

Do Bitches Get Stuff Done?
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Tina Fey's infamous comment, "Bitches Get Stuff Done" aligned her with the feminist appropriation of the term bitch to connote agency and empowerment, and she was "getting stuff done" as she publicly voiced support for a political candidate on Saturday Night Live. Fey is a successful comedy writer and comedienne in a largely male dominated field, and few would dispute her considerable talents. Feminist scholars (some on this panel) commend Fey's work in the sitcom *30 Rock* for its progressive take on gender politics embedded within a broader critique of the entertainment industry. Yet, even their enthusiastic analyses express some reservations, and it is these I will explore in the interests of discussion.

30 Rock, like all "quality" network television driven by ratings, is multiply coded to appeal to both affluent, culturally educated and more general audiences. As was the case with *30 Rock's* predecessors (Mary Tyler Moore, Murphy Brown), Fey's character Liz Lemon can be read as simultaneously progressive and regressive. By conflating the fictional Liz Lemon and the "real" Tina Fey, text and meta-text, *30 Rock* encourages savvy viewers "in on the joke" to read Liz Lemon/Tina Fey as a strong, successful woman who disturbs hierarchies of social and economic power. But I would argue that *30 Rock's* adherence to comedic conventions and familiar tropes of femininity work to negate the threat posed by a "woman on top." Within the diegesis, Liz Lemon is smart, but unattractive and "unfeminine" (signified by her thick glasses, lack of concern with her appearance, geekiness, and ability to participate in male gross-out humor). And while Lemon's unattractiveness is complicated by her plunging necklines and media representations of Fey as attractive, her feminization on this meta-level both attracts male viewers and defuses her threat to hegemonic culture. Moreover, while Tina Fey may (presumably) speak her mind and get stuff done, the fictional Liz Lemon adopts the posture of self-deprecation as source of humor. As is the case with many sitcom protagonists, social inadequacies--in this case her dissatisfaction with being single, her inability to maintain a relationship, unattractiveness, awkwardness, and insecurity--are made laughable. In the process, the cultural values that form the backdrop against which Liz's failures are measured are affirmed rather than questioned. The oft-cited C-word episode provides an example of how Fey/Lemon--and *30 Rock*--addresses but does not challenge gender politics. Liz Lemon is torn by the (feminine) desire to be liked by her staff and the (masculine) desire for authority and control. While the argument has been made that this episode is indicative of *30 Rock's* criticism of the contradictory expectations placed on professional women, the episode's narrative conclusion undermines its critical clout. Fey takes it upon herself to do all of the writing in order to be liked by her staff. She stays up all night and is exhausted, but watches a *Designing Women* marathon where she is inspired by the comment that a woman is as powerful as a man. She tapes it and brings it to play for her staff. She fumbles with the technology, and when the tape is destroyed she bursts into tears, collapses in exhaustion, and her male coworker carries her out of the room. Credits roll. The final image of Liz Lemon shows her curled up like a baby in the arms of a man.

It's also worth noting that just as Liz Lemon is read as Tina Fey, on the extra-diegetic level Tina Fey increasingly plays upon the image of Liz Lemon, and in so doing her feminist politics become even more muted. For example, in a recent American Express commercial with Martin Scorsese, Fey is deferential and bumbling, belying the fact that she is one of the most powerful women in comedy.

While *30 Rock* may be constrained by the commercial imperatives of network television that call for familiar, non-threatening representations of gender (and race), programs on paid subscription channels like HBO can take more risks. It's instructive to compare *30 Rock* to a similar satire of the entertainment industry, HBO's *The Comeback*. *The Comeback* was produced by, written by, and starred Lisa Kudrow, though her character distanced her rather than played upon her role as Phoebe on *Friends*. Its conceit was that an aging ex-sitcom star, played by Kudrow in a red wig and with a southern accent, landed a role in a sitcom under the condition that she allow herself to be filmed for a reality show that documented her "comeback." Both the form and content of the subsequent show depicted the struggle between comedy and reality television as primary modes of television entertainment at the same time that it blurred the boundaries that differentiated them. In so doing, it laid bare not only the artificiality of all television representations, but spoke to the plight of the female comic who is both the subject and target of humor. As producer, writer, and star, Kudrow was a woman in control of the typically male domain of comedy, yet the show's humor was based upon the constant "put down" of her fictional character. For thirteen episodes, *The Comeback* depicted the character's self-aggrandizing image despite a constant barrage of indignities heaped upon aging women in Hollywood. The character was humiliated on multiple levels: by the sitcom writers within the reality show, the reality show producers within the program, and within the narrative itself, which portrayed her eagerness to exchange dignity for fame when she thought no one was watching. The result provided incisive social criticism of the entertainment industry, reality television, television sitcoms, our cultural obsession with youth and beauty, and the egotistical need to brand the self, without relying on familiar tropes and stereotypes. It was a discomfiting program that highlighted rather than resolved tensions and contradictions. It did not fit into conventional genre categories, and Kudrow's character did not conform to conventional representations--and it failed to find an audience. In an early episode, Kudrow's fictional character observes, "Edgy is funny. Too edgy is cancellation." Her words were indeed prescient, as the show was cancelled after one season. It is tremendously difficult for bitches to get stuff done.