

## Women at Warp Episode 59: Sexual Agency in Star Trek

\*\*INTRO MUSIC\*\*

Jarrah: Hi and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry Star Trek podcast. Join us as our crew of four women Star Trek fans boldly go on our bi-weekly mission to explore our favorite franchise. My name's Jarrah. Thanks for tuning in. Today with us we have we have our amazing crew members Grace...

Grace: Hi

Jarrah: And Sue.

Sue: Hi everybody.

Jarrah: And before we get into our main topic just a few items of housekeeping. As usual, we'd like to remind you about the Women at Warp Patreon, where we fund our creation of this podcast and promotion, in terms of going to conventions and getting promotional materials. And you can help us support that work by visiting [Patreon.com/womenatwarp](https://Patreon.com/womenatwarp) and in exchange you get access to cool exclusive bonus content and hangouts and things like that. So check it out.

Another way that you can help support our show is by leaving a review on iTunes. If you rate and review our show on iTunes it helps more people find us and just generally is a nice lovely thing to do, so thanks to everyone who's given us a review already and if you haven't, maybe take a second to hop over there and do that. Sue, do you want to give a housekeeping update on the Parsec Awards?

Sue: Yeah. The Parsec Awards were developed as awards for the science fiction podcasting community. So there are fiction and nonfiction categories and we have been fortunate enough the last couple of years to receive nominations. Nominations for this year's Parsecs, which are held at Dragon Con every year are now open and will be open through June 1st so wink, wink, nudge, nudge.

Jarrah: Say no more, say no more.

Grace: Just think of us, you know?

Jarrah: All right. Well today's main topic is women's sexual agency in Star Trek. This was a request from our Patron, Kay, who asked us a question that we answered in our mailbag episode, "Incoming Transmissions," which I think was episode 26, about the episode "Counterpoint," but she added: "I'd also love to know more general thoughts on the representation of women's sexuality and sexual agency in Trek. A mixed bag in my opinion but there's good stuff in there as well as the cringeworthy."

And before we dive in just a content note, especially for those of you who may be listening with kids. While this won't be an explicit discussion of sex in Star Trek, as you probably guessed, we will be talking about mature themes this episode. So just advance warning.

So Sue's going to give a few more definitions about what sexual agency is, because when we posted about this on Facebook we encountered maybe a bit of confusion. But before we start I just wanted to also mention that this episode is not going to be a thorough survey of all the possible cases we could discuss in Star Trek, because there are a lot of women who have varying degrees of sexual agency, but we kind of brainstormed some particular good and bad examples. We're also going to skip all of the Mudd episodes because we talked about them in great detail in our episode "His Name is Mudd," so go check that out if you're interested. And we

will also be only probably talking briefly about sexual assault, because we're going to be doing a full episode on that in the future as well.

So without further ado, Sue, do you want to give the listeners a little bit of background on the concept of sexual agency?

Sue: Sure. So we'll start with regular agency also called a 'sense of agency,' and this is something that I have found that I end up talking a lot about on panels at conventions, and because panelists know these terms we just go off and go in depth and every single time somebody in our audience asks, "What do you mean when you say 'agency'?" So agency or a sense of agency is awareness that you are controlling your own environment, or in other words making decisions and making choices, acting freely and controlling your own life. You're not subject to anyone else's whims. In literature or media this is called character agency. So it's the ability for that character to make their own choices and act freely. And another way that it's often put is that the character or the person is able to act in a way that accomplishes their goals.

So that's agency. Sexual agency, unsurprisingly, is when you apply that idea to somebody's sexual decisions or actions.

Grace: Sexual goals also count.

Sue: I mean, sure.

Jarrah: Their hopes dreams and plans for sex.

Sue: Exactly. I did find an [article from Psychology Today](#) that puts it in, you know, more direct terms. It's from June 2014. But they say that: "sexual agency can include: the ability to give consent to participating in or declining a sexual activity and having your desires honored; the right to choosing how you define your sexuality, such as gay, straight, bisexual or asexual; the right to choose your gender, such as male or female or anything along the gender spectrum; the ability to choose whether or not you want to engage sexually with a specific person or in a specific place or even the time; the ability to choose safer sex practices or birth control; and the ability to stop in the middle of any sexual activity." So basically the ability to change your mind at any point.

Jarrah: OK. So not pon farr.

Sue: Right.

Grace: Kinda the opposite of pon farr, really.

Jarrah: Yes, so it's worth noting before we get into the episode, as we've said many times in past, in Star Trek, everyone in space is straight. That's changing now but we're not really talking in this episode about sexual orientation or really gender identity. We're more talking about the ability to to assert when, how, how much you want to have sex, with whom, etc.

Sue: I think in the most basic terms we can think of sexual agency as consent and partners' respect of that consent.

Grace: Yeah definitely.

Jarrah: And enthusiastic consent: the ability to to say what you want as well, not just passively be approached and be like, "Oh, I guess, maybe."

Sue: Right, for sure.

Jarrah: All right, well we have a whole bunch of examples so let us dive right in.

Grace: Here we go, gang.

Jarrah: So, there's good examples and there's bad examples but when this topic was suggested, one of the first examples that came to my mind was kind of around this theme that we see in media culture where women with an overt sexuality are sometimes treated as pathological, like it's an illness, criminal, like it's dangerous. And when I say pathological I mean it's usually portrayed as a sign of a physical or mental illness.

