

## Historically Authentic Sexism in Fantasy. Let's Unpack That.

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A great, thoughtful article at the Mary Sue on one of my pet topics: [the common justification of sexist fantasy fiction being that it's historically authentic](#).

I am BUSY today, far too busy for a rant, but then I felt one coming on, and was worried I might end up with a migraine if I tried to stifle it. You know how it is. So let's talk about sexism in history vs. sexism in fantasy.

### **WARNING, ACADEMIC IN THE HOUSE.**

I agree with pretty much everything said in the Mary Sue article: when you're writing fantasy inspired by history, you don't have to take all the ingrained sexism of historical societies along for the party, and even when you do, you don't have to write women in a sexist or demeaning way. Your fantasy will not break by treating women as if they are people too.

But my rant is actually not quite about that stuff at all. It's about history, and this notion that History Is Authentically Sexist. Yes, it is. Sure it is. We all know that. But what do you mean when you say "history?"

History is not a long series of centuries in which men did all the interesting/important things and women stayed home and twiddled their thumbs in between pushing out babies, making soup and dying in childbirth.

History is actually a long series of centuries of men writing down what they thought was important and interesting, and FORGETTING TO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN. It's also a long series of centuries of women's work and women's writing being actively denigrated by men. Writings were destroyed, contributions were downplayed, and women were actively oppressed against, absolutely.

But the forgetting part is vitally important. Most historians and other writers of what we now consider "primary sources" simply didn't think about women and their contribution to society. They took it for granted, except when that contribution or its lack directly affected men.

This does not in any way mean that the female contribution to society was in fact less interesting or important, or complicated, simply that history – *the process of writing down and preserving of the facts, not the facts/events themselves* – was looking the other way.

In history, from primary sources through most of the 20th century (I will absolve our current century-in-progress out of kindness but let's not kid ourselves here), the assumption has always been that men's actions are more politically and historically significant to society, **BECAUSE THEY ARE PERFORMED BY MEN.**

Here's an example from my Honours days: most of the history books looking at Roman state religion were clear that women's participation in the religious rituals of the state was probably less important or politically relevant, because women were excluded from making blood sacrifice. This was used as evidence, in fact, that women weren't that important to politics in general. However, more modern and forward-thinking scholars pointed out that in fact the only reason why we assume blood sacrifice was an essential and a more politically important religious rite was because **it was restricted to men.** Plenty of rituals were restricted to women too, and those rituals were assumed to be less politically relevant on the whole. Guess why. Go on, guess. As it turns out, women did perform sacrifices (mostly of baked goods), and many of their rituals were private rather than public, but they were all performing religious rituals which were essential to the state. Different does not mean better.

Rome was a highly superstitious society which relied on all manner of rituals to feel safe and protected. Those rituals which were performed within the home were as important as those performed in public places – but they weren't written about to the same extent because they were mostly done by women, often exclusively by women, and secrecy was a common element. There are many reasons why men didn't write down the details (except when they interacted with court cases) and one of those reasons was, they didn't know what those details were. Women's history, sadly, was not much of a thing, and what words women did write down were not preserved over the next millennium.

Guess why. Go on, guess.

Women's lives were not written down except on the rare occasions that they were useful tools in the politics of men, or where maligning/celebrating them was relevant to the politics of men, but that doesn't mean they weren't really, really interesting by modern standards.

History is not society. It only covers one aspect. History is imperfect, and biased, and it always, always has omissions. The most common omissions are the bits that the writer of that history took for granted that his readers would know.

So how does this affect fantasy fiction?

## **FANTASY IS NOT HISTORY**

We have a tendency in fantasy fiction to assume that the military/warfare and the politics (two key elements of epic fantasy, with magic being a strong third) are male domains because this was usually the case in history.

Well, I will agree for the **MOST** part on the warfare aspect, but I think *Battlestar Galactica* showed us that you can have female characters on the front lines of your story and still tell very close to the same kinds of stories as you would have done if the soldiers were all men. The *Starship Troopers* movie, adapting a much earlier work, showed this too. OK those are science fiction, but fantasy does not have to be hamstrung by the social conventions of the past. If you want those social conventions in place for other story reasons then you can get around that too by bringing women into the story. Terry Pratchett's *Monstrous Regiment* has

a lot to say about the different kinds of women you might find on a battlefield, and the many different reasons why they might be there despite restrictive social mores. Or, you know, you could read some actual history, because for all its patriarchal leanings, you will find that women's roles in war were a lot more varied than many people expect.

When it comes to politics, I'm sorry, but there are no excuses. Sure, women have been excluded from the public political process for large swathes of history and culture (except, you know, when they weren't – even the supreme patriarchy that was Rome didn't have complete control over the provinces, where female politicians and civil servants sprung up like weeds) but public is only one piece of politics. The Mary Sue article refers substantially to Game of Thrones, and that's a very good example, but again you can look to history – as soon as there is any form of dynastic element to your politics, then women are IMPORTANT. Even when the political careers are solely male, those men have wives and families who have a stake in the proceedings and the outcomes, they have risks to take and campaigns to wage every bit as much as the men. And if the women's politics are happening in salons rather than assembly halls... maybe you should be peeking into those salons. I can guarantee political DYNAMITE is going on in there. With finger sandwiches and mint tea? Why not?

And you know, if your political system is inherently and essentially misogynist and that is essential to your worldbuilding, then throwing a few women into that system to see what cracks first is actually the most interesting thing you could do. Like with science fiction where SCIENCE GOES WRONG is the most interesting plot.

Then there's magic. There are no excuses here. None at all. Either you have a magic system which is inclusive of women, or exclusive of women, and in both instances, FEMALE CHARACTERS ARE GOING TO HAVE OPINIONS ABOUT THAT. If you really want a patriarchal, masculine magical system, then as with politics, the most interesting thing you can do is throw women at that system, to see where the cracks are.

### **So what are the take home messages here?**

- 1.** History is more interesting than most people think. Despite everything I have said, it also has quite a lot of women in it. Read some history. Read some more. Check out the social historians, because they're the ones who tend to pay more attention to what everyone in a society are doing, not just the aristocratic men who think they're in charge.
- 2.** Treating female characters as people will make your fantasy more interesting. Not just to female readers. To readers who are people. And, let's face it, most readers are.
- 3.** Make your books better.

