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# Miss Piggy's Feminism: Redefining Human Relationships through Martial Arts

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*Miss Piggy's Feminism: Redefining Human Relationships through Martial Arts*

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Feminist Icon

Talk about Miss Piggy to women of a certain age and many of us will smile. There weren't a lot of strong female characters on television in the 70s—the Bionic Woman, Charlie's Angels, the girls and women of the Brady Bunch, and of course, Three's Company—but for some reason Miss Piggy stood out. Now as an adult, there's rather a lot Miss Piggy and I have in common. We're big, strong women with a love of martial arts. Miss Piggy karate chops her way around back stage at the Muppet Theatre and I try to blend my practise of the martial art of Aikido with days spent in the ivory tower. I aspire to her level of glamour and self-confidence. As a woman in a very male dominated field, the academic study of philosophy, I am often like Miss Piggy, noticeable as the only woman in the room. And while I lack her acting skills and stage presence, in front of large classes I've been known to channel my inner Pig.

Some women didn't connect with the character of Miss Piggy at the time but came to appreciate her virtues later. She really was written for women, not girls. On *Thought Catalog*, Sarah Pacella writes, "When I was a kid, like many children of the 1970s and 1980s, I loved the Muppets. My favourite characters were Gonzo, Animal and Rowlf the Dog. Although I enjoyed the show I somehow felt that there was always something missing from my Muppet experience: I longed for a female character that I could relate to and the two most prominent female leads annoyed me. I couldn't quite

articulate why I was neither Team Janice or Team Piggy. I mean really, was I supposed to embrace the burn out hippy or the overbearing boar who isn't complete without her man? Miss Piggy really got under my skin in a way that Janice was just incapable of...she was bossy, overbearing, desperate, loud, aggressive and self-centred: everything that little girls aren't supposed to be. And the faux French, come on! I soon came to the conclusion that Miss Piggy wasn't written for little girls, she was written for women everywhere, flaws and all, because she's real, maybe even in a Carrie Bradshaw kind of way. Sure she can be misguided and desperate at times (she still makes me cringe a little), and there are some rage issues, but nobody's perfect." (Pacella, 2014)

I think of Miss Piggy as a feminist icon of her day, though I know that's a controversial claim. She is certainly a feminist icon from my youth. In many ways Miss Piggy is an unlikely feminist icon. First, she's over the top feminine in her self-presentation: heels, fancy hats, a lot of lipstick, and a lot of pink. Often even a feather boa or two. Second, she's one of very few women, most often *the* only, in a male dominated cast. Feminists sometimes call heavily male workplaces and events, veritable 'sausage fests.' Of course, that's just a bad metaphor in this case. Third, she's romantically attached to the lead male character of the Muppets, Kermit the frog, though she's anything but his dutiful sidekick. I'm with the feminist science blogger Skepchick. In "Listen to the Pig" Skepchick writes, "As far as I am concerned, Ms. Piggy is one of the strongest female characters in popular culture in the past 50-odd years. Piggy proves, time and again, that she is a strong, confident woman who can go toe-to-toe.. or snout-to-snout with anyone else." (Skepchick 2011)

The character of Miss Piggy is that of a show biz career woman in a time when women's role in society, particularly in the workplace and in romantic relationships, was changing fast. She is a beacon of bright, brash, outspoken femininity amid a sea of almost entirely male Muppets. She is also the dominant personality in her relationship with the Kermit the Frog. But then there's the "Miss" factor and that her main role is that of the love interest of the main male character. This chapter argues that

despite Miss Piggy's role in her relationship with Kermit and that she is frequently the butt of jokes on the show, that Miss Piggy is indeed a character of which feminists can be proud. She's clearly strong, capable, and physically fit. Her martial arts prowess is one of the reasons, I think girls and women can look up to Miss Piggy. Miss Piggy is chubby, sure, but she's also a fighter. Her fatness is not an impediment to her physical fitness and competence, neither is it an impediment to her looks. She wears glamorous outfits and is beautiful and sexy but she is also as tough as nails.

