The Rise of the Anti-Heroine in TV's Third Golden Age

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By

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015 a number of Hollywood films came out that defied conventional stereotypes of female characters, those of which had been standard for decades. To name a few, Amy Schumer's character in *Trainwreck*, Charlize Theron in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and Anna Kendrick in *Pitch Perfect 2* were all constructed as difficult women who were allowed to be "complicated" as Eliana Dockterman described them (Dockterman 2015).

While this may be a relatively new phenomenon in terms of Hollywood films, for those who have been watching television in recent years, these kinds of female lead characters are now a typical feature of many television series, as in the past several years a significant number of television female characters were in fact constructed as anti-heroines. Some exhibited qualities of excessive masculinity while others could be described as offering a kind of excessive femininity. An important feature they all shared, however, was that they were more complex, multi-layered and morally flawed than "traditional" female characters of past shows. The cable channel Showtime was one of the first channels to create television series that starred an anti-heroine as a female lead. Nancy Botwin (Mary Louise Parker), for instance, the lead character on *Weeds* (Showtime, 2005-2012), was one of the first of these anti-heroines; a suburban "bad mother" who sells marijuana to support her family, and who also engages in promiscuous behavior and has an often reckless and chaotic private life. Other female characters on Showtime followed suit, as women who lived by their own rules and engaged in reckless behavior that made them unlikable as characters. These include Jackie Peyton (Edie Falco) on *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009-2015), Cathy Jamison (Laura Linney) on *The Big C* (Showtime, 2010-2013), Virginia Johnson (Lizzy Caplan) on *Masters of Sex* (Showtime, 2013-present), Carrie Mathison (Claire Danes), on *Homeland* (Showtime, 2011-present) and Alison Bailey (Ruth Wilson), on *The Affair* (Showtime, 2014-present).

Though Showtime was one of the first channels to offer anti-heroines as lead characters, since then, other cable and networks have also created memorable anti-heroines. Some examples can be seen on HBO, including

Hannah (Lena Dunham) and her three friends on *Girls* (2012-present), Selina Meyer (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) on *Veep* (2012-present), the female leads on *Gracie and Frankie* (HBO, 2015-present), as well as several female characters on *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-present). On FX, we have Elizabeth Jennings (Keri Russell) on *The Americans* (2013-present), as well as Jessica Lang's characters on *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-present), and Glenn Close's character Patty Hewes on the now cancelled *Damages* (2007-2012). The Fox channel has the anti-heroine Cookie Lyon on *Empire* (Fox, 2015-present), while Netflix has Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling) and the other female inmates on *Orange is the New Black* (2013-present), as well as Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) on *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-present). On ABC, there are Olivia (Kerry Washington) on *Scandal* (2009-present), Juliette Barnes (Hayden Panettiere) of *Nashville*, Emily Thorne (Emily VanCamp) on *Revenge* (ABC, 2011-2015) and Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) on *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC, 2014-present), while BBC America also boasts several anti-heroines as well, who are played by the same actress Tatiana Maslany on *Orphan Black* (BBC America, 2014-present).

This age of narratives "Featuring a Strong Female Lead," the Netflix term for relevant shows, represents a departure from the days when it was difficult for actresses to find strong roles on television. This is not to say that there have been no roles for women on television in the past decades, including the nineteen-seventies, when actresses like Mary Tyler Moore were able to star in their own television series. As the women's movement took hold, additional figures emerged, such as Candice Bergen on *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), or the women on *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985, 1992). However, what distinguishes these earlier roles from the contemporary ones on the networks as well as cable and video-streaming outlets, is that earlier female characters were usually likable (Kevin O'Keefe 2014).

Of course, one can trace the antecedents to contemporary lead anti-heroines on basic and premium cable television in earlier eras. Characters like Kyra Sedgwick's Brenda Leigh Johnson on TNT's *The Closer* (2005-2012) and as earlier noted, Nancy on *Weeds* were both strong and anti-heroic in different ways; Sedgwick's character was difficult to work with, while Parker was a mother who sells pot as a way to make ends meet for her family. After 2005, four more anti-heroines arrived on television, including Falco's character in *Nurse Jackie*, Close's Patty on *Damages*, Linney on *The Big C* and Holly Hunter on TNT's *Saving Grace* (2007-2010).

Some writers argue that the character of Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) and her friends on HBO's *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) were the first "difficult women" who were anti-heroines on cable television. The phrase "difficult women" is a play on the phrase "difficult men" from Brett Martin's book which explored male characters on cable, titled *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From "The Sopranos" and "The Wire" to "Mad Men" and "Breaking Bad"* (2013). In his reading of the rise of HBO, the male anti-hero figures largely as part of a wider creative revolution. As Emily Nussbaum points out in her piece in *The New Yorker,* "Difficult Women: How "Sex and the City" Lost its Good Name" (29 July 2013), while Martin gives credit to *Sex and the City* for "jump-starting" HBO, the only part of the series that he offers a positive appraisal of is its treatment of sexuality. *Sex and the City* has become denigrated as a kind of "guilty pleasure" rather than an innovative series in its own right. Nussbaum makes a convincing argument that in many ways, in terms of its bold riff on romantic comedy and its ability to engage with many of the debates around second and third-wave feminism, as well as its creation of the first female anti-heroine, Carrie, *Sex and the City* was a "brilliant and, in certain ways, radical show." Earlier shows that centered around single women often emphasized their likable qualities, so that they would be appealing to both women and men. Carrie, on the other hand, who herself was modeled on the *New York Observer* columnist Candace Bushnell, was neither perky nor upbeat, and offered, along with her three friends, a more emotionally flawed and multi-layered take on what it meant to be a single woman in New York City.