## [Doctor Who] Domesticating the Doctor IV: Marrying the Ponds

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The Eleventh Doctor crashes literally into Amelia Pond's back yard, and from that point on is irretrievably tangled in her life and her family – though with the exception of dancing with them (presumably) at her wedding he remains largely apart from, and free from any association with her parents and aunt. Indeed, the whole of season 5 not only has Amy's family literally removed from her life (a mystery to be solved by the Doctor) but frames the Doctor himself as her imaginary friend, a character who, in the land of child logic, would never interact with her parents and guardians anyway.

The Doctor has always been an abductor of young people, but in *The Eleventh Hour* we see him set up as an ostensible kidnapper of children. He not only gets himself invited into her house at night, he agrees to take young Amelia off on adventures with him, without any kind of permission from the adults responsible for her.

*The Eleventh Hour* is for me one of the most perfect pieces of Doctor Who storytelling of all time, but my inner parent is still going, HANG ON A MINUTE. It also raises all kinds of interesting questions of where he got hold of Susan in the first place, back in the 1960's...

The Doctor's first main scene with young Amelia, in which he tries all the foods and spits them out in dramatic fashion, demonstrates quite clearly that he is still a fish out of water in a domestic environment (and shouldn't be let out in public).

Like Rose, the adult Amy alternates between dragging the Doctor into her domestic life, and using him to escape it. Amy's house is a symbol of domesticity gone wrong: the house with missing family members and too many rooms. In that first episode, there's a monster hiding in a room she can't even remember, let alone see – and the Doctor can see her house more clearly than she can.

At the end of *The Eleventh Hour*, the big reveal is that Amy, who may or may not have "something" to come back for in the morning, has hightailed it out of her spooky house with the Doctor, leaving behind a certain wedding dress. We return later that same night, at the end of *Flesh and Stone*, because Amy thinks the best place to proposition the Doctor is back at hers, rather than the far more convenient TARDIS. Why there? Was she expecting him to dump her and wanted to make sure she was back where she started? Or was the TARDIS emanating some kind of 'no unmarried nookie in here thank you' magnetic field?

It's fascinating that the Doctor goes to so much trouble to set up Rory and Amy in *The Vampires of Venice*, in response to her failed seduction. I know there are some who might view this as him being all patriarchal, but I think his general comedic incompetence balances out his assumption that he knows what's best for them. He doesn't understand how humans work, especially the romantic aspects, and his bumbling attempts serve to show how alien he really is. It's certainly preferable to how the Tenth Doctor dealt with Martha's feelings for

him by ignoring the issue.

The Eleventh Doctor isn't completely dense, though. He figures out that Amy and Rory's relationship won't survive her having otherworldly adventures without him (much as travelling in the TARDIS [changed Rose into someone her mother almost didn't recognise](#)) but he is still flailing blindly in the dark. The obvious solution – to leave Amy with Rory and start again with a new companion – doesn't occur to him. Instead, he's determined to keep Amy even if that means bringing her feller along with him. Something he never offered any of his previous companions... and a good thing too, really, or (back in the 70's) Jo Grant would have had a TARDIS full of alien toy-boys by the time Cliff Jones came along.

Amy's Choice is one of several stories in Season 5 to deal overtly with the issue of the human desire for domesticity vs. The Doctor's aversion to it. There are two dreamworlds created in this story, one recreating the TARDIS and the other recreating the life that the Doctor thinks Amy and Rory want for themselves. You'll note that he's already thinking about the fact that someday, Amy and Rory will leave him to settle down planetside. Of course they will. The companions always do.

So dream Amy is pregnant, dream Rory is a qualified GP with a silly ponytail, and they are living in an idyllic but deeply boring country village. The dullness is accentuated by the fact that the characters actually fall asleep as they shift between dreamworlds.

The 'choice' of the story title is implied to be Amy choosing between the Doctor and Rory, as symbolised by the two dreamworlds. But that's a cheat, because the village dream isn't something Amy craves at all (and it could be argued, is only tangentially what Rory wants for them). Her choice has nothing to do with the Doctor – it's about figuring out whether she loves Rory. She chooses a future with him, regardless of where they are, and that's a choice she holds to from that point onwards, even when she doesn't remember him.

Arguably the most important story of the Eleventh Doctor vs. Domesticity is The Lodger, which has nothing to do with Amy Pond at all, but crystallises this particular Doctor's interest in how humans work.

Stranded without the TARDIS, the Doctor investigates a new creepy house which, like the house Amy grew up in, is not what it seems. Again we see him trying to fit in with humans by parodying their behaviour, not always successfully. Where he does succeed, it's often by accident – he cooks and plays football brilliantly, but is less than convincing when it comes to toothbrushes, money or emotional signals.

The story revolves around the top floor of a house that lures and kills people – a floor that was actually never there. It's a neon sign as to what has been going on with Amy all along, but also represents one of the greatest horror tropes, the idea that the place where you live might not only not be safe – but might be trying to kill you.

It's interesting really that this trope is so rarely applied to the TARDIS itself, the Doctor's hearth and home. Though of course it is, many times during this season, and Amy herself is finding out how dangerous the TARDIS can be while all of the Doctor's tea drinking and footballing is going on.

The mystery of Amy's house is unravelled in the finale of Season 5 (though the mystery of the TARDIS blowing up is not) and she leaves the house behind without a backward look,

wending her way into the universe with “her boys” as a married woman ready for adventures. This felt revolutionary at the time – the idea that a wedding doesn’t have to be the coda for ‘time to stop having fun’ or ‘second best to travelling with the Doctor’. I think it’s dangerous to only imagine weddings are the end of a story, a happy ending to strive for rather than the beginning of something new. We need more pop culture that says you can have your domesticity and swashbuckling at the same time.

It was a magnificent end to a great season of Doctor Who, but I’m not convinced that what followed was anything close to the married-in-the-TARDIS hijinks we were promised.

