

Women's Roles in Professional Wrestling, Examined through the Lita-Trish Rivalry

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There is an ongoing battle between the women of professional wrestling, and not just about title belts. In fact, this conflict goes back to the earliest days of women in the ring, back when they were little more than a sideshow attraction to fill up the card. This is the battle between whores and beasts, of warriors and wimps, of true athletes and true women, and what defines all these roles in the scope of the constructed world of professional wrestling. From those early days of athletic women's wrestling but no character other than that of a freak show, to the modern era where Barbie dolls and pinups will face true ring athletes that have to fight to be called female, the roles of women in wrestling have evolved and shifted, but at the same time still reflect the ongoing gender biases of our society and the male dominated wrestling world.

This evolution of women's roles is seen most clearly through one of the most important rivalries in the history of women's wrestling, that of Lita and Trish. These women started out in completely different roles, one a strong, athletic yet sexy woman, the other as pure eye candy, a wrestler's accomplice and tramp with no ring skills to speak of. By the end of their careers, they had run the gamut of roles and feuds, confronting each other and the stereotypes and obstacles that athletic women face, both in wrestling and in real life, and ended up almost exactly where the other had started in the business. Through these two characters and their conflicts I will examine the on-screen roles of women in professional wrestling and their struggle to evolve beyond antiquated gender roles that have been upheld for so long in the business that has been called 'a soap opera for men'.

The mainstream wrestling product that one will see today when flipping through the channels is hardly recognizable as the same business that Mildred Burke and Mae Young locked up in over 60 years ago. Back in those days, wrestling was not as explicitly produced as it is now; rather, it was still promoted as a real athletic contest, instead of the predetermined outcomes and organized matches we see today. Yes, in case you weren't sure yet, professional wrestling is not 'real' in the sense that amateur wrestling at the college or Olympic level is real, as the matches have set outcomes, the feuds and rivalries are scripted, and the action is more cooperative than competitive. But from bell to bell, when one steps in the ring, it takes immense skill, talent and athleticism to powerbomb your opponent without crippling them, to moonsault off the top rope without killing yourself, and to repeatedly take extreme bumps (taking a fall by dispersing the impact over as much of the body as possible)¹ and still get up after years of such abuse. So no, it's not 'real', but the action in the ring is certainly real enough. It certainly hurts enough.

Professional wrestling has existed in this faux-realism state since before the turn of the century, and women's wrestling has been interspersed amongst the male matches along the way. In the post-Civil War era, pro wrestling was part of the carnival circuit, with the women grapplers as more of a sideshow than part of the actual wrestling card (schedule of matches), and would often share the stage with other classic acts such as the bearded lady and sword swallows². As wrestling emerged from the carnivals into promotions in their own right into the new century, the ladies were still far from integral parts of the show, being brought in as 'filler' matches and sideshow gimmicks, held in

¹ Foley, Mick. *Have a Nice Day! A Tale of Blood and Sweatsocks*. New York: Avon/ReganBooks, 2000. 86.

² Lipstick and Dynamite.

the same respects as the 'midget' wrestling.³ These women who got in the ring were serious grapplers, who would put on rough, hard-hitting matches to rival the men, but never had any character backgrounds or storyline buildup like their male counterparts, because they weren't 'real wrestlers', they were 'lady wrestlers', and by default at a lower level than the men. It was in these early matches that the ongoing conflict between being aggressive and powerful in the ring and still remaining 'ladylike' and feminine was exhibited, as the women were easily as strong and even stronger than most men who came to the shows, and some even wrestled in inter-gender bouts on the card, but still took to the ring with perfectly curled hair, fresh makeup and painted nails along with the skimpy bathing suit-type ring attire.⁴ This played-up femininity emphasized the fact that these were still women, who happened to be acting in what has generally been accepted as a very masculine manner, by being overtly physical, aggressive and confident in their athletic abilities. This struggle between balancing classically 'feminine' traits with 'masculine' ⁵ones is still present with female wrestlers in the business today, albeit with even more magnitude, as the roles of women in wrestling have grown significantly since the early days.

Up through the 70's, women's wrestling remained in this sideshow capacity, sometimes interspersing with male matches on the card, but mostly as filler matches and no-name characters. As the 80's progressed and Vince McMahon began to take his WWF

³Lipstick and Dynamite.