And the example I thought of was Lauren in the DS9 episode "Statistical Probabilities." But this is the one where Bashir has all these genetically-enhanced people who are suffering from ostensible mental illnesses. And Lauren - the only thing we ever see her do that apparently defines her as mentally ill is that she hits on guys. Like she's just sitting there basically being like, "Oh hello, Dr. Bashir," and you're like, "Yeah, she's clearly crazy."

Grace: Wouldn't it be great though if that was a level of her genius that she knew just how much she could freak people out by being overtly sexual? And that was just her endgame there? I mean it doesn't make a lot of sense. But wouldn't it be great?

Jarrah: Yeah, exactly. Let's just all get couches and we'll all lounge on them seductively and freak the crap out of people.

Grace: That sounds like a plan. "Well hello, men. I'm very sexual to see you today."

Jarrah: But like obviously, you know, being super...I would say like behaving really seductively and like hitting on people when that's clearly not wanted is...that's not really cool, but it doesn't like it doesn't really justify locking someone up. And certainly we see this all the time with men in Trek approaching women with similar types of pickup lines, and you would never, ever suggest that that was a symptom of an illness. Like even, "What's a knockout like you doing in a computer-generated gin joint like this?" Like Lauren in DS9 doesn't really do anything worse than what Riker does on a typical day.

Grace: A high week for her is like, it's a Tuesday afternoon for him pretty much.

Sue: Well maybe this is jumping way ahead. But we did get...I think it's useful to address it early on...we did get one Facebook comment about how TV and raters tend to portray violence more frequently than they do sex on TV.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: And how that seems weird. Like, wouldn't you think that violence would be more off-limits than a sexual encounter? And that comment brought to mind for me the Netflix documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, which I highly recommend. It's only about an hour and a half long. Go watch it. But they point out that not only is do sexual situations get a more mature rating than violent ones in movies, but that women's sexuality gets a much higher maturity rating than male sexuality.

Grace: Absolutely the most shocking example they show is, if I'm remembering this correctly, a scene of someone masturbating in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, who is a woman. That almost earned them an NC-17 rating, whereas *American Pie* has a guy sticking his junk in a pie. And that was still somehow able to skirt PG-13.

Sue: Right. It's almost as if a woman enjoying a sexual encounter automatically gets an NC-17 rating. Like there's something extra-scandalous about women who enjoy sex. And I think that is very much related to this idea that a woman who enjoys sex has some sort of criminal or pathological side to her - that there's something wrong with it.

Jarrah: Yeah. And we talked about this about Marta in our Orion women episode. She is another great example of this because we don't, again, ever see really what she's done wrong except for having a sexuality and want to plagiarize poetry, but she's also in a mental asylum.

Another one that I have on my list for this topic is the TNG episode "Man of the People."

Grace: Oh Boy.

Jarrah: OK, so oh gosh, where do you begin? This is the one where this negotiator comes on board with this woman who seems to be his mom, but then it's actually his girlfriend that he's made super old through dumping negative emotions on her. And then he dumps all those negative emotions into Troi and she basically becomes like a vamp who wants to sleep with everyone and then also gets super old. And in her case it's like everyone's super worried about her. And then it's like, God forbid, not only is she a woman with a sexuality, she's an *older* woman with a sexuality! Everybody run and hide!

Grace: Well to be fair, doesn't that mean she's kind of turning into Lwaxana there, which everyone is established to be totally afraid of, so double dis there. With Lwaxana we definitely get the impression right off the bat that her being, you know, a sexual older woman is, "Oh, well this is uncomfortable," and that's like a running gag in TNG.

Jarrah: Yeah, I think it's played for humor more than for fear, which isn't necessarily better, but at least I think that when you get to the later Lwaxana episodes, I think that she's treated with more sensitivity and that you can kind of admire her in a way for her kind of brazen behavior, like when you're looking at the, you know the later episodes, the one where she is...what's the one with Alexander in the mud baths? You know, the one where she's marrying the dude and she shows up at the wedding naked?

Grace: Like you do, when you're Lwaxana.

Jarrah: Yeah, but those you know those later episodes, I think Lwaxana is not a bad example actually, and Majel Barrett said that she was approached by a lot of middle-aged and older women who really appreciated the fact that Lwaxana was on TV and got to be open about her sexuality. So that was cool.

Sue: The mud bath one I'm pretty sure is "The Cost of Living."

Jarrah: I always get it mixed up with "Half a Life."

Sue: Right. That's the other one where she wants to marry the guy. But yeah.

Grace: But he has to do the ritual suicide thing?

Sue: Yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah. Ok, so we we've talked about women who are seen as mentally ill or physically ill or some combination of the two for being sexual. "Blood Fever" is another example - this is kind of you to do with pon farr, so should we talk about pon farr generally?

Sue: Let's talk about pon farr.

Grace: There's a lot of talk about pon farr.

Sue: So it's it's a weird situation, right? Where like there's this biological urge that you cannot control. That in itself takes away your ability to make a choice any way. Any agency that you have in that situation.

Jarrah: Yeah, absolutely. And certainly with I think with both T'Pol and with B'Elanna it's like they're very scared. There's fear about what's happening to them. I mean we see that from Spock as well, like there's...he really doesn't want to have to go through pon farr but with B'Elanna especially it's striking because she isn't Vulcan. She goes through it because she is assaulted by Vorik and there is this scene where she's basically begging Paris to have sex with her because she's under the spell of pon farr and she will die otherwise. And Paris is like, "No, I don't want it to be this way. You have to be able to consent," which is like kind of cool but also like...

Grace: She's gonna die, man!

