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# “What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger:” The Fallacy of Rape Narratives as Paths to Women’s Empowerment in Contemporary Television

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“What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger:” The Fallacy of Rape Narratives as Paths to  
Women’s Empowerment in Contemporary Television

An Honors Thesis

Presented By

Alessia S. Guise

To

The Department of Film Studies

In Fulfillment of the Requirements for

Honors in the Major Field

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## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction.....	5
Chapter Two: Sansa Stark the Little Bird.....	35
Chapter Three: “I Imagined a Story Where I Didn’t Have To Be the Damsel”: Dolores Abernathy & Rape Revenge in <i>Westworld</i> .....	58
Chapter Four: <i>Marvel’s Jessica Jones</i> , Rape Revenge, and Representing Trauma.....	74
Chapter Five: Unbelievable Women Detectives.....	88
Filmography.....	103
Works Cited .....	106



## Chapter One: Introduction

“When violence against women is used as a plot device to make characters stronger then we have a problem. It is not empowering to be beaten and raped, yet so many films make it their ‘pheonix’ [*sic*] moment for women. We don’t need abuse in order to be powerful. We already are.” –Jessica Chastain, via Twitter

The last three years have seen a radical change in how sexual violence is discussed in popular culture. A subject which has been historically swept under the rug and not acknowledged was suddenly trending on Twitter in 2017 with millions of sexual assault and harassment survivors telling the world what happened to them with #MeToo. For the first time, sexual violence was not only acknowledged on a massive, global scale, but survivors of it were sharing their stories with the support of millions like them. The #MeToo Movement rocked Hollywood as swarms of sexual violence victims took down industry giants Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, Charlie Rose, Matt Lauer, and more. These men were all fired on top of Bill Cosby, Bill O’Reilly, and head of Fox News Roger Ailes, who were exposed for their histories of sexual assault a few years before the #MeToo Era. Of the seven predators listed above, only Cosby and Weinstein are currently serving prison sentences.

Just because sexual violence was being openly discussed for the first time in Hollywood does not mean it was the first time Hollywood dealt with the topic. In fact, rape narratives have always been “a staple of American cinema” (Clover: “Getting Even,” 137). Film scholar and feminist anti-rape activist Sarah Projansky goes so far as to argue that “one cannot fully understand cinema itself without addressing rape and its representation,” and that “quite probably not a year has gone by since the beginning of cinema when rape, attempted rape, or other forms of sexual violence were not represented or alluded to in films” (“The

Elusive/Ubiquitous...,” 63). In her book, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, Projansky presents a detailed account of how pervasive rape has been throughout the history of film and how it has changed from the silent era, to the days of the Hays Code, and through the second and third-wave feminist movements. This chapter does not provide an exhaustive history but instead focuses on how feminism and postfeminism have intervened and affected representations of sexual violence on-screen. It is crucial to highlight how ubiquitous depictions of rape have been in cinema because such representations have a tangible effect on our society by “naturalizing rape’s place in our everyday world” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 11) through our consumption of it. In other words, representations of rape in media contribute to the larger rape culture in which we all live off-screen, and thus, they should be produced and examined carefully as having an impact on the real world.

This Introduction will provide a brief overview of how rape has been portrayed in film and television since the 1960s to provide context for the representations this thesis focuses on: rape as a narrative catalyst for female empowerment, specifically, women leaders in contemporary television series who are only enabled to lead after being sexually assaulted. The #MeToo movement and the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford at Justice Kavanaugh’s confirmation hearing in 2018 have put sexual violence and rape culture at the forefront of America’s popular culture. The survivors who spoke out opened the topic of sexual assault and harassment up to discussion on college campuses, news outlets, and the United States Congress. Hollywood’s film and television have to represent America’s post-#MeToo values: that sexual violence is not tolerated, and survivors of it should be believed. This chapter will analyze how film and television are capable of upholding and subverting rape myths, such as that someone cannot be assaulted by a partner, consent can be measured through physical passivity, or exacting

revenge on a rapist relieves the survivor of any posttraumatic stress from the attack. Television series that depict rape as a transformative experience for a woman into a leader is dangerous because they imply that rape can have positive repercussions, namely, that it can make a survivor “stronger.” Countless films and television series include “gratuitous representations [of rape], not closely connected to the larger narrative” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 135). However, narratives that use sexual assault as a call to action for women characters are particularly guilty of providing unnecessary portrayals of rape. They use rape as a backstory or a narrative starting point for women when it could easily be substituted with any other form of trauma so that their women leaders can be simultaneously victims (by being raped) and heroes (through their subsequent action). By featuring a woman victim-hero, these narratives participate in misogynist viewing practices by providing male spectators with active women who are less threatening to patriarchy because they were previously victimized by men. It is crucial to understand how representations of rape have evolved and been influenced by the feminist and postfeminist movements before discussing these more recent examples of rape in television.

Before moving forward, I would like to specify that I use “sexual violence” as an umbrella term that encompasses rape, any form of non-consensual touching, domestic/dating violence, and stalking. Throughout the following thesis, I will use the terms “rape” and “sexual assault” interchangeably, as I believe both should be viewed as terms which refer to a wide-range of non-consensual sexual acts, not just non-consensual penetrative intercourse.

