

# Hey Kate, How Often Do You Beat Your Husband?

*Janice Fiamengo*



The trend to make female movie characters tough and abrasive has been proceeding for some time. We can all predict that the new partner in the police procedural, let's say a petite black woman whose entrance surprises (and thus reveals the bigotry of) the white man she'll be working with, will turn out to be the biggest badass on the force. She'll almost certainly save her partner's life—and unearth a crime-solving detail he'd overlooked—before the first episode is over. At the same time, viewers will be treated to her sneering refusal of the partner's banter, her steely gaze, and her fearless embrace of outrider status. She's a woman with wise-cracking disdain for men as a group who takes quick revenge for even the smallest hint of sexism, benevolent or otherwise, from her fellow officers. And she quickly earns not only their respect but also their unwilling awe.

Whether police officers, first responders, detectives, firefighters, FBI—or, for that matter, nurses, ER doctors, politicians, or lawyers—the message is clear: these women are at least as capable and fearsome as any man: tough-minded, smart as a whip, and street-wise. Even in this era of agitation about the trans peril to women's sports, the fictional females are as physically strong and combat-ready as any male, their fists and kicks aimed with staggering accuracy. Even tiny Lucy Tara on [NCIS Hawai'i](#) comes to the rescue of her far-larger male colleagues in impressive physical struggles with suspects.





But physical characteristics, the notable fearlessness and strength, are to some extent less striking than the women's personalities and demeanor. An entire character transformation has been taking place, as traditionally feminine characteristics have been decisively minimized and masculine bravura brought to the fore. These women are, seemingly without effort, brusque, foul-mouthed, and contemptuous, particularly of male authority—and we're to love them for it. They're often beautiful, but they never try to be. With hair pulled back and aggressive booted stride, they are independent, uninterested in male approval, and largely indifferent to men as romantic partners, unless they are shown pursuing their occasionally voracious sexual needs, at which times their approach is direct and unsentimental. After an evening of bronco-riding athleticism, they wake up in a tousled bed with a slight grimace and duck out of the lover's offer of breakfast. They're not interested in commitment or any continued intimacy. A call comes in on their cell phone, they pull on their clothes nonchalantly, and walk out of the man's life. They've already forgotten him as they prepare to conquer evil once again.

A popular new Netflix series, [The Diplomat](#), takes these now-standard elements to the next level, profiling an ambitious, sexy, oft-frowning, brilliant, and explosively hot-tempered woman, Kate Wyler, who engages in uncontrolled physical and verbal abuse of her husband without remorse or narrative comeuppance. Though one might expect that a portrait of reckless physical violence by one spouse against another would be evidence at least of a serious character flaw—if not criminality (as it certainly would be if the male spouse were delivering the blows)—it is not at all clear in this case that the character's actions deserve any condemnation. Her violence is simply the most extreme manifestation of her (rather admirable and plucky) unconventionality in breaking the rules of propriety in order to save the liberal world order.

*The Diplomat* is, in general, a thinly-veiled apologia for the progressive Deep State, assuring viewers that, whatever buffoons happen to be in power (in this case, two more or less useless white men in addition to the great evil at Russia's helm), we can rest assured that a white woman and her multi-ethnic colleagues (with the addition of a winsome non-binary staffer) are maneuvering behind the scenes to keep things sane and to exonerate a wrongly-maligned Iran. Progressivist certainties saturate the script: Brexit was “a self-inflicted wound,” according to the British Foreign Secretary; and later, in another context, the Proud Boys are mentioned as an American parallel to the Wagner Unit. A Biden-esque president is the jovial if somewhat too-folksy American leader whose uncertain grasp of political nuance is kept in check by more knowledgeable advisors. There is a brief reference to an earlier, more potentially destructive, leader (obviously Trump) whose whimsical and megalomaniacal directives were as a matter of course contravened. The British Prime Minister is an odious bully whose mindless belligerence—war seems his only hope for political relevance—must be skillfully countered.

The stakes for the diplomat hero, Kate, couldn't be higher, especially since an appointment as U.S. Vice-President is in the offing. Following a deadly explosion on a British aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf, she is appointed U.S. ambassador to Great Britain in order to deal with the potential fallout. With an expression always halfway between constipation and chagrin, she personifies an aggressive,

warts-and-all competence as the series follows her navigation of political tensions surrounding the attack.

