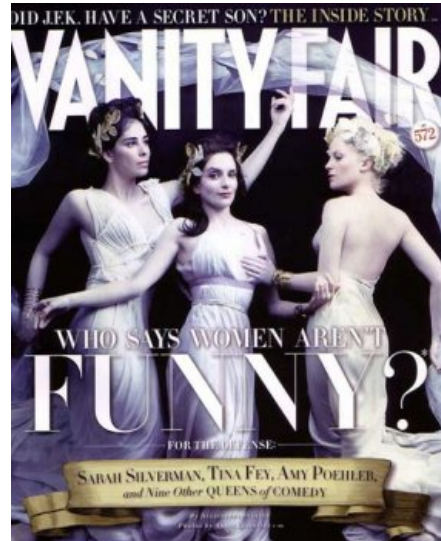


Erica Lies

Roundtable: Bitches Get Stuff Done

The success of stand up comic, Sarah Silverman, writer/producer/performer, Tina Fey, and sketch chameleon, Amy Poehler was heralded in April 2008's *Vanity Fair* when the magazine featured the unexpected trio on its cover. Styled glamorously as Greek statues with a headline reading, "Who Says Women Aren't Funny?" their rise in the comedy ranks signals the shifting gender composition of televised comedy. Here are three women whose work consistently highlights a grotesque living body, who excel equally in blue humor as well as social satire, who often portray unattractive



characters and address female audiences. The trio represents the spectrum of female success in the comedy genre, from cable to network to late night. Of course, their visibility alone would hardly challenge comedy's dominance by (and address to) men, but unlike comedienne of the past, Silverman, Fey and Poehler are known specifically as comedy writers. They present two types of comic persona, and one entirely different model of operation—either mastering the previous format or working with other women and attracting female audiences. While white heterosexual men have historically been the creators and receivers of televised comedy, these women's careers demonstrate that the very notion of what is considered "funny" is being reconfigured and expanded.

The preferred persona for professional funny women shifts with each time period, and these crafted personalities decide their audiences. In the photo, Silverman's slightly distant positioning underscores her stand up background—she's not closely associated with other female comics. In her work, Silverman pairs a biting satire with a cute coquettish persona and tops it off with adolescent boy humor. Silverman's persona signals the wider emergence of a "hot, funny" persona that alternates stereotypically masculine humor with a heightened femininity. Her show, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, airs on male-dominated Comedy Central, where she is only the second woman in the channel's twenty years to play a program's lead character. While Silverman is certainly a comic force, she appeals to the same audience that has traditionally followed comedy. She's mastered the rules, but has she challenged the model? Does her humor mixed with sexual appeal simply reinforce the structure? On the *VF* cover, Poehler only turns to the camera in profile, avoiding the lens. Similarly, she has mostly avoided a sexualized persona, and distinctly lacks a stable one. Her prior sketch work on *The Upright Citizens Brigade* and currently on *Saturday Night Live* has showcased a virtuosic ability to morph into differing physicalities, enabling her to be the rare female player allowed to cross-gender on *SNL*. Her work has garnered increasing attention—indeed, this year she became the first *SNL* player to receive an Emmy nod for working on the show. Poehler has stated in interviews that she's uncomfortable playing sexual roles for their own sake, but as her heightened profile leads her to primetime and away from the

multiple characters of sketch, she will have to avoid being absorbed into Silverman's model.

In contrast to Silverman's distant stance on *VF*'s cover, Poehler's physical alignment with Fey gestures to their off-screen history as colleagues and friends at *SNL* and *Second City*. Fey, the most prominent (and powerful) of the three women, stands in the center and meets the camera's gaze. Now that she has moved to primetime with *30 Rock*, Fey's rise as a manager is expanding the notion of what is considered successful comedy by focusing material at female audiences. As her *30 Rock* character, Liz Lemon, navigates between work and personal life while balancing the million contradictory expectations placed on her (Be independent! Be accommodating!), the frustrations and anxieties of middle class female audiences are embodied onscreen. Her popularity among women spectators is proving a draw, even for vehicles she hasn't written. This spring's *Baby Mama*, a buddy-pic in which Fey co-starred with Poehler, easily grabbed number one at the box office its opening weekend, despite opening opposite other comedies with male leads. Among *Baby Mama*'s audience, 68 percent were women, 55 percent of them over the age of 25. What was it that appealed to female moviegoers? Was it her pairing with another comic? Will primetime take the cue? In 2006, even *30 Rock* decided to recast Fey's longtime collaborator, sketch comic Rachel Dratch.

If the *Vanity Fair* cover is announcing the success of women comedians, the news arrives with an equal amount of unease. There's the question of the bodily containment in the photo, but also its overwhelming whiteness. All twelve of the comedians featured in *Vanity Fair*'s photo spread are thin. Only two are women of color. While neither is present in *VF*'s pages, both Margaret Cho and Mo'Nique have recently helmed reality programs—does moving away from traditionally scripted formats offer more possibilities for women of color? Silverman, Fey and Poehler may have cracked up comedy's glass ceiling, but a delimited whitewashed notion of sex appeal is equally becoming a requirement for the success of female comedians. How can participation in television comedy be opened to more women of color? And when will televised comedy's embodied possibilities be applied as equally to women as it is to men?