Jarrah: Well and then Tuvok basically orders Paris to have sex with her and then thankfully she can instead just punch Vorik a lot and it goes away.

Sue: Because sex and violence: same thing, as we've talked about before.

Jarrah: Yeah, it's weird.

Grace: Or maybe everyone just gets off on hurting Vorik.

Jarrah: It's cool that Paris can be like, "Just because you're saying you want it, it's very, very clear to me you can't actually consent right now."

Sue: Right, because she is being influenced by something outside of her control.

Jarrah: Exactly.

Sue: Similar to Tasha Yar in "The Naked Now."

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: Oh, you jewel.

Sue: Yes. See that's a bit of another stereotype where you've got the prude or the cold woman who just needs to loosen up.

Grace: I hate that one so much.

Sue: That feels very much like what they're doing with Tasha in this episode and suddenly she is ultra-feminine and not that there's anything wrong with being either way of course, but it's just, it's so out of character for her, which is kind of the point. But it's, you know, it's something we've seen a million times.

Grace: I really hate how much I've seen it kind of pop up in feminist media too - this idea that even in a more enlightened era it's like, "Oh she just needs to have sex and loosen up a little bit." I mean not only does that totally do a disservice to the asexual audience, but also just the idea that sex is an end all, be all or curative in some way. It's great, don't get me wrong, but the idea that it has that level of being so much of an end goal is...it's really offensive.

Jarrah: Well and it's it's kind of an impossible thing too, because you know on the one hand there is this thing that you're talking about, this whole like all she needs is a good lay, which is you know something that is clearly in service of heterosexual men's fantasies.

Grace: Absolutely.

Jarrah: But then if she actually does it, she gets shamed for being easy or loose or slutty.

Grace: Or having needs.

Jarrah: Yeah, exactly, That, you know, then well, you can't really respect her because she's gone and had sex.

Grace: Or because she needs to have sex.

Sue: And just to point out the idea of "all she needs is a good lay" or "well, she hasn't had sex good enough to make her want it" is really, really dangerous for the ace and aromantic and demi communities because it leads into the idea of corrective rape.

Jarrah and Grace: Yeah.

Sue: Right? And there are these like there are people out there who think that these people are quote 'broken' and need to be fixed. And like there is some honor to them if they're the ones who do it. So the whole concept is so, so dangerous.

Jarrah: Well, and lesbians as well.

Sue: Oh yeah.

Grace: Just in general the idea that you can be fixed with sex is a very dangerous concept and not one that should be toyed with nearly as much as a lot of writers seem to think it's just cool to do.

Jarrah: Totally. So should we break it up a little bit and talk about a good example and then we'll go back to some of the more questionable ones?

Sue: Yes, let's do it.

Jarrah: All right. Someone throw out a good example.

Sue: Although I think Lwaxana is a pretty good example.

Jarrah: Yeah, I think it starts off as like, "Oh, old woman that makes us uncomfortable because she wants to have sex," but it ends up better. But. Yes. I mean, I think Uhura is a pretty good example, actually. She, you know, we see her in basically one of her first episodes kind of flirting with Spock. She's clearly very friendly with

everyone on the ship and really other than in "Plato's Stepchildren" she doesn't really have that agency taken away. She's not regularly made to be a damsel in distress. And in Star Trek V she gets to do a fan dance and no one questions her morals or capability.

Grace: She gets to do a fan dance well into her 40s or so?

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: God willing we should all be that limber at that age. God willing.

Jarrah: I mean I don't think we're all you know ginormous fans of that as a plot point in Star Trek V, but just from a perspective of agency, it is pretty cool.

Grace: They establish she's always wanted a captive audience.

Jarrah: Yeah and I mean the exotic dancers we see in the rest of TOS are certainly not treated with respect.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: No.

Jarrah: So go, Uhura!

Grace: You wanna go fan dance? You go fan dance!

Sue: I think that Pulaski is a great example.

Jarrah: Oh yeah! Never forget!

Sue: Not only did she bang Riker's dad, she is not shy about her past relationships. She's not embarrassed that she's been married multiple times. She's just, "This is this is who I am. This is what I've been through. These are the people who meant something to me at that time. And then we grew apart and moved on." NBD.

Grace: Which is definitely good to see in just about any female character but especially with a character like Pulaski that gets so much grief for so many reasons it's infuriating. But again an older woman getting to say, "Yeah, I've had sex. It happened," where usually it's more common for us to see older women talk about their sex lives like, "Ew. you're at an age where you're supposed to be ashamed that you ever had sex." Nope. Nope. It is what it is.

Jarrah: Yeah. So another I kind of wanted to talk a bit about the Deltans, who aren't really sure what is criminal but their sort of unbridled sexuality and pheromones are presented as sort of inherently dangerous to the men working with them.

Grace: Oh Lord.

Jarrah: Any thoughts on Ilia and Deltans in general?

Sue: It's this seductress/temptress trope.

Jarrah: Yeah and it kind of goes hand-in-hand with this idea that, you know, men can't trust themselves or can't be expected to behave well around beautiful women.

Grace: That there are women who make it so that men just can't be held accountable because: "I couldn't help it, just look at her." She was just asking for it kind of thing.

Jarrah: Except for it's like literal in this sense. Like literally men can't be expected to, because science.

Sue: Right.

Jarrah: We also see that in the Enterprise episode "Bound," which I won't really go into because we talked a lot about it in our Orion women episode, but that's another example of of kind of like there are these the options for women: you can be a slave and have no sexual agency and be like a victim, or you can be an evil demon seductress. And men should fear you.

