

There's No One Perfect Girl: Third Wave Feminism and *The Powerpuff Girls*

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Introduction

The popular children's television series, *The Powerpuff Girls*, was originally conceived by animator Craig McCracken under the name *The Whoopass Girls* in 1992.¹ Following a name change and three alternative pilot episodes, the series was picked up by the Cartoon Network and ran from 1995 through to 2005. During this time the show won several awards, including two Primetime Emmy awards for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Animation (2000 and 2005), and two Annie awards for Production Design and Musical Score in an Animated Series (2001).² In this article I will be exploring *The Powerpuff Girls* from a feminist perspective, focusing on what is unique about this series and where it is positioned in popular media culture, before addressing some of the common criticisms of the show and identifying some of its major strengths. It will be my contention that *The Powerpuff Girls* embraces third-wave feminist ideology, with its focus on "Girl Power" and consumerism, while also abandoning the more individualistic aspects of this brand of feminism by exploring the meaning of sisterhood and female empowerment through community.

Background: The relationship between the second and third waves of feminism

According to Lise Shapiro Sanders, one of the major distinguishing features of third-wave feminism is the privileging of the “diversity of women’s experience over the similarities amongst women,” with a particular focus on addressing the inadequacies of second-wave ideology to deal with women’s experience beyond its “white, middle-class biases.”³ In this way, women of colour and those from the developing world were recruited into the fight for equality, while at the same time a radical reclamation of the symbols associated with traditional femininity was initiated. Stereotypes of female attractiveness and girlishness that were so vehemently rejected as part of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s were thus reappropriated as potential sources of female empowerment. Third-wave feminism’s redefinition of the struggle for equality, as it applied to women of the 1990s and beyond, thus became less about women seizing power from men, and more about the younger generation rebelling against the narrow definition of power circumscribed for them by others, including pioneering feminists. According to Amanda Lotz, the conflicts between second and third-wave ideologies can therefore be seen to result from both political and generational differences, with the latter form of feminism often striving to “distance itself” from earlier ideals of female power.⁴

Melissa Klein claims that third-wave feminism is “defined by contradiction,” as it rebels against second-wave ideology despite owing its existence to battles already won by this movement.⁵ The Third Wave is sometimes confused with “postfeminism,” and criticised for perpetuating the myth of post-patriarchy: that women from the 1990s to the present have already achieved equality with men and that experiencing sexism is no longer a part of women’s everyday lives. Issues such as the “wage gap” between men and women in paid employment that were so central to second-wave feminism became a focus mostly limited to women in the developing world, whose needs for greater education and opportunity were correctly identified by third-wave feminists.⁶ However, the continued relevance of such debates for women in the developed world was called into question, with many third-wave feminists abandoning what they considered the victim mentality of the Second Wave, in favour of an ideal of femininity that reclaimed symbols of disempowerment, transforming them into sources of strength. This rejection of past feminisms has led to proponents of the Third Wave being disparagingly labelled “feminism’s dissenting daughters,” rebelling against their fore-mothers and adopting an identity that attempts to negotiate the tensions between stereotypical girlishness and toughness.⁷ I

argue this is the element of third-wave ideology best exemplified by *The Powerpuff Girls*, whose cute, pink-loving, girly protagonists are also physically intimidating and excessively violent.

Culturally, the tenets of third-wave feminism were expressed through the formation of various Riot Grrrl punk bands in the 1990s, such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, who appropriated the traditionally “male province” of rebellious anger as artistic expression, recasting it in distinctly feminine terms.⁸ “Girl Power” became the central message of third-wave feminism, the idea that women could be powerful while still being “girly”—a backlash against older feminist arguments that such stereotypes perpetuated women’s inequality and were purely a symptom of patriarchal society. Consumerism became a method by which to link “Girl Power” with “purchasing power,” recognising the changing position of women in society from domestic dependents to financially self-reliant, independent consumers.⁹ This supports what Cristina Stasia calls the “feminism-by-purchase” message of the Third Wave: that market participation necessarily enhances women’s liberation.¹⁰ I argue that *The Powerpuff Girls* series as a cultural text is situated firmly within the artistic expression of third-wave feminist ideals, both embracing the “Girl Power” message and capitalising on its economic potential. The series also boasts a rich popular culture heritage, belonging to the superhero genre and the children’s television market. As such, the series is worthy of analysis for its socio-political content as well as for its entertainment value.

