

TV's Alias, and the Female Hero

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The fourth season of Alias finally premiered last week. The two hour episode presented everything I've come to expect from the cult series -- action packed drama, intrigue, romance, gadgets, butt-kicking and the awesome presence of the coolest female super-spy since The Avengers' Emma Peel -- and Sydney Bristow, you rock my world.

Like Mrs. Peel, Bristow is an illustration of a woman who is intelligent and resourceful, determined and righteous -- a woman with strength both physical and emotional. And like Mrs. Peel, Bristow is a paradoxical representation of the female hero.

With her intelligence and agency, Bristow has the power to challenge traditional gendered roles. Yet her constant sexualized depictions simultaneously reinforce the very roles she is fighting against. I'm concerned that when we think of Alias we think of Bristow's sexuality and not her heroism -- our collective focus leaning towards her lingerie rather than her selfless acts. Unfortunately this paradox is not limited to Alias. When we think of Mrs. Peel do we first think of her agency or of her outfits?

"The popular media are never feeding their audience a single message about women's roles," writes Sherri Inness in her book, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*. "Instead, the media convey countless different messages, with some contradicting others."

Is Bristow's power to challenge gender stereotypes undermined by constant depictions of her prancing around in underwear? Is

her cultural (and critical) relevance undermined by her heightened sexual presence? How do we reconcile her exquisite physicality with her intellectual agency?

Inness argues that although "sexuality may be emphasized, such figures still offer visions of female power and independence and help to challenge the gender status quo."

Perhaps. Although it seems that in the evolution of television's super-spies has advanced little beyond technological gadgetry. It is my hope that once we recognize these contradictions that we will be able to critically address conflicting messages. Bristow may be eye-candy, but she also has an implicit heroic nature worthy of examination (and maybe even embrace).

An apt description of the traits exhibited by the archetypal female hero is provided by UW professor Kate Noble in her text *The Sound of a Silver Horn: Reclaiming the Heroism in Contemporary Women's Lives* -- traits exemplified by Bristow. "A female hero is determined and brave. [She] take[s] what risks she can and must to transform herself and the world in which she lives."

Like Noble's female hero, Bristow "carefully hones her talents and skills and she uses them in the service of others even though the cost may be high."

I believe it would be simplistic to assume that a character such as Bristow is a "good" or "bad" depiction of the female hero -- there is simply no blanket way to read her or any other ass-kicking babe. Rather, she is a multivalent representation of all that women could be.

Even with their problematic sexuality, we need images of women like Peel and Bristow on television -- tough women. Because if we don't see stories of empowered women, how do we begin to empower ourselves? And let me be clear on the sexuality issue. Women should have a healthy and self-confident relationship towards their bodies and towards sex -- this is not the issue. The

problem comes with the lack of women on television who are "sexy" instead of "sexualized."

As a critical audience, it is up to us to decide which aspects of the female hero (as represented on television) we want to take example from.

"The heroic woman," Noble writes, "[is one who] insists she will be what she wants to be and what she can be."

Appropriately, the current season of *Alias* is being promoted with the tagline, "She can be anyone she wants to be. Now she gets to be herself." The promotion is right on target.

I hope that Bristow will continue to move past gendered expectations of who she should be and I hope that through her example women will strive for excellence by insisting on being who they want to be.