Certainly Miss Piggy was a Feminist Pig ahead of her time. The 70s were the era of Second Wave feminism. Consider your second wave feminist options. The liberal feminism of the 1970s suggested that the only obstacles to women's equality were formal and legal barriers. With those removed women were free to join the ranks of men in the courtrooms, board rooms, and university classrooms. But often the women we think of as liberal feminist heroes took on the garb and style of successful men, trading dresses and purses for suits and briefcases. (Jaggar 1983) Radical feminists, on the other hand, viewed women's oppression primarily in terms of domestic violence, rape, and pornography. While the former saw solutions in greater inclusion for women in society as it stood, the latter argued for separatist solutions which placed value on women's distinct culture and contribution. The heroes of radical feminism abandoned traditionally feminine attire and garb too. No make-up, panty hose, or heels for them. (Jaggar 1983) And then there's Miss Piggy. She wanted success on her own terms. Yes, she desired stardom but she was not giving up glamour. Following in the footsteps of divas past, Miss Piggy wanted career success and fame, along with a healthy dollop of glitz and glamour.

#### A Third Wave Feminist in Second Wave Times?

Miss Piggy's version of feminism had not come around quite yet. Indeed, in "It's Time to Get Together for Some Sex and Violence on the Muppet Show," Kathleen Kennedy writes that Miss Piggy would be a perfect poster child for Third Wave feminism, "Feminists in the early 21st century might argue that a feminist who likes sex and diamonds could fit comfortably in Third Wave feminism (and

that it is perhaps unfortunate for Miss Piggy it did not exist yet.)” (Kennedy 2009, p. 142) Miss Piggy fits in much better in today’s pluralist third wave feminist ethos. She’s powerfully feminine, size positive, and sex positive too. In answer to the question of how far one should go on a first date, she answers “Tucson.” “Unless you’re from Texas, then you can go further.” (Lewis and Gikow 1997)

So what makes Miss Piggy a feminist icon? What makes any woman a feminist icon, really? The feminist blogger Jo Breeze weighs in on feminist icons and who counts,

“It can’t just be someone who succeeded in a male-dominated field. It has to be someone who has had some success in intentionally improving the lives of other women. A woman who’s succeeded where no other woman succeeded before can be inspiring, certainly, but not necessarily feminist. Sadly, for all the names we list as feminist icons, it can sometimes feel like they keep having to be struck off the list. Ill-judged jokes at the expense of other minority groups, ignoring one’s own privilege, thoughtlessly writing off the lived experiences of other women in favour of an ideology. Who can we list as a feminist icon that all feminists can agree on and who has never spoken unthinkingly or caused any offence?

(Clue: I can’t think of any)

Everyone makes mistakes, and public figures get to make them more obviously than the rest of us. How you respond to making mistakes and causing offence matters, a lot – if someone points out that your use of language was upsetting, for example, it takes no effort at all to say ‘I’d never thought of it like that, thank you, I’ll try and avoid doing that in future’ rather than ‘god this is so hard, I’m trying to be an ally, why are you being so picky?’. But I’d far prefer to have a public space full of opinionated intelligent verbose women who get it wrong than a public space full of people who are over-cautious of causing offence and never speak boldly.” (Breeze 2013)

The category of intelligent, verbose women speaking boldly, occasionally getting it wrong, but more often getting it right, seems tailor made for Miss Piggy. What would Miss Piggy herself say about her iconic status? Miss Piggy was interviewed in *Toronto Life* magazine recently on just this topic. It's not just feminists who have claimed Miss Piggy as an icon. Reports the Star, "She's a gay icon, diva icon, style icon, feminism icon, journalism icon. You name it. The divine swine is an icon to all. "I am everyone's icon," she told a roomful of reporters. "I am an icon to all who will have moi." When asked about her influence on young women, who may look to her as a strong and independent feminist role model, Miss Piggy said she's just happy to be worshipped." (Toronto Star, 2014)

In what follows I describe some ways in which Miss Piggy stands out on television and in the movies as role model for girls and women.

### Miss Piggy: Fat, Feminist, and Fabulous

Miss Piggy was ahead of her time in terms of fat politics. When Miss Piggy first entered the world of television, the academic field of Fat Studies had yet to be born. (Cooper 2010) It was not until the early 2000s that Fat Studies conferences were first held. Shortly after readers and anthologies were published and after that courses in Fat Studies were held at university campuses across North America. But Miss Piggy came first. She stood out as a beacon of fat positivity in an era of enforced female thinness and Scarsdale dieting. She's larger than life and no less beautiful for it. In her bestselling *Miss Piggy's Guide to Life*, she writes, "Beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. Therefore, the bigger you are the more style you have." The diet chapter of her guide to life includes before and after pictures of herself, which are, of course, identical. Miss Piggy explicitly resists conventional beauty norms around body shape and size. She refuses to diet. When Kermit steps in at one point on the show to check in on what she's eating, Miss Piggy takes his head and smushes into a large cake. Her one piece of diet advice: "Never eat more than you can lift."