Having a married couple in the TARDIS (and a baby of sorts) is a huge change of focus for the show, and while it’s good that it didn’t change the format too drastically (we don’t actually want the show to turn into The Pond Sitcom however cute that YouTube trailer was) it also felt like the show didn’t change enough. A cute married couple can absolutely bomb along with the Doctor in his rickety old TARDIS without making him change his habits too drastically, especially as they were doing so in the previous season as a romantic couple anyway – but why do something different with the companions only to then NOT do anything different with the companions?

The Time and Space comic relief scenes are actually the closest we come to seeing ‘married person chatter’ or any real acknowledgement that something has changed. The funny revelation in The Doctor’s Wife that the room the Doctor set up for Amy and Rory features bunk beds (and he can’t imagine why they might not think they were awesome) and his embarrassed discussion with Madam Vastra about the conception of the baby go to show that actually, the Doctor has not had to compromise in order to make space for the Ponds in his life. They are still travelling with him on his terms, and he’s not even letting them partly set up home for themselves.

Indeed, we see that Rory is still unsure of where he stands with Amy well into Day of the Moon, and episodes like The Rebel Flesh two parter still prioritise the relationship of Amy as the Doctor’s main companion, with Rory as a sidekick. The controversial kidnapping of Amy by Madam Kovarian may put Amy in a traditionally passive role, but at least it forces the Doctor and Rory to work as a team, something we haven’t seen nearly enough of, and makes the TARDIS crew feel more united by the second half of the season.

Then there’s The Doctor’s Wife, another story about houses that are trying to kill you. It is a loving tribute to the TARDIS as the Doctor’s faithful companion (or rather, the Doctor as her faithful companion) and makes it clear that the show is really about the two of them. Companions come and go, but the TARDIS, the Doctor’s hearth and home, is always going to be there for him, and vice versa. The reason he has always fled domestic spheres in the past is not necessarily because they scare him or confuse him, but because he already has a wife and house waiting for him within those blue doors, and no one else compares to Her Indoors.

Wait, I’ve forgotten to address something.

The baby.

But that’s okay, because the show forgot to address it too!

I’m all for babies in my science fiction and fantasy. I’m a mum, and I love to see motherhood explored in my favourite genres. It’s not done nearly enough... and of course, it’s rarely done

well. It drives me batty when a pregnancy or baby story is introduced to an ongoing science fiction series, usually to a female character, and then whisked away again, leaving little to no emotional ramifications. Think Deanna Troi and “The Child” in Next Generation. Also there’s the rapidly ageing baby trick, as with Connor in Angel or Eve/Livia in Xena. I don’t even like it when the show in question properly acknowledges how horrible an experience that is for the parent/s, because I’m well aware that the emotional trauma is a side effect of a cynical production choice, to dabble with a baby story but not bother with the realistic long term issues of how that would change a character’s life and priorities.

Which is relevant in the case of Season 6 of Doctor Who, because not only did they take the easy escape by writing the baby out almost as soon as it was born (and indeed skipping the inconvenient pregnancy period too) but they didn’t properly address the emotional ramifications of this to Amy or Rory for a full half of a season. Especially Rory, actually, as Amy at least gets to express her feelings in The Wedding of River Song, while we have to read his loss as a father from subtext in stories where he openly expresses other reasons to be dissatisfied with the Doctor.

It’s a shame, because one or two sentences per episode throughout the second half of Season 6, to show the characters were still thinking about and dealing with this enormous loss would have made it a far more powerful, worthwhile storyline. My only hope is that the story isn’t over yet, and there’s a twist still to come. Recent revelations about the setting of the episode in which the Ponds will be written out only further support my theory that the story of baby Melody is not yet finished. (And you can [see HERE my argument for why Amy Pond should not be killed off](#))

*[another reminder that this essay was written before Season 7 screened! I decided to leave this piece as is and write a follow up rather than edit it with new perceptions]*

Domesticity and parent-child relationships are a huge part of Season 6, despite the baby-fail. The Doctor can barely turn around without being faced with more children, daddy issues and haunted and/or murderous houses. In Closing Time, he slapsticks his way through Two Men and a Stormageddon, and we are treated to a fun comedy of errors which deals with all kinds of great issues to do with the clash of domesticity, danger and dads. I particularly enjoyed the whole issue of – how do you save the world if you can’t get a babysitter?

So... why couldn’t this be done with Melody Pond? Why couldn’t we have a baby in the TARDIS, stick a robot nanny in with the Gallifreyan crib, and tell the story that way? It’s not like we were going to be stuck with her forever, they’re only keeping the Ponds another five episodes into Season 7!

James, a regular commenter on Doctor Her, [expresses fan frustration with this issue beautifully in a comment on another post, which had me punching the air in agreement:](#)

*Night Terrors looks particularly bad owing to its position in the series. One episode after Amy and Rory have realised that their baby’s not going to grow up with them, the Doctor takes them off to rescue a complete stranger’s son. You do have to wonder why one of them doesn’t just lamp him. Probably just as well they’re not around for most of “Doctor, Widow and the Wardrobe”. You can imagine the dialogue.*

*“So, Doctor, where are we going?”*

*“Well, Amy, there’s these two children of a woman who I met once for 10 minutes and I want to put a disproportionately huge amount of effort into getting them Christmas presents.”*

*“RORY! Get Romaned up and fetch a shovel. You kill him and I’ll dig the grave.”*

So, the Doctor has a married couple in the TARDIS (mostly) but he doesn’t have to change his spots. They have a baby, but while there are all manner of timey wimey consequences, it’s hardly even worth the Doctor dusting off that old cot of his. Then, to cap it all off, the Doctor gets married (to someone who isn’t the TARDIS though you could definitely say River is TARDIS-approved) and is in no way expected to live with, change or compromise anything for his new bride.

And yet... maybe he isn’t living as fancy free as we think – at least, not by choice. If we learn anything from The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe, it’s that this Doctor rather likes playing house. He creates a Christmas home for Madge and her children, and afterwards, goes home to Amy and Rory – the home he bought for them, something he’s never done for a companion before. Another Doctor at Christmas dinner, but this time it’s all his idea.