⁴Ibid,

⁵ "I use the quoted 'masculine' and 'feminine' to indicate that these are the qualities that have been normally attributed to the conservative gender roles by mainstream society. It is clear that by women wrestling at all, they are confronting and contradicting what it has been classically defined to be 'feminine', which is generally weak, subordinate, quiet, pretty and a healer, not a fighter. The generally 'masculine' traits (dominance, independence and physical strength) that are exhibited by female wrestlers are only considered 'feminine' in certain contexts, namely when the woman displaying these traits also explicitly exhibits 'feminine' traits and is dressed (or not-dressed, as the case may be) so that her womanhood can hardly be debated.

territory national, a handful of significant female characters began to be included in the plotlines along with the men, mostly associated with a popular male wrestler or tag team, and rarely (if ever) taking part in any real wrestling. Characters such as Miss Elizabeth and the Sensational Sherrie might help their associates Macho Man Randy Savage and The Million Dollar Man Ted DiBiase (respectively) during matches, stay at ringside to cheer them on, and become figure points in plotlines, where a foe may insult or manhandle a female character, and her associated wrestler would challenge the offender to a match to defend his woman's honor.

These female characters were more highly developed and actually involved in important storylines, traits that had never before been associated with females associated with wrestling, but they were not actual wrestlers in their own rights. This character role is known as a 'valet' or manager, an associate of an actual wrestling competitor. This role is often an introductory role for wrestlers and other talents to learn the ropes⁶ and build their characters, which may later evolve into an actual in-ring wrestling role. While the introduction and advancement of the female valet was a step forward in terms of character development and involvement in relevant storylines, it was a step backward in terms of the level of athleticism and aggression exhibited by females, as these valets were generally non-confrontational, submissive to their respective males, and more often than not, played the 'damsel in distress' in the storyline. They generally filled the stereotypical female gender role, standing as explicitly female alongside the male wrestlers, who would therefore be unquestionably male by comparison.⁷

⁶ I say 'ropes' as in performing on television or in front of the crowd, but not actually getting in the ring and learning the ring ropes, as it were. There is only so much that one can learn in an empty gym.

⁷ As Gregory Spicer discussed during his visit and presentation, the homosexual overtones present in professional wrestling are unavoidable, and while homosocial ties between male characters are frequent,

As wrestling moved into the 90's, women's roles began to flesh out even more, with several actual wrestlers getting in the ring and making names for themselves, and not just as side acts⁸, but as parts of the storyline, introducing names like Sable, Tori, Ivory, Jacqueline and later Chyna. Of the later 3 especially, these were strong, tough, athletic women who brought intensity and solid mat skills that had been unseen in the WWF up to that point. The rise of the Attitude Era accompanied this gradual influx of female talent, and along with 'attitude' came the hyper-sexualizing of just about everything, including the language, the storylines, and of course, the ladies. So along with the actual tough female wrestlers who played heels (bad guys) and faces (or babyfaces, good guys) and wrestled proper matches, there were much more valets and pretty blonde women who did little more but flash skin at ringside, titillate audiences in Bra and Panties matches⁹ and occasionally engage in catfight bouts that required little wrestling skill. So basically at the end of the nineties there were two main roles for women in the World Wrestling Federation: a strong female wrestler who didn't rise above mid-card, or a flashy, sexy valet who didn't so much wrestle but would get lots of exposure for, er, exposing herself. Into this environment entered two new women, whose rivalries would both embody and revolutionize the roles of women in wrestling for years.

In February 2000, Lita debuted on WWF's Sunday Night Heat, accompanying luchador¹⁰ Essa Rios to the ring. At first glance, Lita appeared to be nothing more special

the threat of crossing the line between social and sexual interactions is high. By having overtly sexualized females in the mix for the men to associate with, the threat of homosexual associations is dissipated.

⁸ Many 'old school' bookers still consider women's matches to be filler on the card, especially on pay-per-views, and will often position them as 'breather' matches in between more high profile bouts between the bigger (male) names on the card.

⁹ The sophisticated concept of a Bra and Panties match stipulates that the first person to be stripped to her bra and panties is the loser.

