BEATRIX KIDDO: POPULAR CULTURE'S DEADLIEST SUPER-MOM

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The relationship between the individual and society is defined by dissent as well as conformity. In "Popular Culture," John Fiske states that popular culture is contradictory; it contains opposition as well as an influence that the individual can never fully escape (45). This juxtaposition of resistance and conformity can also be found within the feminist movement, especially with regard to motherhood. Although birth control has given women sexual freedom by eliminating the commitment to raise children, many women are encouraged to pursue a career and fulfill their motherly duties simultaneously. Feminists are somewhat divided over this conflict between motherhood and gender equality within the larger public sphere. Beatrix Kiddo, the heroine of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, delicately straddles these two sides of the debate. Beatrix, played by Uma Thurman, lives her life as an assassin, traveling all over the world, earning vast sums of money, and committing murder; however, her priorities suddenly shift when she becomes pregnant with the daughter of her lover and boss, Bill. Despite her extreme circumstances, Beatrix embodies the dual expectations that are placed upon modern women. Society expects women to be a fusion of fierce independence and motherly compassion. Beatrix fills both roles, suggesting that it is difficult yet possible to be both a mother and a warrior.

What makes the heroine of Tarantino's gore-fest especially unique is that she takes on a career path that one may not expect a female to fulfill. In our society, one would not expect a woman to be a sword-wielding assassin. According to historians Anderson and Zinsser in "Buried Tradition: The Question of Origins," "no culture is known in which women are trained to be warlike and aggressive as men, and in most warlike cultures, only males are urged to be aggressive" (14). However, freelance writer Trudy Frisk calls this assumption an "arrogant denial of history" (3). She challenges this notion and cites Amazon and Celtic cultures, in which women were considered just as capable as men to be leaders and warriors. Beatrix Kiddo echoes this tradition of female empowerment. She is not just a successful warrior; she claims to be the "deadliest woman in the world" (*Kill Bill Volume* 2). In addition, she seems to reject personality traits that are typically characterized as female and takes on traits that, in our culture, are associated with men. "It's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness

I lack," Beatrix explains to one of her victims, "not rationality" (*Kill Bill Vol. 1*). Sandra L. Calvert, Tracey A. Kondla, Karen A. Ertel, and Douglas S. Meisel, professors at Georgetown University, studied *Xena: Warrior Princess,* a television show starring Xena, a heroic Amazon woman who also embodies "masculine" traits. They observe that "although recent portrayals of women have become less traditional, an infrequent portrayal of women continues to be that of a hero" (Calvert et al. 31). Heroines that do appear in popular culture are often "dark, evil and ruthless" when they seek "revenge and retribution" (34). Psychologist Carl Jung labels this as the "male shadow," or the "dark side" of male persona (34). Frisk would argue, however, that "asserting that all women are innately gentle and all men are inherently brutal destroyers [does a] disservice to the individual natures of both women and men" (3). According to our society's traditional gender norms, Beatrix's aggressive nature would be considered "manly." To say that she was "acting like a man," however, would be to imply that men and women are biologically programmed to act a certain way. This idea would be contradicted by earlier cultures that viewed men and women as equally capable of physical strength and rationality.

While Beatrix's supposedly masculine personality may help her to win respect as an assassin, it also provides entertainment for the film's general audience. Fiske states that "it's the [characters] who challenge or fail to live up to [social] norms that provide the popular pleasure" of the audience (41). Therefore, although women in the film are allowed to physically compete does not automatically qualify the battle as a feminist statement. In an interview, Quentin Tarantino suggested that "cool parents" should take their kids to see *Kill Bill*, adding that "boys will have a great time, [and] girls will have a dose of girl power"(qtd. in Drudge). However, in her film review, Emma Young, a student at Sydney University, questions whether "women killing women in a hysterically violent manner for the satisfaction of a largely male audience is 'girl power'" (Young). Although feminists fight for women's equality, it is doubtful that the movement's objective was for women to be just as cruel and abusive as male action-heroes in films that generally cater to a largely male audience. This is not to say that women in films should avoid physical combat or competition with one another. Yet, as Young argues, this extreme violence between women proves to be "less like a feminist statement and more like entertainment" (Young). While it may be unusual and thus compelling to watch women abandon

social graces and openly compete with one another, the violence may be used more for its entertainment value than its promotion of feminism.

