

First I'm a Woman: The Heroic Film Roles of Pam Grier

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Few film genres have the bad reputation that has always been attached to the blaxploitation film. These low budget movies, filled with scenes of sex and violence, were wildly popular with audiences in the 1970s and just as heavily criticized by critics and journalists. "The celluloid diet of sex and violence that nearly strangled the white film business has now been fed to black audiences—with great success," *Jet* magazine complained in 1972. "One wonders if these new black filmmakers are even involved in any earnest exploration of the black experience" ("51 Black-Oriented Films Produced Since Mid-1970." *Jet* Sept. 21, 1972: 58). They weren't. The makers of blaxploitation films were creating heroic tales with larger than life characters who battled one dimensional villains easily recognized by the audience. Blaxploitation film stars fought white racists, crooked cops, and ruthless businessmen who would happily exploit the African-American population. The protagonists of these films were heroes at a time when the nature of American motion picture heroes was changing, and while the protagonists of blaxploitation films were not radically different from the sort of characters white actors were portraying at then time. Because these characters did not adhere to the simple moral code often associated with heroic literature, they were often characterized as "anti-heroes," but their heroic attributes are plentiful and obvious. They were brave, powerful, and physically attractive. Willing to break rules and even laws if necessary, they asserted themselves on behalf of the oppressed. As black men, they also responded to overtly racist treatment from white society.

Still, even if blaxploitation protagonists could be considered heroes, the female characters in these films were hardly heroic at the start. In *Shaft* (1971), *Superfly* (1972), their sequels, and their many imitators, women existed for the sexual gratification of men and served very little other purpose. Fortunately, a second wave of blaxploitation movies began a few years after the first. Produced by independent studios rather than major studios such as MGM and Warner Bros., these films were free to take risks and present women as their lead characters, rather than simply adornments of male stars. Black women who were strong, assertive, and yes, heroic, emerged rather quickly. These women got to do all the things men had done in blaxploitation cinema and do many of the things males had done in more traditional motion pictures. They carried guns, solved mysteries, broke up crime rings, defended loved ones, and made wisecracks. Like the men in blaxploitation films, they confronted racist behavior. And they had active sex lives, just as male heroes had been doing for years.

When one is discussing females in blaxploitation movies, one is really discussing Pam Grier. There were significant female roles in blaxploitation movies performed by other actresses, most notably Tamara Dobson, who starred in two *Cleopatra Jones* films, Rosanne Katon, who acted in *The Mothers* (1976) and *Ebony, Ivory, and Jade* (1976), and Jeanne Bell, who starred *TNT Jackson* (1975) and also appeared in *The Mothers* but for most movie fans, Pam Grier is the female blaxploitation star. In just a few years in the early 1970s, Grier starred in several films in which she played a variety of heroic roles. The tendency among critics, then and now, was to view Grier's films as interchangeable and it is true that there are strong similarities between her starring vehicles. But what many film scholars have overlooked is that while the film's plots and situations may have been very much the same, while Grier herself seemed to function within a

narrowly defined screen persona, the characters she portrayed were different in one key sense—they represented different types of heroes. In her starring roles, including the films *Friday Foster* (1975); *Coffy* (1973); *Sheba, Baby* (1975), and of course, *Foxy Brown* (1974), Grier actually redefines heroic archetypes, taking parts that had been traditionally portrayed onscreen by white males and revising them to accommodate black women.

The first three films depicted Grier as a strong and cynical hero, a determined loner who doesn't like to ask for or accept help from others, someone who is aggressive, not above using weapons, and fights fire with fire. (As shall be discussed, Grier's character *Friday Foster* differs from the others in significant ways.) These are standard characteristics for male movie heroes but the sight of a woman engaging in what was considered to be typically macho behavior—shooting guns, making glib remarks during fights, seeking vengeance for past wrongs—was very unusual indeed. Grier played heroes in these films; furthermore, she played different types of heroes and each of her starring features fits into a different heroic genre.

Coffy is Pam Grier's superhero movie. She is a determined character who is motivated by the (near) death of a loved one; although this theme is most readily associated with *Batman*, it is a common premise for comic books. She carries secret weapons. She even has an alter ego, of sorts—though her real surname is *Coffin*, a name given to her by the filmmakers with obvious irony, she constantly tells people she is "*Coffy*," presumably because she is strong and black, but also because she is hiding her true self from the public. If wealthy Don Diego can become *Zorro*, "*The Fox*," the defender of the poor, then *Nurse Coffin* can become *Coffy*, protector of the lower class.