Despite her track record in conflict zones, Wyler is, to say the least, not particularly diplomatic in her conduct. She curses frequently—hardly a sentence is uttered without an obligatory ‘fuck;’ snaps at a female staffer and then complains that women apologize too much; screams at her husband in a meeting room so loudly that everyone in the outer office cannot help but hear, develops an uncontrollable case of the giggles after an Iranian diplomat drops dead at a secret meeting, and lusts after the British Foreign Secretary. All of these are, it seems, to be regarded as humanizing rather than fatal flaws. Above all, anger and impatience, even hatred, of her husband—himself a career diplomat with a reputation damaged by his unpredictability—are a near-constant feature. She does not hesitate to convey her contempt for him to those around her, and eventually they commiserate. In one of the final scenes, she has managed to convince her new love interest that her waffling about her divorce was owing to her unusual decency and generosity.



The unprecedented scene in the third episode depicts her [sustained physical attack on the husband](#), Hal, whose transgression—not having told her about the behind-the-scenes plan to have her replace the sitting Vice-President—does not, by any stretch of the imagination, seem to justify her rage. Leading up to the attack are various moments in which we witness her unaccountable, chest-heaving fury building, always far in excess of what reason would seem to dictate. It appears that Kate is triggered by the thought that accepting the VP position would mean that she and her husband will not, after all, be able to carry through on a planned divorce, though why that should be—and why some sort of politically expedient compromise could not be worked out—is never made clear.

The attack itself, which takes place in a small copse of trees on the grounds of the American embassy, involves repeated punching with closed fists at her husband's face as she squats on his chest; she even attempts to beat him with a large fallen branch. It goes on and on while she shouts "This marriage is killing me!" She is interrupted by an aide, who tells her that the President of the United States needs to speak with her. Covered in leaf mold and panting from her exertions, she hurries back to the embassy, where, undaunted, she convinces the President not to provoke Iran by sending American ships to the Gulf.

The next morning, we see the husband sitting a bit glumly at the embassy breakfast table, where he acknowledges his black eye to the deputy chief of mission, who brushes it aside. Kate enters the room, snatches some morsels of toast (one of the signs of her single-minded dedication is that she never seems to eat a meal, mainly grabbing bits of food with her fingers and stuffing them absently into her mouth as she contemplates the day's tasks). She barely glances at her husband and evinces no consciousness or remorse. Various twists and turns over the following episodes complicate the political tensions, but the beating is never acknowledged. Hal, for his part, accepts it and is eager to keep the marriage going, making repeated pitches for their alliance and delighted to oblige when his wife wants sex.

When I first wrote on Twitter about my disgust at the beating scene, a number of people chided me for over-reaction. She is a complex, flawed character, said one, reminding me, Weren't you an English teacher? Another found it a good thing that the female capacity for violence and emotional incontinence were starkly on display.

To be clear, I don't object to complexity of character, and I am the last person to demand that women be presented as angels. (I also happen to believe that much minor domestic violence—where it does not cause bodily harm—should be decriminalized.) But that is not what is going on here. This is the affirmation of Kate's volatility as a marker of her liberation from female stereotypes. Just as we do not object when the male hero beats up bad guys, we are not to lament Kate's cursing or beating of her husband. If that's what she needs, so be it. The double standards that once characterized political discourse about women and men—that women are less able than men to control their emotions—have been brought to life again, but now in order to support a hagiographical portrait of a woman whose lack of self-control is evidence of her bold authenticity.

What is the purpose of the "physical altercation," as more than one [gushing reviewer](#) called it? It's quite possible that writers simply don't know how else to portray a strong woman except to have her embody stereotypically masculine qualities. The point is obviously not to highlight women's capacity for domestic violence. We won't be hearing anything about shelters for abused men or the danger such women represent to their families. On the contrary, this seems an unabashed celebration of all things female, including even those qualities that feminists have told us for decades [characterized male behavior near-exclusively](#) and were antithetical to female being. It is the normalization of female abuse in service of the liberation narrative.

I don't expect there will be much outcry, if any. Most people, men and women, don't care about domestic violence against men, which may be the least popular of all unpopular men's issues. The thought seems to be that because men allegedly abused women for centuries with impunity, a little fictional abuse now is nothing. The fact that we know that [women are fully capable of violence](#) and that the [celebration of violence as empowerment is a dangerous inducement to more violence](#) will get no traction.

But I would think that a few thoughtful people might be disturbed by the general trend to encourage female badassery. Most men have a deeply ingrained horror of hitting women back, but even the best among them might be provoked past endurance. Encouraging women to seek fulfillment through abusive behavior, especially in thinking themselves men's physical equals, is likely to endanger some women as well as men. Most feminists will take satisfaction in being able to report yet more "male violence," and their complicity in tolerating domestic abuse when it's a man being abused is yet more reason to reject their claims that empowered women will save the world.

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