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### Who is More Able?

#### Interrogating Power and Disability in Ronald Moore's Battlestar Galactica

Can a character from a television series provide a productive space to interrogate female leadership? Can a television series “challenge an assertion of the male gaze in or through the camera’s work” and “take a...step toward positive cinema...to find new images and new formal means of representation for women’s feelings and experiences?” (Mulvey ix). Or, do such images serve merely to reify the male gaze and work to control women’s bodies? Susan Bordo claims that many contemporary representations of women in media do both: the body of a powerful woman often is both slender and beautiful, a site where “the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the requirement to embody the ‘masculine’ values of the public arena” (Bordo 97). In a nutshell, the images both resist and reify the male gaze that reduces women to passive objects. No image is immune from cultural inscription, so perhaps the more effective question is, since the feminist project protests inequality and resists patriarchy, does the image move this project backward or does the image move this project forward?

The television series, Battlestar Galactica presents a woman, Laura Roslin, who is President of the Colonies. Roslin also has terminal breast cancer. This combination of bodies, female and diseased, has rarely been seen in this way. So, how does the series present this particular body? Certainly, the series shows Roslin in a leadership position, making key decisions to ensure the continued survival of the scant 50,000 humans left of the billions wiped out during the Cylon attacks. She confers with both civilian and military advisors to arrive at decisions that will best preserve the human race. She defers some authority to Adama as the military commander, demonstrating the awareness that others possess expertise in areas unfamiliar to her, and their expertise has value. On the other hand, the actress is petite, so her body seems unthreatening; she never stands over anyone in the show. She is always shorter than anybody else in the screen, reminiscent of first wave feminists who often sat down while addressing men so their bodies did not threaten them.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the show's creators recognize that culturally, women still do not have access to power that is equal to men's access, and so they choose an actress that appears innocuous. But the character Roslin certainly possesses effective leadership characteristics: she incorporates multiple viewpoints into her decision-making process; she delegates responsibilities to others when necessary; she

makes the split-second command decisions as well. The season two episode “Fragged” provides a particularly rich forum to explore leadership in a variety of contexts.

In an earlier episode, Roslin chooses to use chamalla, a non-traditional treatment for cancer, despite Doctor Cottle’s suggestion to use standard methods of treatment, such as radiation or chemotherapy. While the doctor takes the standard western view that disease needs eradication, Roslin challenges this view by choosing a non-traditional method of treating her disease.<sup>3</sup> Cancer is not necessarily the enemy that needs destroying, and attitude that places cancer outside the body, but rather cancer is something that is integral to Roslin.<sup>4</sup> By rejecting the doctor’s definition that says cancer needs destroying, she redefines cancer as an integral part of herself, displacing the authority of the doctor and relocating that authority to herself. She decides the best treatment for her, and her decision reflects a more holistic view of disease and illness. She claims authority to make the decision about what is best for her body.

Camera angles mark her body as abnormal in other ways as well. The first view of Roslin in this episode shows her in the background with her head on a pillow, and a close-up of a metal cup in the foreground. In this view, her body is blurry and distorted, emphasizing that her character is also

somehow blurry and distorted. The clear foregrounding of the cup adds to this picture by suggesting that the distortion has something to do with not having bodily needs being met. At this moment, Ellen walks in to visit Roslin, and throughout the scene, viewers see Ellen's viewpoint, never Roslin's. Later, the camera is angled from the ground upwards, an inversion of a 'God's eye' view coming from high above. This 'view from hell,' if you will, makes Roslin's body grotesque, enlarging her legs, hands and feet, while shrinking her head, reminiscent of the "circus freak," whose body is "at once wondrous and repellent" (Garland-Thomson 136).

In what way does this freakish body gain acceptance? The answer for Roslin comes in the form of a religious prophecy that validates her diseased body. Billy, Roslin's aide, seizes on an opportunity to use religion as a way of getting Roslin the chamalla. After Ellen leaves, he notices Corporal Venner pick up the show's version of a rosary, praying. Billy first looks at the beaded necklace, then looks at Corporal Venner and says, "Corporal Venner, there's a drug priests sometimes use. It's called chamalla extract" ("Fragged"). Billy equates Roslin to a priest. Though Roslin is the president, a title that already carries with it respect, Billy chooses to use a word that will cause Corporal Venner to see Roslin as more than a president:

he sees her as someone with a direct link to the gods. This strategy pays off, for it is Corporal Venner who has the access to get Roslin the chamalla she needs. The visual techniques further reinforce this religious connection by extreme close-up of the rosary-like beaded necklace, mirroring the episode's opening shot of the dog tags. Like Lieutenant Crashdown, Billy invokes religion in a time of crisis, but unlike Crashdown, Billy uses this invocation as a means of assisting someone else.

Billy's assistance comes just before Tigh employs a time-honored strategy of confining powerful women by labeling them as mentally unstable. He brings the Quorum to the brig because he believes when the Quorum sees the "crazy" Roslin, they will ultimately support Adama's decision to remove her from office and place her in the brig. Now, Tigh can use the assignation of mentally unstable and crazy to confine Roslin and justify Adama's previous action of removing her from office.<sup>5</sup> Tigh's action reflects a long tradition of oppressing women who do not remain weak and silent. Roslin is neither weak nor silent, and so when she makes a mistake, she gets confined. Then, when labeling her 'mentally unstable' works as a way of continuing confinement, Tigh attempts to use the label to do just that.