¹⁰ Refers to one who wrestles in the Lucha Libre style, of Mexican origin, characterized by high-flying, acrobatic maneuvers and quick series of holds.

than another valet, except with red hair and big tattoo on one shoulder. She was not especially large or muscular, but she was no pushover either. Following the Light Heavyweight Championship win of Rios, Lita climbed the top rope and mimicked his finishing move, the moonsault, onto his still prone opponent Gillberg. Unlike the other women in mainstream wrestling, Lita was one of the first to pull off high-flying maneuvers like the moonsault, which is basically a back flip from the top rope, landing on the opponent lying on the mat, and not just on other women, but men too¹¹. Other than Chyna, whose physique rivaled that of many of the male wrestlers, Lita was one of the first women to attempt offensive moves on the men at all:

“The idea of a girl doing something physical to a guy other than a nut shot was a new concept. With the exception of Chyna, most girl-on-guy physicality was the traditional damsel-in-distress-trying-to-escape variety. It was still very rare for females to do offensive moves to guys”¹²

It was around this time that the WWF was bringing in more the lucha libre high-flying style that has influenced much of the styles seen today in wrestling, but at this time it was limited to the light heavyweight (or cruiserweight) division, featuring several Mexican wrestlers, where the luchador style ruled. Hence, Lita and Essa had a fiery, Latino quality to their characters, from their flaming red hair to flaming red costumes to flaming red, well, moves. While Lita was technically in the role of a valet, she would consistently interfere on Rios’ behalf during matches and then mimic his moves, such as the hurricanrana and other daring leaps from either the top turnbuckle or from the ring apron to the outside. In this sense, she was filling a more active role in association with

¹¹ Dumas, Amy and Michael Krugman. *Lita: A Less Traveled R.O.A.D.* New York: Pocket Books, 2003. 142-152.

¹² Dumas, 152.

Essa Rios, more of a partner than the regular sexy valet or manager. It was this individualism and extreme wrestling style that helped define Lita later on.

A month later in March 2000, a pretty blonde named Trish Stratus made her debut, also on Sunday Night Heat. Initially she would scout various wrestlers, eventually joining the tag team of Test and Albert¹³ (T&A) as their manager. Unlike Lita, who demonstrated her ring skills and stretched the boundaries of what a female valet had been in the past, Trish was firmly rooted as the classic blonde, sexy valet who used her feminine wiles to aid her male associates. Trish had no ring skills or wrestling training to speak of, and basically entered the WWF as pure eye candy, a fit accomplice who lived up to the name of her associated tag team. Instead of interfering physically in matches to help her male clients like Lita, Trish often distracted their opponents by showing off her physical assets, allowing T&A to mount an offense. When she did eventually become somewhat involved physically in matches, she limited her offensive moves to bitch slaps, chick kicks and other basic moves. More often than not she literally ran away from confrontation, playing the role of the cowardly heel, after having taunted the attacker for ages from her safe vantage point beside her monstrous ‘clients’¹⁴. Trish was the embodiment of nearly every negative stereotypical female quality: manipulative, weak, cowardly, asking for trouble, using her sexuality to get what she wanted. Of course, these were mostly traits associated with the heel (bad guy), but still.

¹³ Test was a rather generic blond, big and tall wrestler, while Albert was decidedly not generic-looking, with a face full of piercings and bald head, as well as being big and tall as well. Their characters however were not much more complex than big and scary and accompanied by the hot chick.

¹⁴ “Hardy Boys, Lita, T&A, Trish – Inter-gender Match”. *Lita: It Just Feels Right*. DVD. WWE Home Video, 2001.

These two women began growing in the business and making a name for themselves on WWF television matches. Eventually Lita and Essa Rios split, and Lita joined up the high-risk, high-flying tag team of the Hardy Boys, a punk rock inspired duo that treated Lita not so much as a sexy female valet but more as a sister, a “girl best friend of the Hardyz”¹⁵ as put by Good Ol’ JR, Jim Ross. Together the group was dubbed ‘Team Extreme’ for their shared pension for high risk moves, acrobatic aerial maneuvers and alternative style. Being an already quite popular tag team, the joining of the brothers and Lita helped all members reach unprecedented heights of popularity, due in no small part to their feuds with T&A and Trish, which began in June 2000.