Coffy comes into being so that the nurse can avenge her sister, who was hospitalized after taking heroin. In order to reach the persons responsible, the responsible and professional *Coffin* becomes sexy vamp *Coffy*. *Nurse Coffin* has risen above her previous station in life, as have many heroes; *Coffy* must return to the things left behind to accomplish her goal. The movie begins with *Coffy* coming on to the men who sold her sister heroin. As if she is wearing a disguise, she presents herself as a woman of loose morals and even entices one of the men with what we realize, but he does not, is a double entendre: "I know what you want and you're gonna get it." Having talked herself into the man's home, *Coffy* then performs what might be considered her first heroic act—she kills the drug dealer. It is clear that her disguised persona is what allowed her to accomplish her goal; turning to the other drug dealer present, she announces, "It was easy for him because he didn't know it was coming. But it won't be easy for you because you'd better believe it's coming." She then kills him also.

Are *Coffy*'s actions heroic or is she simply a murderous vigilante? The two concepts are not mutually exclusive. Consider the audience for *Coffy*, inner city residents who felt disenfranchised and who would applaud *Coffy*'s actions, seeing them as the only logical step left open to an urban superhero. The film does recognize the moral dilemma raised by *Coffy*'s actions; a line in its theme song goes, "*Coffy*, baby, you can't see right from wrong." But the movie also goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the only hope the residents of the inner city have is the extreme actions of someone like *Coffy*. *Nurse Coffin*'s lover is running for Congress. As an African-American, he seems particularly determined to help his race, but every good hero must have a

villain and Coffy finds hers in Nurse Coffin's boyfriend; the politician is also involved in drug dealing. If even their alleged protectors are victimizing the people, then only the hero who functions outside the law can help, a theme that was particularly relevant to Grier's largely African-American audience at the time and a theme that therefore recurs throughout her films.

Coffy may resort to gunfire at the beginning of the film but later she fights like a superhero. Pretending to be a prostitute, she goes to a lavish party. One of the genuine prostitutes there feels threatened and deliberately spills her drink on Coffy. A fight breaks out and Coffy takes on four or five women at the same time, quickly defeating all of them—but she doesn't do it without help. Batman has his utility belt, the Green Arrow has his quiver, Wonder Woman has her lasso and Zorro has his whip. Coffy has her afro, in which she has hidden several razor blades. One enemy with shredded, bleeding fingers is enough to bring the fight to a conclusion. And just as Zorro leaves his mark behind, carving a "Z" with his sword, so does Coffy leave hers: as she defeats each woman, she rips that woman's blouse off, exposing and humiliating her. (For all her heroic qualities, Grier is overtly presented as a sex symbol in all of her films, but these movies do make a distinction between who are in control of their sexuality and woman who are exploited because of it. It is one thing for any of Grier's characters to appear willingly in the nude; it is quite another for a woman to be forcibly stripped—as happens to Grier herself more than once—and degraded.)

Of course, a superhero must keep her secret identity a secret. "There's something funny about that chick, something not quite right," one woman observes after an encounter with Coffy. Indeed, there is often something "funny" about Coffy as she masks her real self to present a different face to the public. Like Don Diego, Peter Parker, and Clark Kent, Coffy can depict herself as meek and subservient if necessary. Arturo Vitroni, the mobster behind the heroin peddling, is completely fooled by her. During Coffy's fight with the prostitutes, Vitroni overlooks her wiles and her prowess to focus on her sheer physicality, which Coffy has exaggerated as part of her disguise. "She's a wild animal!" he cries out and orders Coffy to his room. Here she begins her subservient act, begging, crawling, allowing Vitroni to spit on her and telling him she is attracted to him because he is "dangerous." But she quickly reverts to her true identity, giving up her act and launching a powerful verbal attack on Vitroni. Pulling out another hidden weapon—a gun this time—Coffy snarls, "You want me to crawl, white motherfucker? You want to spit on me and make me crawl? I'm going to spit on your grave tomorrow!" Unfortunately, Coffy's attempts to bring Vitroni to justice—her type of justice, at least—are halted when Vitroni's bodyguards burst into the room. It seems one of them recognized Coffy from an earlier struggle, proof positive that a hero must preserve her secret identity.