Somehow, the Doctor has ended up with a real family, not one he visits in order to placate his current companion, but one that includes him as official, full fledged son-in-law. It’s not a permanent thing – Amy and Rory’s days with the show are numbered, and they’ll be gone by Christmas – but it’s hard to imagine that the Doctor hasn’t somehow been irretrievably changed by this development.

Looking back over the Seasons 5 and 6, I wonder if maybe all the kids and killer houses were not about showing us what the Doctor (and those who travel with him) can’t have, but about what this Doctor might be looking for in the future. Eleven didn’t *have* to marry River, or provide a home and car for Amy and Rory. He certainly doesn’t have to fly through space with a cot in his TARDIS, all ready for some future occupant. No once forced him into doing those things.

Is this as domesticated as our hero is ever going to get, or is it the beginning of a new direction for Doctor Who? As long as Moffat is involved in the show, it’s pretty clear that it will be daddy issues ahoy. And that means there’s one fairly obvious next step that the show could take.

Could the Eleventh Doctor become a parent – a real, involved, doing-the-dirty-jobs-while-saving-the-world parent – without breaking the show irretrievably? It would certainly make a change from all those romantic companions, if the next woman to join him in the TARDIS was his daughter...

*If you like this piece, check out the whole Domesticating the Doctor series at [TansyRR.com](http://TansyRR.com) - <http://tansyrr.com/tansywp/tag/domesticating-the-doctor/>*

## Where the Wonder Women Are: #20 Supergirl

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My recent immersion in the world of superheroes started in early 2010, with Supergirl. Raeli had taken an interest in the character, based almost entirely on the image on a drinking glass (like Superman, only a girl, what else is there to know?) and I started hunting for some kind of media property that I could stand to share with my then 5 year old daughter. One thing I learned very quickly from the feminist comics blogs I followed was that it wasn't going to be the comic, which featured some pretty skeevey artwork (yep, let's all peer up the teenage girl's tiny skirt, shall we and OH apparently female superheroes don't need all their ribs) and was squarely aimed at men, not young and impressionable girls.

So where else? I had a vague memory that the 80's Supergirl movie had been fairly dreadful but I had loved it, so there was always that. At a pinch.

Finally I decided upon Justice League Unlimited. I'd enjoyed the earlier Justice League cartoon, though not enough to actually buy the DVDs. But it looked like they had a cute, interesting Supergirl character, and so I gave it a punt. Only to discover that in fact JLU was full of all kinds of amazing and well-constructed female characters, and while the Supergirl was indeed spunky and super cute, she didn't hold a candle to Black Canary, Huntress and Wonder Woman.

Luckily for me, Raeli embraced female superheroes as a whole, and we started out on a long and crazy journey of discovery together. It's been super fun. And the massive pile of JLU lady action figures I acquired from eBay didn't hurt at all.

This week, while doing a bit of covert pre-Christmas detective work (as you do) I asked both Raeli (now nearly 8!) and her recently 3-year-old sister Jem which they preferred, Batgirl or Supergirl. To be frank, I assumed that at least ONE of them would pick Batgirl. They're both thoroughly Bat-obsessed, after all. Raeli has just received the LEGO Batcave she saved her pocket money up for six months, and Jem regularly dresses up as Batman and insists on being called that.

But no, they both immediately picked Supergirl. Which not only put a serious spanner in my Christmas present buying plans, it made me think. What is it about this character that makes her so compelling that she gets to be the best, the favourite, of little girls everywhere, based on a variety of wildly differing properties?

Like Wonder Woman, Supergirl has survived as an iconic female superhero despite all kinds of bizarre and outlandish things that have been done to her story and character over the years. I'm pretty sure she's been killed off and rebooted more often than Wonder Woman.

At its heart, Supergirl/Kara Zor El's story is simple. She's Superman's younger cousin, his spin off, his girl equivalent. She has all the same powers he does, she comes from Krypton, basically it's all the same but she doesn't get to snog Lois Lane (or indeed Wonder Woman) and she wears a skirt.

Raeli has come across various versions of the character since she's been reading comics, and I'll admit that the world is a happier place for junior Supergirl fans than it was a few years

ago (or maybe I have a better idea where to look).

There's Supergirl: Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade, a fun and peppy modern comic that gives Kara crazy eyes and a not-quite-manga sensibility. There's the sadly too-few Super Best Friends Forever minisodes from DC Shorts, which portrays her as a delightfully hefty gal who relishes her strength and lives to kick butt. There's the fun and baby-faced version from kid favourite comic Tiny Titans who remains one of the only characters who got to cross over into the next project by the same creators: Superman Family.

There's even a Polly Pocket.

In recent years, the explosion of popularity of superheroes has meant that even girls sometimes get tie in t-shirts, and the characters who tend to show up on those glittery pink tees are Supergirl, Batgirl, Wonder Woman.

As with the drinking glass effect, Supergirl is a character that young girls in particular are drawn to. The combination of super heroics and blonde hair are apparently irresistible. Like, imagine if Barbie actually did stuff!

I still haven't read many modern Supergirl comics. I tried with the New 52 but I was so outraged that her costume was explained as a Kryptonian uniform signifying graduation honours (you honour your graduates by making them wear skirts that tiny, what is this, Starfleet?) that I couldn't follow through. And then there's the inhumanly skinny waist which feels problematic to me in a character with so much pull among teenage and pre-teen girls. (most superheroines and indeed superheroes have unrealistic body types but when you're depicting teenagers with waists that would require even Buffy to have a few organs removed, that's a red flag)

Classic Supergirl, though. Ahhh, classic Supergirl. I'm a fan. And indeed, with all the reading I've been doing, I've come to the conclusion that even the modern tiny-skirted Supergirl can be quite awesome, when she's written for example as the excellent best friend of Stephanie Brown's Batgirl.

So Supergirl. She's blonde, she's less experienced than Superman (it makes him feel manly), and she's a good friend. But what exactly does she do?

Let's go back to the beginning and find out.

The original Supergirl was launched in 1959 and continued until her death in 1986, one of the major events of the Crisis on Infinite Earths. The cover image of Superman holding her body and grieving is probably one of the most parodied, copied and remembered comics cover image of all time.