As the brothers officially battled Test and Albert in the ring, Trish and Lita would scuffle on the outside, usually after some devious interference on the part of Trish, to which Lita then retaliated. Eventually, as their ring-apron feud grew (including Trish putting Lita through a table and several belt whippings) the trios began facing off in the first 6 person inter-gender tag team matches, where women and men were allowed to wrestle each other, rather than forced to tag in a partner of the other gender as in other matches. One notable match of this nature was at the Fully Loaded pay-per-view in 2000.

After some solid work from the two teams, including a spectacular triple suplex by the Hardyz and Lita, when Trish and Lita finally tagged in together, the crowd went wild. For two women that had been in the WWF for only a few months, the reaction they were getting from the crowd because of their feud was amazing. The ring announcers played up the fact that Trish had been training for this match, as she had very little proper in ring experience up to this point, and again actually ran away from Lita when she tagged in. Lita hit several moves against T&A, including a tornado DDT on Test and a

¹⁵ *Lita* DVD.

flying crossbody off the ring apron onto Albert bellow¹⁶, again demonstrating her daring and willingness to go after the guys rather than defer to her male teammates, as Trish would. It was only after Lita had been momentarily incapacitated by Test after a powerbomb did Trish tag in and make a weak pin attempt, followed by a bulldog, a move she would later develop into one of her signature moves. Lita battled back, eventually superplexing¹⁷ Trish off the top rope and then hitting her moonsault for the win.

Battles like these showcased Lita and Trish as exemplary foils of each other: strong independent female wrestler vs. weak manipulative valet. While Trish was explicitly a heel and thus did not reflect all female valets in wrestling, she was the definition of the bitchy female manager, who taunted her rivals and her associates' rivals, and then ran when actually confronted by them, as she had no wrestling talent at the time and was portrayed as nowhere near as physically tough as Lita. By contrast, Lita's star as a babyface began to shine during this feud, with the crowd cheering her on as she sought retribution for the illegal interferences of the manipulative Trish. Unlike Trish, Lita was a serious athlete who pulled off crazy offensive maneuvers against both sexes, traits that exhibited her physical toughness. Though their feud cooled for a few months after the Fully Loaded match up, it was this initial rivalry between Lita and Trish that helped push both women up that ranks in the WWF, and established Lita as a new force in women's wrestling unlike anything before¹⁸.

¹⁶ Dumas, 190. The fact that the male wrestlers were actually willing to take offensive moves from (or sell for) Lita also deserves credit, since without their cooperation, Lita the character would never have realistically pulled off the high flying moves that made up her offensive assault against males, part of her revolutionary nature in the business.

¹⁷ A suplex off the top rope, where the opponent is flipped forwards by the attacker so both land on their backs.

¹⁸ While Chyna had been the first woman to really go head to head with the men in the ring, she was so impressive in form and skill that she didn't bother wrestling women, and so formed a role in women's wrestling wholly unique to herself. Lita was revolutionary in that she was a proper women's wrestler,

Time passed and each of these characters grew in their storylines, with Lita eventually winning the Women's Championship from Stephanie McMahon in August 2000, and Trish challenging her for the title at least once. Over the course of the year, Trish became embroiled in a controversial storyline with Vince McMahon, during which she was part of a segment that was practically pornographic¹⁹, where Vince forced her to strip to her underwear in the middle of the ring and get on all fours to bark like a dog. The segment offended many viewers and was even cut in the United Kingdom, but the humiliation suffered by Trish was eventually rectified at Wrestlemania Seventeen, as Trish and Linda McMahon united against the dastardly Vince²⁰. This series of events brought Stratus to more of a face status and away from her manipulative valet ways. Along the way, she had been steadily improving her ring skills and establishing herself as a competitor in the women's division.

With both women as fan favorites and a major WCW 'Invasion' going on, the two actually put aside their differences and teamed up to face the WCW ladies Torrie Wilson and Stacy Keibler, soundly defeating them in the first Tag Team Bra and Panties Match²¹. Later after returning from an ankle injury, Trish beat out her fellow wrestlers including Lita for the vacant Women's Championship in a 6 Pack challenge, displaying new wrestling skills including her finisher, the Stratusfaction, a modified bulldog. Stratus reigned as champion for several months, increasing in popularity along the way, as Lita

whose main competitors were women, but who also had the 'balls' and ability to stand toe to toe with the men when it came down to it.

