

## Walk this way

Contributed by  
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From *Alias* to *Elektra*, female warriors are giving a new face to girl power and our sense of justice. There is just something intriguing about a woman who looks like she could kill you.

— Bryan Williams

Jennifer Garner walks funny. Watch *Alias* and you'll see what I mean: one arm is raised in front of her, as if to stop what's coming, and one arm is bent back, almost cocked. Her feet don't quite criss-cross, as though she doesn't want to be off balance. She floats rather than walks, always one step away from a battle stance.

Jennifer Garner is the current head of state in *Grrl World*. She's tough, gorgeous, sensitive and serious. She'll do roman comedy when she wants to, but mostly she just kicks butt in a variety of venues. She's inherited the throne of the action chick with her successful turns in *Alias*, and will reign on the big screen in *Elektra*. She is a force to be reckoned with, and serves as the latest signpost in the journey of feminine heroics.

### Tough old birds

There have always been women who have captured the imagination of their cultures, and many of them have done so by force. "Woman as warrior" is not such an unfamiliar image that its history cannot be traced. In the West, we can look to the ancients for examples of women accustomed to the thrill of adventure or the terror of violence: witness Artemis the Greek goddess of the hunt, Deborah the judge of Israel, or Cleopatra the queen of Egypt. We can recall Joan of Arc, Catherine the Great, or even the iconic farm wife of the American westward expansion. These are women of strong backs and iron wills.

We have left room in our hearts for women of valor, but these visions can become caricatured. Some images persist: the noble, frail, civilized women who must be protected from the world outside, or the wild women from whom young men must guard their hearts. For much of history, woman of valor didn't challenge, so much as mitigate, that cultural bias. Deborah was revered by Israel as its judge, yet she derided her warrior Barak for needing a woman to fight his battles. Rosie the Riveter served as a convenient icon for World War II America, when women were needed in industrial labor while men were at war, but she was quickly replaced by the Happy Homemaker once the war was won. In more recent history, however, strong women have lingered, as have their audiences. Since World War II, and more forcefully since the Civil Rights movement, women in heroics have moved from temporary positions to strong, silent partners, to principals in their own stories.

### Wonder women and girly powers

Scholar Richard Reynolds characterizes the superhero as a modern mythology, complete with its own gods and goddesses. But these goddesses were slow in coming. It took an intentional act of creation on the part of psychotherapist William Moulton Marston for the first great superheroine, Wonder Woman, to come out swinging. The heroines that followed were either granted distinctly "feminine" powers, or were utterly derivative, with names and powers identical to, but muted from, their male counterparts.

- The "lasso of truth" bound Wonder Woman's enemies, rendering them unable to fight and incapable of lying. The domination imagery has been widely commented on.

- While Batman and Robin would swim through a sea of villains, throwing punches as they went, Batgirl tended to sit above the fray, letting the bad guys come to her, then kicking them in the face with her high-heeled bat-boots.

- The Scarlet Witch didn't fight physically; by controlling the laws of probability she changed the outcome of conflicts by changing her mind.

- The X-Men's Marvel Girl was a telepath: another ability characterized by passivity rather than physical prowess.

- Susan Storm of the Fantastic Four took the name Invisible Girl (not yet, apparently, a woman, despite her marriage to team patriarch Mr. Fantastic). In battle she would simply fade from view.

### Six steps behind

In spite of obvious gender inequalities inherent in the design of women characters, the commitment to an expanding female presence in comic books was a significant development. With the advent of Invisible Girl and the women who followed after her, the dynamics of comic book storytelling changed. Sexual politics, now far more sophisticated than the cat-and-mouse games of Superman and Lois Lane, were driving a storytelling format that had shifted from issue-specific epics (one issue tells one complete story) to a serial format (plots and characters developing over years and even decades). Women had found their niche in the genre, as they were finding their niche on television and in song.

Bewitched and I Dream of Jeannie told the stories of women with exceptional abilities living out an idyllic existence from week to week. Women sang about the joys and challenges of romance in chart-topping hits like Heâ€™s So Fine and Itâ€™s My Party (I Can Cry If I Want To). While women were enjoying prominent roles in a variety of mediums, their worldview was highly restricted. Male characters (such as Superman, Captain Kirk, and Marshall Dillon) were often driven by the call of adventure, while female characters were still motivated largely by romance and domestic tranquility.

While the far-reaching implications of the Civil Rights movement prompted discussions about equality as a practical rather than cerebral issue, the job market was also being forced further open to women. By the late 1970s Nancy Drew and Charlieâ€™s Angels were on television as (relatively) independent heroes, and the comic book hero Dazzler, disco singer with mutant powers, celebrated the power of women to define heroism for themselves: "World savin' ain't my . . . I prefer singin' my heart out to an audience that really digs me," said "Dazzler" in Comic Book Encyclopedia.

### The good, the bad, and the beautiful

Moral ambiguity ruled the day in the 1980s " or so it would seem. Marvel Girl had grown in power, sacrificed herself on behalf of the X-Men, and was reborn as the Phoenix. A sympathetic hero, she was driven insane by her newfound power and destroyed an entire universe. The beloved Jean Grey had gone bad and had to be punished, but at her trial she once again sacrificed herself to save her friends. Whether hero or villain, she was dead.

Catwoman, with a longer history than Jean Grey, gained prominence as well. Always acknowledged as a villain, but with a clear hold on Batmanâ€™s affections, Catwoman played a role in the landmark Dark Knight Returns, a story of Batman ten years after his retirement, and in Batman: Year One, the first year of Bruce Wayneâ€™s crime fighting career.