What makes *The Powerpuff Girls* unique in the superhero genre?

One of the most important features distinguishing the Powerpuff girls from other super-heroines is the fact that they are kindergarten-aged *girls*. Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup have no curves, as seen by the coordinated box-cut dresses they wear in every episode. As part of their standard outfit, the girls wear white stockings and Mary-Jane shoes to highlight their girlishness, while also sporting black belts, connecting their image to the martial arts tradition they frequently engage with. While it often appears that these belts are just black stripes on the girls’ dresses, there are several episodes in which these are removed and used as weapons, demonstrating their symbolic purpose as part of the girls’ superhero costume. In terms of their superpowers, each of the girls has flight, heat and x-ray vision, super-speed, super-strength, and super-hearing. In addition, there are a variety of other powers that manifest in one or all of them as convenient for the individual episodes, including ice-breath, sonic blasts and the ability to com-

municate with animals.

What I find most interesting about the Powerpuff girls is that unlike many other young superheroes, these girls are not trying to negotiate their superpowers alongside the demands of puberty and their own developing sexuality. This element is particularly important for series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Secret World of Alex Mac* and *Smallville*, each featuring teenage superheroes whose powers and performance can become unpredictable as a result of hormonal interference. By contrast, the Powerpuff girls remain “little girls” throughout the entirety of the series, never developing toward physical maturity. Although the girls celebrate several birthday parties throughout the series, their age is never explicitly mentioned at any of these, and they never progress beyond Ms Keane’s class at Pokey Oaks kindergarten. According to Ewan Kirkland, this lack of physical maturation “insulates them against the objectification and fetishization that characterizes other women within superhero narratives.”¹¹ This is in direct contrast to various other hyper-sexualised adult and adolescent super-heroines, and also to other female characters within *The Powerpuff Girls*’ fictional universe itself, such as Ms Bellum and Seduca.

Seduca is a highly sexualised villain, who uses her good looks to seduce the Powerpuff girls’ creator, Professor Utonium, becoming the girls’ dreaded stepmother in the first season episode “Mommy Fearest.”¹² The focus for this character is always her womanly figure and long hair, which at times can be seen to be made up of asps, resembling the mythical Medusa. Ms Bellum, on the other hand, is the secretary to the Mayor of Townsville, and is always shown from high-heeled feet to voluptuous chest, with particular attention paid to her curvy figure and long legs. While viewers never see Ms Bellum’s face, her vast intelligence continually calls into question her position as female sexual object in the series. The Powerpuff girls look up to her—quite literally—as one of the few positive female role models available to them, as she single-handedly runs the city of Townsville under the guise of the Mayor’s secretary. Her name, Ms Sara Bellum, is a constant reminder that this character is not just a red-headed “bomb-shell,” she also has a brain and is not afraid to use it. However, while Ms Bellum is one of the good guys in the series, as opposed to the similarly hyper-sexualised Seduca, even when taken in conjunction with her sharp mind and organisation skills, her voluptuous body and sultry voice still create an ambiguous message for young female audiences about the true nature and location of female power. Conversely, the age and appearance of the Powerpuff girls allow for the exploration of a form of female empowerment that is completely divorced from aggressive sexuality. As Joy van Fuqua so delicately puts it: “these three superheroes brandish brawn, bril-

liance, and cuteness in place of the current filmic and televisual fascination with lips, tits and ass.”¹³ This is in stark contrast to various other “Girl Power” heroines in film and TV, which Stasia claims are “allowed to be violent only within the parameters allowed by patriarchal discourse. That is, they may be threatening but are always heterosexually attractive.”¹⁴ The Powerpuff girls, however, are permitted to show physical prowess without having to be sexy. Stasia notes that it is common for female superheroes to be “sexualised and infantilised in ways the male hero is not”; however, in the case of the Powerpuff girls, such infantilisation is not possible—they are already children.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is not entirely clear whether their age is “insulating” the girls from sexualisation, as Kirkland suggests, or merely mitigating the threat of female physical power such that it is no longer considered necessary to apply such compensatory disempowerment as is common for other female superheroes (as Stasia notes: “Vin Diesel has yet to lipsynch in his underwear”).¹⁶