The four female characters on *Sex and the City* were often meant to portray different personality types—cynical versus emotional—or different levels of sexual activity, such as voracious versus timid. Additionally, the characters of Carrie, Miranda (Cynthia Nixon), Samantha (Kim Cattrall), and Charlotte (Kristin Davis) personified the various debates that women were confronting over the limits of second-wave feminism versus third-wave feminism, where one's sexuality was seen as a form of power. Oftentimes these differences were played out in conversations they had at their weekend brunches or during shopping trips. While writers and fans have sometimes reduced these four women to various archetypes of femininity, the characters routinely upended those stereotypes in the ways they behaved in their personal and professional lives. Carrie's relationship with "Mr. Big" (Chris Noth), was one of the ways that Carrie acted out, since he was such an anti-heroic character himself; an unavailable man who, for the bulk of the series, refused to accept the romantic comedy stereotype of the male who eventually alters his ways.

Most of the discussion around the rise of quality television and the "creative revolution" from the late 1990s on in US cable television programming has centered around male characters, which is why a show like *Sex and the City* is often diminished or ignored. However, because of the women's movement, as well as the overall climate of television where better stories are increasingly being told, more interesting and varied female characters than ever are now featured on television. Mary McNamara makes the point that the kinds of female characters who are on television now are different in fundamental ways from earlier female characters, citing that:

> More than 40 years after Mary Richards and Maude Findley made their Modern Woman debuts (and 130 since Ibsen's Nora slammed the door heard 'round the world), another group of groundbreaking women has emerged on television. They work and they parent; love but don't always marry; betray or suffer betrayal but don't necessarily divorce; have flaws, including mental illness, but are not destroyed by them. Most important, they falter, they despair, and then they move on (2013).

As McNamara points out, the choices available to female characters for centuries for the most part included two endings, either in marriage or death. However, for today's female characters, such as Carrie in *Homeland*, there are many more choices available, which itself is a consequence of the women's movement and women's increasing freedom as a result of birth control and more equal pay. And though there were always some exceptions to the rule, such as Mariska Hargity on *Law & Order* (NBC, 1999-present) or Tina Fey on *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013), for the most part female characters on television were fairly limited in their range and options. McNamara credits both premium and basic cable channels with offering older female Hollywood actresses (that is, actresses who are no longer ingénues,) especially the opportunity to star in television roles that offered them a broader range than were previously only found in film roles. Actresses such as Holly Hunter and Glenn Close, as well as Kyra Sedgwick are just some of the examples of highly regarded actresses who found a home on high quality television programs. Many of the filmmakers and middle-aged actresses who were shut out of the film industry because of Hollywood studios' male-centric focus, have consequently created a boon in television programming, with female actresses having substantial roles on a variety of different television shows.

Even when the character wasn't portrayed at first as an anti-heroine, as Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies) of *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009-2016)

was initially constructed as simply a victim of her husband's infidelities, her creators Michelle and Robert King were able to transform her over several seasons. Eventually, her character was faced with ethical conflicts of interest and oftentimes made the kind of morally suspect compromises that she would not have made in earlier episodes. In this way, the Kings were able to offer audiences a new sort of woman, one who was able to make mistakes, be anti-heroic, and yet not pay "the ultimate price" (McNamara 2013).

The anti-heroine's emergence coincided with the end of a number of series centered on male anti-heroes, from Don Draper of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2013), to Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), to Walter White of *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), Dexter in *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), and the male characters on ensemble dramas like *The Shield* (FX, 2002-2008)*, Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006) and *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008)*. The male anti-hero on television immediately received media and academic attention and was understood to represent the damaged American male in the post-Vietnam period of American history. Even if they were portraying men from different periods in history (such as Nucky Thompson on *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014) or several of the male characters on *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-present)), there was still the echo of the larger cultural milieu of post-Vietnam, as well as post-Watergate and post-9/11 questioning of male identity. Characters such as Jimmy McNulty on *The Wire*, Dexter Morgan on *Dexter,* Hank Moody on *Californication* (Showtime, 2007-2014), Gregory House on House (Fox, 2004-2012), together demonstrated that the male anti-hero was a permanent feature of most genres on television in this new era. These men were portrayed as attempting to navigate a world where corruption and the misuse of power had become the norm in many American institutions. This meant that their actions, though morally suspect, could be justified, given the world they lived in. Such anti-heroes also didn't need to be likable or relatable to the audience, since they were sympathetic on some level. Their actions were not seen as necessarily evil so much as understandable given the circumstances; or, as Gary Susman has noted, "They might be charismatic or even admirable at times, but viewers were never allowed to forget that they were being persuaded to care about men who often behaved monstrously" (2015).

More generally, the anti-hero as an archetype serves as a kind of flawed hero. He makes moral compromises, often in an effort to reach a desired end or to help the protagonist secure a fair conclusion. In certain historical eras, stories about heroes are more popular than stories about anti-heroes,

but at other points, stories about anti-heroes become more popular. This can be observed in film history, with Film Noir, Westerns and Science Fiction genre films constituting narratives in which the anti-hero took center stage, and which reflected, in turn, the historical context that surrounded the making of these films. Television anti-heroes similarly reflect the complex historical framework brought on in the 21st century, including 9/11 and the Iraq War and the economic recession, not to mention the changes in the television industry.