Although Beatrix and Xena exhibit physical aggression and other so-called "masculine traits," they embody conventionally feminine traits as well. Aside from being warriors, they are also deeply maternal. Xena is not a mother, yet she often serves as a mother figure to her sidekick and companion, Gabrielle. While Beatrix does not meet her daughter until the end of the second film, she makes sacrifices for her child throughout the movie. The heroine leaves her lover and her career as an assassin to settle down and raise the child, and she cries out in agony when she discovers that she has lost the baby. The study of *Xena: Warrior Princess* revealed that Xena was "most liked" by both male and female viewers when she was "perceived to be in control of her life, physically attractive, and a mother archetypal figure" (Calvert et al. 31). By being a mother and a hero, the authors state that "Xena is regenerated and able to integrate and go beyond the former dark male shadow that consumed her life" (49). In addition to maternal values, heroines often convey a certain degree of care and concern for others—even for their victims. As the authors state, "characters like Disney's Mula, and Shu Lien from *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, who use the mind to achieve victory and show compassion to others including their enemies, [provide] valuable templates for integrating female heroes into mainstream fiction and culture" (59). Beatrix often uses violence to achieve victory and she shows very little compassion for her victims; however, she does show remorse near the end of the second film when she finally kills Bill. Though she does not comfort him verbally, she sheds a few tears as he takes his final steps before collapsing on the ground. This softens the warrior's image and provides an emotional climax to her murderous rampage. Audiences seem to prefer a heroine who possesses a combination of traditional male assertiveness and traditionally female compassion.

As with any well-developed character, Beatrix reveals both surface and deeper, more complex characteristics. Beneath her cold, merciless, "super woman" exterior lies a passionate, emotional human being. Beatrix's raw emotions emerge during three pivotal moments in the film: when she wakes from a coma to realize she has lost her baby, when she explains her difficult choice between her child and her career to Bill, and after she has finally defeated Bill and regained custody of her daughter. During these moments, her stoicism melts away as she sobs uncontrollably. Johnston observes that "women in movies are extremely limited in regard to the amount of

anger or sorrow they are allowed to express. They can cry or shout as much as they like, as long as they maintain a certain level of beauty throughout." The heroines in the television series *Charlie's Angels* often conform to this traditional standard of feminine beauty. As author Cathy Schwichtenburg observes, "the Angels never get dirty or disheveled. Their confrontations with the villains usually appear short, neat, and clean. The 'girls' remain statues—unruffled icons." When Beatrix cries, her face is red, her eyes are puffy, and her face is twisted in anguish and despair. After fighting, her hair is often matted, her clothes are worn and she is usually covered in blood or dirt. This heroine seems to have no problem sacrificing visual perfection in order to portray raw, believable emotion. Beatrix defies the traditional idea that women in movies must look flawless at all times, no matter what kind of pain or agony their characters are going through. And although crying is sometimes associated with femininity and weakness, her tears do not detract from her strength as a warrior or a mother. Instead, the heroine simply reveals humanity and a deeper, more passionate side to her character.

Despite the unusual number of strong female characters, *Kill Bill* displays a patriarchal hierarchy reminiscent of Charlie and his "Angels." Charlie, an omnipresent character often presented as a voice through a machine, is the central male figure in charge of his three "girls." In the show's opening narrative, Charlie says:

> **Once upon a time there were three little girls who went to the police academy. Two were in Los Angeles, the other in San Francisco. And they were each assigned very hazardous duties. But I took them away from all that and now they work for me. My name is Charlie.**
>
> **(Schwichtenberg)**

The show features three beautiful women who are essentially "rescued" by the mysterious Charlie. He determines their missions and serves as a father figure. In the end of each episode, "Charlie as omnipresent father provides narrative closure when he verbally 'pats the Angels on the head' with, 'A job well-done, girls,' or 'I'm very proud of you, Angels'" (Schwichtenberg). In *Kill Bill*, Beatrix and the other members of the Deadly Viper Assassin Squad are under the complete control of Bill. In an intimate conversation near the end of *Volume II*, Thurman's character tells Bill, "I was a woman. I was your woman. I was a killer who killed for you…I would have jumped a motorcycle onto a speeding train, for you" (*Kill Bill Volume II*). Though

Beatrix is fiercely independent throughout much of the movie, she suddenly shows subservience and allegiance to the dominant male figure in her life. Like the Angels, these assassins are ultimately an extension of a gender hierarchy in which their leader tells them where to go, who to associate with, and essentially, how to live their lives. As Fiske observes, "In a Patriarchal society such as ours, the social relations between the genders grant masculinity the position of power" (42). Bill is much older and highly experienced in his line of work and tends to be a sort of father figure to the women, which is why they may accept his reign of power. Therefore, while the assassins seem to escape the boundaries of female subordination, they do so within the realm of a traditional patriarchal hierarchy.