Supergirl was a sweetie. She appeared in Superman and Action Comics at first, then later had her own title Adventure Comics, and appeared in Superman Family. She was created by Otto Binder who had also created Mary Marvel, the sweet teen counterpart to DC's Captain Marvel, and Miss America, the girl version of Marvel's Captain America.

Kara Zor-El was the last survivor of Argo City, which fragmented off from Krypton when it was destroyed, and drifted through space for some time. This is one of many over-complex plot complications introduced over the years to ensure that Kara is always much younger than

her cousin Kal-El, in every iteration of her character, despite the fact that he was a baby when sent away from the exploding Krypton (in *Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade*, for instance, his rocket simply travels at a different speed to hers, and she ages slower in stasis).

Once she arrives on Earth, Kara attends high school (later college) as brunette Linda Lee Danvers, putting on a wig to hide her natural blonde locks. Comics work that way. Men just have to put on a pair of glasses as a disguise; women change their hair colour.

Kara Zor-El had many adventures over the thirty five years or so that she was around as a character (appearing in over 750 stories during this period, according to Wikipedia), and after graduating went on to be a counsellor, news reporter and soap actress. She had a pet cat Streaky (who has a substantial role in *Tiny Titans!* My godson decided this year after their family lost their cat that they really needed a Streaky, though he wasn't sure how to make sure that they got one with superpowers) and Comet the Superhorse. She also regularly teamed up with Barbara Gordon's Batgirl, her best friend. Her family turned up at one point and took up residence in the Bottle City of Kandor, which is basically a Kryptonian city shrunk down and kept in a bottle.

The Silver Age version of Supergirl is mostly characterised by her student identity and her life with adoptive family the Danvers. The Bronze Age (1970's) version allowed her a more adult identity and also heralded her first solo title actually named "Supergirl," something Batgirl didn't get until the 1990's. An alternative version of Supergirl, Power Girl, appeared in comics set in Earth 2.

1980's Supergirl stands out because of her extraordinary permed hair, red hair band and occasional resemblance to Olivia Newton John. In 1984, a live action film starring Helen Slater (with Faye Dunaway as the villain) appeared as a tie-in to the Superman movies of the time. It appeared a year after *Superman III*, and while both films were critically panned, Superman continued as a franchise and Supergirl did not. The Supergirl comic had been cancelled only months before the movie was released. And of course, it was the first of a long line of "examples" why superhero movies starring women aren't financially viable, regardless of whether they are set up to succeed in the first place.

The comic book adaption of the movie is one of the first comics I ever read, and I recall loving it while still being aware that it wasn't actually that good. This is the power of Supergirl: as a character, she transcends crappy writing.

Supergirl's death in the comics was one of the central events of the 1986 Crisis event, and as with many other characters who died in that event (though not Barry Allen's Flash, the other most high profile sacrifice in that storyline) everyone's memory of her was wiped out, as if she had never existed.

Earth 2's Power Girl remained in the new reality (after the various Earths of the multiverse merged), believing herself to be Superman's cousin, though she later discovered she was wrong, then so wrong, then a bit right, then totally right, and possibly crazy. She'll get her own post later.

Behind the scenes, the head men at DC wanted Superman to be unique, and felt that Kara's presence diminished him and the epicness of his story. Which makes me want to go back in time and kick them.

Two years later, a new Supergirl debuted in the DC Universe. Matrix, created by John Byrne (who has a pretty good history of being awesome about female superheroes) came from an alternate reality where Lex Luthor was a good guy and Superman had died young. Luthor, who spent a lot of time gazing through realities stalker-style at the Earth 1 Superman when he wasn't sadly mourning his lost love, Alternate Lana Lang, created a pretend shapeshifting lady who merged qualities from both of them.

Matrix promptly put on a Supergirl costume, made her hair blonde, and kicked butt. Sadly the world was destroyed (through no fault of her own!) and Superman ended up rescuing only Matrix, bringing her through to his reality. He shipped her off to his parents (as Superman usually does with his cousin, the funniest example being one of the Super Best Friends Forever cartoon shorts) who did their best to raise Matrix as their daughter with the same kind of old home values they had invested in Clark.

Sadly it didn't work out so well and Matrix (or Mae) lurched back and forth erratically, caught between her desire to be a superhero and her natural tendency to turn into shapeshifting goo or to flip out and lose hold on reality. She then found a way to freak out her entire adoptive family, by becoming the live-in girlfriend of Lex Luthor II.

The large, red-headed Australian son of the original evil Lex Luthor, Lex II was in fact the original Lex in the body of a rugged Aussie bloke. No one knew this, however, so frankly their suspicions were based on prejudice. I have to say, coming across "Lex II" and Matrix Supergirl for the first time ever in the Death of Superman storyline came as a shock to me, being familiar mostly with old school Kara and Luthor. What the WHAT? Supergirl is a blob of goo and she's shackled up with LEX LUTHOR?

After being showcased to great effect during Panic in the Sky, a storyline that emphasised how the relationship between Matrix and Lex had caused a rift between her and Clark, Mae and Lex later came into their own in the wake of the Death of Superman storyline, as a power couple striving to rebuild Metropolis and provide stability after the world's great loss. However, Lex's possessiveness and manipulative nature became more obvious, and Mae often had to slip away from him in order to help Lois and the city.

When she discovered that Lex had been secretly cloning her... well let's just say the break up was messy. Matrix was left drifting, with no real sense of who she was, or whether she was really even a person. She then merged with a dying woman called Linda Danvers, became an angel, and finally disappeared from the DC Universe just in time for the "original" Supergirl (or at least the original Supergirl concept) to return.

The new old Supergirl, Kara Zor-El, had reappeared briefly in continuity before the Matrix-Linda Danvers version was written out, in the Many Happy Returns storyline by Peter David. It had long been felt that, as with many characters, the post-Crisis continuity was too damn complicated, and the simplest version of the character's backstory was of course the original one. (you think?)