On the other hand, although the female anti-heroine can also be considered a standard character on a range of television shows today, including nighttime dramatic series as well as comedies, an easy definition eludes her. If you look at any number of dictionary entries, they will usually define her as a female anti-hero, but this obscures as much as it reveals what she is. Even more unconventional sources, such as the Urban Dictionary (2005), will offer a definition of a male anti-hero, but not a female anti-heroine. Nevertheless, and drawing at least to start on the definition of the male anti-hero, here is a beginning definition from the Urban Dictionary which will reflect some of her qualities:

> An anti-hero is a flawed hero, and therefore, much more interesting than the more traditional heroes. They can be working on the side of good, but with a tragic flaw, or a horrible past, or for reasons that are selfish and not entirely "pure". They can also be working for the side of evil, but with hidden noble intentions, or other underlying complexities. These darker heroes can be jerks, pathetic, hard, jaded, or mean. However, all anti-heroes must have enough heroic qualities, intentions, or strength…to somehow gain the sympathy of the audience.

In some ways, the anti-heroine is like the anti-hero, but this comparison deserves further examination. For the television viewer, one way of understanding the anti-hero is to examine them in terms of gender, with the anti-hero serving as a particular exploration of masculinity in the historical context that the character emerges within. The qualities we find compelling in these characters are generally associated with masculine traits such as pride, violence or seduction. When the characters use these traits to excess to achieve their ends—in other words, when they behave badly—the audience is challenged to respond to it not necessarily with sympathy, but with a kind of tolerance that a more traditionally villainous character would not be allowed.

For critics like Alyssa Rosenberg (2013), the framework of the anti-hero possessing masculine traits like ambition, physical force and aggression,

means that it is difficult to come up with an equivalent framework by which to identify the female anti-heroine. In her view, traits that are overly coded as female, such as weakness or self-absorption or emotionality, which a character like Hannah Horvath on *Girls* exhibits, limits the range of understanding by which we might usefully begin to identify female anti-heroines. As she suggests, "rather than trying to fit women into a trope that serves men best, we'd be better off to build our own" (Rosenberg, June 27, 2013).

If we attempt, then, to try to build our own definition of the new anti-heroine character, it may be helpful to similarly locate her existence in the new television landscape. She is a reflection of the capacity of television to now portray flawed female characters that exhibit a degree of complexity that was not available to them in earlier eras. Characters like Piper Chapman on *Orange is the New Black* or Amy Jellicoe on *Enlightened* are portrayed as difficult and awkward and uncomfortable, rather than villains like some of the male anti-heroes. Others, such as Olivia Pope from *Scandal* and Annalise Keating on *How to Get Away With Murder* may very well engage in criminal acts that rival male anti-heroes. Some anti-heroines, then, embody some of the masculine qualities of the anti-heroes, while other anti-heroines embody characteristics that are traditionally associated with female qualities.

Another characteristic of many anti-heroines is that audiences perceive them to be unlikable to varying degrees. Whereas the male anti-hero may commit acts that express their troubled masculinity, they are sympathetic in other respects. When female anti-heroines act, on the other hand, they are often considered unlikable, whether it is because they are being "too feminine" or "too masculine." As Michelle Juergen notes:

> Women are socialized to be likable, and when we see TV characters who make no attempt to seem genial, charming, sympathetic, desirable or any other quality we've come to associate with femininity, there's a disconnect – something that has grated on many viewers and critics. But such characters have also resonated with many others precisely because they reflect real qualities of women, and depict women who don't care whether they're likable or not (2014).

The female anti-heroine has arisen within the larger context of the turn towards Quality Television, that has itself been viewed as a consequence of the post-network era. New forms of broadcast delivery, including premium cable channels such as HBO, created a marketing incentive to develop shows with a specific artistic vision; one that was previously

associated with auteur cinema. Some of the features of this new kind of quality television, also referred to as the "Third Golden Age" of television included a focus on ensemble casting, overlapping plot lines, a mixing of genres, as well as an emphasis on high production values, including careful editing and camerawork. These cinematic values, applied to television production, paved the way for the creation of very distinct and memorable characters.

Some feminist scholars, including Diane Negra (2004), have questioned whether these criteria were used as a way to legitimate what had formally been a "feminized" and devalued realm, one that considered television watching a feminine activity. By calling these HBO shows distinctly "not television" as HBO marketed itself in its ads, such shows were now more acceptable to watch (2004). Some of the male characters who were created in this auteur framework included Tony Soprano, Don Draper, Walter White and Dexter Morgan. At the same time, female characters who were equally complicated were also emerging, including Carrie Mathison in *Homeland* and Nancy Botwin in *Weeds*. Unlike male anti-heroes, media critic Joanna Robinson makes the point that these women were both "morally bereft *and* relatable." As she notes:

> Still, the anti-heroine often came with a caveat-some extenuating circumstance that made her machinations relatable. Nancy was trying to support her family; Elizabeth and Carrie are defending their respective countries. These women are *justified* in their depravity (2015).