In “It’s Not Over Until the Fat Lady Sings: Comedy, the Carnavalesque, and Body Politics,” Angela Stukator writes, “From a feminist perspective we might examine Miss Piggy as an unruly woman who acquires oppositional power from her ambivalence: she is the object of disgust and desire, being both repellent and attractive, strong and delicate, friendly and hostile, and most significantly, woman and animal.” (Stukator 2001, p. 197) Writes Stukator, “Miss Piggy signals the radical potential of the unruly fat woman to produce herself as spectacle: she puts on femininity with vengeance that hints at the masquerades ability to “act out” the dilemmas of femininity.” (Stukator 2001, p. 204)

Compare Miss Piggy’s embodiment to the “tyranny of slenderness” described by feminist phenomenologist Sandra Bartky in the passage that follows:

“Under the current ‘tyranny of slenderness’ women are forbidden to become large or massive; they must take up as little space as possible. The very contours of a woman’s body takes on as she matures - the fuller breasts and rounded hips - have become distasteful. The body by which a woman feels herself judged and which by rigorous discipline she must try to assume is the body of early adolescence, slight and unformed, a body lacking flesh or substance, a body in whose very contours the image of immaturity has been inscribed. The requirement that a woman maintain a smooth and hairless skin carries further the theme of inexperience, for an infantilized face must accompany her infantilized body, a face that never ages or furrows its brow in thought. The face of the ideally feminine woman must never display the marks of character, wisdom, and experience that we so admire in men.” (Bartky 1986)

Miss Piggy was a fat, feminist, femme role model at a time when awareness about the politics of body size and the tyranny of slenderness was a very new idea.

Writes Denise Jolly, “There was one large bodied high femme that represented a pin up like aesthetic in mainstream media during my most informative years, one sexy fat being... Miss Piggy. Oh,

how I loved Miss Piggy. She was bossy. She was high femme. She had a subservient adoring Kermit the Frog, who loved her eternally. Then the reality hit me, my greatest feminine influence as a large bodied young woman, was a Pig Muppet.” (Jolly 2014)

Now consider Miss Piggy’s super confident beauty advice, from *Miss Piggy’s Guide to Life*: “Start out perfect and never change a thing. Always accentuate your best features by pointing at them. And conceal your flaws by sucker punching anyone who has the audacity to mention them.”

### Fat, Fit, and Female: Together at Last

The sucker-punching brings us to another one of Miss Piggy’s positive features. She is fearless and strong. Miss Piggy’s physicality is striking not just in her size but also in her sheer athleticism. Miss Piggy is one of the larger Muppets but unlike the stereotypical portrayal of fat woman as non-athletic and out of shape, Miss Piggy is usually portrayed as tremendously physically capable. Many of the cast express fear of her karate chops and if the cast ever needs physical defense it is Miss Piggy they call for. Yes, she’s portrayed as an expert in martial arts but she’s also seen as excellent at running, horse riding, and roller skating. Before “fat and fit” was ever a thing, there was Miss Piggy,

Clearly she’s physically fit. In “The Uniquely Strong but Feminine Miss Piggy,” Maryanne Fisher and Anthony Cox describe the ways in which Miss Piggy stands out. (Fisher and Cox, 2009) Typically in comedy, writers and actors exaggerate traits usually associated with a given role, thus Beaker is even more nerdy and shrill than your typical lab-coat wearing scientist and Fozzie the Bear takes the role of stand up comedian to a whole new level. But Miss Piggy is different. Instead, Fisher and Cox note that she plays counter to many of the stereotypes of women in movies and on television. “She is unique in that she is incongruent with stereotypical portrayal of women in mainstream media.”

(Fisher and Cox, 2009, p.176) Other than her beginning as Piggy Lee, Miss Piggy has always been Miss Piggy, fully formed since the early days of the show. Fisher and Cox compare Miss Piggy to women in science fiction shows and movies of the 1970s such as Uhura in Star Trek and Princess Leia in Star Wars but also Xena, Warrior Princess and Wonder Woman. They too are a mix of the competent and the incompetent and play second in command roles. (Fisher and Cox, 2009, pp. 185-86)

The character of Miss Piggy is still using her martial arts skills. Here's an excerpt from an interview with Miss Piggy and Kermit.

