to be shamed for their sexual identity or their enjoyment of the power it gives them. These young women are not shunned for their sexual enjoyment, unlike in shows such as Gossip Girl and Glee that feature similar teenage girl characters who are called sluts for being sexually active in high school and put down in a culture that encourages misogyny and sexual negativity. Allison and Lydia’s peers do not punish them for their actions, and they are popular at school for their intelligence instead of their sexual conduct.

Teen Wolf is refreshingly free from the male gaze—the objectification of women’s bodies for the assumed male viewer—and the only exploitation for the viewers is that of the male werewolves, who show off their well-defined abs and pectorals in the moonlight. This reversal carries through its portrayal of the normal teen high school romance. Allison is in charge of the physical part of her relationship with Scott, while Scott calls the emotional shots. She is the first to hold his hand, to suggest a date between only the two of them, to kiss, and the first to procure condoms. Instead of the traditional, passive symbol of blossoming teenage sexuality, Allison is assertive and takes initiative in her relationship. The atmosphere of the show projects a supportive, consensual environment where Allison and Lydia are free to explore their growing sexual urges.

This characterization is particularly important because sex positive images in television are still hard to find for young girls, especially teenage girls. In a study led by Rita Atwood, a sample of viewers was interviewed about the images and portrayal of women on television. Only 36.7% of those interviewed identified and described female characters as strong or independent, versus 43.3% who identified women as “stupid sex objects or incompetent housewives” (Atwood). The numbers for negatively associated female traits, such as “gossipy,” “emotional,” or “weak,” were much higher than those for positive traits, like “rational,” “objective,” and “strong,” and those viewed negatively directly relate back to their
sexual or nonsexual identity (Atwood). Sex positivity is important for women and teenaged girls because it allows women to reclaim their sexual identity and bodies for themselves, without fear of being put down as sluts. It is a way of gaining control over the constant objectification of women in television and real life, and a way to firmly hold tight of a woman’s agency. Allison and Lydia represent teen girls in a welcome way, as diverse individuals who are given free reign of their sexualities and identities in a television market that traditionally balks at any such liberties.

Sex positive women also feature heavily in HBO’s fantastic fantasy crossover hit, Game of Thrones. Based on the fantasy series A Song of Ice and Fire by George R. R. Martin, the series details the intimate power struggles between and within warring families as they battle it out to rule the kingdom of Westeros. What truly sets the show apart is the diversity of women. Despite how limiting a medieval fantasy world could be, the variety of women is not limited to teenage girls; from maidservants and whores to queens and warrior princesses, there is a female character of every kind. The second season focuses on the women more than the men, exploring the characters of Cersei Lannister and Daenerys Targaryen in their individual struggles. Cersei Lannister is beautiful and fiercely competitive; she envies her brothers for being men and wishes she could rule Westeros herself. Lena Headey, who plays Cersei, says [Cersei] “burns with anger... because she wasn’t born a man,” and she envies her brothers, “because they’re so respected because they’re guys” (Keveney). Traditionally, Cersei falls into the asexual mother figure, hated for her power and callousness, but the show is careful to navigate around traits older viewers might hate her for. Her ‘bitchiness’ is valued and a key aspect of her survival and her hard heartedness enables her to keep her emotions in check and manipulate her son, the king. Daenerys starts her journey on the show as a young, naïve girl who is forced to marry for what her brother perceives as a power advantage for their family. After the death of her brother and her husband, she assumes the role of ‘Khaleesi,’ a warrior queen and mother of dragons who leads her people into battle. Not only are these women diverse in character and age, but they also become sexually empowered in different ways. As with any HBO show, there is a lot of nudity. Some argue that this is sexist, but actress Michelle Fairley (Catelyn Stark) claims, “The women do not come over as victims. [They] seem to be in control of their own destinies... There is a lot of sex in it because that’s the nature of the world they live in, the time they live in, which could be said about today and the way women in the media use their sexuality to further their careers” (Keveney). Game of Thrones highlights a patriarchal and medieval practice of advancing women for how they appear and act around men, and by smartly bringing it to the viewers’ attention, the show examines how this dynamic is still, unbelievably, in effect today. But unlike the real world at times, the women of Game of Thrones use their sexuality boldly and are as complex as they are beautiful. They are not beholden to men to advance in the world. Daenerys wins the loyalty of her people and steps out of the shadow of her ruined family by herself, choosing which battles to fight and which cities to call upon for allies. Critics who argue that the sexual overtones of the shows are sexist and marginalize the women are not seeing the larger picture. In a world where a son guarantees a lineage, kingship, and powerful future, sex is the natural resulting currency and a source of power for the women of the time. Beholden to sexual negativity and privacy, these critics would impose a puritanical ideology on a fantasy world where sex is power and survival, and then only apply it to the women. Sex for pleasure in Game of Thrones has public consequences, for men and for women, from producing an heir to the throne to invalidating a marriage contract. The women in the world of Game of Thrones range from the strong to the
weak, from feminine to masculine, and many times turn out to be just as strong if not stronger than the men, something that many older network television shows are reluctant to bestow on female characters.

The success of *Game of Thrones* suggests that the American public has not idly sat by and passively absorbed the images of good girls next door, as if Penny of the *Big Bang Theory* were the only good representation of women on television. Ask a television aficionado about the women of television and you will hear the good and the bad. The bad is the quantity, with only 37% of female characters on shows representing 51% of America’s population (Azad). In a world where women are the primary viewers of almost every major network show, it is surprising to learn that women are not portrayed equally. Growing attention to the qualitative effects of female characters on television now reflects a changing attitude towards women. Women are strong, they are funny, and they are unabashed in their enjoyment of life and sex. They hold a myriad of jobs, positions of leadership, and won’t stand being shamed for their gender. Sex positivity and individual character arcs for female characters are now a normal viewing option for the American public. The digital era’s shift from passive audience to active viewing communities has forced network television channels to compete with what could be considered niche TV markets and give viewers varied female characters, and the representation of women stuck in domestic fields or figuring passive doll figures is fading away. The Penny’s and Sue Heck’s of the world are being rewritten as women with the liberty to enjoy their sexuality on their own terms. The Allison Argent’s, Robin Sherbatsky’s, and Daenerys Targaryen’s are taking their place on television and in the hearts of the American viewers. America’s new breed of sweetheart is on television, and she’s here to kick your gender norms in the ass.

**Works Cited**