For a working definition of an anti-heroine, then, there are several qualities that can be drawn on from this initial definition. The anti-heroine that has arisen on popular television shows is a deeply flawed, yet at the same time, sympathetic character. She is one who is neither uniformly good nor evil, but has qualities that mark her as being capable of doing bad things for good reasons. She is usually "edgy," in the sense that her actions and her personality do not obey the conventions of traditional femininity, though she may or may not behave at times in conventionally masculine ways either. And this is where the definition becomes even more interesting, because as we will see, some of the qualities of some of the anti-heroines reside in their transgression of traditional female attributes that include the injunction that female characters should be likable. At the same time, the anti-heroine may or may not necessarily act like a male anti-hero. To take one example, when we explore the character of Olivia Pope on *Scandal*, we will find that she has many positive qualities, such as being strong and powerful and beautiful and

independent. For a woman of color on mainstream television, this is especially rare. On the other hand, she is also ruthless, manipulative, and oftentimes unethical, in addition to engaging in conspiracies and having an affair with the President of the United States while he is still married. In this way, she is the opposite of a role model and instead arguably is both morally corrupt while at the same time sympathetic in other ways. She has power but she can use that power in morally questionable ways to attain what she wants. Olivia, like many of the anti-heroines we will explore, questions her actions and knows that she is behaving immorally which also helps define the anti-heroine as one who transgresses but does so in the name of a higher good.

Demographics are Destiny:
The Economics of the New Anti-Heroine

As noted, the bulk of television anti-heroines have emerged since 2005. Writers like Kevin O'Keefe speculate that:

> Like any trend on TV, the influx of Strong Female Characters on network shows can't be attributed to one factor. But a quick look at numbers offers an obvious explanation: Women viewers dominate broadcast ratings. There are exceptions, of course, and it's hardly a bit of wisdom exclusive to the modern era, but in the past few years it's become clear that for a majority of American households, women control the remote (2014).

Because they have control of the remote, so to speak, women are especially important to advertisers who seek to court them. The demographic of adult women aged 25-54 is particularly marketable. The networks are also trying to broaden the appeal of their shows so that men will watch the same show. In doing so, they have found that it is more difficult to build a show that is more male-focused that will also appeal to women than vice versa. This is one of the reasons why there are shows now being created such as *Madam Secretary* (CBS, 2014-present) that center around a lead female character, Elizabeth McCord, but where the story lines also arguably include plotlines that will appeal to men, like corporate and legal politics and political intrigues around national security.

Another reason why there has been a surge of anti-heroines on television, in addition to the demographic realities, as well as changes in women's roles as a result of the Women's Movement, is the fact that there are now several women showrunners or creators of television shows and they are bringing new stories with new kinds of female characters to the television

screen. These include Jenji Kohan, the creator first of *Weeds* and now *Orange is the New Black;* Jenni Konner and Lena Dunham, the young showrunner of *Girls* and Shonda Rhimes, who has created several anti-heroines on her television shows, including Olivia Pope on *Scandal* and Annalise Keating on *How to Get Away With Murder*. As is the case with talented actresses who are now looking at quality television roles to be a rich source of work that can provide an alternative to film roles, so too are there now opportunities for female showrunners to make strides in an industry that had previously been restrictive in terms of offering opportunities for women who work behind the screens. While there are still barriers in terms of the relative amount of women who are given the chance to produce, create and direct television shows, the fact that the industry recognizes the need for content that is appealing to women means that more women are being given the chance to create shows with stories about complex women, including those who are not necessarily likable or laudable.

Despite some gains in terms of the number of women working behind the screen, as well as starring in television shows, other writers question whether television is truly in a "golden age", as it pertains to the portrayal of anti-heroines. For, while there are increasing roles for female actresses to play against conventional gender stereotypes, anti-heroines still have to deal with cultural expectations that male anti-heroes are not restricted by. Female anti-heroines often must explain their aberrant behavior and guilt about making choices that are perceived to be selfish or morally suspect. Heather Havrilesky (2013), for example, finds that while there is a new kind of female anti-heroine, they are often portrayed as being mentally unstable. The character of Jackie Peyton on *Nurse Jackie* (Showtime, 2009-2015) for instance, was portrayed as mentally unstable because she was addicted to painkillers. Her addiction is also what allows her to be a skilled and competent nurse, and her dysfunctional behavior, such as sleeping with men outside of her marriage, is viewed as part of her addiction.

Similarly Carrie Mathison on *Homeland* is a bipolar C.I.A. agent who engages in promiscuous sex as an undercover terrorist. Her disorder, additionally, is what allows her to have an unusual ability as a brilliant CIA operative. In this reading, from serious thriller shows like *Homeland* to comedies such as *The Mindy Project* (Fox; Hulu, 2012-present) where Mindy Kaling plays an obstetrician-gynecologist who is manically trying to find a husband, contemporary television offers anti-heroines whose mental instability is what defines their personality. Without their addiction

to pills, in the case of Nurse Jackie, or their personality disorder in the case of Carrie Mathison, their "exceptional" qualities are subdued and/or eliminated.

Another question that has emerged is whether the sheer number of female characters has risen compared to earlier eras on television. For example, media scholar Amanda Lotz, in her important book, *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era* (2006) has studied the changes in programming on television from 1997-1992. Her research focuses on marketing trends during this period; the changes that ensued in programming; how feminist television scholars view these changes in terms of whether these new programs were progressive or not, as well as what kinds of narratives might be created in the future. Lotz found that during this brief period, the "male epicenter" opened up to include a number of new female characters (Lotz 2006:171).

In Lotz's view, the opportunity to create "niche audiences," through "narrowcasting" on the cable channels allowed advertisers to target the female consumer with programming that opened up narratives about women. Specifically, the rise of "women's" cable channels, such as Lifetime, Oxygen Media, and the Women's Entertainment Network (WE) in turn put pressure on other cable and network channels to similarly create programming that was relevant and more interesting to their female audiences. Some of these newer shows with a strong female lead included *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) and *Sex and the City*, as well as *Judging Amy* (CBS, 1999-2005), *Strong Medicine* (Lifetime, 2000-2006*)*, *Xena: Warrior Princess* (USA, 1995-2001) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Fox, 1997-2003).