*“Miss Piggy, we get to see you use your martial arts skills in the film but only briefly, are you still a black belt and how often do you practice your fighting moves?”*

*Piggy: Yes I did all my own stunts in the movie. I trained at and continue to be seen frequently at Master Chang's Karate Dojo and Chinese restaurant.”*

Again, the food reference is of course a comment on Miss Piggy's size. One of things that is especially interesting about Piggy is that she's portrayed as being both fat and fit and she's a strong woman. Both of these are rarely portrayed on mainstream television. Sure she's teased about her weight and portrayed as eating too much, but there are never any doubts raised about her strength. How rare is that in television and movie culture? She's a size positive feminist preaching body acceptance before that's even a thing. Yes, she engages with beauty but it's never judgemental and it's seen as being far from an ideal, instead something that is available to every woman.

### Miss Piggy is a Feminist Icon but What about the Muppets?

So Miss Piggy herself is a feminist icon, it seems to me, but what about the show and the movies in which she appears? Are they feminist? Inevitably when thinking and talking about Miss Piggy, feminism, and the Muppet Show one thing that comes up is that she's the only recognizably

female Muppet who is a regular member of the cast. (I say “recognizably” because for many of the Muppets we might claim not to be clear just what they are.) But Miss Piggy stands out as the only female Muppet. In her 1991 column for the New York Times feminist essayist Katha Pollit lamented the lack of female characters for her young daughter to watch and she dubbed the rule that says shows can only have one woman, the Smurfette principle. (Pollit 1991) It seems true that for any series not aimed solely at females, odds are high that only one female will be in the regular cast. Often the only woman in the cast of characters will be romantically attached to one of the main male characters and it’s true that for Miss Piggy her main connection to the Muppets is through her romantic partnership with her beau, the star’s main show, Kermit the frog.

Feminist pop culture critic Anita Sarkeesian writes “What do Inception, the Transformers, and the Muppets all have in common? They all suffer from a trope called the Smurfette Principle. As defined by TVTropes, “The Smurfette Principle is the tendency for works of fiction to have exactly one female amongst an ensemble of male characters, in spite of the fact that roughly half of the human race is female. Unless a show is purposefully aimed at a female viewing audience, the main characters will tend to be disproportionately male.”... Even Jim Hensen didn’t seem too keen on the women, along side Kermit, Gonzo, and Fozzie the Bear, Miss Piggy was the only female muppet.” (Sarkeesian)

Sarkeesian writes that in addition to there only being one woman, on shows that follow the Smurfette Principle the one woman will have a narrow and stereotypically female personality. Men can come in different shapes and flavours but women will always be The Chick. She writes that “thus, by The Law of Conservation of Detail, you only need one.” That aspect of the trope is less suited to Miss Piggy and the Muppets because Miss Piggy is such a strong character, larger than life, and her personality often dominates the show. In many ways, she’s not the Chick.

Feminist pop culture critics might also wonder whether the Muppet Show would pass the Bechdel test. Here I think the show and the movies are on much firmer ground. What's the Bechdel test? The Bechdel Test is a simple test which names the following three criteria for a movie to pass: (1) it has to have at least two women in it, who (2) who talk to each other, about (3) something besides a man. The test was popularized by Alison Bechdel's comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in a 1985 strip called *The Rule*. (<http://bechdeltest.com/>) On the web page for the Bechdel test there is controversy over whether the 2011 Muppets Movie passes the test.

Originally listed as only meeting one criteria (there are at least two women) viewers debated the content of Miss Piggy's conversations. On my reading of the discussion and watching of the film, it passes. Miss Piggy talks about fighting with Miss Poogy and she banter with her assistant at Vogue and Mary (the other female lead) chats with Sarah Silverman in her role as a waitress at the restaurant. Miss Poogy is a boar version of Miss Piggy and though she is listed as a female muppet on the Muppet Wiki, there is discussion on the Bechdel site about possible transphobia. Putting the movies aside, the show itself would pass the Bechdel test when there were female guests. Miss Piggy had significant interactions with the female human guests on the show.

Although the Muppet Show and the movies that followed are not great for the numbers and representation of women, I think Henson's Miss Piggy is a feminist Pig ahead of her time, a body confident role model for women and swine of all shapes and sizes.

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