The (Double) X Files: The Horror of Sexism and Misogyny in Contemporary America

“Woman is the root of all evil.” While most Americans aren’t going to be quoting St. Jerome in public any time soon, an overwhelming majority are still consciously and subconsciously emulating his teachings. Most history textbooks are content to paint a pretty picture of civil rights activists securing legal and social equality for women, and then declare sexism henceforth dead. Contrary to popular belief, women’s suffrage was not the death knell of centuries’ worth of discrimination; misogyny did not disappear overnight. Decades of research—coupled with overwhelming evidence from politicians, lobbyist groups, social media, musical/cinema pop culture, and advertising—show that women are still stereotyped, held to political double standards, asked to relinquish autonomy over their own bodies, and sexually objectified. Despite the Nineteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution “granting” women “equal rights,” in contemporary America women are still facing discrimination.

Contemporary American society stereotypes women as suited exclusively for domestic life. From the twentieth century onward, the classic portrayal of women was that of the American housewife, the dedicated Swiss army knife of child-rearing, husband-catering, home-maintaining, luncheon-organizing, and floor-scrubbing. No greater aspiration existed for women than to prescribe to the nuclear family model, the absolute pinnacle of feminism. They were taught by the “experts” (Friedan 27) “to pity…women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents” (15 - 16). Society actively conditioned women to believe that those who desired a career apart from “housewife” on the census blank were neurotic. Young girls were ingrained with the idea that ambition was a symptom of neurosis, a mental disorder. This yearning for a sense of identity left women with feelings of “desperation” (21), “anxieties,” and “fatigue” (30), with “great bleeding blisters” (20) on their arms and a numbness that they “blotted out [with tranquilizers]” (20). Although The Feminine Mystique helped explain the cause of “the housewife’s syndrome” (20) and oversee a resurgence of women in roles
beyond motherhood, the damage had already been done. This vestigial stereotype has helped bar women from making progress in the workforce, in the armed forces, and even in extracurricular-based communities. Comments telling women to go back to the kitchen and make sandwiches are an example of male privilege and entitlement manifesting in the online video gaming community (Daniels). Stereotyping against women doesn’t end with the housewife archetype, either.

Religion, law, government officials, pop culture, and mainstream media stereotype women as habitual liars. Take for example the fifteen-year-old girl in Florensc, France who had to record her father raping her to convince her school’s counselor that she was telling the truth. Only when she set up a webcam and filmed herself being violated again did the police take her seriously (Klee). So ubiquitous is the belief that women lie about sexual assault, that Philadelphia’s sex crimes unit is referred to as “the lying bitch unit” (Chemaly), despite false rape reports only being in the 2%-8% range. This indoctrination starts young, too. Children are assaulted by a barrage of subliminal messaging in the forms of TV shows (Pretty Little Liars, Gossip Girl) and music (Gold Digger, Somethin’ ’Bout Pimpin’), which portray women as untrustworthy, greedy, scheming, and materialistic (Chemaly). The willingness of artists and producers to market these to young audiences—while taking zero responsibility for the impact of their messages—both compounds and perpetuates sexism. Like the aforementioned Jerome, influential albeit long-dead religious figures hold an ironclad grip on the formation of society and its views about women. The infamous St. Magnus believed women obtain what they want through “lying and diabolic deceptions” (Chemaly). Given how figures like him are deeply-rooted in Christian and Catholic teachings, deconstructions of religious misogyny and their ties to institutional powers aren’t likely to happen, ever. Religious institutions and leaders found themselves on the contemporary expressions of these philosophers which in turn found (and influence) the politicians that Americans elect to represent them in government. Such was the case of Jamie Johnson,
a member of Rick Santorum’s staff, who believes that children would be harmed if the country had a
female president—a belief that he justified as “formal, theological studies [based in] classical Christian
document” (Diamond). Here we see the domino effect hard at work, ricocheting off religion, politics, and
news coverage all in one destructive swing. Not a single corner of American society remains unscathed
from misogynistic stereotypes. Allowing these mindsets to go unchallenged proves damaging to the
children readily exposed to it, when they are at their most impressionable; and enables malicious
behavior on every level of society, from laymen to lawmaker. Stereotyping erodes the individuality of
women, fostering a culture that doesn’t hesitate to believe and repeat degenerative messages about their
credibility, authority, and value. Misogyny doesn’t end with widespread stereotyping, either, for
discrimination against women also frequently manifests on the U.S. political front.

