From Afterthought to Elected: How Approval of Bitches Has Increased the Complexity of Roles for Women in TV

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The truth is a lot easier to swallow when it's hidden in the laughter of a well-crafted joke. I'm grateful to be living in an era where comedy is the leader of social commentary, rather than the fiction of Charles Dickens or the brutal reality of Upton Sinclair's work. Even more so I'm grateful to be experiencing commentary led by funny women such as Julia Louis-Dreyfus. So when I was told that the writers for *Veep* have found inspiration in real rumors from the staff of one of the women running for president, it made the jaw-dropping, side-splitting insults delivered each episode even better. As D.C. legend goes, Amy Klobuchar once had a staffer shave her legs for her, a bit that the writing team slipped in for Selina Meyer's chief of staff to passively mention, which is as good as satire gets. Whether or not the much-denied rumors of Meyer's like antics in Klobuchar's own office are true isn't necessarily important but it certainly brings the politics of *Veep* to life in my imagination. As bitchiness has become a more acceptable trait in the past thirty years, Julia Louis-Dreyfus has gone from portraying Elaine Benes, the original independent woman, to the President of the United States. To begin explaining this shift I will summarize the two characters and take a moment to highlight Louis-Dreyfus's active role in the advancement of comedy. I will then analyze the evolution of feminist characteristics between Elaine and Selina, followed by the importance of language in and surrounding *Veep* and conclude my analysis by dissecting the ways female sexual liberation are addressed in the 1990s compared to today. From these three pieces of evidence I have concluded that Elaine Benes and Selina Meyer are deeply feminist roles, despite the anti-hero characteristics they display.

When Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David started working with NBC to bring *Seinfeld* to primetime television, only three men had been written into the featured cast. Worried about ratings, the network required a woman to be brought on and Elaine Benes was born. It seems appropriate for the fickle, feisty and self-centered character to have been an accident, although it stunted its development into a role worthy of its groundbreaking status. The reluctance to have the presence of a woman was evident in the writers' room, according to Molly Ball's feature of Julia Louis-Dreyfus in *Time Magazine*. She interviewed a writer who said that David and Seinfeld gave the room instructions to write Elaine just like a man. Ball responds to this revelation saying "on a show considered one of history's finest, the only way the writers knew how to fully realize the character was to imagine she was male." Feeling that Elaine's character had untapped potential and was underwritten, Louis-Dreyfus advocated for richer storylines. This tireless fight to push the boundaries of a woman's role in comedy did not stop after *Seinfeld*; her role as the vulgar, vain and sometimes vicious politician Selina Meyer on *Veep* is the product of decades of work. Calling attention to the discrepancy between her trademark characters and Louis-Dreyfus'ss own personality, Ball demonstrates just how masterful the actress truly is. All lovely qualities aside, Ball writes: "in the noxious politician, Louis-Dreyfus finds a pressure valve for the anger and frustration many women bottle up in public." "One has to power through it," [Louis-Dreyfus] adds. "And frankly, I've made a career of playing unlikable people. I don't cotton to likability" (Louis-Dreyfus qtd in Ball). It's true that these women are hard to love but despite Louis-Dreyfus's worst efforts, viewers find themselves rooting for their success.

The men in *Seinfeld* all have a specific role within the group: Jerry Seinfeld the ringleader, George Costanza the sidekick and Cosmo Kramer the comic relief, in addition to all of the qualities they share. Elaine, through no real fault of writing or