Grace: Your call! Gee, how do I choose?

Sue: Not only is this a gross thing for women but let's be real this is should offend men too.

Grace: Yeah, the idea that they don't have the capability to control themselves.

Sue: Right. And if like I'm sure we have all heard the analogy, like: "This is like leaving a steak in front of a pack of wolves."

Jarrah: Ewww.

Sue: If you subscribe to that idea or have ever used that as a defense, you should be offended by that. You're saying that men don't have more self-control than a pack of wolves - than literally non-domesticated animals. Come on.

Jarrah: Yeah. We all have higher brain functions here.

Sue: It's not a defense and it's not an explanation. It's offensive to literally everyone.

Jarrah: Yeah. So we have some examples of women who also sort of follow the trope of "Bound," that like women who enjoy sex are villains. Sue, did you...you or Grace wanted to talk about Klingon women?

Sue: I think when we see the Klingon women they are just immediately sexualized because of their costumes, because of their boob windows.

Grace: It's hard not to sexualize a boob window, really.

Sue: Klingons at least in, you know, TNG on, are like sort of villains, sort of not villains.

Grace: They're established as being just kind of generally dangerous in general, and in their sexuality. I think like the first time we really get anything about that is Worf talking about how a human couldn't handle Klingon women and that Klingon women will throw furniture and get violent as part of the sexual process.

Sue: Right, and just we have, we associate throughout all of Star Trek, as you know Klingon sexual relations as being violent. Or a competition or a battle. So I think that that goes with that same trope of, you know, sex is the



same thing as violence, but also that, you know, these are aggressive women. They're violent and therefore they're also very sexualized and very sexually aggressive.

Grace: That their sexuality is in itself an act of violence. Something like that?

Jarrah: I think that like the Duras sisters are clearly examples of that.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: I think that K'Ehleyr is actually a pretty good example, though of a woman who definitely is part of that culture, but I think that the way that she expresses her sexuality is a lot more, I don't know, I guess healthy because there's like...so it's not the fact of that there are violent practices built into Klingon sexual culture that's the issue. It's about consent and danger, like this idea that it's threatening because you don't believe that they would take your...take a man's wishes into consideration. And I think with K'Ehleyr she's negotiating a practice with Worf and it's like, she's very clear about what she wants, but it's never shown in a way that like you should be scared for Worf.

Grace: I guess. And we also with her get this, because a big part of her character is that she's half-Klingon and has this kind of fear being half-Klingon and this attitude of, "I don't want to be just taken over by these instincts and these drives that are part of being Klingon." It's kind of like she's ashamed of what - word salad - she's ashamed of the idea that she could turn into one of these sexual violent Klingon women sort of thing.

Jarrah: I think that's more true of B'Elanna than it is of K'Ehleyr. I think with K'Ehleyr like you know right from her first episode she's got the whole...basically like, "What's wrong? I don't bite. Oh wait, I actually do bite," like she's I think, she's a lot sassier than B'Elanna in terms of the half-Klingon, half-human thing, and certainly she isn't cool with like all aspects of Klingon culture but she does like, end up basically making out with Worf after fighting stuff on the holodeck with him.

Sue: K'Ehleyr...it feels like she rejects a lot of the more traditional machismo of Klingon culture, but not all of Klingon culture.

Grace: At the same time though I feel like B'Elanna is someone who is more down with her sexuality and like talking about ex-relationships and she's on the holodeck, she's going to summon up a bunch of bikini dudes to follow her around. I appreciate that about her a lot.

Jarrah: That is true. That's cool. I think we have a note here about Vash.

Sue: Yeah that was my addition.

Jarrah: So you have her under under "Villainous Women."

Sue: OK. She says she's certainly not the villain.

Grace: But she's definitely not nice. She is definitely not someone we're rooting for.

Jarrah: She is a lawbreaker. She's the scoundrel.

Jarrah: I was kind of rooting for her.

Sue: But like, and she uses, there's no doubt that she uses her sexuality and sex in general as a manipulation tactic. And that's sort of why I stuck her in that category and my brain is that she's using it as a weapon.

Jarrah: Yeah that's true. I think I actually originally probably would have put her in a good example category. I don't think she's the worst. But you're right that she's definitely manipulative about her sexuality and that's not cool.

Grace: She uses it as a weapon.

Jarrah: She has a lot of agency. She's just maybe not using it particularly well and it maybe is again a bit of a cautionary tale for men about the whole like, "Don't trust yourself around beautiful women," because certainly Picard ends up, you know, feeling like I think a bit of a dupe.

Sue: Right. And I think Seska certainly falls into that same category.

Grace: Definitely. And let's face it, the times we see her hitting...so much of her relationship with Chakotay is aggressive and it's not comfortable. It's really just very one-sided. He makes it very clear that he's not interested but she keeps going for it, and that's not ok.

Jarrah: Yeah she definitely comes across as, I think you know, we talked about her in our "Women Villains Part I" episode, of it's a bit of like the 'crazy ex' stereotype that, "This woman just can't let go." And it just infuses everything about her and it's gross. And, I don't know, kind of head-desk-y.

Grace: Yeah, oh my god, I'm just now realizing how much we could swap her out for Lara Flynn Boyle in *Wayne's World*. There's a mental image.

Jarrah: So should we talk about some women who basically just have no sexual agency in Star Trek?

Grace: We've got a couple to get through.

Jarrah: Then we'll go back to more good examples.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: All right. Let's start by talking about "The Perfect Mate."

Grace: Oh, we can only go up from here.