Stuck in a Kryptonian asteroid crashing Armageddon-style to Earth, Kara Zor-El arrived (again) with a bang in the Superman/Batman title in 2004, and took on the Supergirl identity. After a few years, even made an artistic choice to give her biker shorts instead of panties under her short skirt, this seeming more "respectful." While being chronologically older than Superman, she was of course physically a young teenage girl (as always) and thus able to be

patronised by him at any opportunity.

Trained at first by Wonder Woman and the Amazons, Supergirl's journey to find her own heroic path has continued in her own comic for many years now. She was transported to the future for a while, taking up membership of the Legion of Super-Heroes, and has also fought under the identity of Flamebird in the bottle city of Kandor. A variety of different creators meant a whole bunch of different creative directions through the 2000's, and many of them couldn't resist throwing in new "true" origin stories for her, which muddied the waters.

Kara's lack of experience with humanity and the loss of any solid family base for her meant that she had far more trouble fitting in than her Silver/Bronze Age counterpart had. She eventually finds a secret identity for herself, posing as Lana Lang's niece Linda for some time, though she eventually broke her connection from Lana after a traumatic storyline involving insect queens.

My entry point to this version of Supergirl comes from my reading of the Stephanie Brown Batgirl series, in which Kara/Linda turns up in one glorious issue for a Girl's Night Out which showcases their friendship beautifully and reveals Kara as a fun loving superhero without the kind of heavy baggage her character had been weighed down with in her own book.

The New 52 rebooted Supergirl yet again, came up with another reason for her to crash to Earth many years after Clark Kent and still be way younger than him, and made her short skirt even shorter. The title didn't interest me much, but then I'm a 30+ woman who's all cynical. Supergirl's main DC title shouldn't be written for me any more than it should be written for blokes. It should be written for my daughters.

Kara Zor-El was a semi-regular character in season 7 of the live action TV series Smallville, played by Laura Vandervoort and Adrienne Palicki. The classic elements of her storyline – being young and confused and trying to fit in with humans despite having super strength, and not having the same rock solid childhood advantage of Clark Kent – were expressed through the show's seventh season, and then they shut her up in the Phantom Zone to get rid of her. She only returned in occasional guest spots after that.

The animated Supergirl – the point at which I came in – is based very much on the modern version of the character, including her fairly distant if fond relationship with Superman, and her inability to properly integrate with humanity. After appearing in other animated films/series, she found her destiny in the Justice League Unlimited series, falling in love with Brainiac 5 and leaving the present day to join the Legion of Super-Heroes in the future. Yep, she might be cute but there's a REASON I started encouraging my daughters to appreciate Huntress' awesomeness instead...

Animated Supergirl, who is designed as a teeny pocket rocket compared even to the other small women on the show, is voiced mostly by Nicholle Tom, both in the animated adventures of Superman and JLU, though a one-off movie Superman/Batman: Apocalypse has her voiced by Summer Glau. This movie, based closely on the Superman/Batman comic storyline that introduced New Old Supergirl, had her name and image removed from the packaging in response to poor sales of the Wonder Woman animated movie. Which is why it took me two years to realise there was in fact an animated Supergirl movie out there. Sigh.

There's a solid narrative here. For all my discomfort about Supergirl being written out of JLU

by falling in love, I think that this animated version of the character captured most of the key elements of the character. Supergirl can be cute and blonde but she also should be confused and angry. She never gets the stable childhood that Clark Kent received, and so the balance of her alien/superhero self and “real life” should be harder, and it’s okay for her to be frustrated about it.

Tiny Titans, Supergirl: Cosmic Adventures in the 8th Grade and the brief appearances of the stompy Supergirl in Super Best Friends Forever get it very right, I think, while approaching the character in very different ways. I also loved the recent appearance of Supergirl in Ame-Comi Girls, and noted how differently the story works when Power Girl is put in Superman’s place (and indeed in Clark Kent’s place, with his childhood and loving parents) and then Supergirl crashes in her asteroid... I’m excited to see where this story goes, because while Supergirl is once more the “older” cousin who is now younger thanks to spacey-wacey time dilation, having two women at the centre of that story finally offers a new twist.

Kara Zor-El is a great character, with huge potential and recognisability to young girls. If written and presented well, she could easily be the new Buffy or Veronica Mars of a generation. But creators need to stop thinking of her as a property that must appeal to male comics readers. Like Batgirl, she was designed to appeal to young women back in the day, and she still has the power to do that, given half a chance.

Girls, especially young girls, love Supergirl. They will buy dolls based on her and t-shirts with her face on them, even if they’ve never read a comic or seen her on TV. They get her. So while I mourn the loss of Tiny Titans, I am delighted that the new project by the same creators, Superman Family, provides a home for a slightly older version of the Tiny Titans Supergirl. There will be more fun, lighthearted adventures for my girls to enjoy, without me having to show them the ‘adult’ Supergirl comic.

They don’t want to see up her skirt. They just want to play with her.

*If you like this post, check out the whole Where the Wonder Women series of essays on [TansyRR.com](http://tansyrr.com) - <http://tansyrr.com/tansywp/tag/where-the-wonder-women-are/>*

# Hack, Slash, Squish: Gender and Sex In Season One of Game of Thrones

**THIS POST SPOILS ALL THE THINGS FOR SEASON ONE. PLEASE DON'T SPOIL SEASONS 2 OR 3 IN COMMENTS. NO I HAVEN'T READ THE BOOKS EITHER.**

Previously posted on [TansyRR.com](http://TansyRR.com) on October 12 2012

OK everyone's way ahead of me on this one, even (to her great delight), my Mum. Once I actually sat down to watch this first season of Game of Thrones, I found myself enjoying it way more than the waves of (mostly feminist) internet critique suggested I would.

There's a lesson in that somewhere, possibly. Anyhow, here are my reflections on the show:

*[Warning, text probably not work safe, though the images should be fine, presuming that your workplace is non judgemental about fantasy fiction as a whole, which is presuming quite a lot, really, what do I know, my workplace is me and the three-year-old. She hasn't watched the show.]*

## TEN THOUGHTS ABOUT GAME OF THRONES SEASON ONE:

### 1. SEX.

The sex scenes are quite confronting early on, not because they are graphic (you've read my books, right?) but because they are so uniformly degrading to the women involved. I think it's interesting that in the first couple of episodes, almost every coupling involves the woman being "taken roughly from behind", and apparently not enjoying herself all that much in comparison to her male partner. Even the incestuous shag on a tower that is plot-relevant does it that way, and that's the one that felt to me least convincing. If the queen was going to go to all the trouble and risk of shagging her brother, why wouldn't she want to look him in the face while doing it?

