

**Beeler, Karin.** *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen: An Analysis of Women Visionary Characters in Recent Television and Film.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008. 219 pages; bibliography, index.

In *Seers, Witches and Psychics on Screen*, Karin Beeler has produced a tight, thorough, and highly readable study of the representation of what she terms “women of vision” in film and television since the 1990’s. The “tightness” of the study is due to a clear analytical mission, which she lays out in the introduction, revisits in each of the twelve chapters with her discussion of each character addressed in the book, and sums up in the conclusion. This is particularly laudable given that this thorough study considers 17 contemporary film and television texts as well as the literary figures of Cassandra and Joan of Arc and a variety of what she describes as “postmodern” and “postfeminist” commentators. The clarity of focus keeps the book from becoming unwieldy or scattered and contributes to its readability, to its scholarly but engaging tone and style.

Beeler is clearly a veteran scholar of popular culture and of gender, and she knows her fields well, contextualizing this book with reference to television studies (Abbott; Lavery; Wilcox), to feminist criticism (Baumgardner and Richards; Daly; Mulvey), to postcolonial theory (Bhabha), and to the study of myth and literature (Aeschylus; Campbell; Purkiss). The book is admirably researched, both with respect to her careful analysis of the film and television texts in question and with respect to the secondary sources she uses to structure that analysis. I can imagine using this book to teach gender and popular culture at the advanced undergraduate level in two ways: as scholarly commentary for my class to study and critique and as an example of how to do studies of popular culture.

Beeler’s argument hinges on three central terms: the “postfeminist,” the “postmodern,” and “hybridity.” I am not entirely comfortable with these terms, especially the first two, because they are often too loosely applied and prone to misinterpretation, but Beeler states her decision to use them clearly. In her introduction, she writes:

This book examines how these television shows and films reflect third wave feminist or postfeminist (and postmodern) ideas

including an emphasis on negotiation or mediation of the female visionary who is the protagonist of these works in many cases. These women experience shifting or hybrid identities and also serve as a means of advocating cultural, sexual, or social diversity, thus challenging a narrow definition of what it means to be “normal.” (1)

Later in the introduction, Beeler elucidates what she means by “postfeminist,” pointing out that she does not use the term to refer to anti-feminism, as it is often meant. Rather, she equates it with Third Wave feminism, which has “embraced the contradictions and diversity among feminists instead of focusing on feminist solidarity” (14).

This flexibility of perspective seems key to how Beeler understands postmodernism and hybridity as well, as she writes, “Like post-colonialist theorist Homi Bhabha, postfeminists and postmodernists also recognize the importance of contradictions, difference, and changing identities” (27). She borrows and reframes the concept of the “third space” from Bhabha, arguing that “it is an effective term to apply to women with visionary powers, since they often live in a hybrid world, acting as mediators between different worlds of experience” (2) and quotes Shugart, Waggoner, and Hallstein in writing, “Postmodernism... is premised... on the understanding that all knowledge is relative and multiple” (28). While I can certainly accept this claim for the reading of this study, this assertion is not an uncontested one. I would have appreciated a deeper engagement with the fields of postcolonialist and poststructuralist theory in explaining and justifying the specific ways that she dips into and borrows from them. While she adds to her explication of how she uses “postmodern” at several points throughout the book, and the term, in this context, becomes more intuitively clear, I would have liked to have seen postcolonialism or postmodernism receive the same sort of designated treatment in her introduction or conclusion that postfeminism did.

This is even more the case because there is a question of race and racialized privilege (or lack thereof) at the heart of all postcolonialist theory and of Bhabha’s work. Beeler is aware of this, and she does address race explicitly at some points, especially in her discussion of the character Oda Mae in *Ghost* and of Native American figures in the series *Wonderfalls*. Further, I recognize that issues of race and racism are sometimes addressed

in fantasy media through metaphor and have presented on this idea myself, with reference to the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. However, by far, most of the characters analyzed in Beeler's book are white, with an unproblematic racial identity. I bristle slightly at the application of a concept developed for the understanding of postcolonialism and hybrid racial and ethnic identities to women whose hybrid statuses are fantasized ones rather than lived reality.

Regardless, Beeler's critique is consistent and illuminating, and I found her chapters on the character River Tam (from *Firefly* and *Serenity*), on Joan Girardi (from *Joan of Arcadia*), and Melinda Gordon (from *Ghost Whisperer*) to be particularly strong. This was especially interesting to me because I am not familiar with the latter two texts, but Beeler provided enough background that I was able to follow her argument throughout but not so much that the writing became murky or cumbersome. Reading these chapters made me want to watch these series, and her chapters on series with which I am more familiar (*Angel*, *Firefly*, *Tru Calling*, *Charmed*) impressed me with the amount of detailed evidence she offered to support and illustrate her well articulated argument. Beeler's analysis of gender comprised, amongst other issues, the questions of female agency, female sexuality, Third Wave political resistance, and the relationships between Second Wave mothers and their Third Wave daughters.

In sum, I enjoyed reading Karin Beeler's book, learned a great deal from it, and found myself stimulated to continue on and do my own studies of several of the texts she introduces, both to test her analyses and to develop my own. I also think it could be a valuable teaching resource and do believe it makes an important contribution to the fields of popular culture studies, literary studies, and women's/gender studies.

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