Jarrah: Yeah, and I kind of already talked about a bit about this, but I think it's worth just like renaming the Madonna/Whore complex.

Sue: Absolutely.

Jarrah: Which comes out of, originally, Freudian psychoanalysis but it's obviously been adopted with, like, cultural and feminist theory: this idea that, you know, either a woman can be a Madonna, like a virgin - pure, chaste, holy, respected - or a whore, where she is desired but not respected. And there's no middle ground. And certainly when we're looking at "The Perfect Mate" she is certainly kind of framed as this kind of Madonna character, I would say, even though you know she also has these pheromones that make men attracted to her.

Sue: Science, Jarrah.

Jarrah: She's helpless. Right?

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: So in this episode, she herself frames it that, you know, she *can* adapt to whatever the man she's with wants. And she chooses to bond with Picard because she likes who she is when she's with him, like that's how it's explained in the episode.

Jarrah: But...

Sue: Take it with a grain of salt. But I mean, she's still...her entire life is meant to be a gift to settle a war so that she can be what this man desires and bond with him and basically she doesn't have agency or sexual agency really.

Grace: One of the most uncomfortable things about this episode for me anyway was the amount of girls I have known, and again this is me, just this is my experience here. Take it for what you will, but the amount of women I have known who will go out of their way to sort of bend over backwards to be what they think the men in their life want, or adapt themselves to try and become the suitable partner for the man in their lives. And it can get so frightening to see someone kind of change themselves overnight and be like, "No, that's who I am now because this is who I'm with now." And what's very scary is to see women who do that repeatedly and who kind of have trouble being outside of a relationship because of that, because all they know how to do is to adapt to what they think someone wants them to be. And it's very frightening to see. And again it's very hard to address that with someone when you see it happening.

Jarrah: Yeah, because that training is so deep that you're not valuable unless you have a man, and it's your job to keep them, and you're probably the 'crazy' one if you can't.

Sue: And I mean for a comedic example of this you can look at Ann in Parks and Rec.

Grace: I was just thinking that. We even have an episode where she's talking about how you can track her boyfriends through her past wardrobe and everything.

Sue: Yeah. She is at a garage sale and she has a box for each past boyfriend.

Grace: Yeah. And it's funny but it's kind of apt. I know a lot of people who that can apply to.

Sue: It's super real.

Jarrah: Yeah. And I think with Kamala in "The Perfect Mate," you know even this whole thing of her saying she's choosing to bond with Picard. How do we know that she's not just saying that because Picard wants it to be her choice?

Grace: Yeah. That's another part of it that's really uncomfortable.

Jarrah: The whole thing is really quite uncomfortable. It's, you know, there's a lot of *Star Trek* episodes to deal with like sex slavery and none of them seem to really, really roundly condemn it. And it's kind of disturbing. But this this one has a bit of a, you know, an analog to "Bound" where you have them, again, transporting women who they at least believe to be slaves. And they're kind of like, "Oh well, nothing we can really do about it."

Grace: Guys, I don't think the Prime Directive is supposed to work like that. I mean if you're going to just bend it and break it any way you want it, this might be one of the time to do its. Ugh. That is my official statement on that. Ugh.

Jarrah: Yeah for sure. Sue, did you want to talk about "The Host?"

Sue: I do want to talk about "The Host."

Grace: Please do.

Sue: I feel like the issue of sexual agency is kind of all over the place in "The Host" because in the beginning we have Odan addressing Beverly about how he thought she was an 'ice queen' and 'under the ice there is fire,' which is super gross

Grace: Is there anyone on Earth who's ever taken that as a compliment? Seriously.

Sue: It's really funny though, because in so many of the - this is a bit of a digression - in so many of the novels they describe Crusher as the 'ice queen.' Right? And you can't like penetrate her. And she's so hard to read. And like I feel like that must have been in a character brief somewhere and then people went and ran with it. But like that's not how McFadden plays that character at all. So I've been reading it for like 30 years.

Grace: She's Warmy McHug-Mom!

Sue: And then it actually appears in an episode. It's ridiculous. Anyway...

Grace: Good grief.

Sue: So Beverly is in that trope of like the woman who just needs to loosen up at the beginning of the episode. But then we actually have an issue with Riker when when the symbiont is implanted in him so that it can continue to live until the next host arrives. And it is heavily implied by the episode that there are sexual relations taking place between Crusher and Odan in Riker's body. So what agency does Riker have in that situation? You know?

Grace: You're kinda getting into a *Dollhouse* situation there, aren't ya?

Jarrah: Like seriously, Bev, you couldn't have waited two days?

Sue: There's fire, Jarrah!

Grace: Kind of the opposite of an 'ice queen' there, isn't it?

Sue: But we know later in Deep Space Nine that the bonding of the host and the symbiont is more of like a joint thing. Right? Where they they sort of have personalities that mesh together. But this is our first time with the Trill in TNG and it's heavily implied that the parasite is actually controlling the host. Right?

Grace: That's uncomfortable.

Sue: Right. So does Riker have any agency in this decision? Does he even have the ability to consent? Because, I think if we're having a discussion about sexual agency it's important to bring it up that you know men have it too.

Grace: Definitely.

Jarrah: I think that what we see in Star Trek, and we'll definitely talk more about this in our sexual assault episode, is that the issue for men is like they're not...it's inconceivable that they would say no, and this is another thing that comes out of our society that, you know, men are kind of horn dogs who just want sex all the time, and it's up to women to police that boundary.