Having captured Coffy, the villains behave as villains often do and imprison her rather than kill her immediately. A superhero often has a specific weakness and the villains have determined Coffy's kryptonite—they will inject into her the very drug that put her sister into a coma and make her death appear to be the result of an overdose. They do shoot her up but since Coffy had substituted sugar for heroin earlier the "fix" does nothing to her. She offers to have sex with one of Vitroni's men and once she leads him away, stabs him and escapes. It is at this point that Coffy deviates from the superhero role—she runs away from the villains rather than fighting them. The scene seems odd until one realizes that in 1973, running away was a rather standard option for

female characters in the movies, even heroic ones, even those in films made outside the normal studio system.

The movie's finale also deviates from the normal superhero scenario. Having killed Vitroni—"That's a present for my little sister"—Coffy goes to her lover's home with the intent of killing him as well. But when she comes face to face with him, her resolve weakens; it is weakened further by his attempts to win her back. "I don't know how I did it," Coffy says. "I feel like I'm in a dream and I'm still in this dream....And I loved you. I loved you so much." After insisting he loves her as well, the boyfriend asserts that since drug use among African-Americans is inevitable, it is better for the race if an African-American, rather than a white person, controls the drug trade. His actions, therefore, were pro-social. "You could talk me into almost anything," Coffy says. "But I don't know. I just don't know anymore." It is clear that the Coffy identity is disappearing at this point and Nurse Coffin is returning. She is ready to let her boyfriend live when his new lover, and a white woman at that, comes into the room scantily clad. Irate, Coffy shoots the man and then walks out the door, leaving it ajar. Coffy's director, Jack Hill, deliberately left an open ending to the film because he and American International Pictures believed that Coffy could, like many a motion picture superhero, become a franchise character; those plans were abandoned after AIP's marketing department determined audiences were unenthusiastic about sequels on the whole (a revelation possibly brought about by another of Grier's AIP films, the Blacula sequel *Scream*, *Blacula*, *Scream*). The proposed *Burn, Coffy, Burn* was reworked into *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, director's commentary. *Foxy Brown* DVD. MGM 2001). Thematically it is just as well. By the end of *Coffy*, the character has killed for personal reasons. The superhero is no more.

If *Coffy* is Grier's superhero movie, then *Sheba, Baby* is her western. The movie begins with a scene familiar to even casual film watchers: a small business is being threatened by criminals who want to force it out of existence. In this case, the business is a loan company in Louisville, Kentucky and the owner is the father of Grier's character, Sheba Shayne. Sheba learns that her father is in trouble and returns to her hometown, thus setting into motion one of the classic themes of heroic tales, the prodigal returning home, the character who comes into town and fights the villains single-handedly when no one else can stand up to them. Grier is a former police officer who is now a private investigator; to put it in frontier terms, she is the former sheriff turned hired gun. Even her last name, Shayne, is evocative of Shane, the classic western novel and film in which a mysterious stranger comes into town and helps the oppressed. (Her first name, of course, connotes royalty and heritage as befits a hero.) Furthermore, it must be noted that though *Sheba* is a private detective, she is not working for a client but essentially for herself to protect her family, something that places this film closer to a western in theme than to a police or detective drama.

Initially *Sheba* resists violent action; like many a western hero, she has seen enough bloodshed in her day and hopes to avoid it now. She even promises her father not to get involved. But also like many a western hero, she is motivated back into action after her family is threatened. A bomb goes off in her father's car, almost killing *Sheba*. In response, she quickly establishes herself as her own law, not bound by any rules, because she believes that the only way to fight the villains is on their own terms. When her father reminds her of her promise, she tells him that "That agreement just blew up in that car." Now driven back into action, *Sheba* will confront the villains

to preserve her home. Like a virtual ghost town in the west, Louisville has seen too many of its businesses fold under pressure. Sheba wants to stop this so that her childhood neighborhood will survive. If violence is the way to accomplish that, then she will use violence. "We've got to find a better way," says an old friend. "Well, then, you find it," says Sheba. When told "You can't handle it by street fighting," she responds, "Do I look like a street fighter?" Unlike Coffy, Sheba is a professional, even if she is also a vigilante. She is not going to let her sex hold her back either: "I'm not going to sit on the sidelines just because I'm a woman."

The villains aren't held back by Sheba's gender either; they react to her as the tough gunslinger they know her to be. "The business was going so smooth until that bitch came into town," complains the head gangster. Later, the same villain threatens, "That bitch Sheba wants to make trouble for us. Well, we're going to give her some back." The villains don't let Sheba's sex deter them from violent behavior but that doesn't mean that they are oblivious to the fact that she is a female, as is shown by their repeated references to her as a "bitch." It is just another of the things that a female hero has to overcome that a male hero will never face. Still, the villains recognize that they must be frightened of Sheba. After one criminal disobeys his boss's orders and shoots Sheba's father, who is hospitalized, the gangster says, "Pray that that broad's daddy don't die or there ain't gonna be a safe place for you to shit in this town, much less live."

Sheba's father does die, a victim of another western tradition, the innocent bystander killed during a shootout. Four gangsters come into the loan company in an attempt to intimidate Mr. Shayne. When an employee attempts to reason with the men—Sheba has already warned him that his logical approach is inferior to her action-oriented one—the criminals admit that they are there simply to cause trouble for the business. During a scuffle, gunfire begins. Sheba shoots three of the four criminals and is preparing to shoot the fourth when the police arrive—too late to be effective, another western cliché. Unfortunately her father was shot and dies shortly after being taken to the hospital.

Sheba is bent upon revenge and uses whatever methods will help her achieve it, no matter how brutal. "Don't give me that 'What you doing back in town' shit," she tells one small time criminal whom she thinks has useful information. When the man refuses to talk, she threatens him with her gun. Later, getting information from a street hustler—the contemporary equal of a western medicine show salesman—she threatens him by saying, "You'd better talk before I put my number one foot down your number one mouth." She even threatens one source in a car wash; jumping into his car, she rolls the window down and threatens to push his head into the hot wax. In a true western, the characters threaten with a lariat, but the effect is the same here.

The criminals plot a secret midnight rendezvous in an open space—something that makes no sense in contemporary Kentucky but is perfectly logical in the old west. Sheba spies on them but they get away. She tracks the villains to a boat, admittedly not something usually seen in western films but still analogous to a bad guy's isolated hideaway. Sheba is captured but using a familiar western tool—a knife—she escapes. The climactic scene of the film is straight from hundreds of western melodramas, updated for contemporary times. The villains have Sheba outnumbered. The police (cavalry) arrive to help. The villains flee in small individual crafts (horses). Sheba shoots at one from a great distance, miraculously hits him, then pursues the others on a jet ski

(horse). When she comes to the boat of the man she shot, she dumps him overboard and takes his boat, larger than her jet ski, better to pursue the criminals (rides a fresh horse). Finally, the bad guys are all caught or killed and Sheba says to one of the local police, "You can have your town back." Though she is asked to remain in Louisville—the equivalent of asking the mysterious gunslinger to settle down—she realizes that she has to move on.

And then there's *Foxy Brown*. Arguably Grier's best-known film, it is her detective movie, what the French call the *policier*, the story of a police officer in a difficult task of fighting crime; it even has many of the characteristics of a 1940s film noir. *Foxy Brown* begins with a man clearly in trouble, being stalked by criminal types. We learn that he is Foxy's brother when he calls her for help. The movie quickly establishes Brown as a character of action when she arrives in a speeding car to rescue her brother. He jumps in and one of the criminals jumps on the hood; Brown drives away as fast as she can, despite the presence of a living human being grasping on to her car.

Moral ambiguities emerge rapidly. Brown cares deeply for her brother but is concerned that he is involved in drug dealing and illegal lotteries. Her brother justifies his actions saying that the normal avenues for black men are closed to him—he has no musical or athletic ability and he's "too ugly to be mayor." Brown's other dilemma stems from her boyfriend, an undercover narcotics agent. Although he bravely plans to testify against drug dealers, within the neighborhood, he is not always perceived as noble. "He was not an informer. He was a federal cop," Brown points out to her brother, who replies that people "don't know the difference some time." The white criminals against whom he intends to testify are more direct in their hatred, calling him a "nigger cop fink." These criminals, of course become Foxy Brown's adversaries very soon.

Once Anderson is released from prison, the police elements come to the forefront of the movie. Brown introduces Anderson to Oscar, the head of a neighborhood watch. As a police officer, Anderson is concerned that Oscar's "committee" might actually be vigilantes but Brown dismisses him by pointing out that vigilante justice is "as American as apple pie." In the meantime, Brown's brother has guessed that Anderson is really Dalton, who was presumed dead after criminals shot him. Twenty thousand dollars in debt to criminals, he offers them Dalton's whereabouts if they will eliminate his debt. This is an act of betrayal so egregious that even the villains are stunned when they eventually discover the connection between Brown, her lover, and her brother who reveals him, but it is perfectly in keeping with the "trust no one" atmosphere of film noir, as is the pervasive nature of the criminals, who get much more screen time than is usual for Grier's films.

Anderson is murdered and Brown must avenge him. Realizing her brother must have identified Anderson for the criminals, Brown goes to his home and shoots up the place, destroying much of what he owns in her rampage. She gets him to tell her about "the fixer," Claudia, a woman who uses prostitutes to blackmail powerful men, a recurring concept in Grier's films. Brown decides to pass herself off as a prostitute to get close to Anderson's killers. Because Brown's job and function in life are never specified in this film, her pretending to be a prostitute has a darker overtone than it does in *Coffy* and *Friday Foster*, in which she does the same thing. In those films audiences know that Grier's character is an experienced professional with legitimate jobs, nurse and photographer respectively, so there is some contrast between what the characters really are

and what they pretend to be. There is no such contrast in *Foxy Brown*; for all we know, she isn't even pretending. Heroes in *policier* are not necessarily without flaw or sin; Brown can be a fake prostitute or even a real one and still be a hero.

Prostitution is also presented in a much more realistic, seamier manner than in the other two films. Brown quickly befriends Cleo, a somewhat friendly prostitute, but that woman's story is unusually tragic. She has a husband and a young child, whom she has not seen in six months. The husband arrives at the house of prostitution one day and demands that Cleo quit and move with him to Seattle, where he has found a good job, but she is too afraid of Claudia and her boyfriend to leave. Claudia, in fact, has the man severely beaten and thrown off the premises, which only frightens Cleo more. She and Brown are sent to service a judge, who will return the Claudia's favor by finding some of her men innocent of drug trafficking charges. The scene between Brown, Cleo, and the judge is unusual and compelling. In *Coffy*, Grier humiliates other women by removing their clothes; here she humiliates a man, the judge, by getting him to remove his clothes, making fun of his small penis, then locking him out of his expensive hotel room so that passers by can see him in his underwear. Brown's motivations go beyond mere humiliation, however. She has a hero's goal—in angering the judge she has ensured that he will not free the drug dealers who come before his court. When he actually sentences two dealers to prison, a panic begins among other criminals in town who thought they had protection. One act has amazing repercussions.

Unfortunately, Brown's other heroic action at this time fails completely. Cleo had only gone along with Brown's plan for two reasons—she has lost all reason to live since she believes she will never see her husband and child again and she was too high on drugs truly to understand what she was doing. Brown offers her enough money to fly to Seattle and join her husband and child but Claudia's men track Cleo to a bar—as is typical of the *policier*, the criminals have informants everywhere and are often better informed than are the police themselves—and when Brown shows up looking for her, the men kill Cleo and take Brown back to Claudia. Claudia intends to addict Brown to heroin, break her, and then sell her into a life of prostitution overseas. She sends Brown to “the Ranch,” an out of the way home maintained by two men who can only be described as rednecks. The scenes of Brown in captivity are as shocking as anything in any of Grier's films. She is taunted by the men, who call her a “nigger” and a “big jugged jigaboo,” brutally beaten, and finally raped. Again, suffering acts of extreme violence is standard for the protagonists of *policier*, but seeing men getting beaten is one thing; seeing the traumatized victim of a rape is another. It adds to Brown's heroic stature that she is able to survive the attack, escape, and get revenge on her rapists. And if her method of escape and vengeance seems far fetched—she picks up a razor blade in her mouth and slices her bonds, then sets the men on fire—such melodrama is commonplace in heroic tales.

Brown returns home and finds her brother has been murdered. Realizing that she cannot defeat Claudia and her men alone, Brown turns to Oscar and his neighborhood committee for assistance. Some of the members are reluctant to help, arguing that they are a neighborhood watch and that Brown's problems exist far outside their neighborhood. When Brown states that she wants justice, one of the men sarcastically says, “For who? Your brother?” Brown responds

with a speech, the longest monologue Grier has in any of her films, and the stuff that true heroes are made of:

“Why not? It could be your brother too. Or your sister. Or your children. I want justice for all of them and I want justice for all the other people whose lives were bought and sold. And most of all I want justice for a good man. This man had love in his heart. And he died. So that a few big shots could crawl up on the backs of the people to laugh at the law and to laugh at human decency. Because he went out of his neighborhood. To do what was right. You just take care of the justice and I’ll handle the revenge myself.”

A far cry from Coffy’s “a present for my sister,” even if equally heartfelt. This speech not only supports Grier’s status as a hero and explains the appeal of her characters, it also shows why female blaxploitation characters could be heroes, perhaps even stronger heroes than women in more mainstream cinema. The excessive nature of blaxploitation films caused critics to dismiss them and not take them seriously but with that dismissal came an odd sort of freedom—since nobody was paying attention to these movies anyway, they could show and say almost anything they wanted to. One would have to look long and hard to find any other mid-70s movie in which a female character gave such a speech—it would be rather difficult to find an equivalent in any decade, for that matter—and if that speech had to be sandwiched in between scenes of nudity and graphic violence, perhaps that was a small compromise to make.

The conclusion of Foxy Brown is disturbing but perfectly in keeping with everything that has preceded it. With the committee’s help, Brown captures Claudia’s boyfriend, Elias, and has the committee cut off his penis—significantly, while she is willing to order such a violent act, she does not actually commit it herself. She then puts the penis in a jar and takes it to Claudia. Claudia fears that Brown will kill her but Brown states that death would be too easy for Claudia; she must live and suffer every day, just as Brown will suffer the death of Anderson and her brother. An ironic sense of justice completes the hero’s task in the policier.

A dramatic change came with Friday Foster, Grier’s final blaxploitation film. Based on a short-lived comic strip of the same name, Friday Foster is the only of Grier’s movies to be adapted from another source. Grier plays Foster, a news photographer who works for a national magazine, Glance, squabbles with her irascible editor, and cares for her young brother. It is an unusually mainstream role for Grier and an unusually passive one as well. Grier has softer edges here; in her opening scene Foster lets her editor’s command that she get her “cute little ass” out to an assignment go without comment and she is friends, rather than enemies, with the local pimp. She spends much of the movie running from danger, rather than confronting it head on, but even if she finds herself in trouble, she has a tough boyfriend, a private detective, who can rescue her. Friday Foster, in short, is not a typical Pam Grier movie—but it is typical of a genre of adventure stories featuring female protagonists. Friday Foster is a variant of “girl detectives” like Nancy Drew; she also has a great deal in common with two other women journalists from the comics, Brenda Starr and Lois Lane.

As is typical of the girl detective genre, Friday Foster has a more complicated plot than Grier’s other films. Initially Foster is involved in what appear to be two different plots, one involving an

assassination attempt on African-American millionaire Blake Tarr, the other involving the death of a close friend from an apparent drug overdose; the friend had phoned Foster twice the day before her death. As is also typical of the genre, Foster is not really supposed to be occupied in the solving of the mysteries; her editor repeatedly tells her not to “get involved”—even before any criminal activity occurs!—and her insistence that her friend did not use drugs and was probably murdered is ignored by authorities who believe that Foster has much courage but is lacking in good sense.

Of course, the two mysteries are connected. When Foster is taking photographs of Tarr, she spies one of his attempted assassins; later she sees the same man at her friend’s funeral. Foster follows the man but the scenes that follow are a far cry from Grier’s earlier action based exploits. Foster has to use the only vehicle she can find, a hearse, to follow her suspect, and the sight of Grier chasing a man in a hearse is played for laughs. After she trails the man to a meeting of criminals, she is observed and everyone flees; Grier attempts to follow but is stopped by a police officer who does not believe her story. Instead, he arrests her and wonders whether they should bring in a matron to strip search her (as we have seen with Coffy, being forced to strip is particularly humiliating to women in Grier’s movies); when Foster returns to her office, her editor chides her for ruining an expensive camera, which she had used as a weapon to protect herself.

Eventually Foster learns that her friend was part of a prostitution ring that services powerful, well-connected men and then blackmails them. Foster approaches the head of the ring, asking him to help her work undercover as one of the prostitutes. His reply to her is particularly condescending: “Go home. Get laid. Have a baby. Or something.” Foster’s boyfriend then asks to speak to the procurer “Man to man,” presumably getting some information out of him. In the next scene, the boyfriend also saves Foster when a cab driver attempts to run her down and kill her.

Even though she relies on her boyfriend’s help, Foster is still the detective who must solve this mystery. She learns that a secret operation code-named “Black Widow” intends to kill important African-Americans around the country. She convinces her editor to send her to Washington D.C., where she talks herself into a meeting of influential African-Americans by pretending to be a reporter for a church publication. Fending off the advances of a lecherous, nationally known minister, she inadvertently uncovers what will become a vital clue to the mystery—the minister owns a retreat called Jericho. She is also told by an African-American senator that Tarr faked his own assassination as part of his plan to implement “Black Widow.” Foster then visits the Madame Rena, the employer of her deceased friend. Typical for the genre, Foster arrives just before Rena is shot and killed, leaving Foster with a mysterious message and a request to phone Tarr directly. A meeting with Tarr convinces Foster that he is innocent; it also leads to a revealing scene in which Tarr asks, “Who is Friday Foster?” “Well,” replies, “First I’m a woman. Second I’m a photographer and a sister.” This is the sort of question that male heroes rarely are asked and it is significant that Foster places her sexual identity ahead of her professional one—the ranking does not make her any less a hero but it does allow her to display her human. Friday Foster is a hero but she is a real, flesh and blood person as well.

Rena’s dying words cause Foster to realize that Black Widow will be implemented at the reverend’s estate, Jericho. The scene in which Foster makes this deduction displays her strengths as a detective; her boyfriend, the professional, confesses he does not recognize the

Biblical allusion to "the walls come tumbling down" because he never completed high school. Foster arrives at Jericho to find every significant African-American leader in the nation is present, and they are attacked by a virtual army. Tarr has sent reinforcements, however, and all are saved, including Foster, who once again participates in the action but has to be rescued by a male. The film ends with Foster back at home with her brother. She is surrounded by gifts, presumably from Tarr but also possibly from others who were saved at Jericho. As a hero she has received tribute, but she prefers the simplicity of her boyfriend, and they leave on a date.

Friday Foster is a different film from Grier's others and it provides her with a more passive role, but that does not mean that Foster is not a hero. Rather, she is a more traditional female hero; like the great girl detectives from the past she is clever, persistent, intuitive but always willing to turn things over to a more powerful male once the mystery has been solved. In some ways it is disappointing to see Grier move away from the aggressive action heroes she had been portraying but some viewers might actually prefer the less lurid Foster to some of Grier's other characters and certainly female heroes who act in what is usually considered to be a masculine manner are often criticized for perpetuating the idea that heroes must be violent and destructive. The differences between Foster and Grier's other characters, however, must be attributed more to changing markets than to any particular introspection on the part of Grier and her directors. The blaxploitation cycle had largely run its course by 1975; what had seemed fresh and exciting about Grier's characters just two years earlier was no longer appealing. Friday Foster, in its attempt to provide a variation on Grier's standard character, actually demonstrates that her characters had run out of material.

In *BaadAsssss Cinema*, a documentary about blaxploitation movies, Grier attempted to analyze the appeal and the significance of her film characters. In the 1970s, she observed, because of the Viet Nam war and other social problems, many communities felt the absence of men and women were often forced to assume male roles. Grier's films reflected that cultural change. Similar situations had spawned films about powerful women in the post World War II era, but Grier's blaxploitation roles are less misogynistic than the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s and her characters are heroes, not villainous femme fatales. In the 1970s "we could really live out the freedoms" that the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s had only promised to women and to minorities. Grier, who described her characters as "women who were very demonstrative and yet very feminine" (Isaac Julien. *Minerva Picture Company, Ltd*, 2002), had provided a combination of qualities that made her film roles appealing and quite heroic indeed.

Still active as an actress, Pam Grier has left a lasting impact on motion pictures and on popular culture in general. There is a rapper named Foxy Brown. Grier's characters, along with Tamara Dobson's, were spoofed with the inclusion of Foxy Cleopatra in the third *Austin Powers* film. A big budget remake of *Foxy Brown* is in the works. But most notably, Grier helped change the concept of female heroes, proving not only that they could do things that only men had done before, but that they could do those things while still remaining feminine, not just men in women's garb, and that African-American women did not have to be subservient to anyone. The powerful characters she depicted onscreen have never been equaled, nor are they likely to be. Foxy Brown, Coffy, Sheba, and Friday Foster were unquestionably heroes. And so was Pam Grier.

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