Essay Review

Xena, Warrior Princess, or Judith, Sexual Warrior? The Search for a Liberating Image of Women's Power in Popular Culture

Sherrie Inness. *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 352pp. Cloth $30.00.

Margarita Stocker. *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998. 256pp. Paper $19.95.

The image of the "bad" or "tough" woman has captured the imagination of many scholars over the past several decades. This essay review analyzes two new books in this genre: *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, by Sherrie Inness, and *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture*, by Margarita Stocker. What makes Inness and Stocker's books so interesting, when considered together, is the fact that the authors provide different perspectives, not just in the scope and focus of their research, but also in their approach to the feminist theory that undergirds much of the work in this genre.

In *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Sherrie Inness analyzes the increasing prevalence of tough girls in the popular media from the 1960s to the present. Her study focuses on such media as television shows, movies, popular magazines, and comic books. Inness argues that for more than thirty years, the image of the tough woman has become increasingly tougher and thus presumably more of a challenge to traditional male gender roles.

Inness argues that it is important to analyze how women's relationship to toughness is represented in popular culture because the connection we make between maleness and toughness works to ensure male privilege and authority. She identifies four characteristics that define toughness: body, attitude, action, and authority. Body denotes a physical presence that signifies toughness in our culture; according to Inness, "A tough body is typically an athletic, fit body" (p. 25). The attitude of a tough individual expresses little or no fear. The actions of the tough individual reveal intelligence, strategy, and calculation. Authority is expressed through such qualities as assurance, superior judgment, leadership, and the ability to impose discipline.

Throughout the book, Inness shows how the toughness of the toughest women in the media has been confined, reduced, or regulated in a number of ways. She categorizes as "pseudo-tough" the women in such 1970s television shows as *Charlie's Angels* because, although such characterizations

suggested that being tough was acceptable for a woman, they also "helped to reaffirm stereotypes about the sexuality and femininity of women, attributes that worked to diminish the impact of the women's toughness" (p. 49). Although she believes that women have been portrayed as increasingly tough over the past several decades, she also demonstrates ways that women's toughness is often still undermined or subordinated. Either like Agent Scully in *The X Files*, the woman's intelligence and toughness is contrasted to the greater intelligence and toughness of her male partner, or like Captain Janeway in *Star Trek: Voyager* and Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*, her toughness is diminished by the emphasis placed on her nurturing or maternal qualities. In the case of Sarah Connor, toughness has made her a bad mother; in *The Terminator 2*, Connor has become so tough that she has become incapable of nurturing and providing emotional support to her alienated son.

Although the great preponderance of examples in her book serve to demonstrate ways that women's toughness is diminished or subordinated to conventional gender stereotypes, in the final chapter of her book, Inness argues that such modern-day characters as *Xena, Warrior Princess* are helping to change how society perceives the relationship between women and toughness. She devotes a full chapter to Xena because "Unlike Storm, Elektra, and Martha Washington, who find their homes in the more narrow realm of alternative comic books, Xena has found her place in the most widely distributed media form in the United States: television. More interestingly, her toughness is not diminished as it is for many other female characters examined in this book" (p. 161). For Inness, Xena represents a new image of toughness for the 1990s and beyond; she represents "one of the strongest 1990s challenges to the dominance of the male hero" (p. 166).

Does Inness support her thesis that women are becoming tougher, and if so, does this represent a positive shift in cultural views toward women and toughness? After a careful reading of her provocative book, my answer is no. First, although Inness demonstrates that women are becoming tougher in the media, such portrayals are not always positive, even in movies produced very recently. As she notes in Chapter 4, such 1990s Hollywood movies as *Thelma and Louise*, *Galaxis*, and *The Demolitionist* depict a society in which toughness in women makes people uneasy. For instance, at the end of *Thelma and Louise*, the two female protagonists decide to commit suicide by driving off a cliff, demonstrating "how impossible it is for tough women to survive and thrive in Hollywood" (p. 80). Second, even the case of *Xena, Warrior Princess*, does not necessarily support Inness's optimistic contention that "Xena offers viewers a new vision of toughness" (p. 159). Xena is certainly as tough as any man, but she inhabits the remote mythological past, where she is safely distanced from the present. As Inness admits, Xena is also a beautiful woman "who upholds the convention that woman superheroes should always be attractive . . . and white" (p. 176). Addition-

ally, Xena is superpowerful, capable of executing twenty-foot leaps from the ground. While she always conquers her male opponents, it is not always clear that she is defeating opponents who have potentially equal powers.