Grace: Which is horrible for one thing because you're making one gender morally accountable for another one. That's ridiculous. And for another, it's again saying that men aren't in control of themselves and that they don't have the mental capacity to know what they want versus what their body wants.

Sue: Right.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Which is probably, unfortunately, probably comes up a lot in men being sexually assaulted.

Jarrah: Absolutely. So I think that it's not supposed to be uncomfortable because, like, well of course Riker would want it anyway.

Sue: I mean he does hit on her in "Encounter at Farpoint" but that was four years ago.

Grace: Riker's wanted to sleep with Beverly this whole time? Really?

Sue: He was hitting on her in "Encounter at Farpoint," it's just four years later.

Grace: Well who wouldn't?

Jarrah: And then he saw Wesley and was like, "Oh wait, no."

Grace: "I'm out. I'm out." Just moonwalked backwards out that door.

Sue: "That's part of the deal?" But yes there are lots of weird things happening in "The Host." Not to mention the end, which I think we've talked about before so we won't do it again.

Grace: That's why it's still one of my 'best left forgotten' episodes.

Jarrah: I can't remember the episode we talked about it, but we have definitely talked about it before and we will again when we talk about Trills. So, also in the department of complete lack of sexual agency we have...well there was a request to talk about the Enterprise episode "Cogenitor" and we're certainly going to have to focus more in detail on this episode at a later date because there is so much to unpack in this episode.

Grace: Yeah, they just kind of threw us a whale of an issue there with that episode.

Jarrah: Yeah, and I feel like it's actually more about like reproductive agency than sexual agency, which is not always the same thing. And it's also an issue...there's a discussion to be had about gender identity and sexual orientation, but I guess there's also no sexual agency. Sue, you most recently watched this episode. What are your thoughts?

Sue: Yeah I mean there are also issues of discrimination and denial of services, etcetera, etcetera.

Jarrah: General Archer being a jerkface issues?

Sue: Right, right. He's only concerned about his little trip into the sun. Not only does the cogenitor not have sexual agency, the cogenitor doesn't have any agency at all. And then Trip tries to like 8 the cogenitor agency in a way...

Grace: In a very ham-fisted way.

Jarrah: In a, like, "Let's go civilize the natives" kind of way.

Sue: Yeah exactly. I mean my anthropology classes were over a decade ago but this makes me remember those lectures of like interference, right?

Jarrah: Yeah, it totally backfires. I guess the reason that I don't think this really is about sexual agency is that we just, I mean...OK so clearly the cogenitor has no agency at all, including sexual agency, but there's no indication of what they would do if they had sexual agency.

Grace: Yeah, we don't even see evidence of a sexuality there.

Jarrah: Yeah. I almost feel like it's kind of similar to the early Seven of Nine stories where they're coming from such a, you know, alien...such a different background and extreme oppression that they're nowhere near a place where they could express a healthy sexuality.

Sue: When I was watching it earlier - it might be because of the new Hulu series, but it rang very strongly in my head with tones of *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Grace: Absolutely.

Jarrah: Interesting. I mean certainly it's just like, "Oh well, we can't have babies. So we sort of, you know, oppressed this other group of people to have them for us."

Sue: Right. This individual is necessary if we want to have a child.

Grace: Yeah, which they will have no right to.

Sue: And I think the the next thing on our list is a little bit borderline between sexual assault and lack of agency and those That's from the J.J films and Pine Kirk's peeping tom instances. So when he is looking at his roommate whose name escapes me at the moment.

Jarrah and Grace: Gaila

Sue: Thank you. Or at Carol Marcus when she says, "Don't turn around," and he turns around anyway.

Grace: And in both situations it's played off as being kind of puckish rather than, "Oh my gosh."

Sue: Right. It's like that in the general world the people who know *Star Trek* in passing and have gotten ideas of what the characters are from, just, cultural absorption think of Kirk as a womanizer.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: Whereas, you know, if you actually watch TOS you know that he's really not. So I think it's a play to that crowd of like, "This is what I know Kirk to be."

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah, for sure. And I think that, you know, in the part where he's hiding under the bed watching Uhura, I feel like maybe this is obvious, but you can't have agency if you don't know something is happening. So if you are getting undressed and you don't know someone is watching you, you have no agency in that situation.

Sue: And then of course we have something else that was mentioned on our Facebook page, and that is women who were taken as prisoners of war, specifically the Bjoern women taken by Cardassians. But this also applies to the version of Tasha Yar who goes back in time on the Enterprise-C in "Yesterday's Enterprise" to the Romulans. So, and of course if you are captured and you're a prisoner of war and you're turned into a sex slave, you do not have agency.

Jarrah: Yeah. I mean certainly, so the like the Tasha Yar stuff all is just described. We don't ever actually see it, thank goodness. The Bajoran comfort women thing is really interesting and we're definitely going to do an episode on the "Wrongs Darker Than Death or Night" episode at some point because it does really sort of question to what extent did these women have agency in the worst possible situation. So you have Kira Meru and several other Bajoran women being basically picked out of the camps to 'service' Cardassian soldiers on Terok Nor. And Kira is super uncomfortable with what she feels is her mom collaborating by having any kind of enjoyment in sleeping with Dukat and not just automatically trying to murder him.

Grace: Which is unfortunate because there's a very real analogy of that of women who were pretty much strong-armed or forced to sleep with Nazi soldiers and were then pretty much ostracized by their communities after the fall of the Third Reich. There's some terrifying stuff to find from that.