There is not an abundant amount of scholarship on rape representation in film and television. This thesis relies heavily on the works of five major scholars in this field: Carol Clover, Lisa Cuklanz, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Sarah Projansky, and Jacinda Read. Most of



these works were written in the 1990s and 2000s, with the most recent work being Heller-Nicholas's in 2011. This thesis brings their conceptions on rape representation in film and television up-to-date, which is especially important as cultural ideations regarding rape in Hollywood are shifting, and people are becoming more frustrated with rape culture following the #MeToo Movement. Clover wrote the influential article "Getting Even" on the rape revenge subgenre of horror in films from the 1970s and '80s. Specifically, she examines the gruesome film *I Spit On Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978) in which a woman is brutally gang-raped by four men for the first half of the film and hunts down and murders her attackers in the second half. "Getting Even" and Clover's seminal work on the Final Girl of the horror film, "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" are heavily invested in the idea of female victim-heroines in horror films. The women I discuss who are enabled to lead after being raped are victim-heroines similar to the ones she discusses but exist outside of the slasher film. Unlike Clover, I do not believe the representation of a tortured, enduring victim-hero is feminist because her triumph only occurs after she is brutally abused by a man for audience entertainment. As Heller-Nicholas argues, "simply 'not dying' can hardly be considered any cause for feminist celebration" (10).

Read's book, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, departs from Clover's work by understanding rape revenge "not as a genre, but as a narrative structure, which has been mapped on to and across not only a whole range of genres, but a whole range of historical and discursive contexts" (25). I agree that rape revenge should be read as a narrative structure and not solely as a subgenre of the horror film, as Clover discusses it; the rape revenge plot exists in a variety of genres, such as action films, westerns, and legal dramas. However, Read ignores a larger issue of the rape revenge film: the depiction of rape itself. Neither Clover nor Read delves into the repercussions of depicting and consuming imagery of

sexual violence against women. In her book *Rape Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, Heller-Nicholas articulates a similar point of contention with these scholars' works and dedicates a significant portion of her book to the implications of representing rape and rape trauma in film. This thesis brings Clover's, Heller-Nicholas's, and Read's arguments on the rape revenge narrative structure in film and applies them to television series, while also incorporating theory on how to ethically represent sexual violence on-screen.

Lisa Cuklanz's book *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* is a comprehensive analysis of rape representation on primetime television up to the 1990s. Cuklanz focuses her analysis of rape narratives mostly on procedural dramas and how masculinity functions within them. I will depart from her scholarship by focusing on the women in rape narratives, specifically the women survivors, and how the act of rape constructs their characters and their rise to leadership, rather than the men around them. I will also only focus on serialized dramas—series in which no episode can stand alone, and every episode builds off of the one that comes before it, which I believe produces more evocative character development than a procedural program, in which episodes can be watched out of order—that aired in the last ten years to bring scholarship on rape narratives in television up-to-date with contemporary examples.

This thesis would not have been possible without the work of Sarah Projansky. *Watching Rape* is a foundational text for scholarship on rape representation. In addition to providing an extensive history of rape in film and television since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it also analyzes different representational strategies of rape and how they interact with postfeminism to produce a backlash against feminism and women. Graphic depictions, particularly, she contends, “can be understood to express hatred for and violence against women and thus can potentially

increase anxiety and discomfort for many spectators” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 135).

Projansky acknowledges the impact consuming imagery of rape can have on spectators, which I believe is essential for scholarship on this subject. However, I disagree with her contention that “all representations of rape,” regardless of how feminist or anti-feminist it is, “necessarily contribute to the discursive existence of rape” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 137). There are instances in which rape can be depicted to *subvert* rape culture rather than contribute to it by debunking commonly held rape myths, and are therefore beneficial additions to discourse, which will be discussed later on in this chapter.

Before discussing the specific focus of this thesis—women being empowered to leadership through the act of rape—I will provide a brief background on rape revenge films from the 1960s to the 2000s and how the second and third-wave feminist movements influenced them. I will then do the same with rape narratives on television. Finally, I will demonstrate what I believe to be a feminist depiction of a rape revenge narrative with the MTV series *Sweet/Vicious* (Robinson, 2016–2017) to illustrate a model of how rape can be depicted in pursuit of feminist goals.

### **The Rape Revenge Film**

Ingmar Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring* (1960) is regarded as creating the basic narrative structure for the rape revenge film (Heller-Nicholas, 22), which Heller-Nicholas defines as a film “whereby a rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or by an agent” (3). In *The Virgin Spring*, devout Christian Tore sends his daughter to deliver candles to a faraway church, and on her journey, she is brutally raped and murdered by a group of goat herders, so Tore takes it upon himself to avenge her death.