characterization is simply the woman. As Ball discussed in her article, when *Seinfeld* was brought to NBC it had no featured female role and it was the network that required the presence of a woman before it was to air. In her essay "Elaine Benes: Feminist Icon or One of the Boys?", Sarah E. Worth discusses the value of Elaine's character and whether she is worthy of the "feminist" label. She runs through examples like *Friends* that have equal gender representation but whose women fall under tired stereotypes; Elaine may be outnumbered but she breaks the mold of female characters. But is she a feminist icon? Of overused feminine stereotypes, Worth points out that "she is not emotionally dependent on a man to keep her happy all the time, but she and her friends seem to keep each other going. Importantly, I think, she is not financially dependent on anyone" (53). Elaine is clearly independent without being a shrew-like character—she has close friends and is often in relationships. Where Worth probably began to pause in considering Elaine a feminist is that the conversation around feminism is focused on upward trends: lifting women up to the same societal privileges that men are allowed, improving and growing as a society on the whole to support women as equals, bringing other women up with you if you are on the rise. Rather than elevate herself, Elaine challenges this standard by stooping down in order to be equal with her male counterparts. Although she represents many qualities that make her more of a "role model" than other sitcom women in the 90s, she displays clear anti-hero characteristics. Like the men she shares the screen with "she lies and cheats; she can be rude, vain, inconsiderate, and unreasonable" (Worth 56). Worth concludes that although Elaine may be a product of feminism, she isn't "strong" enough to be deemed a feminist herself and could be doing more to counter the misogyny of the male *Seinfeld* characters. While I would consider Worth's concerns to be valid, looking at Elaine almost 30 years later, her unapologetic existence in a space dominated by men is enough for me to call her a feminist. It is clear to me that she was an important

stepping stone towards complex representation in comedy and breaking down the stereotypes women were often boxed into.

The groundwork laid by Elaine in the 90s, leads us to Selina Meyer today. In *Veep* we see Julia Louis Dreyfus begin as Vice President who eventually takes over as Commander in Chief when her former superior resigns. Whether she's in office or running after being ousted after less than a year as President, Selina is an unforgiving, cutthroat political operative doing everything she can to get what she wants. Both fictional and real political worlds are unforgiving, and especially so for women. Selina has no problem taking down fellow women if it means she can get ahead. In the aftermath of a historical tie in the presidential election, Selina and her running mate Tom James are convincing members of congress to vote for them in the episode "Congressional Ball." It opens on Air Force One as Selina is trading souvenirs and a promise to manufacture boats that the Navy has deemed useless with Rep. Penny Nickerson for her vote. After events which I will be revisiting later on, she finds out that Nickerson has been convinced to abstain from voting while in attendance at the ball put on for the sole purpose of lobbying congress members for their votes. Selina takes her aside to say "If I do win, I will have my administration come to your shitty little district and shake it to death like a Guatemalan nanny. And then I'm gonna have the IRS crawl so far up your husband's colon he's going to wish the only thing they find is more cancer. So, can I count on your vote, or do I need to shove a box of White House M&Ms up your stretched-out, six-baby vag?" (*Veep)*. I might not be able to convey the scathingly calm deliverance of these lines on paper but these unforgiving words showcase Selina in her element.

Here is the clear evolution from Elaine, who merely had no close female relationships and hung around the boys, to Selina who is more than willing to destroy any woman who stands in her path and is playing politics the dirty way, just like the men.

From a feminist standpoint, this treatment of other women is a point of contention. Caitlin Moran expresses her disdain for the "sisterhood" in her piece, "I Am a Feminist!". "If someone's an arsehole, someone's an arsehole-regardless of whether we're both standing in the longer bathroom queue at concerts or not" (Moran 81). She argues that if men were making comments about other men they would not be reprimanded or accused of "letting our side down" (Moran 81). This brand of feminism is certainly on display in *Veep* where Selina plays it like the boys and only plays the "woman card" or appeals directly as a feminist when it advances her own agenda. In a satirical context I believe it's more than permissible to play this role but in order to truly be feminist, helping other women as you succeed should be a priority. According to Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist who has studied the influence of gender bias in the workplace, it's harder to succeed at the top if you're the only woman up there. In her portion of the article "Women Mentoring Women: Tapping the Wisdom in Networks to Navigate Career Obstacles and Opportunities" she highlights research that displays the effects of representation on gender bias in performance reviews. Women receive more negative reviews when only 1-10% of executives are female compared to 10-20%, however the largest shift in perception only occurs when women make up 50% of the executives (Hewlett 51). Women becoming more dominant in the corporate executive landscape can only occur when women support each other. As one person lifts another person up, the likeliness for bias to make an impact goes down and it makes it easier for each woman who follows. Selina isn't an anti-feminist but she certainly isn't the perfect vessel for female advancement. The games she plays and the jaded outlook she has towards other women trying to climb the same ladder are more so a product of the environment that she suffered through to this point.