Jarrah: Yeah. And the of course Korean and other Southeast Asian women who were made 'comfort women' for Japanese soldiers. And you know and Kira Meru...her argument is I'm doing what I can to help my family and because I do this for Dukat, Dukat actually basically insured her family's survival.

Sue: And it's a better life than being in the mines.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: Supposedly.

Jarrah: Yeah, absolutely. But I mean that's not really agency.

Grace: That kind of situation is definitely coerced...coercive. Yeah.

Sue: A choice between two terrible things is not much of a choice.

Grace: No.

Jarrah: No. OK. Let's go back to people who have choices, yay.

Grace: Let's pull ourselves out of this pit a little bit.

Jarrah: Yeah I mean because you know, I would say like the Kira Meru thing, it isn't bad that Star Trek showed that. I mean we're going to, we'll talk about the problematic elements of that in more detail at some point, but you know it's not necessarily that bad that Star Trek shows us bad situations. It's when you know, some of these other things, you know examples that we talked about like in "The Perfect Mate," where it reinforces these sort of patterns in our society like women changing themselves for a man. But good example: one of the ones that I really like from Enterprise is Feezal Phlox, who's one of Phlox's wives who comes on board and is just like super hitting on Trip..

I will say again, not to excuse that hitting on people who don't want it...it's not cool. But she is clearly a character who just partly it's because of her cultural background, she doesn't understand that that would be weird. And also the reason Trip thinks it's weird is he thinks she *belongs* to Phlox, basically. Like he would be probably totally down with making out with her, it's kind of implied, except he's like I'm not going to mack on another man's wife.

Sue: Right.

Jarrah: Even though Phlox is like, "Oh, good for her!"

Sue: The Denobulan relationship structure...I feel like they could have done so much more with, and it's so interesting, and like they could have actually explored poly relationships on Star Trek, but it's really just played off for comedy. But at the same time, you have this woman who, like, there are no qualms, there are no excuses, there's no embarrassment about what she wants and what she's interested in.

Grace: She is totally down with everything that she wants and that's awesome but the fact that that sort of treated as, "Oh, ha ha ha," it takes away any serious discussion that could be had there.

Jarrah: Yes. Absolutely.

Grace: "Oh, ha ha ha," is my way of saying for comedy right now.

Jarrah: Other good examples that people want to talk about?

Sue: You know I think that for the most part when one of our main women characters chooses to have a relationship, in general, there's a lot of agency there. They might turn out to be bad choices or terrible people. But we rarely see a main character enter into a relationship and feeling like they're coerced.

Jarrah: Except for maybe if it's a relationship with a Scottish ghost candle.

Sue: Right.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: That's why I said I was generalizing.

Jarrah: And actually I think I think you're right. And just to briefly throw in another not great example would be almost every relationship Troi's in, because she almost always enters into them seemingly willingly and they turn out to be super creeps.

Sue: And they just turn out to be terrible. She just has bad judgment.



Grace: Born under a bad sign.

Jarrah: But I feel like that it does take away from her agency, even though she's choosing to be in a relationship with them, because it sends the message to the audience that she shouldn't have, that she should have protected herself better.

Grace: Or that she should have automatically known better.

Sue: Or that she always makes the wrong choice so someone should choose for her.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue. Right. But a really great example I think is Kira.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Yeah. I really like that we get to see her have multiple romantic relationship and it's treated as something that's totally natural, that sometimes shit doesn't work, out or something happens, or he dies or what have you.

Jarrah: Or they're just really boring.

Grace: And you move on and that is just a part of life and that there is nothing weird or outlandish about a woman having multiple relationships at different points.

Sue: She's also in a relationship with a religious and cultural leader in her society.

Jarrah: Followed by a political leader.

Sue: But in both of those situations you are you'd be under a lot of scrutiny. And she just, she doesn't care. She's like, "I'm doing what I'm going to do. This is my relationship it's none of your business."

Grace: She is exactly who she is and she is unafraid of that. And that's so cool.

Jarrah: Kira's the best. Although I will suggest that listeners might want to take a listen to our Mirror Universe episode for a discussion about Intendant Kira, where we talk a lot about how she also has a crap ton of sexual agency, however, not really used or portrayed in the best way possible.

Grace: Also some definite opinions on this sexual agency of Mirror Dax.

Jarrah: Yeah. Take a listen to that episode. It was fairly recent. But Prime Dax is also I think someone with a lot of sexual agency. She dates a lot. And it's, you know, sort of implied that she's probably having a fair amount of sex. She also is very assertive with Worf when they're together around their sexuality just generally. I think Jadzia is...and I think it's a cool message because like she's old and wise and she knows that you know you can have fun and...

Grace: She's experienced in every sense.

Jarrah: Yeah. It's not like you're old and wise and therefore don't have sex.

Sue: Right. And thankfully she's not really ever portrayed as promiscuous.

Grace: I think we get the idea that people view her as promiscuous, but not that her behavior is bad at all.

Jarrah: Like I've seen message boards and stuff where people accuse both Kira and Dax of being like a worse word than promiscuous. But I don't think that that's really borne out, and I don't think the other characters are ever shown to see them that way; they're just people who have sex lives, like a lot of people do.

Grace: Which are things that we're taught to think are bad with women characters pretty much.

Jarrah: Yeah. Like if you count the number of sexual partners Kira had it's still like, I think less than five, I may be wrong - in seven years.

Grace: Which is very funny if you rank that to - I think someone went out of their way to count the number of girlfriends George Costanza had on *Seinfeld*.