Another interesting element of *The Powerpuff Girls*’ representation of the female superhero is the complete lack of a secret identity for the girls. Everyone in Townsville knows who the girls are and this allows them to be full participants in the community, as opposed to being outcast and isolated like so many other superheroes. Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup attend the local kindergarten where their teacher, Ms Keane, makes special allowances for them to leave class “to save the day” as necessary. While this would seem an irresistible opportunity for truancy, the girls never use their position to escape classroom learning, but only ever leave with a legitimate excuse. Nevertheless, the girls absolutely do use their superpowers for personal gain in a number of other ways, committing a variety of thefts throughout the series and using coercion and threats of physical violence to achieve certain self-interested goals. While most of these instances are portrayed negatively and lead to some unfortunate consequences, I argue that the representation of a superhero without the superimposed sanctimonious attitude so prevalent among the breed is rather refreshing!

Thus the use of child superheroes is worth investigating in terms of avoiding the hyper-sexualisation of female characters within the superhero genre, in addition to the potential for full social participation that a lack of secret identity bestows on the fictional hero. However, the element of *The Powerpuff Girls* that is most relevant for this article is the uniqueness of the girls’ origin story. This is described in the opening sequence of the show:

Sugar ... Spice ... And everything nice.
These were the ingredients chosen to create the perfect little girl.
But Professor Utonium accidentally added another ingredient into
the concoction—

Chemical X!

Thus, the Powerpuff Girls were born!

Using their ultra-super powers, Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup
Have dedicated their lives to fighting crime and the forces of
evil!¹⁷

This origin story has attracted a great deal of scholarly interest, particularly regarding the role of the Professor as the usurper of the female life-giver. As a third-wave feminist text this complete rejection of the mother figure is important, as it supports the idea of a new breed of feminist who can negotiate her own power and position in the world, independent of the battles for liberation and equality that have gone before. In terms of male creator myths, Professor Utonium's narrative is especially noteworthy, as unlike Dr Frankenstein and his monster, the Jewish Rabbi and his golem, or Master Gepetto and his puppet son Pinocchio, here the Professor intends to bring forth *female* creations. Also, while he did not intend to create super-heroines, once he has these super-human females in his home there is no attempt to contain them within the domestic sphere, as is seen with the domineering male characters of 1960s television programs *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie*.¹⁸ Rather, the Professor is more than happy to stay at home cooking dinner while his "perfect angels" are out saving the citizens of Townsville.

Although there are various episodes in which the Powerpuff girls question whether the Professor is disappointed with how his experiment turned out, in each of these cases he reaffirms that he loves them "just the way they are," and is always relieved when their superpowers are restored after any disruption to them. There are also a number of episodes in which alternative realities are explored in which the girls do not have superpowers, such as in "Oops, I Did It Again," the sixth-season episode in which the Professor dreams of what life would have been like had he created "The Run-of-the-mill" girls, instead of the Powerpuff girls. As with all similarly themed episodes, at the end the Professor is thrilled to discover his three little superheroes are unchanged, exclaiming: "Girls, it's you! You're floating, you have big eyes, no fingers, and superpowers!"¹⁹ So, although some feminist critics are concerned that the super-heroines of *The Powerpuff Girls* series were created both *by a man* and *by accident*, I argue that in the context of the show as a whole, the overall message is definitely one that supports female empowerment. The Professor never tries to curb the girls' crime-fighting activities of his own volition (although he is sometimes pressured by others to do so), nor does he equate the girls' accidental acquisition of superpowers with any detraction from their "perfection." This is most significant when considering the fact that the Professor's attempt to create

“the perfect little girl” actually yields *three* distinct and powerful female creations. Some possible feminist interpretations of this will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

The position of *The Powerpuff Girls* in popular media culture

As a series, *The Powerpuff Girls* is acutely aware of the various media cultures from which it arose, as evidenced through the very self-conscious intertextuality present in many of the episodes. The extensive use of popular culture references and icons in *The Powerpuff Girls* is reminiscent of many other animated series, most notably *The Simpsons*, and reflects the diverse audience the show attracted. At the height of its popularity *The Powerpuff Girls* boasted an equal number of male and female viewers, with almost a quarter of these being adults, and much of the pop-culture humour in the series reflects an awareness of this fact.²⁰ There are episodes parodying *Star Wars*, James Bond, and other superhero franchises, that are clearly intended to appeal to this adult market. There is even an episode titled “The Beat Alls,” in which the girls must disband a group of super-villains by introducing their leader, the evil monkey Mojo Jojo, to a female monkey called Moko Jono. There are also numerous episodes in which cartoon characters from other children’s series, including *The Jetsons* and *The Flintstones*, are inserted into the fictional city of Townsville.