The benefit of these shows was that they established entirely new ways of telling stories about women's lives, which ultimately paved the way for more complex female characters. This diversity "broadens dominant norms of femininity, the range of 'acceptable' female priorities, and the scope of issues with which women are seen to struggle" (Lotz 2006: 64). While the scope and range of stories increased, there still existed the problem that these stories were narrowly cast in terms of focusing on the problems of white, upper-middle class, heterosexuals. A second and related issue is that, in terms of the ability to watch these shows on cable, the cost was prohibitive for many television viewers, so female audiences who were not wealthy enough were a priori excluded.

Generally, however, the push to create programming geared toward particular segments of the female audience, such as 14-45 year old women who might want to buy feminine products, allows for advertisers to direct their marketing dollars to the specific group they want to reach. These shows may sometimes have an "edge," which is to say that they will be trying to target a specific group and that this edge contrasts sharply with the previous network strategy to offer the least objectionable programming to attract the widest group of people. In their attempt to delineate and attract particular groups, there are a diverse array of female character types and even countertypes to conventional images of women than was previously offered on television. This "narrowcasting" strategy, finally, while not always successful, has been helpful enough to create incentives for the television industry to bring in more stories and characters that can attract more specific groups than they had in the past.

For other writers, including to some degree Lotz herself, the changes in the television industry have not corresponded, at least until fairly recently, to substantive changes in programming directed to women. For example, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, a research institute in partnership with the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, has looked at gender roles on film and television as well as what kinds of jobs women hold both on and off screen in the television and film industry. They found that only 20% of producers in television, 7% of directors and 13% of writers were women (cited in Holly Rosen Fink 2013). This lack of female representation has made it difficult to promote stories about women with their own distinctive voices, and is part of a longer history in popular culture of being resistant to showing women who stepped outside of conventional stereotypes of women. Stacy L. Smith, the sociologist who led the study, found that overall female characters tended to be "sidelined, stereotyped and sexualized" (cited in Fink 2013).

This stereotypical portrait of women suggests that, while some progress has been made in terms of the type and amount of women who are characters in film and television, it is by no means a wide-scale trend to see new images of women on television and film. The fact that there is a trend at all, then, of seeing female anti-heroines is therefore noteworthy, because it arises within an industry that is still stubbornly resistant to portraying new images of women, despite women's gains in the larger society. In this way, the anti-heroine is one who has had to struggle for recognition, because it is only until very recently that images of women who behave in unconventional ways were welcomed as characters in

mainstream popular culture. Cable channel FX president John Landgraf discussed this problem in an interview on National Public Radio where he described the double standard about showing male versus female anti-heroes on television, saying:

> It's fascinating to me that we just have a really different, I think much more rigorous set of standards for female characters than we do for male characters, in this society. It's much harder to buy acceptance of a female anti-hero (cited in NPR 2013).

Moreover, additional evidence that women are still marginalized in the television industry comes from media scholar Martha Lauzen, a professor of film and television at San Diego State and executive director of The Center for the Study of Women in Television & Film. In her research, presented in her most recent report, "Boxed In," she found that since 1997, no significant difference has been made in the proportion of women working in prime-time television (Lauzen 2014). In 1997, she found that 21 percent of individuals working behind the scenes in network broadcast television were women, including writers, editors, directors and executive producers. In the year 2013-2014, she found that that number has only increased six percentage points, to 27 percent. When she included cable and other sources of television streaming, the numbers became even smaller, with only 25% of those working in cable, network and Netflix shows being women. The percentage of women who are in front of the camera has also not increased significantly, moving from 39 percent in 1997 to 42 percent in 2013-2014. The reason this is particularly significant is that as we will see, there is a strong relationship between women behind the camera, as showrunners, producers, writers, directors and so on, and the amount and kinds of portrayals of women who we see in television narratives. While there are also male showrunners who create strong female characters, as for instance Armando Iannucci's creation of Selina Meyer in *Veep*, there is a strong trend towards females who work behind the camera making sure that a diverse array of women's stories, and an array of female characters, are created as well.

Lauzen's research confirms this link between female creators of film and television shows who end up hiring women behind the camera in greater numbers as well as their development of stories that center on women's lives. She found that when women make up at least one of the creators of a broadcast show, the program ended up hiring at least 50% women for the writing staff. In contrast, if there were not any female creators of the program, only 15% of the writers were women. This suggests that there is

a need to increase the number of women who are showrunners as a way to increase the amount of women hired for other jobs in the industry (cited in Jeremy Egner 2015).

It is perhaps instructive, by way of example, to look at Netflix, which has more female executives than the other cable, broadcast and net streaming services, and which is arguably producing shows that are not only innovative but offer new kinds of female characters with their own stories. One of these shows, *Orange is the New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present) is not only created by a woman, Jenji Kohan, but is focused on an all-women's environment; a women's correctional facility. Another example of a female showrunner who has created new opportunities especially for women of color is Shonda Rhimes, responsible for *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-present) and *How to Get Away With Murder* (ABC, 2014-present). In the latter, Viola Davis' character, Professor Keating, is one of the new strong female characters in this era, while Davis' performance gave her the first Emmy ever awarded to an African-American female actress and this is due, in part, to the morally grey area that she is allowed to embody as an anti-heroine. In both these examples, female showrunners have not only hired more female writers than shows with male showrunners, but also created memorable anti-heroines who are complex and multi-dimensional.