"Fragged" ends with Tigh enacting the greatest threat possible: he dissolves the fledgling democratic government. He addresses the press,

outlining his reasons for the declaration and ends his address with, “For these reasons I am declaring martial law” (“Fragged”). A cacophony of protest from the reporters erupts, and Tigh ignores them all, walking through the crowd, guarded by marines as the mournful background music swells, drowning out all noise. Slow-motion photography accentuates this tragic moment, and the music and filming style places all the emphasis on Tigh, making the rest of the people invisible. He is all-powerful, central and the rest are marginalized. However, as soon as he opens the door, the photography switches back to real time, and he removes the flask from his boot to take a long drink. The three men, Tigh, Crashdown and Baltor use fear to lead. In many ways, they enact stereotypically gendered male cultural inscriptions: they are “turned into little soldier boys from the day...[they]...are born” (Dworkin 334). Within the forced leadership roles, none can enact leadership to counter cultural inscription.

Roslin, too, was forced into leadership, but her actions contrast dramatically with the three other characters’ attempts at leadership. The episode presents Roslin’s ‘crazy’ as withdrawal from a beneficial drug. The others, who significantly are also all male, display a different brand of ‘crazy’: their ‘crazy’ actions result from their inability to cope with events rather than from illness or disease. While one could make the case that

Baltor possibly has some kind of mental illness, his inability to accept his role in his people's holocaust provides a stronger case as to the root of his visions. Roslin possesses the ability to cope with events, but she cannot cope with cancer without assistance. With treatment, she provides essential leadership to her people in the form of hope. Rather than make cancer the problem, the series chooses a more complicated road in presenting conflicts. The illness is an integral part of Roslin and therefore needs to remain within Roslin. There is no magic cure for her, even in science fiction, so she finds a way to be president with the disease.

Why does the choice of revealing the disease come only when the disease can be grounded in a religious context? What values and assumptions are directors, writers and actors showing when they make this choice? Clearly, the disease itself is not the problem, but the context in which the disease is presented is the problem. One context produces reveal(ment); another produces concealment. "The inability to disclose is...one of the constitutive markers of oppression" (Siebers 2). Roslin conceals her disease because she operates under the common assumption that revealing the disease will cause panic, for the 'general' populace could not handle such devastating news. If the polis learns that their president is dying, the polis will fear the president cannot make reasoned decisions, or

that the president will die in a crucial moment. This assumption demonstrates a prevalent belief in a medical model of disability, a model that sees disability as a “problem to be solved,” or a deficit in need of cure (Mitchell 2). Only ‘healthy’ people can effectively make decisions. BG resists this assumption to a degree by showing Roslin making effective presidential decisions while having cancer. However, BG also succumbs to this assumption by having Roslin conceal her cancer until religion can provide a safe context for her.

So, this brings us back to the question, does BG move forward the image of a powerful woman? Does BG resist dominant cultural scripts for women? When asked how her portrayal of Roslin might assist other women, Mary McDonnell, the actress who plays Roslin, responded, “I think Laura should help women like Hilary Clinton get into power. The more we have actresses playing women in power the more the idea becomes part of people’s expectations and culture. People start absorbing it as a given, and start expecting women to be in that position. The repetition of the image is what shifts our perception in TV and movies and then hopefully in real life” (Eden 16). The actress has input into the dialogue and portrayal of her character, and while many could say this is a simplistic viewpoint, the fact of the matter is, her portrayal is generating myriad discussions in a variety of

places, from internet-based fandom to print media interviews. Certainly some women criticize her portrayal of a powerful woman dying from cancer, while other women applaud it, but no single image can ever capture the ‘right’ portrayal, as there is no single, right portrayal. Roslin generates questions and controversy, and it is in the discussion of the questions and controversy that moves the feminist project forward.

### Notes

1. Katherine Henry’s “Angelina Grimke’s Rhetoric of Exposure” points out how Angelina Grimke uses her small, seemingly weak and defenseless body as a rhetorical strategy: a woman may be small, but she can still speak out. Additionally, many women during the 19<sup>th</sup> century found it necessary to sit down when addressing men on matters of equality and abolition. While this strategy reinforces a certain passivity in women, it also creates a space where men listen to women, adding to the process that widens the space where women can speak, and men will listen.
2. Diane Herndl-Price theorizes that the “traditional figure of the [female] invalid” in narratives has “three outcome: she can die, go mad or get well” (Invalid Women 15). While BG consistently narrates how these potential outcomes overlap, BG also offers another

- overlapping outcome: a way of living with the disease that benefits the community.
3. See Lewis Mehl-Madrona's Coyote Healing as one possibility of how a non-traditional, non-western approach to medicine works.
  4. See Susan Sontag's "Illness and Metaphor," where she argues about the dangers of representing disease using metaphors, specifically the war metaphors often used in describing the body's relationship to cancer: cancer "invades" and the body "battles back." These metaphors place cancer outside the body as an invader, placing the body in a position to battle itself.
  5. Michel Foucault's Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason describes changes in European societies' view of insanity and reason, theorizing why the two have become opposites. By creating this diametric opposition, "madness" can be used as a way of ostracizing "undesirables." In The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar further interrogate diametric oppositions, such as the angel/monster images in literature that uphold feminine values that oppress women.

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