According to Heller-Nicholas, rape is not the subject of Bergman's film; rather, it "acts as a narrative trigger" (23) for Tore's journey as a character. Akin to many other rape narratives predating the 1970s, *The Virgin Spring* does not focus on the victim of rape or her trauma but focuses instead on the pain that rape causes the men close to the victim. According to Read, such early rape revenge films were not trying to be feminist or even produce films about women, but "instead largely functioned to endorse and uphold the traditional conceptions of masculinity and femininity inscribed in the genres over which it was mapped" (77). In the case of *The Virgin Spring*, the film upholds the notions that women are helpless, and men are powerful and needed to avenge crimes against women.

Narrative formulations regarding rape changed in the 1970s due to an easing of film censorship regulations and the increase in discussion of sexual violence due to the work of the Anti-Rape Movement (Heller-Nicholas, 8-9). The Anti-Rape or Rape Reform Movement began in the early 1970s alongside the second-wave feminist movement as an effort to end rape and reform the judicial system to get justice for survivors. The New York Radical Feminists organized conferences where survivors spoke about their experiences with rape and the judicial system, leading the NYRF to conclusions that reshaped feminist ideology regarding rape, such as:

"The idea that victims of rape were unfairly made to feel guilty and responsible, the observation that victims were often accused of lying or exaggerating their claims of rape, the assertion that rape was treated differently from other felony crimes with respect to standards of proof and assumptions about victim behavior, and the conclusion that current law reinforced shame and secrecy." (Cuklanz, 8)

According to Cuklanz, the late 1970s and 1980s saw the most dramatic changes in feminist doctrine regarding rape and its causes (4). These discourses led to new representations of rape in film, specifically, the birth of films in which rape survivors avenge their own attacks.

Read identifies three categories of rape revenge: “primary, secondary, and displaced revenge” (95):

“Primary revenge refers to instances in which the rapist is killed by his victim, while secondary revenge refers to those cases in which he is killed by someone other than his victim, most usually a family member or loved one...displaced revenge, covers instances in which, while the rapist is not killed, another man or men is made to suffer in his place.” (Read, 95)

Before the 1970s, rape revenge narratives almost always fell into the “secondary” category, as victims would not enact their own revenge. The 1970s saw the rise of “primary” rape revenge narratives, and with Lamont Johnson’s popular film *Lipstick* (1976), the rape-revenge film became popular and rape became “a problem for women themselves to solve” (Clover: “Getting Even,” 138). In *Lipstick*, a model named Chris (Margaux Hemingway) is raped by her little sister’s music teacher and loses her criminal case against him. When the music teacher tries to rape Chris’s little sister, Chris, having lost all faith in the justice system, takes matters into her own hands and shoots him. Heller-Nicholas credits *Lipstick* for highlighting a rapist who is not a “cartoonish villain” (27) as previous rapists were represented in film, but a seemingly ordinary person. This new representation of a rapist was no doubt influenced by the new conceptions of rape formulated by the anti-rape movement, which argued that *anyone* could be a rapist, not just those othered by society. Most of the time, a rapist is someone who is embraced by society, whose privilege enables them to take advantage of others, often people they know and may even love.

As survivors of rape were advocating for themselves in the public sphere and feminists started challenging the rape myths society held, they not only shed light on the discussion of rape but enabled the creation of the female avenger in rape revenge films (Read, 97). Survivors of rape in cinema began advocating for themselves alongside the second-wave feminist movement,

by taking their revenge into their own hands. The rape revenge films of the '70s and '80s were shaped by the social changes that were taking place during those years), most notably by implying that we live in a rape culture, for which all members of our society, not just rapists, are responsible (Clover: "Getting Even," 138-139). The understanding of rape culture changed society's conception of rape prevention. The onus should not solely lie on survivors to fight for social change; every member of society must educate themselves and change their behavior in order to make a difference.

Rape narratives in film changed with the rise of postfeminism in the 1980s. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra define postfeminism as broadly encompassing "a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (1). Since postfeminism operates on the assumption that feminism is "no longer needed" (Tasker and Negra, 1), it "entails an emphatic individualism, but this formulation tends to confuse self-interest with individuality" (Tasker and Negra, 2) because, with the belief that the feminist movement is in the past, there is no need for women to work together for common goals. Thus, women in postfeminist films work towards individual goals rather than tackle institutional problems. Not only is postfeminism taking the place of what it considers to be an unnecessary feminist movement, but it is also "understood as a backlash against feminism" (Read, 117). Tasker and Negra go on to argue that postfeminism is inherently white and middle class, as well as being propagated on consumerism for self-betterment (2). Thus, the rise of postfeminism led to the representation of postfeminist heroines in film and television: women who were white, of privileged class status, and who, in the guise of self-empowerment, consume products in order to alter their appearance for the heterosexual male viewers' pleasure.