Regardless of field, whether it's male dominated or not, women are primed to face consequences and criticism based on gender stereotypes. As Sylvia Ann Hewlett

discusses the effects of women executive on performance reviews, she also shares research from the same study to show just how impossible it is for women to win. “Acting “masculine” provokes antagonism, but cultivating “feminine” traits also won’t get them anywhere because femininity-with the associated characteristics of nurturance and empathy-is associated with weakness and incompetence” (Hewlett 52). The gendered connotation of language is clearly present in the performance reviews being studied, and the language is unlikely to stop as your career grows, as shown by Selina Meyer. She faces this head on as she orders her Chief of Staff Amy Brookheimer to investigate the staff to see which of them called Selina a cunt, a story which had been leaked to the press, amidst the fallout from a stock market meltdown. The episode “C**tgate” puts the issue that Laura K. Brunner focuses the chapter “#BitchBoss/BossBitch: Love Hate Relationships With Unruly Women” of her dissertation on working women in current popular media, into the most extreme scenario. Brunner looks at the way Selina Meyer and Leslie Knope, both bosses in their respective shows, were addressed and found that “women characters were called “bitchy,” “emotional,” or “crazy,” when not meeting others expectations (Brunner 128). By looking at Twitter, Facebook and IMBd discussions of shows she found that fans of the shows also used this language to describe these characters but with a positive connotation. When fans used language that typically carries a negative connotation, Brunner argues that “the use of the term bitch was a way of creating a personal relationship with an inaccessibly powerful woman” (153). Interestingly, many of the other female leads that she features throughout her dissertation were also described as a bitch by viewers but in an unfavorable tone. In Selina’s case “embracing bitchiness also gave women strength and resolve” and they “expressed admiration and awe” (Brunner 154). Perhaps it has to do with the role itself and as President, Selina wields more power to be a bitch than a random CEO of a publishing firm. The words that

we use to describe people carry a lot of weight and in the age of political correctness it has never been more imperative to analyze whether you should be using words with polarizing power.

Veep runs rampant with the use of foul language, often insulting people to their face or in mocking the policies they should be supporting. When it comes to words that typically would be censored on TV many of them have been deemed inappropriate because of the connotations they carry. On this particular show, choice words typically revolve around women and their body parts, words that when used even by women, many might pause to contemplate if it's acceptable. The process of reclaiming words is not an easy task and not the same for every word or every person. Robin Brontsema closes out "A Queer Revolution: Reconceptualizing the Debate Over Linguistic Reclamation" with an all-encompassing testimony to its value: "Linguistic reclamation is a courageous self-emancipation that boldly moves from a tragic, painful past into a future full of uncertainty, full of doubt-and full of possibility" (16). This particular article focuses on words that have impacted the LGBTQ community and concludes that it is difficult to definitively measure the success of reclamation as each process has a different intention in mind. Brontsema uses the word "dyke" to demonstrate that though it may still be used negatively "because of its very pejoration, d*yke* claims a political fierceness and anti-assimilationism" (Brontsema 14). This concept can be applied to a plethora of words like those being reclaimed by women.

Bitch Media, a feminist media organization, often is questioned about their name, a choice they explain rather simply. "When it's being used as an insult, "bitch" is an epithet hurled at women who speak their minds, who have opinions and don't shy away from expressing them, and who don't sit by and smile uncomfortably if they're bothered or offended. If being an outspoken woman means being a bitch, we'll take that as a