Patriarchal values have been challenged and somewhat decayed by developments like birth control and increased career opportunities for women, however. Such advancements give women more power within the family as well as the larger socioeconomic sphere. Sociologists Crompton and Lyonette state that "increasingly, women, including mothers of young children, are entering and remaining in the labor market, thus eroding, at least in part, the conventional 'male breadwinner' model of employment and family life" (602). Despite this movement toward gender equality in the home and the workplace, resistant groups, such as Populist conservative feminists, blame this Neo-liberal movement for the breakdown of the family. Political scientists Fukuyama and Kristol state that "massive social disruption, it is suggested, can only be averted if women somehow rediscover their innate nurturing capabilities and devote themselves to the care of their young children, rather than seek success in the employment sphere." (qtd. in Crompton and Lyonette, 602) While liberal feminists assert that these characteristics are "socially constructed," conservative feminists believe that maternal values are intrinsic to females (601). Vernita Green, Beatrix's first victim, seems to embrace these supposedly "innate" maternal qualities. This "Pasadena homemaker" married a doctor and raises their child in a bright, quiet suburban neighborhood—a stark contrast from her days as an assassin (*Kill Bill Volume 1*). Once a cold-blooded killer, Vernita now enjoys coaching softball and greeting her daughter, Nikki, at the door when the child comes home from school. But before Nikki was born, she severely assaulted a pregnant woman and robbed both mother and child of a nice, peaceful life together. This hypocrisy certainly questions the innate female maternal instinct as

argued by conservative feminists. In this way, the film suggests that motherly instincts are merely constructed by a traditionally patriarchal society.

When Beatrix finally finds Bill, he questions her actions and asserts that her instincts as a warrior somehow override whatever maternal instincts she may possess. When he questions Beatrix's decision to leave him and settle down to raise their daughter, she says that she made her decision for the well-being of her child. "I had to choose," Beatrix explains, "I chose her" (*Kill Bill Volume 2*). However, Bill suggests that her life in El Paso with the man she was going to marry would have merely disguised the natural-born killer that she truly was. He compares her false identity, "Arlene Plimpton," to Superman and his alias, Clark Kent. "Clark Kent is weak, he's unsure of himself, he's a coward… he's Super Man's critique of the whole human race" Bill explains (*Kill Bill Volume 2*). He states that by adopting a mundane, domestic life, Beatrix was "renegade killer bee" trying to blend into the hive as a "worker bee" (*Kill Bill Volume 2*). Beatrix admits that killing all of those people to get to Bill felt "damn good" (*Kill Bill Volume 2),* which somewhat supports Bill's notion that she is a natural born killer. However, Beatrix stands by her decision to leave him. She declares, "It was the right decision and I made it for my daughter" *(Kill Bill Volume 2*). Bill replies, "I think you would have been a wonderful mother, but you are a killer" (*Kill Bill Volume 2*). He therefore asserts that her killer instincts are stronger than her maternal instincts. When Bill shoots Beatrix in the beginning of the first film, he robs her of any choices in raising her daughter. Finally, however, Beatrix takes control by killing Bill with the "five point palm exploding heart technique," a simple maneuver that literally breaks his heart. She thus reclaims her daughter by defeating Bill's patriarchal reign over her life. But in the end, the heroine lies on the bathroom floor, crying over her lover's death and laughing with the joy of being reunited with her daughter. According to the studies of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Beatrix is a favorable heroine because she regains control of her life, uses her wisdom instead of her sword to kill Bill, and reveals maternal qualities that offset her ruthlessness (Calvert et al.). Beatrix's cold and violent aggression is balanced by her love and tenderness toward her daughter, which suggests that it is possible for a woman to embody both killer and maternal instincts.

Beatrix Kiddo is an extraordinarily dynamic character in popular culture. In her youth, she rejects traditional female stereotypes and pursues a career that is both dangerous and successful. Yet, she performs tasks under the guidance and control of

her male boss, Bill. Although Beatrix does not conform to the traditional image of a passive and subservient female, she is involved in a traditional gender hierarchy. She was once a dedicated assassin, but when she becomes pregnant, her daughter becomes a priority. Both killer and maternal instincts fuel Beatrix's bloody path of revenge. She shows little remorse while killing countless people, but cries in a fit of hysterical sadness and joy over the death of her lover and the reclamation of her daughter. The ending credits identify her by several different names, including "Beatrix Kiddo, the Bride, Black Mamba, and Mommy" (*Kill Bill Volume II*). Beatrix has several identities: she is a killer, a lover, mother, and a survivor all at once. She is strong and rational, yet beautiful and emotional. By exhibiting all of these characteristics, Beatrix effectively defies and conforms to our society's definition of femininity. She possesses compassion as well as a thirst for competition outside of the domestic sphere, and it is this complex nature that makes Beatrix the prototype for modern society's ideal "super-mom."