Oh, wait, answered my own question there.

The main trouble of course with the repetition of this 'ladies, grit your teeth and think of Valhalla' attitude to sex in the early episodes, apart from the fact that it makes the Game of Thrones smutty bits boring very fast (I don't think that was the effect they were going for?) is that the actresses involved (and to some extent the actors) look as if they are mostly worried about not falling over.

Find a bed, people. Fewer potential health and safety problems!

### 2. DAENERYS

This leads me to Daenerys, the character who progressed from being a political pawn handed over as marriage meat to a woman taking charge of her own destiny. Yes, sometimes getting to face your husband while having sex with him counts as character development!

I know that many people were upset by the first scene in which the consummation of her marriage is framed as a rape scene, and understandably so. Luckily for me I had read so much

analysis of this scene ahead of time that I was prepared for it. I don't want to be one of those people who is all 'hey it's historically accurate so it's FINE' but in this case I think you can argue that her powerlessness in the early episodes are an essential part of her character arc. Which doesn't make it less distressing.

They were going for shock value in the first episode, that much is certain, and while I found Daenerys' progression through season one quite satisfying at a narrative level, it's hard to avoid the fact that the actress's body is repeatedly depicted in disturbing and unsettling ways to convey truths about the culture of this world that could probably have been done in subtler ways.

It's also very uncomfortable to see that a big part of her story is that of a white woman learning to take command of the 'savage' brown people, and I see why many people find that aspect hard to stomach. Personally I think that is at least partly balanced out by the fact that Daenerys' equally blond brother is the most horrible person on that particular continent, and that conquering and escaping his influence is such a big aspect of her character arc, but I'm not going to argue with anyone who finds the racial aspects of this story a major turn off.

From a gender point of view, I found Daenerys to be a compelling example of historical/fantasy women who find power even when the society is determined to keep them powerless. There are lots of those women in this show, more than I expected to find.

### **3. SPEAKING OF WOMEN TAKING THEIR OWN POWER, CATELYN STARK.**

Catelyn is set up very much as the wife and mother, matriarch to a large household, but right from the start we see her political awareness and interests. And yes, a big driving force of her in this story is her fury and determination to avenge the hurt done to her youngest son (ie an extension of her motherly duty), but I love the fact that in a show that talks constantly about 'woman's weapons' (i.e. Poison) and is wall to wall prostitutes, we get a grown up lady character who leaps on a horse and rides from one end of the country to the other to get justice.

Sure, she's not always right, but damn she's feisty! You can see what Sean Bean saw in her. After HBO's Rome it's really nice to see a matronly character who gets to do more than snipe at people at parties. Not that the women of HBO's Rome didn't snipe brilliantly at parties, but sometimes ladies over thirty years old do like to get out and about and have adventures.

I also really enjoy Catelyn role in the later episodes of the season, where she has to watch her eldest son become a war commander, and is quite blatantly restraining herself from treating him like the baby boy he is.

I have forgiven her, in other words, for not being Jennifer Ehle. Just.

### **4. LATE BREASTFEEDING = INSANITY WTF**

I have OPINIONS about the gratuitous use of the 'woman breastfeeds a child past the traditional age of breastfeeding in order to show she is batshit crazy' trope that we got more than once with Catelyn's sister. But you can probably guess what those opinions are. So let's move on. (I noticed what you did there, HBO, and it made me cranky)

### **5. QUEEN OF EVERYTHING: CERSEI LANNISTER.**

Speaking of sniping indoors, it's a good thing that this isn't Catelyn's specialty, because Cersei Lannister would wipe the floor with her. I am loving this character, her villainous

charisma and her utter ruthlessness. Who would win in a duel between Cersei and Atia of the Julii? I don't know but I would watch the hell out of that show!

It's so rare to get a really crunchy female villain who is also allowed to be human and intelligent, and Cersei is both. I particularly liked the scene where she and her husband, Henry VIII (I know he has a real name, but come on, who are we kidding here?) sat down and had a frank discussion about their history and their marriage, even managing to share a bittersweet joke or two. There are so many layers in this show, and I think the way that the effect of arranged marriages have on a society from a psychological point of view comes across in a complex and interesting way.

Mostly, though, Cersei terrifies me. I found myself constantly yelling advice inside my head to various characters along the lines of DO WHATEVER CERSEI WANTS, YOU DON'T WANT TO UPSET HER! Powerful lady is powerful.

I do find it a little disconcerting how much this devastating, cruel and ruthless woman looks exactly like Buttercup from The Princess Bride. Once you have seen it, you cannot unsee it! You're welcome.

## **6. SEXPOSITION FOR FUN AND PROFIT**

I'm sure I didn't invent the word 'sexposition' – apart from anything it has to be scrawled in mile high letters on every whiteboard at HBO studios, right? I do find it deeply amusing, though, how many of the 'now it's time to explain the political infrastructure/historical climate/weather/dragons' scenes are conveyed while two characters are slightly distracted by having sex with each other, or watching sex occur across the room.

Occasionally the children do get to play the exposition game by doing their homework loudly or being randomly verbally tested by adults, but these scenes are about 1 to every 4-5 sexposition scenes.

This, fantasy writers, is now to deal with info dump. ADD SMUT! While much of the sexposition is utterly gratuitous, I cannot disapprove, because once you realise what they're doing (apparently George RR has publicly admitted that is exactly what they're doing) it is hilarious.

## **7. SQUELCH.**

The person most deserving of an Emmy for Game of Thrones is whomever is in charge of sound effects. Sure, the scenery is gorgeous and beautifully rendered, the performances are awesome, and so on, but have you HEARD what happens during gory death scenes (cough, and many of the sexposition scenes)? Squelch squelch squelch.