Much later, in the 1980s, the character of Catwoman was played with supreme sensibility by Michelle Pfeiffer in the second film of the Batman franchise. Sexy and sympathetic, Pfeifferâ€™s Catwoman stole the show. Blurring the lines between good and bad, Pfeiffer saw the villain "as a positive role model if you look at her metaphorically. Sheâ€™s about empowerment, a character coming into her own," Suzan Colón wrote in Catwoman: The Life and Times of a Feline Fatale.

Into the midst of these longstanding characters came a new woman with a nebulous history: Elektra Natchios was an intriguing romantic interest for fan favorite Daredevil. She appeared out of nowhere and prompted a mild revisionist retelling of Daredevilâ€™s history " a college love of Matt Murdock, she witnessed her fatherâ€™s killing and lashed out at M used to love the world. . . . Youâ€™re a part of that world. And you love it. You let it hurt you and you love it all the more. Iâ€™m not that strong," she said in Elektra Saga. Her innocence lost, Elektra channels her rage into a job as an assassin. Even after dying (more than once), Elektra remained a popular character who would ultimately make the jump to film " not simply as a foil for the male hero, but as the center of a storytellerâ€™s universe.

### Girl power remixed

Elektra opened the floodgates for strong, independent women in heroic roles. In the comics, characters like Witchblade carved out their own niche audiences, and writer Anne Nocenti took a turn crafting Daredevil, taking up where Elektraâ€™s creator left off, introducing her own complex character, Typhoid Mary, whose split personality made her sympathetic one moment, psychotic the next.

On television, women were becoming the focal point for action. Buffy the Vampire Slayer was a cult favorite that rested the fate of the world on a teenage girlâ€™s shoulders. With its commitment to ensemble heroics and relationship development, Buffy and its spinoff series Angel turned convention on its ear. Whereas "legitimate knowing in Western patriarchal cultures has for centuries situated the ideal knower as an autonomous individual," and in particular "strong female heroes have been represented as isolated from other women socially," Sharon Ross wrote in "Tough Enough," Action Chicks. Here we saw men and women fighting side by side with a young woman " a child, really " leading them.

Alongside Buffy were others " shows like La Femme Nikita, Xena: Warrior Princess, Witchblade, Dark Angel, Birds of Prey " each showcasing the particular strengths and challenges of women in heroic roles. Even childrenâ€™s programming got in

on the act with *The Power-Puff Girls* and *Totally Spies*. While many such series featured a man in prominent leadership over the principal characters, the women remained the heroes, and the drama involved watching them come to terms with their emerging power and womanhood.

## Alias, Elektra

That brings us to *Alias*, the most recent entry in grrl power television. *Alias* follows Sydney Bristow, a young woman working alongside a man, and under the authority of her father and a father figure, until she realizes that the spy agency she works for is an enemy of the American government. She turns herself in to the CIA and begins to work as a double agent. In the process, she is given another male mentor, her "handler." The show develops from there as Sydney and her viewers have to make sense of unbelievable plot twists from minute to minute while Sydney avoids being killed or revealing her secret mission.

Jennifer Garner brought a youthful naiveté to the role of Sydney, striking a difficult balance between supreme competence and a sense of being in over her head. As the series develops, we see Sydney seize and effectively wield power, not just physically, but bureaucratically: she makes the systems work for her.

In this sense, *Alias* reflects a common theme in female heroics, particularly for the young: our hero is as much becoming as she is overcoming. The most recent wave of women characters has brought this insight into heroism, where it has often been lacking. Rather than hacking away at villains until there are no more villains to hack away at, "feminine" heroes are "flexible with how they approach the events with which they become involved. They learn to listen before they speak, converse before they act," according to Sharon Ross. This shift offers a corrective to the negative agenda of the conventional epic (putting an end to clear and present danger) by pursuing a positive agenda: the peace and prosperity of the whole community.

This pursuit finds its way into the *Elektra* film as well. In the 2003 film *Daredevil*, Jennifer Garner plays Elektra, a character who bears a striking resemblance to Sydney Bristow. In the 2005 sequel, *Elektra*, Garner reprises the titular role. Here, we no longer find the young, naïve girl struggling to get by. Elektra is hardened, old-souled and is almost mythically ruthless until she meets a girl who is at the first step in the same journey. Elektra, having left behind her own "handler," Stick, becomes the handler for her protégé while fighting to protect the girl's life. In the process, Elektra prophecies that leads to a final peace after centuries of conflict.

Naturally, she also learns a lot about herself. Garner told *Wizard* magazine that Elektra "does not enjoy this journey back to well-being at all. She doesn't see the good in it. Nor does she see any good in herself." The good becomes evident, however, in the maternal looks she gives her student, in her reconciliation with Stick, in the vindication of her mother's death, and in her own happy ending as she walks off into the sunset.

Former villain and never-ending warrior, Elektra breaks new ground for women of valor. She has left behind the protection of men while maintaining a close relationship with them "she has no handler, only men who wish her well. She makes peace with who she is: as a woman and a warrior. In playing the role, Garner herself felt "like a great combination of a fighter and a girl." While the film is unlikely to break box office records, the impact of Elektra will linger long, leaving young women and men with a vision of heroism that moves beyond simple opposition to evil by adding the promotion of good. Elektra is a hero, plain and simple, in the fight for her own humanity "just as all of us, male and female, are called to be.

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Dave A. Zimmerman's blog *Strangely Dim*  
URL: <http://ivpress.gospelcom.net/campus/sd/>

A Tale of Two Superheroes: Spider-Man, the Punisher & the Ethics of Power  
URL: [http://www.bustedhalo.com/archive/2004\\_18pop\\_culture.htm](http://www.bustedhalo.com/archive/2004_18pop_culture.htm)

Elektra Artwork Gallery  
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Comic Book Character

By David A. Zimmerman. Published by InterVarsity Press. 2004.

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