Rikke Schubart coined the term “High Trash Heroine” to describe low-budget postfeminist action films from the early 2000s, which highlight their heroines’ bodies over everything else (291). One such film she discusses is *Charlie’s Angels* (McG, 2000), featuring superstars Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, and Lucy Liu, and more importantly, their perfectly made-up and fit bodies. The angels wear skin-tight clothing to perform action, dress up as Swiss mountain girls, racecar drivers, and even strippers to complete their mission, jiggle their butts for the camera, and comment on their bodies’ appearance, effectively fulfilling straight male viewers’ desires. Women’s narratives in the postfeminist era, even in the action genre, focused heavily on the heroine’s bodies and her individual goals. Action heroines born out of the second-wave feminist movement, however, often use their powers/abilities to help others or create meaningful change. For example, Sarah Connor of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (Cameron, 1991) uses her ultra-fit hardbody to prevent global nuclear annihilation. By contrast, postfeminist action heroine The Bride of *Kill Bill: Volumes 1 & 2* (Tarantino, 2003 & 2004) uses her abilities as the world’s greatest samurai to hunt down and kill five people who have personally wronged her.

Projansky connects rape narratives following the 1980s to postfeminism, arguing that they alter feminist ideals and propose that feminism is not necessary (*Watching Rape*, 121). Postfeminism enables a “double reading of any representation of rape:” the actual assault of a woman, which acts as a backlash against women, and a representation of the calamity of the act (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 123). In other words, postfeminism allows a film to portray a violent sexual assault on a woman, which is read as an anti-feminist representation of hateful violence against women, while it is demonstrating the horrors of rape, which is read as a feminist

exposure of the realities of rape. I believe there are methods to portray rape on-screen without depicting a brutal attack that functions as a backlash against women.

Projansky focuses her criticism of postfeminist portrayals of rape narratives on arguably the most famous rape revenge film in recent memory, Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused* (1988). Though the film is regarded as progressive, Projansky contends the film partakes in a postfeminist backlash against women through its violent rape scene (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 123-124). *The Accused*, based on a real-life rape case, won Jodie Foster an Academy Award for her portrayal of Sarah Tobias, the scantily-clad woman who was gang-raped in a bar by three men while bystanders watched. Sarah's rapists plead guilty and receive a mild sentence, so Sarah, discouraged by the justice system, wants to try the men who watched the attack and did not intervene. In order to get justice, she must testify about what happened to her and convince a jury to believe her. The drama of the film hinges on the question its characters struggle with: "Did she provoke her attack?" or, as it is more colloquially phrased: "Was she asking for it?" The witnesses of the rape are only found guilty after one agrees to testify and corroborate Sarah's account of what happened. With his testimony, the audience finally sees the rape unfold in flashback, and thus because the audience sees what happens through his account, his version of events, Clover argues, becomes the audience's version—a narrative fact—whereas Sarah's testimony is *her* version ("Getting Even," 150). Not only does the jury believe him over Sarah, but, because the rape is shown from his perspective, the *audience* believes him over Sarah, as well. *The Accused* fails to sympathetically portray its rape victim by forcing the audience to doubt her until they receive verification from a "more reliable" male character, and by making the hero of the film the justice system, who punished the bystanders, instead of Sarah, herself.



## Rape Narratives on Television

Television did not incorporate the feminist movement into its programming as quickly as film narratives did. Lisa Cuklanz analyzes how rape narratives developed on prime time television, beginning with what she defines as the “basic plot” of rape narratives, which was popular in the 1980s, especially in detective series. In the “basic plot,” the victim is violently attacked by an off-screen rapist who often threatens the victim or insults her with sexist comments (Cuklanz, 6). “Basic plot” narratives are only interested in portraying rape in the most dramatic and entertaining way possible and are never about the victim, but about its male protagonist who gets justice for her. The attack highlights “the rapist’s intense depravity,” which is contrasted by the male protagonist’s “own actions, beliefs, and character” (Cuklanz, 6). In these episodes, the narrative does not focus on the victim or her feelings, though the plot centers on their attack.

For example, in the season three premiere of *Hill Street Blues* (Bochco, 1981–1987), a nun is raped and murdered by two black men in a church robbery. Captain Furillo, horrified by the attack and facing pressure from the scores of appalled citizens who want these men’s blood, coerces a confession out of one of the attackers by threatening him with the angry mob waiting outside the precinct. After the man confesses, Furillo goes to church to confess his sin of coercing a confession, making him seem like a moral character with a conscience. The crux of this episode’s narrative focuses on the juxtaposition of Furillo and the criminals: the heinousness of their crime, compounded by the fact that they rob a *church* when in need of money, rather than a store or a bank, make them undeserving of any sympathy from the audience. Despite coercing a confession, Furillo maintains the moral high ground because he used this tactic against two deplorable black men, feeding into America’s conceptions that police officers can

bend the rules if it is in the pursuit of “justice,” especially against minorities, and its racist fears of black men raping white women that have existed since the era of slavery. A nun is an ideal victim for the “basic plot” because she is inherently chaste, virginal, and holy, and therefore neither the authorities nor the audience would doubt her accusation. The audience learns almost nothing about the victim in this episode—*Hill Street Blues* does not even show her face because her body is covered with a sheet—but the audience does hear graphic details of her assault from the male officer at the crime scene. The woman herself is not important to this narrative; she is merely a culmination of American values—Christianity, female chastity and purity, and whiteness—that is violated by two poor black men.