compliment" (Bitch Media). Selina is the epitome of the outspoken woman so it only makes sense that she tosses out "that's Washington, D.C. for you-District of Cunts" without batting an eyelash (*Veep*). When Amy and Selina talk like that, I personally don't take any offense to it. As women they are allowed to shout the B and C words and sprinkle in all the abortion jokes they want, and even some men have no hesitation in following suit. For users of reclaimed words who aren't a part of the target group, it is difficult to universalize how others feel about each word and it can become a slippery slope to offending people. In the political environment on display in *Veep*, it seems like this language has lost its sexist undertones and is used to just be plain mean, rather than offensive. That isn't to say that negatively gendered language doesn't make its way into the conversation of *Veep*. A portion of Lauren DeCarvalho's dissertation *The Work of Prime-Time Post-Recessionary Sexism: Gender and Television Sitcoms in the Post-Recession Era of the 2010s* looks at the language of nine workplace sitcoms featuring women. She concludes that a gender bias exists, which she calls "The Critical Double Standard". "When critics or reviewers of any text, regardless of media, offer misogynistic remarks in lieu of gender-neutral criticism" and "can range from the blatant usage of offensive language to the more subtle sexism through the lack of 'reversibility'" (DeCarvalho 169). This means that critics will resort to generalizations when reviewing texts and media that focus on women and often find more fault in the characters based on misogynistic stereotypes rather than actual character and plot flaws. DeCarvalho discovered that there were three main categories when it came to reviewing *Veep*; people who just like Julia Louis-Dreyfus, people who thought Selina Meyer was a good politician and people who thought Selina Meyer was a bad politician. Regardless of how they felt, almost every critic used some kind of gendered language like Curt Wagner of *RedEye* used when describing Selina: "she's not a complete idiot, but she is a bit ditzy, a lot self-involved and completely image-

obsessed" (Wagner qtd. in DeCarvalho 201). DeCarvalho points to "ditzy" as a word that would never be used to describe a man and is reinforcing clear gender bias when it comes to reviewing female characters. I would go further to say that it's unlikely that a critic would call out a fictional male politician's narcissistic qualities as it's common in political satires to portray them as such.

Because she is a prominent public official, Selina has a lot more to worry about when it comes to how are actions are perceived; and she often has real consequences that come from just about everything she does. On the contrary, Elaine may not have much power but she certainly has a lot more freedom to do as she pleases, a luxury that she takes full advantage of. As a result she and the other characters of *Seinfeld* fall into a pattern of "humorous incivility" which Laura K. Hahn explores in her dissertation "A Generic Analysis of the Rhetoric of Humorous Incivility in Popular Culture". Hahn argues that the characters on *Seinfeld* remain in a naive childlike state as the show isn't centered around their careers and they are often shown ignoring their responsibilities, which provides imagery that their environment reinforces. "The high presence of the home and the surrogate presence of the dining table (at Monk's) on *Seinfeld* remind the audience of children playing at home rather than being out in the world of adults" (Hahn 90). Childlike behavior also suggests the idea that a character needs protection and is often portrayed as a feminine quality, something that Elaine clearly does not need or want. One interpretation of Elaine's involvement is that she is turning this trope on its head and plays by her own rules. I would argue that more so, Elaine defies Hahn's assessment. Jerry's career is unconventional and not portrayed as demanding, George is without a job for a large span of the show and only finds employment after moving in with his parents and Kramer has never had a job and earns money through mysterious or unknown methods. While it is not the focus of the show, Elaine is the only character who has a

steady job and is seen throughout the show advancing in her career. She is acting in opposition to her environment, a testament to her strength and feminist qualities. "Humorous incivility" also manifests in the show centering itself around "self-focused" topics like sex.