The episode “Super Zeroes” best highlights where *The Powerpuff Girls* situates itself in relation to the superhero genre as a whole, with each of the girls re-imagining themselves in the image of their favourite comic book hero. Blossom’s idol, Justice Girl, is clearly a reference to Wonder Woman, with her red, blue and yellow outfit and her “lasso of guilt.” In the episode Blossom is convinced if she had the costume and gadgets of Justice Girl that she would be a “better” superhero. Similarly, Buttercup believes she would be a better hero if she adopted the attitude and angst of her superhero idol, Mange, a parody of such dark, soul-tortured heroes as Batman and Spawn. Batman is also parodied elsewhere in the series through the appropriation of the “bat signal,” which in the case of the Powerpuff girls is a strobing, pink heart in the sky. Finally, Bubbles decides to fashion herself after her favourite manga character, re-inventing herself as “The Harmony Bunny,” while also exposing the relationship between *The Powerpuff Girls* and the Japanese anime media culture. This relationship is further explored in the episode “Uh Oh... Dynamo,” in which the girls do battle with an oversized puffer fish in “Little Tokyo” Townsville, using the enormous Powerpuff girl mecha the Professor built for their protection. In each of these cases,

the Powerpuff girls are better off just being themselves, as when they try to use the technology, gadgets or costumes of other heroes they end up unduly restricted. When convincing the girls to return to their usual activities, the Professor makes it clear that he believes the Powerpuff girls are superior to the superheroes who have gone before.

Criticisms of the show: Violence

One of the major criticisms *The Powerpuff Girls* consistently receives from reviewers relates to the excessive use of violence in the show. As it is firmly rooted in the “Girl Power” message of mid-90s third-wave feminism, the politics of female strength, independence, and rebellion are central issues addressed in the show. However, while I cannot deny that the show is extremely violent—in one of the pilot episodes, for example, the girls cook and eat one of their opponents—I disagree that the Powerpuff girls are responsible for the collapse of civilised society and the increase in female-perpetrated aggravated assault, accusations that are sometimes directed toward them.²¹ Moreover, I believe that treating *The Powerpuff Girls* simply as one more show displaying over-the-top animated violence for cheap entertainment is too reductionist, as it fails to recognise what the violence achieves for the narrative. According to Rebecca Hains, *The Powerpuff Girls* exposes the “false dichotomy” between the ultra-feminine appearance of the cute girls, and the traditionally masculine violence present in the show: the “power” versus the “puff.”²² In this way the show achieves its goal of reclaiming “girlhood,” while also exploring physically strong female characters, and children at that. Lisa Hager claims this provides a good contrast to many other children’s programs in which gratuitous violence is reserved for male characters, with the females relying on words and cunning deception to achieve their goals, thus supporting stereotypical images of both genders.²³ In these shows, females are seen as mediators with the ability to make villains realise the errors of their ways, much like using Justice Girl’s “lasso of guilt,” rather than being viewed as formidable opponents capable of physically engaging with the enemy.

As feminist icons of the Third Wave, the Powerpuff girls’ physical and mental strength challenges second-wave notions of female victimhood. Like their cultural counterparts, the Spice Girls, each of the “puffs” has a distinct personality that incorporates a stereotypical ideal of female power. However, in all three cases this ideal is held subordinate to their physical prowess as fighters and defenders. Examining the appearance and behaviour of each individual member of the Powerpuff girls thus yields an interesting comparison:

- Blossom, “commander and the leader,” pulls her fiery red hair into a practical ponytail, which she then decorates with a girly hairclip. She embodies the ideal of female intelligence and is undoubtedly the “brains” behind the Powerpuff girls. She uses calculated violence to achieve specific goals and devises the plans and attack patterns the girls use when fighting. Despite the fact she is clearly capable of using her mind rather than her fists to solve problems, she still chooses to use violence primarily, with witty repartee an additional extra. According to the show’s mythology, her dominant ingredient is *everything nice*.
- Bubbles, “the joy and the laughter,” is the blonde ditz of the series and incorporates all the vacuousness this stereotype demands. She is repeatedly referred to as the “cutest” of the girls, with her pigtails and caring spirit; however, there is also a general attitude among the other characters in the series that there is something “wrong” or “special” about her. As the “beauty” ideal of the show she is often jealous of her more “hardcore” sister, Buttercup, and although she does not enjoy violence to the same degree as her sisters she refuses to be outdone by them. As to be expected, her main ingredient is *sugar*.
- Buttercup, “the fiercest fighter,” is the tomboy character with the “transgressive” short, black hair.²⁴ She is the “brawn” of the group despite also being very intelligent and cute, and is often seen to be the most impatient and hot-headed of the crew. Unlike her sisters she will not cease beating on a criminal once they have surrendered, earning both respect and censure for being the “most ruthless, sadistic lover of carnage” the other sisters know.²⁵ Buttercup’s dominant ingredient is *spice*.

What is most interesting about these three distinct personalities is the way they all use violence differently. Blossom wields her powers swiftly and with precision, while Bubbles usually relies on directions, which are followed with varying degrees of accuracy. Buttercup meanwhile revels in the blood and gore of fighting, integrating violence into every part of her life.

There is a great deal of disagreement about whether the violence in *The Powerpuff Girls* is cause for concern or celebration, with different opinions about the correct implementation of the “Girl Power” message of third-wave feminism. Nevertheless, while the series does seem to fixate on physical strength and violence, Spring-Serenity Duvall notes that the girls very rarely destroy their enemies, rather they usually insist on sending them to prison.²⁶ This applies not only to hardened criminals, but also fel-

low kindergarteners that misbehave. As a result of this there are very few actual deaths in Townsville, despite the severe beatings that are regularly delivered at the hands of the city's protectors. Hager claims that the violence of the series is no more extreme than in many other children's series, such as *The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers*, highlighting that it is the use of violence by young *girls* that has attracted so much attention among critics.²⁷ I argue that when addressing what the series is attempting to achieve for the representation of the female superhero, one finds that this violence is necessary in establishing the Powerpuff girls as equal to the male superheroes they often reference. The dominance of this violence within the characterisations of each of the girls represents the incorporation of the "Girl Power" message into a diverse group of personalities. By creating super-heroines who are both cute and girly, and powerfully violent, *The Powerpuff Girls* challenges the idea that embracing "girlhood" makes females weak.

Criticisms of the show: Representation of women

Another major criticism the show has received, particularly from feminist critics, relates to the inconsistent representation of the girls. Throughout the majority of the series the Powerpuff girls are seen as super-heroines who can "kick butt" while still remaining feminine and cute, and without needing to resort to seduction or trickery. However, there are a few episodes that seem to contradict this empowering message, including the one that has received the most attention from scholars: "The Rowdyruff Boys." In this episode Mojo Jojo decides to create male super-villains who are the antithesis of the Powerpuff girls. Following the recipe prescribed by the Mother Goose rhyme, he collects "snips, snails and puppy-dogs' tails" and mixes these ingredients in the prison latrine, which he believes contains the only substance potent enough to compete with Chemical X. His creations have the same powers as the Powerpuff girls but are intent on villainy and immediately aim to destroy the girls. While under usual circumstances the Powerpuff girls would use their physical strength and teamwork to bring down this new enemy, it turns out that the girls cannot beat their male counterparts. As they prepare to surrender they receive the rather disturbing advice to "try being nice ...you know *nice*," which apparently involves putting on makeup and kissing the boys, making them disintegrate.²⁸ What is most troubling here is that this advice comes from the voice of wisdom in the show, Ms Bellum.