Television programs began reflecting feminist conceptions of rape, its causes, and survivors in the late 1980s, featuring episodes on acquaintance rape and offering the victim’s perspective more often (Cuklanz, 25). Cuklanz lists four traditional rape myths that the anti-rape movement worked to debunk: 1) “Rape claimants are often liars,” 2) “Rapists are marginal or readily identifiable,” 3) “Real rape is violent and committed by a stranger,” and 4) “Victims contribute to their own attacks by provoking or asking for rape” (16). As anti-rape activists discredited these myths throughout the ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, television slowly began to portray rape in less exaggerated ways. For example, studies on acquaintance rape began in the 1970s, and by the 1990s, prime time television was producing episodes on acquaintance rape more often than the “basic plot” narratives of stranger rape found often in the ‘70s (Cuklanz, 4). The relationship between television and anti-rape ideology is not insignificant: television takes such ideology out of feminist theory and makes it available to mainstream audiences, who, in turn, view rape and its victims in a more empathetic light because of how they are portrayed on-screen. Cuklanz posits: “prime time serial television may be an important ground on which the

tensions between traditional and feminist ideas about rape are played out” (15), and for an example of a series that dedicates itself to playing out those tensions, one needs to look no further than *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (Wolf, 1999–).

The longest-running live-action prime time television show of all time deals exclusively with topics that have historically been ignored as being a ubiquitous part of America’s culture: sexual assault, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and child abuse. *Law & Order’s* (Wolf, 1990–2010) sex-crimes-focused spin-off does not shy away from such topics but shines a light on them while keeping the victims of these crimes and the always-sympathetic Captain Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) at the forefront of every narrative. Hargitay was so inspired by the series that she became an activist, founding the Joyful Heart Foundation for survivors of sexual violence and working to end the backlog of rape kits throughout the US. She views *SVU* as “a longtime force for positive change” (Barcella), and many others who work or have worked on the series in the last two decades agree with her. Episodes do not simply dramatize sexual violence; they are “laden with real-life lessons about consent, domestic violence, and the psychological impacts of sexual assault,” which is why the creative team behind *SVU* “see their show partly as a vehicle for education” (Minich, 5). Procedural detective dramas have historically been “the primary masculine television genre, with a predominantly male audience” (Cuklanz, 19); *SVU’s* audience, however, is “made up mostly of women” (Minich, 5) because it depicts a world in which the United States judicial system takes sexual violence seriously. Critics have argued that the way the show portrays how the justice system treats survivors is “the heart of the show’s appeal” (Minich, 5).

The season eleven episode “Savior” features a serial killer who targets sex workers. Many people believe sex workers cannot be sexually assaulted because of the nature of their

work. *SVU* debunks that notion by having Detectives Benson and Stabler (Christopher Meloni) dedicate just as much care, time, and attention to this case as they do every other. Benson cares deeply for the young, pregnant sex worker survivor in this episode, Gladys (Mischa Barton), tracking her down after she runs away from the crime scene, helping her after she is kicked out of her home, and even taking guardianship for her baby. This episode illustrates how Olivia Benson goes above and beyond for survivors whom society would cast aside. When Gladys testifies in court against the man who attacked her, the defense attorney calls her a “streetwalker testifying to save your own skin,” because her profession is illegal. In response, the Assistant District Attorney points out that Gladys has been under the control of her pimp since she was twelve-years-old, who forced her to work five nights a week and have sex with at least five clients each night, concluding: “And since you were twelve, you couldn’t consent, and because you were forced, you were raped. So would you estimate that you were raped a total of 13,000 times over those ten years?” She then turns to the defense attorney, points to Gladys and says, “That is a victim,” she then points to the defendant, “and that is a criminal.” A female ADA sympathizing with a sex worker and calling her a victim of rape in open court is a powerful example of *SVU* illustrating a version of the judicial system that cares for survivors much more than the real American justice system does.

*SVU* has consistently made an effort “to keep pace with the times” (Minich, 5), and has always incorporated the latest theory on sexual assault—from changing their language to refer to “victims” as “survivors,” to having the detectives participate in trauma-informed interviews with survivors in their latest season, which acknowledges that people’s memories are affected by trauma. Trauma-informed interviews allow survivors to focus on the memories that their senses provide—for example, what they heard, smelled, etc.—to give a description of what happened to

them, rather than try to remember specific details which is often difficult for someone to do after experiencing trauma. These interviews affect not only the answers the survivors give the detectives on the show, but also how their trauma is portrayed on-screen. In the season 21 episode, “The Darkest Journey Home,” the survivor tells Olivia everything she remembers, which is that she went to a bar, took a car home, and nothing else. When the survivor says that she drank a lot and took a Xanax, Olivia says: “Well, you know what? None of that matters. None of it.” Then Olivia begins the trauma-informed interview: “What, if anything, can you tell me about what you heard? What you saw?” The episode then cuts to flashes of bright lights on a ceiling, illustrating the disjointed memory from the survivor’s perspective. When she says she remembers water, Olivia responds: “So tell me about water,” leading to a longer point-of-view flashback of the ceiling, with silhouettes of male hands over the camera and the sounds of waves crashing and the survivor struggling. The motion of the camera in this flashback is chaotic, evoking the sense of fear and confusion the survivor must have felt when she experienced it. The flashbacks focus entirely on the survivor’s perspective, by staying locked in her visual and aural subjectivity through the use of her POV and the sounds she describes having heard. This method is effective at sensitively portraying an assault because “representing a rape scene from a woman’s point of view...may be the most explicit way to incorporate a woman’s perspective on rape” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 153).