Sue: Well that goes two way back to the beginning where we were talking about the difference between how men's relationships are portrayed and how women's relationships are portrayed, right? To be a 'promiscuous' man is like, "I got another notch on my belt." You know, it's like a status thing. A promiscuous woman is looked down upon.

Grace: To be mentally ill, essentially.

Sue: Right. Well I think we should talk a little bit about Janeway.

Grace: Yeah, let's!

Sue: And I know that Kate Mulgrew has said over the years that she didn't want for the first several years for Janeway to have any kind of relationship.

Grace: I think on the one hand that probably what would have been what people would have immediately expected from a female captain: a certain level of soap opera-y-ness that people automatically assume will come with having a woman as your primary character. So in that sense I can definitely say, yeah, ok.

Sue: Right and when she did start having onscreen relationships it sort of was just in the holodeck - something that wouldn't interfere with the crew. So you know if she's creating programs she's making all those choices, but then there is the episode that I think a lot of people point to...

Jarrah: "Counterpoint."

Sue: Yes. So basically it was the situation that brought up this question in Kay's original e-mail, right? Of she's flirting with the other captain in "Counterpoint" and is she doing that as manipulation? Is she really interested in this guy? Do they have this kind of rapport and it becomes, you know, a more complex situation.

Jarrah: Yeah. We talked a bit in our Janeway episode, "Coffee. Black." about just the feedback that the show and Kate Mulgrew and the creators were getting about Janeway. And you know they knew a lot of what they were going to get in advance but there were so many double standards that people were applying to Janeway in terms of criticisms about her hair and her emotions or lack thereof.

Grace: And just everyone had something bad to say about her.

Jarrah: Yeah absolutely. It was like she's too warm or she's too cold or she's too maternal or she's too bitchy or whatever. Like there were so many...

Sue: Contradictory

Jarrah: ...about her gender and so you can see how there was concern that her having romantic relationships would undermine people's confidence in her, which is not cool but goes back to that perception about women we were talking about before. It's good that in season seven she gets a little bit of a relationship in "Workforce," but then she doesn't know who she is. And then when she knows and figures out who she is she's like, "Oh this isn't going to work. Maybe don't come with me. Actually maybe that's a bad idea." So the solution is we just give all the strong women amnesia.

Grace: I guess so.

Sue: And then of course in Voyager there's also more Seven of Nine.

Jarrah: Yeah, Seven of Nine is a super mixed bag. I think she's really interesting. I think it's fascinating how at the beginning of her character, she really sees sex as like a mechanical act that's really detached from feelings or romance like, "Ensign, remove your clothes." And it's really interesting because it challenges how much sex is packed in with those things in our culture.

Grace: Yeah.

Sue: Which. I mean can be, if you want, an allegory for the aromantic community.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Wouldn't it have been interesting if we'd had asexual Seven of Nine?

Jarrah: Yeah. You know, I don't necessarily mind that she explored sexuality. But I feel like she didn't need to end up in a heterosexual relationship.

Grace: Nah, just that whole relationship felt unnecessary and felt very tacked on.

Sue: The Doctor is literally teaching her how to be a sexual creature.

Jarrah: Yeah, that's weird.

Sue: And teaching her how to have a heterosexual relationship.

Jarrah: Yeah. Complete with stereotypical dating. That is super weird. And given that he is also attracted to her is problematic at best.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: It just calls into question how she would know what she really wanted. I mean, we all deal with that. How do we separate out the messages that we get from society from parents and school and media from what we really want? But how would you if the only messages you had were from the Doctor...

Sue: And she's being taught one-on-one by a medical professional certain things, like how much of that is not brainwashing but close to brainwashing?

Grace: Definitely a grooming aspect to it that is really uncomfortable.

Sue: Yeah, for sure. How much agency does she really have?

Grace: At least in that relationship, not a lot!

Jarrah: I feel like it always made me uncomfortable that she didn't get more...I think would've been cool to for her to end up back on Earth and then she could figure some stuff out in her own space with her relatives that she had never met and explore all this other stuff instead of just like being forced into this script because they needed neat endings for her and Chakotay. There's a lot of really fascinating scholarly literature about Seven of Nine and sexuality, so if anyone's got access to academic databases and feels bored one weekend you should check it out.

Cool. OK. Well any final thoughts?

Grace: If I can quote Shirley Manson for a second, "Sex is not the enemy."

Jarrah: What is the enemy?

Grace: Not sex!

Jarrah: The Suliban are the enemy, not sex. OK, Sue, final thoughts?

Sue: I think that as I said before that, in general, for our main women characters, is that Star Trek does a pretty good job with agency. It's when I feel like they try to tell a *story* that involves sex where things kind of go off the rails. But yeah, and I just I wish that not everybody was straight in space.

Grace: Yes, space sounds really boring.

Sue: Yeah "straights in space!" doesn't work as well.

Grace: Yeah, I would absolutely pay to see that. Yeah, no.

Jarrah: Well we'll reconnect once we've seen some Discovery. Cool, well thank you for joining us, everyone.

Sue, where can people find you elsewhere on the interwebs?

Sue: You can find me on Twitter [@spaltor](#).

Jarrah: And Grace, where can we find you?

Grace: Also on Twitter [@bonecrusherjenk](#).

Jarrah: Cool, and you can find me at <http://trekkiefeminist.tumblr.com> and you can also contact our show by email at [crew@womenatwarp.com](mailto:crew@womenatwarp.com), on our Web site <http://womenatwarp.com>, on our [Facebook](#) or on Twitter [@womenatwarp](#). Well, thanks so much everyone for listening and we'll talk to you next time