"The Rowdyruff Boys" was considered so controversial it was banned in some countries and is often cited as a reason to reject *The Powerpuff*

Girls as a feminist text.²⁹ Hager claims that this episode serves to reinforce certain stereotypes regarding the female superhero, as in the end, despite the girls' formidable strength, "their sexuality is their only real, fear-inspiring weapon."³⁰ There is a very humorous episode in the sixth season that develops this storyline further, in which the Rowdyruff boys are revived, this time having been given a "cooties shot" that renders them impervious to the Powerpuff girls' kisses. In this episode, after trying to seduce them once again, the girls realise their kisses are not only ineffectual as a weapon, but are also making the boys grow bigger! Fortunately, Blossom discovers that threatening the boys' masculinity can counteract this *enlargement*, shrinking them back down to size.

The sexual connotations in these episodes are clear, and at odds with the usually asexual representation of the girls in the series. Overall, *The Powerpuff Girls* is quite "slippery" in terms of potential interpretations, as evidenced by the many contradictory analyses existent in the scholarship. However, there is one explanation that I believe accounts for how the show can be a feminist text, even while it contains such problematic counter-messages. While the majority of the show can be categorised as embracing the "Girl Power" message, the Rowdyruff boys episodes more clearly identify with the ideals of "power feminism," thus supporting Hains's claim that the series is a "negotiation" between these two conflicting forms of third-wave feminism.³¹ Thus I argue it is not that *The Powerpuff Girls* has failed third-wave feminism, as many suggest, but rather the incoherent goals of third-wave feminism have failed the Powerpuff girls! While the majority of third-wave feminism is focused on reclaiming girlhood as potentially powerful, power feminism is a subset within this wave that aims to seize power wherever it can be found. In this way the objectification of women's bodies is exploited by women to exert power over men, including in situations traditionally considered disempowering for women, such as in prostitution arrangements.³² In "The Rowdyruff Boys" the girls become the supposedly "empowered" seductresses power feminism demands, which through its exaggeration and performance in kindergarten-aged girls is exposed as rather unsettling.

There are also other aspects of third-wave feminism that are present in *The Powerpuff Girls* that have attracted both positive and negative attention, such as the relationship between "Girl Power" and consumerism. The show is very aware of its commercial value, incorporating its own consumer products into the narratives of several episodes. In "Collect Her," the Powerpuff girls are abducted by an avid collector of the series' merchandise, and are sealed in collectible packaging until they can escape.³³ In the later episode, "I See a Funny Cartoon in Your Future," the girls are rescued by

another collector, who in an attempt to secure more items to sell on e-Bay, inadvertently releases the girls by cutting down the Powerpuff girl voodoo dolls being used to trap them.³⁴ The third-wave feminist ideal of female empowerment through consumerism is thus actively engaged. I argue that the excessive amount of merchandise associated with the show was not merely the network exploiting potential revenue, since, as van Fuqua notes, although *The Powerpuff Girls* was known to attract both male and female audiences, the merchandise was targeted exclusively to girls.³⁵ Stasia contends that marketers recognised that women would put their money where “liberation” appeared, arguing that third-wave ideals of “Girl Power” are inextricably linked to independent consumer power.³⁶

However, there is one area in which the series definitely fails to live up to its potential, with “Girl Power” seen to be restricted to the white and suburban middle-class, thus failing to engage with the racial and social diversity so central to third-wave ideology.³⁷ Ironically, it is the super-villain Mojo Jojo who highlights this failure when he chooses to bestow the powers of Chemical X on what he calls “a wonderfully diverse and multi-ethnic team of superheroes,” including Black, Asian, and disabled children.³⁸ Unlike in the case of the inconsistencies in the girls’ representation seen in episodes like “The Rowdyruff Boys,” there is no alternative explanation that can be supplied to account for this undercurrent of racism, particularly as the only non-white characters in the series tend to be villains. However, *The Powerpuff Girls* is certainly not alone in attracting such criticism, with many children’s series displaying a similar pattern of discrimination, where diversity and difference are equated with aberrance and deviancy. Some examples include Big Idea Production’s *VeggieTales*, in which all the villains represent racial minorities, and various Disney studio productions where racist stereotypes abound, even among talking animals, as seen in *The Lion King*, *Dumbo*, and *The Little Mermaid*.³⁹ This is a long-standing issue in children’s television that I believe is particularly obvious in a show that embraces third-wave feminism so effectively in other ways, while failing to engage with the message of diversity so central to the ideology.