¹⁹ Pornographic being defined as "material involving degradation or abuse of women in a sexual context" Saul, Jennifer Mather. "Pornography". *Feminism: Issues and Arguments*. Oxford University Press, 2003. 76.

²⁰ "Trish Stratus". Wikipedia. Retrieved May 19, 2007.

²¹ The author would like to take this 20th footnote to say that first, footnotes are a wonderful invention, and second, that match was ridiculously lame. Torrie and Stacy did not belong in that ring, and Lita and Trish had to walk them through the whole thing.

and the Hardyz began to show cracks in their team. After taking some time off, Lita returned to ring action and faced against Trish and hardcore newcomer Jazz in a Triple Threat Match for the Women's Championship at Wrestlemania Eighteen, with Jazz pinning Lita to keep her title²². Unfortunately, the first Wrestlemania match for all three women was placed in a sacrifice spot on the card between Hulk Hogan vs. The Rock and Triple H vs. Chris Jericho, so what was a good match overall was received with the equivalent of crickets, as Lita puts it: “[The crowd] had just exploded in an unprecedented fashion and needed to catch their breath. Unfortunately, our match was out into that sacrifice slot. ... The audience didn't have any time to switch from the Match of the Century to us.”²³ This sacrifice of an excellent women's match demonstrates the stigmatism that still needs to be overcome regarding women's wrestling in general in the business.

Not long after, Lita (real life name, Amy Dumas) injured her neck when a stunt person dropped her on her head, requiring spinal fusion surgery and over a year of rehabilitation. During her time away from the ring, Trish rose to the top of the WWE, recapturing the Women's Championship several times and feuding with Molly Holly, Jazz, and Victoria, consistently as a face. When Lita returned to the ring in September 2003, she and Trish teamed up in a Battle of Sexes against Chris Jericho and Christian, due to a bet between the two men over which could seduce one of the two women first. This storyline eventually led to Trish turning heel again after betraying Jericho at Wrestlemania Twenty and aligning herself with Christian. This heel turn showed a very nasty side of Trish in her feud with Jericho, but she and Lita did not interact much.

²² “Amy Dumas”. Wikipedia. Retrieved May 19, 2007.

²³ Dumas, 286.

Later on in the fall of 2004, their rivalry sparked again, as Trish began to berate Lita's 'pregnancy'²⁴ with Kane²⁵. They feuded over several months, until Lita finally gained her second Women's Championship reign, pinning Trish on Raw in December 2000. Trish regained the title only a month later when Lita tore her ACL during the match and was out again for 2 months. When she returned, Lita guided several new female wrestlers in their challenges to Trish for the women's title, thereby feuding by proxy, as she was still out of ring action due to her knee injury, although the promising young women were unable to defeat the champion. Their proxy feud included a match between Lita's 'husband' Kane and Trish's associate Viscera, after which Viscera attacked Trish, who was berating the 'Love Machine' for losing. Trish took time off after the attack to heal her injuries. During this reignited feud, Trish was still the heel, and Lita the face, training these new optimistic women to go up against the bitchy champion, who had shown her backstabbing side once again. But everything would change soon.

During Trish's absence, Lita turned on her husband Kane, whom she had slowly began to appreciate if not in a loving manner, then at least a cooperative one. She turned heel for the first time in her career by aligning herself with Kane's opponent, Edge, during the finals of the WWE RAW Gold Rush Tournament.²⁶ She flushed her wedding ring and announced she was getting a divorce from the Big Red Machine, as she and her new squeeze made out almost every time they were on camera²⁷. This heel turn shocked fans, as Lita had always been a fan favorite, but now was flaunting herself and her new

²⁴ This was part of an elaborate storyline involving a Matt Hardy – Kane feud that resulted in a 'Death Do us Part' match where the winner Kane got to marry Lita, then a miscarriage. Don't ask.

²⁵ "Trish Stratus". Wikipedia.

²⁶ "Amy Dumas". Wikipedia.