## **8. THE PROSTITUTION SATURATION.**

So, prostitutes. There are a metric ton of prostitutes and brothels in this story. That's how you know it is gritty and "realistic," right?

Well, um, yes, to a point. From a historical perspective I think that this aspect of society often gets ignored or rendered invisible in history/fantasy fiction, and it's a pretty vital aspect to many societies and how they function. I do appreciate the fact that this is depicted in Game of Thrones as an everyday part of life, and that the sex industry is not always glamorised, nor treated as the most degrading thing in the universe.

But oh boy. This show is *so very proud* of the fact that it is edgy enough to include prostitution, isn't it? So, so proud of themselves. I think they could pare down the scenes and references by about half and still get the effect they need. And possibly occasionally have a whole episode in which it's barely mentioned. You'd think.

The scripts Game of Thrones have made a fair stab at humanising the women involved, giving actual characterisation to some of the prostitutes/sex slaves such as Roz the redhead from the Stark local brothel, Daenerys' servant who teaches her how to pleasure her husband, and Tyrion's girlfriend Shae. The 'truth game' scene in the final episode in which Shae challenges every cliché Tyrion believes about the type of woman she is, and he in turn reveals why he is such a gratuitous hirer of women, goes a long way to redeeming the prostitution saturation of the show.

But the scenes in which prostitutes are used as set decoration, saucy punctuation to a scene, blokey jokes, sexposition, random nudity, to make Catelyn Stark do that shocked face, to prove that Tyron Lannister is awesome at the sex, orgies, and so on, far outnumber the handful of scenes in which the women in question get speaking lines and/or to show that they are humans.

Is the sex industry as thematically significant in the books as it is in the TV show? Or is this just an excuse for the show to have lots of sexposition while keeping many of the other female characters "pure"? Cos I have to say, there isn't a whole lot of happy marital/romantic sex in the show to balance it out.

## **9. THE CASE FOR SANSA STARK**

I've heard that there is a great deal of hatred directed at Sansa as a character, which seems odd to me – sure, she's less easy to like than her honest, plucky and sword-mad little sister, but she's also a young woman who has been placed in an impossible, completely vulnerable position.

Yes, she's a collaborator, and every time she is put in a difficult position, she does exactly what she is told to do, the most political choice to stay on the right side of the ruling power. But what options does she have?

Apparently many people were surprised when Ned Stark got beheaded at the end of Season One. We found ourselves quite bewildered that he survived as long as he did. Man, he was all pride and no compromise, wasn't he? Sansa's father's imprisonment and death shows exactly what happens to those who rebel against the Lannisters and their cruelty. He could have compromised, have bent his ideals and lived to win at a more politic moment, but instead he chose to let his honour hang out where it could be seen by everyone, and he got it chopped off along with his head.

Arya makes exactly the same types of choices as their father – she refuses to compromise her honour or what she believes in, regularly voices her outrage, and only through sheer luck and the support of people around her manages to survive the season. She doesn't live *because* of her actions or because she is clever, but because the circumstances of the story (and the author himself) did not yet choose to punish her.

Which is not to say Arya is not cute and awesome, particularly when learning her sword skills, because she is. But I think it's worth discussing the fact that the female characters who become fan favourites often do so because they are perceived as 'cool' and often that

coolness is defined as ‘acts like a male character while being cute’. Arya’s an easy character to like.

Sansa, though, has no lucky breaks or carefully-placed allies. Abandoned in a court with no friends and a father whose ideals are more important to him than the safety of his family (I’m not saying ideals or honour are bad, but diplomacy was not Ned Stark’s superpower, and he could have done a much better job of getting his daughters out of the city before he decided to dig his heels in and make a stand for those ideals), all she can do is what vulnerable aristocratic women have always done – she makes concessions.

Sansa’s only mistake is to assume that doing everything that Cersei Lannister tells her is the best option, and that she will be in a position to help those she loves by behaving as a ‘good girl.’ It’s hard to argue that she made the wrong choice even then because all the available information suggested it was the best path.

It’s Joffrey’s lack of respect for ‘the rules’ that throws everything out of the window, and the shock on Cersei’s face when he decides to play tyrant all on his own makes it clear that she would certainly have not made those same choices. So Sansa is stuck, an abused girlfriend to a mad young king, and she’s the one who has to watch her father beheaded in front of her – no one shields her eyes as they do with Arya! It’s too late for her to start investing in a “dance master” of her own. All she can do is keep nodding and smiling and hoping that a chance may come, some time in the future, to make things better for herself.

Sansa and Ned both represent extreme examples of reaction to an impossible situation, the rock and the hard place. They’re both screwed, but she at least is still alive, and where there’s life there’s hope, right?

I really hope there’s hope. I worry about Sansa.

Arya, meanwhile, I don’t worry about much at all. I can tell an author’s favourite when I see one!

## **10. MY WISHLIST FOR SEASON TWO**

**(this is not an invitation to tell me what actually happens, I know you’ve all seen it already)**

\*Everyone is happy and no one has any problems ever again. Okay, that’s probably not realistic. Let’s try:

\*Cersei enacts some measure of control over Joffrey, now she’s got over the shock of having raised a right little psychopath. We’d all rather have her on the throne than him, right? Right?

\*No one rapes anyone.

\*Some form of unionism for all the prostitutes since they are obviously the key to the economy of the Seven Kingdoms. They kick out Littlefinger and start running their own damn brothels, with adequate healthcare.

\*Daenerys gets to interact with SOMEONE in the rest of the main cast.

\*Ditto Jon Snow.

\*Tyrion Lannister and Catelyn Stark team up to fight crime.

\*Arya rescues Sansa because someone has to, and she should use her jammy luck for the greater good.

\*Winter actually turns up.

\*At least two characters have enjoyable sex without paying for it or somehow suffering because of it.

\*Tyrion rides into battle again because the look on his face last time was priceless.

\*A death scene even funnier than Daenerys' brother and the "gold crown" which was pretty awesome.

\*Dragons dragons dragons.

\*More jousting.

\*No one rapes anyone. Yes, it was worth saying twice.