Sisterhood and The Powerpuff Girls

Regardless of its failings in terms of racial inclusiveness and the occasional mixed message in relation to gender stereotypes, I argue that there are also ways in which *The Powerpuff Girls* exceeds the ideals of third-wave feminism, particularly with regards to embracing the concept of sisterhood. While third-wave feminism is often criticised for being too focused on individualism, in the world of the Powerpuff girls the bonds of sisterhood su-

persede any other consideration. In fact, the most evil character in the series, a cross-dressing lobster devil known only as *Him*, is portrayed as being particularly vicious precisely because his attacks against the girls often centre on trying to turn them against each other. Despite any competing interests though, the girls always stick together and work as an effective crime-fighting team. They also inspire collective action in others such as the citizens of Townsville and their other female friends.

Although they are not in a traditional family, there is never any question in the series that the girls are sisters. This is particularly remarkable when compared to their somewhat more ambiguous relationship with the Professor, who, although a parent-like figure, is rarely referred to as the girls' father. One of the first instances in which the girls do call the Professor "Dad" occurs in the fourth-season episode "Members Only" in which the term is used solely to establish his character as *not-Mum*. When the Association of World Super Men (or AWSM) reject the Powerpuff girls' application to join their society on the basis that they are girls, they attempt to justify their decision on the grounds that certain roles should belong to men, while girls should be at home "learning how to be mummies."⁴⁰ When the girls contest this, the male superheroes try to prove their point by asking who in the girls' household goes to work and pays the bills, to which they receive the answer "our Dad." However, when following up with the question of who then stays at home and cooks and cleans, they receive the same answer: "our Dad." Regardless of this, the girls still refer to their male creator directly as "the Professor," and he continues to avoid the term "father" when introducing himself to the other parents of Townsville. In the episode "Simian Says," Mojo Jojo refers to the Professor as the girls' "father ... of sorts," further highlighting the awkward position this character holds in relation to his laboratory creations.⁴¹ Thus *The Powerpuff Girls* explores the representation of girls who, while sisters, have never truly been daughters, and do not progress through the stages of daughter-sister-wife-mother. This is quite unique when compared to other female superheroes, including Buffy and Wonder Woman, who are frequently seen to be negotiating different roles, including that of daughter and legal guardian. The fact that the Powerpuff girls are only kindergarten-aged also makes the argument that they should be at home "learning to be mummies" sound even more implausible.

The sisterhood itself also serves as a source of power for the girls, one that *Him* cannot comprehend. After failing yet again to drive the girls apart in the fifth-season episode "Power-Noia," the girls explain *Him*'s defeat by stating: "Guess you should have done your homework weirdo.... We're sisters and we love each other!"⁴² In this episode the camaraderie the girls

feel for one another is the very reason they have triumphed, even in the absence of some of their superpowers. It is also clear throughout the series that other characters jealously desire the power they recognise as accompanying admission into the Powerpuff girls' sisterhood. In the episode "Equal Fights," Femme Fatale, one of few female super-villains in the show, tries to appeal to ideals of female solidarity to secure leniency when the Powerpuff girls catch her robbing a rare coins exhibition of all the "Susan B. Anthony" coins.⁴³ Fatale temporarily succeeds in convincing the girls that they should let her go, by quoting how under-represented women are in both superhero and super-villain circles. When Fatale asks the girls who besides themselves can be considered a super-heroine in her own right, Blossom answers: "Well there's Wonder Woman... and, um... Wonder Woman," but is unable to come up with any other names besides those Fatale considers mere shadows of their male counterparts, such as Batgirl and Supergirl. While Fatale argues that putting her in prison would be a blow to all womankind, the girls eventually realise that her claims to their sisterhood are invalid and that true equality dictates that she should be imprisoned like any other criminal.