²⁷ It is interesting that the duo used this tactic to earn heel heat, as Lita mentioned such behavior as doing just that when she and Matt Hardy made their real life relationship public on screen in 2000: "The Kiss got such great audience feedback... that they wanted us to do it again. If we kept up that pace, we'd end up as heels – the annoying couple that's always making out for no reason." Dumas, 233.

relationship with the Rated R Superstar all over the WWE²⁸. When once she was a tough athletic competitor in the ring, Lita was no longer wrestling, but accompanying Edge to the ring and interfering in matches, just like the classic bitchy valet that Trish used to embody. Oh, how the tables had turned.

Lita remained mainly in this manager capacity throughout the rest of 2006, while making time for a wrestling match here or there, and managing to defeat Mickie James for her third title reign in August 2006, but only by knocking out her opponent with the championship belt, a classic heel maneuver. She and Edge began to feud with Trish and her 'boyfriend' Carlito when she returned to action, with the heel couple living up to their despicable ways, using dirty tactics instead of the actual honorable athleticism they had shown in the past, while Trish had grown in her years from a pretty face with no ring skills to a venerable former champion who took it to Lita like no other, light years away from the character she was when she entered the ring. In September 2006, Trish defeated Lita for her record 7th Women's Championship by making her tap out to the Sharpshooter submission hold, in her home town of Toronto no less²⁹. Lita retired a few months later³⁰, losing her 4th Women's title to Mickie James and then being humiliated by the tag team Cryme Tyme.

From bitchy, cheating valet to beloved and talented women's champion, Trish Straus took her role in women's wrestling and expanded beyond all expectations, to a

²⁸ Their levels of exhibitionism peaked during a "Live Sex Celebration" on a January 2006 episode of Raw, where the real life couple simulated under bedding in the middle of the ring on national television, before being interrupted by John Cena. The spot earned Raw its highest ratings in over a year.

²⁹ "Trish Stratus". Wikipedia.

³⁰ The onscreen relationship with Edge and later feud with Matt Hardy reflected the personal lives of all these wrestlers, as Lita (Amy Dumas) had begun an affair with Edge and left Hardy, her long term boyfriend. Hardy was released from the WWE when he began airing his troubles, but rehired later after the upwelling of fan support. They later turned this real life drama into the on air storyline, so that the heel heat generated for Lita translated into her own life, such that the fan harassment became too much for her, making her decide to retire. Her heel turn worked too well.

record 7 Women's Championships. Her character arc demonstrated the latent ability and goodness present in even the most reviled human being, and outgrew the negative female archetype into one of the most positive female characters ever seen in wrestling.

Lita too had her arc, starting out as a valet but growing to be one of the most popular stars period at the time, revolutionizing the way women interacted with male wrestlers and obviously influencing Trish's later face run. She overcame several career-threatening injuries to win even more championships, this time without the help of the Hardy Boyz, and was able to hold her own against the new blood in the women's division, which had swelled with athletic talent in her time off. But despite her achievements in the roles of women in wrestling, she turned heel, in an enormously successful way, and turned into the very picture of every negative stereotype of a female, the bitchy, cheating heel valet. But worst of all: she barely wrestled anymore. This woman had displayed top rope feats and powerful moves in the ring, but then she changed to staying in her man's corner, being supportive and subordinate instead of proactive and independent. That is what made her heel turn so successful, is that she took everything that made her a role model for women, and turned her back on it all.

These two women have run the gamut of female roles in wrestling, from the best to the worst, expanding and reverting the characters and options for women in wrestling today, as reflected in some of the current ladies, including Victoria, Mickie James, and Melina, who are talented in-ring athletes in their own rights. However, there is still a war going on between the strong female wrestlers and the eye candy valets, as exhibited by the annual Diva Search contest endorsed to heavily by the WWE, which is little more

than a played up beauty pageant and strip show, a sideshow act³¹. Even now, when the strong female athletes in wrestling have more opportunities and freedom than ever and can stand up for themselves in the ring, they are still battling against negative portrayals of women, of weak, male-subordinate Barbie dolls who can barely pull off a suplex.

³¹ "WWE Diva Search". Wikipedia. Retrieved May 19, 2007.