The portrayal of rape in this episode is incredibly sensitive to the survivor it is portraying and survivors who may be watching, because “graphic depictions of trauma can vicariously traumatize certain viewers” (Spallacci, 6). The survivor is not objectified, the scene is not sensationalized or eroticized, and the narrative is focused entirely on the survivor’s experience, which is believed by Captain Benson from start to finish, consequently validating her experience

as true to the audience. *SVU* has always believed survivors. The show has debunked rape myths—such as sex workers cannot be assaulted, someone cannot be raped by their partner, consent is not reversible, and countless others—for over twenty years by having their detectives and prosecutors *always* believe the survivors who come to them. Such commitment to survivors makes it no wonder why the show is so popular with them. Additionally, the series helps viewers learn the signs and attributes of sexual violence, proving Cuklanz’s point that because rape is discussed so infrequently in American society, “film, serial prime time television, and television talk shows have been more useful in making rape reform ideas available to a mainstream audience” (15).

Representation of rape trauma is crucial to the responsible representation of rape in film and television. In her work on this topic, Amanda Spallacci contends: “The prevalence of rape *scenes* in mainstream Hollywood cinema over representations of rape *trauma* creates the standard that the burden of proof falls onto the survivor” (3). Moreover, without representations of trauma, the film or series implies that rape does not stay with a survivor after it happens, manifesting itself physically and mentally, often in the form of posttraumatic stress disorder. The rape revenge genre is especially guilty of not representing rape trauma. Because the resolution of the rape revenge narrative sees the rapist punished, the genre insinuates that a survivor is completely healed after rape once they get revenge on their rapist, whether that revenge takes form in physical harm or legal ramifications. The narrative does not continue to depict how the rape continues to affect the survivor mentally. This thesis contends the “myth of rape revenge,” as I refer to it, perpetuates the notion that the trauma of rape ends when the rapist is punished. The short-lived MTV show *Sweet/Vicious* provides a contemporary example of the rape-revenge narrative, which portrays that while physical rape revenge—in the vein of the classic rape

revenge films from the 1970s and '80s—can be cathartic for both the characters and the audience, true healing for a survivor is a mental process that goes far beyond revenge and may never be completely achieved.

The series, which focuses on the startling prevalence of rape on American college campuses, carefully and sensitively portrays sexual assault and does so exclusively in the form of traumatic memory. The series follows Jules (Eliza Bennett), sexual-assault-survivor-turned-vigilante and her partner in crime Ophelia (Taylor Cranston) as they beat up rapists on their campus, so that they are served the justice their school's administration refuses to provide them. The pilot of the series begins with Jules attacking a fraternity brother: the hyper-stylized fluidity and speed of her movements combined with "whooshing" sound effects emphasizes her incredible fighting skills and presents her as the hero of the scene, even though all the audience knows at this point is a person wearing all black, a ski mask, and using a voice box has broken into an unsuspecting man's room and started beating him up. Jules confronts her victim with a picture of the woman he raped and forces him to say her name while threatening him with a knife. Her physical assault of him with a phallic weapon is meant to make him understand how it feels to be overpowered and sexually assaulted, a fact made explicit when she asks, "You scared, Will? You feel powerless?" Her tactics revolve around anti-rape rhetoric one can often hear on a college campus: "Do I have consent, Will?" "I'm sorry. I thought no meant yes," making the scene even more relatable to the series' target audience: teenagers and college students. She leaves him with a blade in his thigh and warns him that if he ever rapes again, she will be back. Once she is out of the fraternity house, the episode reveals that she is a pretty sorority girl who stores her vigilante outfit in a bright pink backpack.

Other fight scenes in the series go similarly: Jules, and sometimes Ophelia, target an unsuspecting man while in disguise, taunt him with the name and photo of his victim so that he knows why he is being attacked, and then show off their exceptional combat skills in a hyper-stylized fight sequence. Jules and Ophelia attack several rapists throughout the series, but they never go after Jules's own rapist, around whom Jules freezes up. Jules knows that beating him up will not make her feel better, but beating up rapists for other victims does. Thus, the show does not participate in the postfeminist tradition of a female action hero with individual goals—Jules and Ophelia use their skills to make their campus safer for every person on it.