Although Inness has provided a fascinating look at representations of tough women in selected popular media, her study is hampered by an important limitation. Throughout the book, Inness assumes a linkage between representations in the popular media and social reality. She states that it is important to "recognize the popular media's power to present images of women that have the potential to change social reality" (p. 48). Nevertheless, this link is never explored by investigating the social, political, or economic contexts in which the evolving images of tough women appeared. While Innes argues that "toughness and issues concerning toughness are a part of our daily lives and continually shape our ideas about appropriate gender roles for women and men," (p. ?) her work is necessarily limited to images portrayed in the media, not how toughness is played out in real life. How do audience members perceive the tough women they see, and what impact do such perceptions have on behavior?

Whereas Inness analyzes a variety of modern portrayals of tough girls, Margarita Stocker explores the mythical story of one tough woman: Judith. In *Judith, Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture*, Stocker provides a historical analysis of the enduring cultural myth of the beautiful and virtuous Old Testament widow who lured Israel's deadly enemy, Holofernes, to his death, beheading him to save Jerusalem.

Stocker argues that as a counter-cultural myth, the tale of Judith "effectively encodes the whole project of feminism" (p. 236). Feminist thinkers have contended that it is necessary to retrieve alternative myths of women's power, particularly matriarchal myths of 'The Goddess,' that have been lost or diminished in male-dominated Western Culture. Stocker claims that if it is important to enfranchise the female sex by retrieving counter-cultural mythologies and if, as she suggests, Judith's is the ultimate counter-cultural myth, then the tale of Judith should be recognized as the sign of a new liberty.

A strength of Stocker's study is the richness of the cultural and literary contexts within which she considers various historical interpretations of the Judith myth. Stocker effectively reveals the enormous range of rhetorical and symbolic uses the ambiguous story of Judith has served throughout history. The Judith icon has functioned as a rallying symbol for such diverse groups as Protestant partisans during the Wars of Religion, aristocratic women supporters of the Protestant Reformation, both supporters and opponents of the French Revolution, freedom fighters, and postwar Zionists.

The icon of Judith has represented positive traits or virtues at various times in history. For example, Stocker demonstrates that during the early Middle Ages an influential Christian epic, Predentius's *Psychomachia*

(AD 405) established Judith's role in the Christian imagery of human virtues. The image of Judith represented chastity, temperance, justice, fortitude, wisdom, and humility. During the sixteenth century, the use of Judith as emblem for wives' proper virtues became particularly common in Northern Europe. Throughout the Reformation period, Judith symbolically represented Western culture's uneasiness with strong women. Stocker claims that the stimuli for the obsession with Judith during this period, which produced the greatest profusion of Judith images in all the available artistic media, included both an increasing cultural fascination with images of strong women and "an intensifying debate about the character of the female sex, whose main function in life, Christian tradition suggested, was to lead poor witless men astray" (p. 46).

The Judith myth could be used as an example both for and against women. For instance, John Lydgate (1431-8) cited Judith in his poem *Examples Against Women* as one of the striking instances of women's natural perfidy and their ability to bring men to ruinous ends. On the other hand, Aemilia Lanier, in her poem *Salve Deus rex Judaeorum* (1611) exploited Judith's story as a consciously feminist argument for women's spiritual potential and their special favor in the eyes of God.

Throughout history, the Judith myth served useful if diverse purposes in justifying political ends. As Stocker demonstrates, Judith's political role as a stimulant for resistance, revolt, war, and massacre was repeatedly invoked in the protracted sixteenth-century struggle between Protestants and Catholics. Later, during the French Revolution, the image of Judith served as a beacon for radicalism, a period during which "She marked the point of conflict between ideas of mass liberty and ideas of individual freedom" (p. 120). As a woman who had traduced the patriarchal order, Judith was also used to justify the political rule of women during the Elizabethan period, and during the twentieth century, postwar Zionism turned to Judith's story for a mythic prototype to support the self-perception that modern Israel was only aggressive in the cause of self-preservation.

Stocker argues that on both political and personal levels, the myth of Judith is countercultural because it is unreceptive to the pattern whereby society absorbs and placates its rebels. But has Stocker supported her thesis, that Judith's is the ultimate countercultural myth for the modern feminist project? It is difficult to agree with this assessment, simply because Stocker has done such a marvelous job of demonstrating the many different rhetorical uses of this tale. Yes, at times the Judith tale has been used to advance women's power, such as during the Elizabethan period; at other times, however, it has been used effectively by the dominant male culture to justify the subordination of women. The Judith myth is so multifaceted that it can be interpreted to mean just about anything to just about anyone, and there is the rub.

Inness and Stocker represent two differing perspectives within contemporary feminism. In the 1970s, feminism was generally committed to the view that women differed from men in being more compassionate and nurturing. An "essentialist" view of the female gender regards it as qualitatively distinct from the male, and on the basis of that opposition, some earlier feminists repudiated such presumably "masculine" mental qualities as logic, analytic rigor, and rationality in favor of such presumably "feminine" qualities as intuition, instinct, and creativity. Of course, to such a philosophy of feminism the intelligence, rationalism, and ruthlessness of the tough woman are as repulsive as her use of force.

In contrast to this earlier view, Inness argues that the association between men and "tough" jobs — and toughness in general — brings males social power. She believes that by appropriating the normally masculine role of toughness, women may achieve social equality with men: "the depiction of tough women on television can challenge and even change the assumption that toughness is primarily a male attribute, which could potentially lead to more social power for women" (p. 180).

Stocker is suspicious of the idea that women should be like men or seek to emulate qualities that masculinist society admires, for she regards this as compromising a fully alternative feminism. It is possible, for instance, to see *Xena, Warrior Princess* as having defected to the traditionally masculine values of aggression, competition, and domination. Instead, Stocker seeks a feminism that stands as an integration of rationality, physicality, and emotion. Whereas Inness expresses optimism that *Xena, Warrior Princess* represents a possible breakthrough for women by achieving an equality of toughness with men, Stocker rejects the view that achieving toughness is a worthwhile feminist goal. Instead she sees the myth of Judith as possibly one that can achieve an integration of both male and female qualities and pave the road to an authentic womanhood.

Is it even possible that a mythical icon can liberate in social reality? This is a key question for feminism, raised by a reading of these two books. No image or legend has any meaning in or of itself, because its interpretation depends on the social, cultural, historical, and gendered situation of the interpreter. As Stocker has demonstrated so well, a myth that serves in some historical contexts to promote the empowerment of women can be used to subordinate them in others. What is the relationship between myths, stories, or onscreen images, and public decisions as they are played out in real life? Is it the story that influences action, or do changing social and economic contexts impel human actors to seize upon certain interpretations of stories for their own ends? How is liberation achieved?

Such questions are of paramount importance for the historian of education, who understands that learning occurs in many contexts, of which the schoolroom is but one. In movie theaters, libraries, shopping malls, art

galleries, dance halls, churches, sports venues, and so on, young men and women learn what it means to be male or female; they learn about the possibilities, or limitations, that culture ascribes to the role biology has dealt them. Historians of education interested in the social construction of gender roles will welcome the analysis provided in both books and will find the questions raised by both intriguing. An important project for scholars from a variety of fields is to gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between myths and icons in popular culture and behavior in the social world.

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