Contemporary American society discriminates against women in politics and legislature by holding
them to double standards. Ultra-conservative Fox news representative Ann Coulter remarked that
“liberal women are too fragile and too easily-offended to hold political office” (Bennett-Smith). During
a Senate hearing on gun control laws, Dianne Feinstein was described by Coulter as having “snapped”
at Ted Cruz when he started quoting the Bill of Rights at her. Coulter, ever the champion of loaded
language, framed Feinstein’s calm yet firm reply on the pointlessness of being lectured about the
Constitution as an emotional backlash. This constant portrayal of women as being misguided by their
emotions and unable to maintain an unfeeling façade is a double standard applied exclusively to female
politicians. Hillary Clinton, after suffering a recent loss in Iowa, let her guard down at a New
Hampshire campaign event and adopted a choked-up, brittle tone. This show of “weakness” riled up a
news media storm which proceeded to attack and question her for her faltering resolve, with one
anchorwoman declaring that “we can’t have people who break down and start crying at the most
difficult moments” (Stewart). Similarly, when Clinton infused her arguments with passion, she was
ridiculed for being “unable to control her temper” (Stewart). Yet when male politicians unabashedly cry (Mitch McConnell), swear (Chris Christie), ignore other politicians attempting to speak (Darrel Issa), and demonstrate immature conflict resolution, they are accepted, applauded, cheered, encouraged, and lauded because “it takes a lot more courage for a politician to cry on television than it does to be tough” (Stewart). It is alarmingly apparent that any form of emotional display on the behalf of a female politician is regarded under closer scrutiny and harsher condemnation, while male politicians are exempted from those standards and free to emote without fear of negative consequence. Similarly, a woman’s ability to reproduce is held against them as a liability. When Hillary Clinton announced that she was to be a grandmother, news media coverage went into a frenzy over whether or not Clinton had forced her daughter to become pregnant as part of a publicity stunt to manipulate voters, whether or not it would impact her decision to run for office, and whether or not asking the question itself was sexist. Meanwhile, her political rival and equal Mitt Romney has a “litter of grandchildren…[three of which were added] while he was campaigning” and was never posed the question. These examples painfully demonstrate that women in positions of political power are discriminated against based on biology/gender standards that cast emotional responses—responses that all human beings have—as a sign of ineptitude and inadequacy. The struggle against misogyny includes the ways that women must advocate for the basic right to have a say in what becomes of their own bodies.

Contemporary American society also attempts to seize bodily autonomy from women through anti-abortion laws, sexual objectification, and rape culture at universities. Self-styled “pundit” Ann Coulter demanded public records for women who have had abortions and “might be willing to murder a child” with “money from Planned Parenthood…Medicare…and Medicaid” (Bennett-Smith). Her appeal to emotional persuasion conveniently overlooks the fact that “the Hyde Amendment withholds federal Medicaid funding from abortion” (Planned Parenthood) with the exception of endangerment to the
mother from continuing the pregnancy, or pregnancy beget in rape or incest. Yet even with pregnancy being “the leading cause of death for girls ages fifteen to nineteen worldwide” (Chemaly), Republican political agendas seek to eliminate abortion in the cases of rape and incest. According to Sen. Chuck Winder, anyone desirous of an abortion can use those claims as a loophole, and he point blank “refused to allow any exception for rape, incest, or medical emergencies” (Lithwick 2). Even though young girls who are raped have a high chance of dying from pregnancy complications or childbirth itself, politicians want to take away their ability to save themselves from pregnancy-induced mortality. Loss of autonomy surfaces in other areas, too. Sexual objectification has seen a resurgence in propaganda and advertising, “representing and treating a person like a [sex] object” (Heldman), a non-thinking entity that can be used without consent to satisfy another person’s pleasure. The Sex Object Test poses seven questions that measure the presence of sexual objectification in an image. At Amherst, a fraternity printed and sold t-shirts of a woman clad only in a bra and thong turning on a spit, with bruises on her sides and an apple stuffed in her mouth (Chemaly). This particular image passes question four on the SOT, of the image affirming violation of the woman’s bodily integrity without her consent, and glamorizing the idea of her being attacked and subsequently dominated. Never mind the Phi Kappa Tau fraternity at Georgia Tech that e-mailed a “Christmas ditty” to its members that condones raping girls, burying them in a coffin, and later unburying their corpses so “she [can] fuck [them] again” (Chemaly). Society has no qualms with asking women to forfeit autonomy of their bodies to politicians bent on eliminating life-saving health coverage, and to misogynistic fraternities content to advertise women’s bodies as an avenue of sexual fulfillment.

The United States of America was founded on the belief that equal rights should be extended to all citizens; this was reaffirmed by the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. However, time and time again society has shown how stereotyping, political bias, relinquishment of autonomy, and sexual
objectification degrade women as individuals; limit their career options; hinder the advancements of their political statuses; increase the mortality rate of young girls denied life-saving medical coverage; deny protection against predators and rapists; and rob women of the ability to have control over their bodies. As a society we have collectively failed to give voice to an oppressed group, and by refusing to acknowledge the problem, have caused just as much harm as the direct instigators. When politicians state that they plan on passing legislation that aims to weaken a woman’s access to life-saving medical care, we should openly question that politician and withdraw our support. When we watch a movie that portrays a female character as an accessory to the male lead and sexually objectifies them, we should walk out of that theater. When a local church teaches religious beliefs that regard women as lesser beings, we should not return to that institution. When a friend in a fraternity wears a t-shirt that condones violence against women, we should have the courage to tell him to take it off. It’s not an easy battle to fight, but we owe it to ourselves to boycott and protest these symptoms of a misogynistic society. In doing so, we can improve the lives of women everywhere, and perhaps save a few as well.

Works Cited