To summarize, as recent writing and scholarship by authors examining women in the television industry have shown, while strides have been made in terms of the kinds of female characters who are now on television, there is still not parity in terms of the overall numbers of women who have been hired to direct, produce and star in television and films in particular. Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are changes in terms of the development of anti-heroines on television, and these morally complex and ambiguous characters are a response, in different ways, to the women's movement, which in turn has created the impetus for changes in the television industry. This book, then, will help to illuminate some of the qualities of the new anti-heroines on television today, and how these roles provide a much more varied and rich environment for actresses than were available in earlier eras. I will look at the ways these anti-heroines have become part of the television landscape and the women who have made these memorable characters, as writers, directors, producers and actors.

Television scholars such as Jason Mittell have discussed the importance of characters as central to understanding a television series, which are considered narrative elements in themselves (2013). The series I will be looking at offer the opportunity for exploring character development as

well as a range of character traits over several episodes and seasons, and this further helps to illuminate how anti-heroines have been developed as characters with specific traits, and how these traits can be observed in several different genres of television, including comedies, dramas, political narratives and fantasy stories as well.

One of the questions that will be explored is whether these characters are being judged in terms of their likability, as a result of the gendered expectation that women should be likable, or whether they are granted the autonomy to depart from this cultural norm? Do different television networks, cable channels and outlets, such as Netflix and Amazon, offer a range of different female characters and anti-heroines, and if so, what accounts for these differences? Second, are there ways in which some of these anti-heroines are saddled with deep personality flaws, such as being mentally unstable, that explain their actions as anti-heroines? Third, what impact does a female showrunner have in terms of the stories and the kinds of anti-heroines who are created? What does it mean to have "female-centric" television shows and how do anti-heroines on these shows open up the possibilities for character development? Finally, what are some of the possibilities for diversity in terms of race and class with the introduction of the anti-heroine as a character on television? Have there been new opportunities for women of color to play these kinds of roles, and how has this shifted the kinds of images that are now offered on television to be more inclusive of other races and ethnicities and social classes? These are some of the questions that will be explored in the following pages.

Organization of the Book

One way to begin to offer a window onto these anti-heroines is through their recognition by the industry itself. Two out of the five nominees for Best Drama in the 2014-2015 Season from the Writers Guild featured a female anti-heroine protagonist: Margulies (*The Good Wife*) and Danes for *Homeland*. For comedies, that number jumped to four of the five Best Comedy nominees that included a lead female character, two of whom are anti-heroines**:** Louis-Dreyfus (*Veep*)*,* and Schilling (*Orange is the New Black*). For the category of Best New Shows, there were three either lead or co-lead characters who were anti-heroines, Schilling (*Orange is the New Black,*) co-lead Russell (*The Americans,*) and co-lead Caplan (in *Masters of Sex*).

For the Emmy nominations, there was a similar pattern of female lead characters who were anti-heroines being nominated for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series in the same 2014-2015 awards Season: four out of six are either leads or co-leads in the show: Davis for *How to Get Away with Murder*; Danes for *Homeland*, Maslany for *Orphan Black*, and Wright for *House of Cards*. For Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series, the Emmys featured at least five anti-heroines out of six nominations: Louis-Dreyfus for *Veep*; Falco for *Nurse Jackie*; Lisa Kudrow for *The Comeback*; Amy Poehler, for *Parks and Recreation*; Amy Schumer for *Inside Amy Schumer* and Lily Tomlin for *Grace and Frankie.* The winner for Comedy Series was Julia Louis-Dreyfus, while the winner for a Drama Series was Viola Davis.

A second way to think about the rise of the anti-heroine is to focus on the specific channels and outlets that they debut on, whether it is the networks, cable or other streaming outlets. There are several important decisions formed on these channels about what kind of content programming they will develop and certain channels and outlets have specifically green-lighted projects that have lead anti-heroines. For example, Showtime has several shows centered around anti-heroines, as do ABC, HBO, Netflix, Amazon and FX. However, while Showtime has made a clear strategy out of these kind of characters, other outlets, like HBO, have been viewed as not being as female-centric, indeed as being primarily male-centered, so it is only in the past few years that they are starting to create female-driven content. The process by which the executives in these companies made programming decisions in favor of the new anti-heroine is integral to the larger story of her development. Thus, the book will also be organized in terms of the industry context of the major channels and outlets that gave the green light to developing these kinds of female lead characters for their programs as well.

A third way to think about the new anti-heroine is to see where, if at all, these characters share any similar demographic or character traits, or whether they are connected by virtue of being married, single or in a female-centric cast. For example, in order to think about the question of diversity in relation to the new anti-heroine, it will be helpful to explore the African-American characters of Olivia and Annalise on *Scandal* and *How to Get Away With Murder*, both of which were created by African-American female showrunner Shonda Rhimes. I am also examining the character of Piper on *Orange is the New Black* and the other female characters, as well as Hannah and her twenty-something friends on *Girls*. In terms of the question of the role of mental illness in the characterization

of some of the new anti-heroines on television, I am exploring Carrie Mathison on *Homeland* as well as similar law enforcement female lead characters on recent shows with a range of mental disturbances.