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COMMENTARY: GRETA NELSON

What can popular culture illuminate about the world in which we live, what are the expectations for the twenty-first century woman, and what are the implications of the representation of women in popular culture? These are some of the complex questions that Amanda Davis' "Beatrix Kiddo: Popular Culture's Deadliest Super-Mom" raises, connects and explores. Davis' argument, which draws upon the discourses of feminist theory, film studies, history, and sociology, illuminates wider truths about the way that fictional figures—particularly Beatrix Kiddo of Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films—reinforce, challenge, and reconstruct societal gender roles. The case through which Davis explores these dynamics is brilliantly itself a part of the popular culture which has been produced within this social order. Her analysis of both *Volumes I* and *II*, though not enough to confirm without qualification that it is possible for women, in the context of reality, to embody this ideal of the "super-mom," proves a revealing mode through which to argue that popular culture reinforces this as the current cultural expectation for women. Thus, the most profound and resonating work that takes place within Davis' essay is that her multidisciplinary investigation sheds crucial light upon how popular culture arises from and produces (or reproduces) particular social constructions.

Davis opens her piece with a discussion of John Fiske's "Popular Culture" as she sets up a framework that recognizes a tension between an individual's resistance to and desire to conform with particular cultural norms both in fiction and in reality. She uses this conflict as a foundation upon which to construct the next dimension of her argument. Insightfully, Davis draws connections among these cultural theories in order to illuminate the transformation of the role of the mother in contemporary society and the divide within the feminist camp over expectations for females within that society. Davis continues her examination by laying out a dominant conception of women within Western culture that puts them at odds, with several exceptions, with the warrior heroine of Tarantino's films. This presentation of traditional notions of what characteristics are culturally accepted and expected as female or male is crucial to the direction that Davis takes the essay as she points to Beatrix's defiance of these socially constructed gender norms as being exploited by popular genres for entertainment value. Here, she again suggestively weaves in the ideas of Fiske to explain Beatrix's popularity as a film icon. In this way, Davis illustrates that while Beatrix's position as the physically powerful female is progressive in the sense that it breaks particular, often destructive stereotypes of women as submissive and weak as compared to men, the manner in which it is framed in film and within the larger context of popular culture undermines any feminist statement it might make by boiling its appeal down merely to the enjoyment by the audience of a character who challenges the expectations of her society.

Davis goes on to explore that the female characters within these films in particular, and powerful female figures in pop culture in general, embody a far more complex psychological makeup than that of a simple brutal warrior because of the fact that they do not wholly abandon characteristics traditionally associated with women. Rather, Beatrix is a model of a complex character who asserts herself at the same time that she operates in a distinctly patriarchical context. In this way, Davis argues that Beatrix may not be so distant from the women of *Charlie's Angels* who, although they exhibit physical power, only do so with the discretion and direction of their male supervisor. This patriarchical system and its implications become the focus of Davis' exploration of the feminist issues that problematize a simplified interpretation of these films. The reader may not walk away from Davis' completely convinced that the attainment of the ideal of "super-mom" for post-modern women is actually possible simply by virtue of the fact that for a particular female character on

the Hollywood screen this seems to be; however, she *will* see that such an ideal is in fact a current culturally constructed role that a larger society expects and to which many women aspire. Oscillating between close examination of particular moments in the films and the wider theoretical frameworks, Davis on the whole offers concrete and compelling evidence for her points to this end. She uses real-world facts and theoretical figures to analyze Tarantino's films. By highlighting characters such as Vernita Green for example, and by exploring Beatrix's changing attitudes toward motherhood and toward her own daughter, Davis shows that post-modern womanhood is a duality, a balancing act that expects a strong female to be both a worker and a mother.

The case that Davis presents is a hyperbolic one—dramatic and amplified; however, as such, Beatrix Kiddo serves to represent and elucidate many underappreciated currents of popular culture that in turn reveal truths within the sphere of reality. At once, her character is a reproduction of and a producer of a cultural ideal. She is an embodiment of that by which we are entertained and yet, she is more: a representation of a revised feminism that reconciles divided views and enhances the belief that the empowered working woman who is also a mother is the figure to which females should aspire. Davis illustrates that Beatrix's power within the films as well as her appeal to real-world audiences is rooted in the fact that she is not one-dimensionally either submissive or violent; rather, she is both aggressive and compassionate, both fierce and nurturing, both independent and empathetic. By "close-reading" these two films and contextualizing them in a interdisciplinary framework, Davis asks her readers to consider seriously essential questions as to how life and art, society and the individual simultaneously shape and are shaped by one another. Davis' analysis is one that opens as many questions as it answers, and therein lies its essential value. The question that stands out as being in most need of addressing pertains to the repercussions of the development of this cultural "ideal" of the super mom. Davis suggests that it is both favorable and possible to achieve this model of womanhood, but what does this mean in the context of all of the fields upon which she has touched in her piece? Thus, the argument provokes challenges in its weaker points, but the work that Davis has performed so far succeeds in its aim, inspiring further exploration into what is undeniably a rich ground within the domain of cultural studies.