The pilot episode flashes back to Jules's rape when Jules confronts a rapist in a garage who overpowers her, gets on top of her, and starts choking her. While he is on top of her, Jules flashes back to her assault, and the episode cuts to a hazy, desaturated, shaky shot of her rapist holding her down by the neck and shushing her on his bed. The shot lasts less than ten seconds, yet in that time, it gives the audience everything it needs to understand that Jules was assaulted—there is no long, dragged out, graphic rape scene portrayed in the present tense—just a brief flashback. The episodes following the pilot portray similar flashbacks to hint at Jules's attack. The attack itself is not depicted until the seventh episode of the series, "Heartbreaker," once again in the form of traumatic memory. Much of the series is dedicated to accurately portraying the mental health effects of being a sexual assault survivor. In episode three, "Sucker," Jules breaks down at her frustration over suffering from PTSD, saying: "I don't sleep and when I do I have terrible nightmares, and I can barely be touched without jumping out of my skin...I can barely remember the girl I was before I got raped, and I miss her." The audience sees PTSD manifest in Jules when she freezes up and then cries whenever she sees her rapist, when she refuses to re-enter the frat house where she was attacked, and through her fear of intimacy. Jules



makes clear throughout her new relationship that she needs to take things slowly but never explains why. When she finally feels ready to have sex again, she pictures her rapist on top of her instead of her boyfriend and, in a moment of instinctual panic, kicks him off of her.

The consistent representations of Jules' PTSD make the episode where the audience sees Jules's assault and the context surrounding it especially heartbreaking because it portrays how much happier Jules was before she was raped. It also depicts how much she trusted her rapist, Nate (Dylan McTee), who was her best friend's boyfriend at the time of her assault. On the night of her assault, Jules is drunk at a party in Nate's frat house, and because she trusts Nate as a friend, she asks if she can lie down on his bed. The audience, because they know Jules so well at this point, understands that she wants to go to his room to sleep. Nate, however, interprets her request as an invitation for sex. He lies down next to her and kisses her while she sleeps. She wakes up and immediately says she does not want to, but he insists it is OK and gets on top of her. The shots following are brief and erratic, illustrating the chaos of the moment. At first, Jules tries to push him off of her, but once he puts his hand over her mouth, she freezes. The shots then become longer takes in close-up on Jules's face as she cries and lies there passively, enacting the "freeze" in the "fight-flight-freeze response" to trauma (Seltzer). According to *Psychology Today*, the well-known fight or flight response is "your reaction to a stimulus perceived as an imminent threat to your survival." However, a less known component to this set of responses is to freeze, "when the situation confronting you overwhelms your coping capacities and leaves you paralyzed in fear" (Seltzer). This reaction is incredibly common during rapes and is often the answer to the insensitive question: "Why didn't the victim fight back?" The fact that Jules freezes up during her attack provides a unique portrayal of sexual assault on-screen that is

sensitive to the many survivors who do freeze up during their attacks and demystifies the notion that passivity or lack of resistance can be construed as consent.

The success of the series' portrayal of sexual assault is that it does not need a detective to listen to Jules and validate her experience in order for the audience to believe her. In fact, the audience watches as Jules is *not* believed by authority figures, such as her college's Title IX coordinator, yet it still allies her because the show consistently presents the assault from its protagonist's perspective, and therefore, as a fact of the narrative. Unlike *The Accused*, the series leaves no room for the audience to question whether or not Jules was raped or whether she did anything to provoke it—its sympathies, and that of the audience, remain constantly aligned with her. *Sweet/Vicious* is an example of the importance of centering the victim during an assault scene, rather than the rapist or any third-party participant because it keeps the audience's sympathies allied with the victim and makes the scene more about the horrors of sexual assault for a victim rather than the spectacle of the act. The series' choice to always present the attack in flashback while depicting the toll the attack has taken on Jules's mental health demonstrates its dedication to not just depict survivors, but how they actually survive after sexual assault. Such a representation does its best to address what Heller-Nicholas refers to as “the very ‘unrepresentability’ of the reality and trauma of rape itself—the inability to capture the magnitude of human suffering that results from sexual violence” (8). This thesis asserts that such a representation of sexual assault, one that focuses on the *aftermath* of the attack on survivors more than the attack itself, is the most sympathetic method of representing rape on-screen.

*Sweet/Vicious* also effectively subverts the myth of rape revenge. Jules may attack rapists on her campus, but she never attacks Nate. She confronts him only with words and gets her revenge on him by filing a Title IX case against him and then by exposing him to the school as

the rapist he is. When she finally confronts him in the series' sixth episode, "Fearless," she pushes him up against a wall, covers his mouth—just like he did to her when he raped her—and tells him to listen to her. She explains to him that what he did to her *was* rape and, "the fact that you thought it was sex for just one second is disgusting." She tells him the impact it has had on her and then breaks down crying, letting him get away without injury. That verbal confrontation is more cathartic for her than any time she beat up a rapist and is a crucial moment in her healing process. In the following episode, Jules gets drunk and wants to attack Nate, saying, "I'm gonna take care of him," to which Ophelia responds: "You need to take care of yourself." Jules swears that attacking Nate will be the only way that she can get better, but Ophelia insists that she needs to talk to someone about what happened to her and how she is feeling, and Jules agrees to go to a survivor support group and not hurt Nate. This scene perfectly encapsulates the myth of the rape revenge narrative: while getting revenge on an attacker might feel like a short-term solution for a survivor on-screen and be cathartic for other survivors to watch, such a narrative resolution implies that once the rape is avenged, the survivor is healed. The reality is, healing after sexual assault is a long, difficult, and often disheartening process, which requires a support system and mental health professionals for the survivor. By not addressing the mental health effects of sexual assault, rape revenge narratives provide an idealized portrayal of survivors, their healing, and their strength in the guise of self-empowerment.