Another interesting trend in the portrayal of the new anti-heroine is that many of them are married, and sometimes to men who could be considered anti-heroes. For example, Claire on *House of Cards* is married to an anti-hero, Frank Underwood, while Elizabeth on *The Americans* is married to Phillip, and some of their morally suspect actions take place within the context of their marriage. Another trope in recent television shows is to conflate anti-heroines with being bad mothers. To explore this characterization, I am looking at several of these "bad mothers" in *Nurse Jackie, Weeds*, *Veep*, as well as *Masters of* Sex as well as other shows.

Finally, these shows have received special attention from critics in a range of media outlets, including online periodicals and magazines and blogs. These metatexts, to use Gérard Genette's term (1991), that is all the articles, essays, reviews, etc. about the shows, create a kind of meta-dialogue that surrounds the programs, while they arguably also help to shape the popular reception of the character of the anti-heroine in the larger culture. Some of these metatexts offer favorable reviews while others, which could be called the "anti-fan'' readings, are more critical of the characters and the shows. In both cases, however, they are important to attend to since they greatly contribute to the overall reception of the anti-heroine character on television.

For this reason, it is illuminating to include the popular reception of these shows in the media by highlighting several online magazines, periodicals and blogs that provide critical commentaries on anti-heroines, including such diverse outlets as *The New York Times*, *BitchMedia, Salon*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *Slate*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Jezebel*, as well as scholarly articles.

In the first chapter, then, I will explore the cable channel Showtime. I will look at how they were progressive in the sense that they were the first channel to present shows which featured female protagonists who struggled with everything from widowhood, to cancer, to drug addiction to bi-polar disorder. These "ladies with problems" (Richard Lawson 2010), as they were sometimes derisively referred to, nevertheless offered viewers perhaps the first sustained exploration of female characters who were flawed, yet who acted in order to do some greater good. Showtime offered these new characters to their viewing audience because they

believed that by creating these kinds of characters, their female audience would be not only receptive but would increase their viewership overall. In addition, as we will see, many of the shows also had women directors and showrunners and writers, which created the space to tell more diverse kinds of stories with more varied women characters. For example, Claire Danes' character of Carrie Mathison on *Homeland* is a relatively new female character, since she plays a government agent who is so dedicated to her work that she is willing to take incredible risks to attain her goal of capturing terrorists. At the same time, she is struggling with bi-polar disorder and is alienated from her baby and from her role as a mother. Lesli Linka Glatter, who served as an executive producer of *Homeland* for three seasons, has noted how Showtime and other channels and streaming outlets are now intentionally trying to develop female characters that are multi-layered in serialized TV. As she notes:

> The characters who interest me are always complicated, deep human beings…Those are the ones, whether they're male or female, that I want to be spending time with. Now we have these amazing female characters that are as complicated as male characters. I don't think before there were uninteresting women characters, but I think now it's OK to be multifaceted. You can be multileveled. Their behavior shows us something about the human condition (cited in Friedlander 2016).

In chapter two, I will explore how the television streaming outlets have been at the forefront of creating anti-heroine characters by looking at some of the new television series on Netflix. As we will learn, Netflix, following the lead of Showtime, has been very proactive in trying to cultivate stories about diverse characters, including anti-heroines. They have gone so far as to create a specific category called "TV Programs Featuring a Strong Female Lead," as a way to attract more viewers to their television options. And they are aggressive in terms of following how their viewers are streaming their programs. For example, more women are now "binge-watching" television shows than men are, by 67% (cited in MacAaron 2014) and Netflix has arguably taken the lead with developing programs that are "binge-worthy." This is part of their larger business strategy of focusing on data about what their viewers are watching and using this as a basis for making decisions about what kind of content they will create. This has led to their development of such original television shows as *Orange is the New Black* and *House of Cards*, both of which feature lead protagonists who are anti-heroines. Interestingly enough, while they don't focus on the demographics of their viewers by age or gender, they do track the viewing habits of their subscribers. This means that if their viewers are watching *Orange is the New Black* and then they watch another show with

a female anti-heroine, such as *The Fall* (BBC, Netflix, 2013-present) which stars Gillian Anderson as a no-nonsense detective in Belfast who is pursuing a serial killer, then they will use that information as the basis to create new shows that will similarly appeal to their viewers. The larger point is that Netflix, like Showtime, has realized the potential for creating content that features anti-heroines as a way to draw large audiences.

In chapter three, we will explore how the network channels, in particular ABC, have also drawn their lesson from cable and streaming outlets like Showtime and Netflix to create strong female anti-heroines. In particular, I will look at the role of the female showrunner Shonda Rhimes, to understand how she has been able to craft two strong female characters on ABC, Olivia Pope of *Scandal* as well as Annalise Keating of *How to Get Away With Murder*. These anti-heroines are fascinating to explore not only for their character development and ability to attract large audiences, but also for the way that they have become trailblazers in a television landscape that had few, if any, female protagonists who were African-American in several decades. In this sense, it is hard to overestimate the larger cultural impact of her shows, nor the fact that there has never been a woman who was a female showrunner who has had the degree of success that Rhimes has had. Rhime's example of how she has, with her production company called "Shondaland," been able to dominate the line-up of Thursday night television, (which has been dubbed "Thank God it's Thursday," by the network,) is a testament to the power of having more women's voices as creators of television content in this day and age.