Femme Fatale's physical appearance also highlights her role in the series as a caricature of the second-wave feminist. She has the woman symbol brandished across her costume and even uses a woman symbol-shaped gun when committing her crimes. When she appeals to the Powerpuff girls she uses arguments belonging to second-wave feminist ideology, which unlike the retrospectively-named First Wave was not solely concerned with gender inequalities *de jure*, but also *de facto*, especially including indirect discrimination preventing equal participation for women in the workplace. After hearing Fatale's arguments, the Powerpuff girls start seeing sexism *everywhere*, the show claiming through exaggeration that Fatale's rhetoric is no longer valid in the Powerpuff girls' post-second-wave world. When the girls realise, with the assistance of Ms Keane and Ms Bellum, that they have been overreacting to nonexistent discrimination, they truly become the daughters of the second-wave feminist generation that came before. No longer fighting for equality under the law, the Powerpuff girls are able to embrace the "Girl Power" message of the Third Wave, while also expanding upon its tenets by embracing the ideal of sisterhood, in addition to independence and consumer power. Most fascinating about this episode perhaps is the fact that no suggestion is made regarding how to redress the under-representation of female superheroes that Fatale correctly identified. Rather, once the girls have established criteria for inclusion and exclusion to their sisterhood, Fatale is simply sent to prison and the episode ends with her complaining that the horizontally striped prison

jumpsuits make her look fat! Thus, Fatale and the feminism she represents are written off in the series as no longer relevant, despite the fact the inequalities she discusses are still affecting women today. This rebellion against and disregard for second-wave feminism is itself another characteristic of third-wave feminism, and is heavily represented in the gender politics of *The Powerpuff Girls*. Thus there is a complete rejection of the mother figure that is both literal (since the girls lack a biological mother) and figurative (as they abandon the ideals of their feminist fore-mothers). Hains notes that this episode also serves to re-enforce the myth of post-patriarchy, as the equality the girls enjoy in Townsville is taken for granted without acknowledging how it came to be.⁴⁴

Another female character that tries to encroach upon the Powerpuff girls' sisterhood is wealthy fellow kindergartener, Princess Morebucks. This character only becomes a villain after the girls reject her as a member of their inner circle, leading Princess to seek attention through other means. It is not just her lack of family connection that disqualifies Princess from gaining admittance into the Powerpuff girls' sisterhood, but also her lack of superpowers. Although Princess develops powerful weapons and has access to many resources that could assist the Powerpuff girls in fighting crime, they are not interested in letting her join them. So while sisterhood is held in high regard in *The Powerpuff Girls*, it is important to note that this is not the universal sisterhood espoused in earlier feminist ideologies, but rather a specific privileged position that the girls hold in relation to each other. While not as inclusive as many might hope, I argue that this sisterhood does succeed in moving away from the purely individualistic elements of third-wave feminism.

This element of the female superhero existing *in community* is one of the most common themes that can be seen across superhero narratives involving women. Male heroes, like Superman, Batman, Spiderman and Daredevil, are almost always seen to be lone vigilantes, involving at best a sole, often male, side-kick in their adventures. Female superheroes, on the other hand, usually share power across family bonds, as in the case of Wonder Woman and the Charmed sisters, or close friendships, such as in *Buffy* and the comic series *Birds of Prey*. Although some feminist critics argue that a lack of independence and "self-creation" among these superheroines is disempowering, I argue that in the case of the Powerpuff girls at least, their sisterhood is what prevents them alienating some of their female audience.⁴⁵ Given the diversity of the three girls' unique personalities, it is clear that having only one Powerpuff girl could be quite restrictive. There are many girls who would find Buttercup's tomboyishness or Bubble's ditzy-ness to be very off-putting when not ameliorated by Blossom's intelli-

gence. Likewise, some audiences would find Blossom's nerdy personality difficult to relate to. While any one of these representations of idealised female power could be considered sexist in isolation, I believe that the combination serves to challenge such stereotypes by establishing that, despite their fundamental differences, each girl is equally powerful.

In conclusion, with regards to the Professor's goal to create the "perfect little girl," the incorporation of sisterhood as a desirable trait can partially explain why his experiment yielded three little girls instead of one. However, when also considering the way in which each of the Powerpuff girls embodies a different stereotype of idealised female power, the message comes across that in this show there really is no single "perfect" girl, but rather many different ways to express "girlhood"—and most importantly, that each of these can co-exist with the idea of "Girl Power." As Hager notes, the series' creator "makes it clear he is purposefully questioning what a girl can be rather than what all girls must be," embracing the diversity and difference so central to third-wave feminist ideology. As such, I argue that *The Powerpuff Girls* is a good example of a third-wave feminist text, and that Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup have earned the right to be called feminist icons.

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NOTES

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