### **Rape Narratives as a Path to Leadership**

Throughout the past few years, I have noticed a startling trend in rape narratives on popular cable television programs, which use the act of rape as a catalyst to propel a female character to a position of leadership or power. These narratives imply that these women need

some sort of trauma to “overcome” in order to achieve power in an androcentric world, and because sexual violence against women is so prevalent in film and television, rape appears to be an obvious narrative tool in a woman’s path to empowerment. This trope is neither new, nor is it exclusive to television series. In 2001, Projansky noted in her book: “Some texts depict independent women as interested in masculine careers. Rape emerges in these films as a mark of women’s essentialized bodily gender difference that must be overcome before they can succeed in a masculine world” (144). In other words, rape in these narratives serves to point out the fundamental difference between the male and female sexes—the male being read as superior and the female as inferior—through the violation of the female body. Only after the woman is reminded of her place as lesser in the misogynistic diegesis through this violation, she can rise to positions of power. In these narratives, “a woman *both* faces rape because of her desire to access her equal right to a masculine career *and* is fully transformed into an independent masculine subject (a version of a postfeminist feminist), ironically, as a result of rape” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 144). Projansky articulates this point with the film *Opposing Force* (Karson, 1986) in which a military captain rapes the only woman soldier in his prisoner of war training camp in order to prepare her for what would happen if she were taken by the enemy. By the postfeminist logic of this film, her rape was inevitable because of her decision, fueled by her independence and ambition, to enter the masculine space of the military. As a woman soldier, the main difference between her and her male colleagues in this POW training scenario is her risk of being raped. Therefore her rape emphasizes her status as “other” from the men so that she may remain in this space while being reminded of her place within its misogynistic structure. Thus she becomes a postfeminist (accepting of her place within patriarchy) feminist (an independent, active woman).

Such character arcs for women are incredibly problematic because they “imply that rape can produce positive results,” specifically leadership opportunities, as well as insinuate, “that all women are already committed to independent action, they just need rape to ‘free’ them to take that action” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 150). In other words, the women in these narratives are capable of being active characters, but only the act of rape can enable them to be active.

Additionally, these character arcs uphold the misogynistic notion that in order for a woman to be a hero for male viewers to identify with without threatening “the structures of male competence” (Clover: “Her Body, Himself,” 99), she must be brutally victimized on-screen. I believe Projansky’s argument applies to the character arcs of Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) in *Game of Thrones* (Benioff and Weiss, 2011–2019), Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood) in *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy, 2016– ) and Jessica Jones (Krysten Ritter) in *Marvel’s Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg, 2015–2019). Sansa and Dolores’s rape propels them to political power and leadership positions, and Jessica’s incites her to be a superhero.

It is crucial to emphasize at this point that most rape narratives focus on white, heterosexual, able-bodied women, perpetuating the myth that straight, white women without disabilities are the most likely demographic to be assaulted, when in reality, people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and people with disabilities experience sexual assault much more often (Linder, 10). Hollywood is notoriously heteronormative and white-centered, and the women it chooses to portray in leadership positions and as victim-heroes reflect those values—not the reality of who is actually assaulted in the US. Additionally, I do not want to imply that only women can be victims of sexual assault. People of all genders can be and are assaulted every day. However, referring back to Projansky’s argument, the idea that rape could be a catalyst for empowerment is specific to non-male characters as it, for lack of a better phrase,

“puts them in their place” within misogynist society, and allows for them to become heroes without disrupting patriarchal power dynamics by making them victim-heroes.

19.3 million viewers tuned in to watch the finale of HBO’s epic series *Game of Thrones* (Patten). For reference, if the *Game of Thrones* audience made up a country, it would be 62<sup>nd</sup> most populated in the world. As an extra to one’s cable package, HBO needs just one show to bring in high enough viewership numbers so that people keep paying for the network, and Benioff and Weiss’s adaptation of George R.R. Martin’s popular book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* more than delivered. For eight seasons, people tuned in to watch spectacular dragons, incredible special effects, political intrigue, and lots of sex and violence. With copious nudity, excessive violence, aggressive displays of masculinity to exert power over others, and a narrative built on devastating blows to beloved characters, rape seems inevitable on the world’s most epic television series. As Anne Gjelsvik notes: “sex and violence are integral to the contest for power which underpins the story” (57) of *Game of Thrones*, and are what many find so entertaining about the series. One need not wait long to see an assault on-screen: one of the show’s protagonists, Daenerys (Emilia Clarke), is raped in the pilot episode when she is supposed to be only fourteen years old. The series’ creative team and its fans were able to explain that assault and the incestuous rape of Cersei Lannister (Lena Heady) in season three on the fact that both rapes occurred in Martin’s books and the show was just being loyal to its subject matter. