

Resisting Presentism, Reviving the Past: Feminist TV History

“Expanding the Feminist Media History Cannon”

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When we consider the history of women’s broadcast representations, the two genres that come most rapidly to mind are soap operas and sitcoms. Both genres have a long and storied history of appealing to housewives in daytime, or to women and their families in primetime. These are the genres that dominate the current TV history cannon, and they are most likely to be taught in introductory television history class segments on women in television, and the preponderance of feminist historical research, especially that focusing on pre-1980s broadcast media, has been concentrated on these so-called feminine genres. However, despite the nuanced perspective that this work has given us on many aspects of feminine representation, it is important to remember that there were other programs on television that both featured and appealed to women in different ways, and presented different types of women. Indeed, despite advertisers’ established obsession with men’s purchasing power, scholar after scholar reminds us that women were broadcasters’ chief audience at all times of the day. What we need – and what some emerging historical scholarship is examining – is an exploration of women’s representation across other genres, particularly those like crime, which have been typically associated with men, but which also frequently – and not always negatively – depicted women resisting conventional definitions of femininity.

A focus on the historical shifts in women’s representation in crime series and other atypical genres will help us to avoid allowing incomplete narratives, based on women’s representations in a few genres, to harden into apparent facts about all female representation. A focus on female-centric crime series will particularly help us complicate the narrative that media representations of women are consistently improving. As feminist media scholars looking for

signs of that all-important historical quality – change over time – we often assume that representations of women have improved since the not so good old days. But have they really? And is any improvement we can see genre-specific? Era-specific? Race specific? Women’s increasing representation in modern crime dramas is often seen as a sign of improving representation. However, in 2016, *Castle*’s Kate Beckett and *Sleepy Hollow*’s Abbie Mills, strong female investigators who had long been sidelined within their own narratives, were killed off to further their male costars’ journeys (though Kate’s life was ultimately saved when *Castle* was cancelled). Is this an improvement over 1965, when Honey West solved crime, dominated her male partner, and judo-chopped every enemy in sight?

Honey West’s cancellation, along with the cancellations of a number of other short-lived crime programs featuring female detectives, has long been interpreted as the 1960s’ repudiation of a woman’s right to judo chop. However, historical research complicates this narrative, showing that the explanation that Honey, played by Anne Francis, was not feminine enough for a mid-1960s audience was applied after of the fact, based on a few newspaper clippings, most quoting Barbara Parkins, who competed with Francis for the 1966 Best Leading Actress Emmy. Both lost to Barbara Stanwyck, but Francis was nominated for *Honey West*. The idea that 1960s audiences were not ready for Honey reappeared in 1980s commentaries on the wave of female-centric crime programs that included *Cagney & Lacey*, *Remington Steele*, and *Murder, She Wrote*. However, alternate sources, including Francis, who publicly owned a significant stake in the program, suggest *Honey West* was actually a victim of ABC’s budget woes, an allegation bolstered by the fact that the network replaced the slick production with *The Avengers*, a cheaper ITV import featuring the almost equally assertive Emma Peel.

Examining such neglected series also further pushes us to tap previously ignored archives and recover the histories of women behind the scenes, like series adapter Gwen Bagni. In the midst of a career writing for many of radio and television's top adventure and suspense dramas, most not typically associated with female audiences, Bagni and her husband, Paul Dubov, guided *Honey West* and influenced its approach to gender and crime throughout its brief life.

Rewarding as it is, historical research is difficult, especially for emerging scholars. Beyond graduate programs' and the job market's current emphasis on new media, graduate students studying historical topics are faced with the daunting challenge of funding research trips to archives spread across the country, as well as the expanded writing timelines that such projects often necessitate. Furthermore, despite our expanding access to old radio and television programs through platforms like Archive.org, Netflix, and DVD sales, many important texts – especially short-lived, niche programs like *Get Christie Love!*, a 1970s detective show featuring a black female lead – remain virtually inaccessible because of copyright and business concerns. However, this work is necessary to expand the existing canon, both for our students' sakes and our own.