Many of *Seinfeld*'s most memorable moments stem from the seemingly meaningless relationships that the group goes through, rarely lasting more than one episode. In a typical sitcom, serial dating is an activity for men and having temporary partners is shameful if you are a woman. Enter: Elaine Benes. She sleeps with who she pleases and for the most part, the men around her don't see a problem with Elaine's sexual liberation. Still, the conversations the men are having about sex focus on their needs and often display blissful ignorance to how women think about sex. In "The Sponge" we see these two ideas coming to a head, as news breaks that Elaine's contraceptive method has been taken off the market. George asks why she can't just use a different method and she responds "women are very loyal to their birth control!" (*Seinfeld).* Despite the fact that George has a fiance, who we later find out also uses "the sponge", he is clearly not invested or concerned with the sexual needs of his partner. After a comical montage of Elaine running from pharmacy to pharmacy, she finally finds one that has a whole case of sponges left. At first, she cautiously asks for three sponges and each time the pharmacist asks to confirm the amount Elaine asks for more and eventually settles on buying the whole case, which causes the pharmacist to omit a look of surprise in judgement of her decision. This situation displays a woman who is comfortable in her sexuality, committed to having safe sex and certainly isn't going to let a little discontinuation stop her from doing what she wants. Besides it being an undeniably feminist move, representation of contraceptives in popular media is extremely important according to "The Media Project", a subset of Kaiser Family Foundation, charged with

promoting positive discussions around sexuality in popular TV shows that teenagers are likely to watch. After an episode of *Felicity* with a "condom demonstration" scene, a survey of 103 girls ages 12 to 21 found that 58 percent thought it was informative, 35 percent said it was the first time they had seen a condom demonstration and 86 percent got useful information regarding sexuality from TV (Folb). Television plays a huge role in shaping adolescents, and although they might not be *Seinfeld*'s target demographic, I can attest to the fact that there are many younger viewers. It's impressive that the show carried a message that has the potential of being informative (although outdated), as any of the character's relationships with other people don't always set the best example. Whether its Elaine getting back with Jerry to prove that women fake orgasms, or losing the group contest to abstain from masturbation, vulgar moments like these are huge moments as a woman on a primetime sitcom being so open with these topics.

Seinfeld and *Veep* are on opposite ends of the continuum when it comes to defining clean comedies. Here lies a juxtaposition: despite it being less acceptable for a woman of Selina's political stature to be sexually liberated she just loves to express it way more than Elaine, who has virtually nothing to lose. In the middle of *Veep*'s first season Selina's casual relationship results in a pregnancy scare that ends quickly after a miscarriage. Throughout the series the interactions between Selina and her ex-husband are filled with sexual tension. As she ran for election while acting president, without her knowledge the staff hired a "sex slave" disguised as a personal trainer (whom she frequently slept with) to keep her away from her ex-husband and put her in a better mood. Behind closed doors Selina has no trouble relaying the most vulgar thoughts a boss could pass down to their subordinates. The public eye and opposite party would not see her as a modern woman taking control of her sexuality, but probably a slut unfit for office. In the aforementioned episode "Congressional Ball" we see Selina at her most cut throat as she tears

Congresswoman Nickerson to shreds. What puts her in this eerie fit of rage is the revelation that her running mate Tom convincing people to abstain, as a tie vote would open the door for him to become president instead. In the article "Thank God for Selina Meyer's Unapologetic 50-Something Sex Drive" Heather Havrilesky describes the interaction between the two characters. "Selina yells at her running mate, VP-almost-elect Tom James, for fucking her (undermining her election efforts) while obviously wanting to fuck her. Apparently this is Meyer's version of verbal foreplay, because in the next scene, we discover Selina straddling Tom in her very presidential blue dress" (Havrilesky). Of all the times throughout the show where you think you've heard the most explicit of Selina's quips, suddenly it's on screen for all to see: women in their 50s have sex too! Havrilesky stereotype as women who "focus all of their pent-up passion on kvetching over their teenage daughter's short skirts and trying to get their tubby husbands to lay off the potato chips" (Havrilesky). Selina's brand of empowerment may be twisted and rooted in serving herself, but she is getting it done. Sexual liberation needs to not only be portrayed as the young thirtysomething dating her way through New York City but by women who are likely reaching menopause too.

Despite their anti-hero characteristics Elaine and Selina's existence in male dominated spaces as outspoken, sexually liberated women is fundamentally feminist. Although Julia Louis-Dreyfus's two most recognizable characters exist in different times, places, positions and parts of their lives they are linked in the way they have unconventionally pushed forward feminism and a woman's place in comedy.

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