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‘How I Met Your Mother’ vs ‘Big Bang Theory’: Isn’t Gender Bias as Bad as Yellowface?

Margaret Sessa-Hawkins · Wednesday, February 5th, 2014

In on January 13, *How I Met Your Mother* made headlines for all the wrong reasons. In the episode “Slapsgiving 3: Slappointment in Slapmarra” most of the all-white cast donned Fu Manchu moustaches and stuck chopsticks in their hair, the writers and producers having decided this was a great way to portray Chinese people. Not surprisingly, quite a wide swath of the American population disagreed, and took to Twitter to express their disapproval. Two days later, HIMYM executive producer Carter Bays had apologized (also via Twitter). This event, however, served to remind me of a similar (but less publicized) episode in recent sitcom history; the time Howard, a character on another CBS show, *The Big Bang Theory*, accidentally ingested large amounts of estrogen and started acting like a “woman.”

This storyline occurs in “The Deception Verification”. In the episode Howard ingests the estrogen for weeks through his skin while helping his mother to apply a cream. As a result, Howard becomes irritable, hyper worried about his weight and appearance, prone to crying for almost no reason, and develops a sudden interest in cooking. While none of these are actual side-effects that come from taking estrogen, they are all actual stereotypes applied to women.

Given the current presence (or lack thereof) of women behind-the-scenes in television, it’s no surprise that such a skit would happen. In the 2012/13 season, women represented only 26% of those working to help create television shows (creators, writers, directors, producers). As a result, women tend to also have diminished roles on screen. Women represent only 41% of major characters, and while the majority of females are shown as being in their 20s and 30s, the majority of male characters are in their 30s and 40s. Women are also presented in a professional setting about half as often as their male peers are. In such an environment, it’s hardly surprising that there would be a segment of a show where exposure to estrogen gives a man a slew of farcical and offensive female characteristics. What is surprising is the lack of reaction to it.

There’s a reason the “yellowface” episode of HIMYM caused so much of an outcry, and it’s the same reason that similar portrayals of minorities (e.g. blackface) are taboo. It’s because these types of depictions reduce the character to nothing more than stereotypes and generalizations. These representations take away much of what makes a character three-dimensional, complex, unique and human. It’s right that when such a portrayal does occur we should protest against it, and vehemently.

It is now generally understood (in theory if not in practice) that it is not okay to portray members

of a certain ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation in this simplistic or generalized manner. *When How I Met Your Mother* did so they were rightfully criticized, recognized their error and apologized. Strange, then, that when *The Big Bang Theory* presented a similar representation of women, barely anyone uttered a word.

Here is a video clip from the episode, showing Howard supposedly under the effects of estrogen:

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