In chapter four, I will explore how one cable channel, HBO, after having pioneered the creation of the anti-hero on television, was paradoxically relatively late in terms of creating an equally robust roster of anti-heroines. While they were arguably the first to offer an anti-heroine with Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex in the City*, after that initial foray they were focused primarily on the creation of memorable male anti-heros on shows like *The Sopranos, The Wire* and *Deadwood*. From that time on, there were few women who were lead protagonists on any of their series, and it was not until the creation of *Girls* and *Veep* that HBO became a cable channel that had some depth in terms of female characters. While there have been some more developments in this direction with the creation of anti-heroine characters on *Enlightened* (2011-2013), *Getting On* (2013-2015) and *Grace and Frankie* (2015-present), HBO has also had to confront the criticism that their shows were often sexist, as for example the charge that there was a dearth of female characters in *Silicon Valley* (2014-present) or the prevalence of rape scenes in *Game of Thrones* (2011-present). For this

reason, it is especially interesting to see how these two anti-heroines on *Girls* and *Veep* were created and how, though they are different in many ways, nevertheless have come to embody some of the main qualities of this new character type in television.

In the concluding chapter, finally, I will ask what the creation of the anti-heroine on television means in terms of the larger culture? For example, if the cultural norms used to dictate that women behave in a certain way, what is it about our current climate that the anti-heroine has finally been allowed to emerge? Another issue is whether it makes sense to understand her by comparison to the anti-hero, or whether there are other criteria that are more useful to analyze her motivations and her character? A third issue is to assess the larger industrial shifts that have occurred, not only in terms of the changes in technology that have allowed for more ways of streaming content, but also who is able to create these stories in the first place? If the dearth of stories about women and the ability to create complicated female characters was a result in part of the lack of women who were in the industry who were hired as writers, directors, producers and showrunners, what have been the larger industrial changes that have created a space in which these stories are now finally being told? These are some of the questions that will need to be continually assessed, as the anti-heroine becomes a fixed character type on television serials for some time to come.

CHAPTER ONE

SHOWTIME, ANTI-HEROINES
AND THE QUESTION
OF "LADIES WITH PROBLEMS"

In January of 2015 several actresses and writers who have starred and written on shows created by Showtime discussed the question of the impact of sex scenes on TV on a panel sponsored by the Television Critics Association (Alanna Vagianos 2015). The panel included writers Michelle Ashford (*Masters of Sex,* Showtime, 2013-present) and writer Sarah Treem (*The Affair*, Showtime, 2014-present)), as well as actresses Emmy Rossum (*Shameless*, Showtime, 2011-present) and Caitlin Fitzgerald (from *Masters of Sex*). At one point, the discussion turned to the new description of their characters in popular media as "strong female characters," and the women responded with mixed reactions to the phrase. In part, the objection to the term was that it raised questions of gendered expectations of men and women, with the assumption that men are the stronger sex. As Fitzgerald noted:

> This word "strong," I find a little tricky. We have heard "strong female character" so frequently, and I think the word "strong" puts me in line with a very specific masculine energy. I appreciate what the sentiment is supposed to be with that phrase… but all of us are strong in our vulnerability, our nakedness, emotionally or otherwise. And so, I just think we need other kinds of words: "comprehensive," "whole," "complete," "real" (cited in Vagianos 2015).

Other women on the panel had the same reaction to the "strong women character" label. For these women, the ability of writers to portray female characters as whole people who have flaws, and who may not behave in culturally acceptable ways, is what makes the characters so compelling. This ability to "show everything about them," (cited in Vagianos 2015) as Rossum summed up in the conversation, is arguably what has contributed to the success of Showtime.

In fact, Showtime began to develop programs that featured "strong female leads" for the past decade, and many of the characteristics of these female leads, including being flawed, complex, multi-dimensional and going against the grain of traditionally acceptable feminine behavior are what, taken together, make them anti-heroines. Unlike earlier trends in Quality Television shows that featured male anti-heroes such as Don Draper or Tony Soprano, Showtime has been a trailblazer in offering portrayals of middle aged women who were dealing with a variety of crises, including widowhood, cancer, drug addiction, etc. *Nurse Jackie*, *The Big C*, *The United States of Tara* and *Weeds* all offered portraits of women on the edge, facing life-altering events. Before the mid-2000s, Showtime's content was more focused on public sports events like boxing, which attracted male viewers, as well as movies and some original programming along with shows with adult content (Lara Bradshaw 2013). Showtime became the first to portray anti-heroines (*Weeds*'s Nancy) much earlier than Walter White started making meth on *Breaking Bad*. From *Weeds,* Showtime went on to offer, as Gary Susman notes:

> Similar anti-heroines, mothers and wives who were both competent and reckless, women who were often brazenly sexual and refused to apologize for being so, women who lived by their own rules, even if such behavior occasionally caused harm to themselves or people close to them, striving matriarchs who tried to build a better life for their husbands or children but who also jeopardized that better life with the chaos and drama they created through their own headstrong behavior (2015).

Kevin Fallon (2010), for example, has also observed that shows like *The Big C* reflect Showtime's emphasis on creating programming that focuses on women who have problems, and who were often mothers, whether it was *Weeds* or *Nurse Jackie*. Interestingly enough, while these women are in families, the shows are not specifically targeted as being family dramas or as Fallon notes:

> What the network has so deftly done is brand these shows around sexy, hot-button issues that draw in buzz and viewers- things like pill-popping nurses, a suburban moms dealing pot, multiple personalities, refusing cancer treatments- and capitalize on that initial intrigue to create fully realized female characters (2010).

The series *Weeds* was one of the first shows to offer the representation of an anti-heroine in 2005. It starred Mary-Louise Parker as Nancy Botwin, a California mom who becomes a widow overnight. She has two sons and no other source of visible income, so she turns to selling marijuana in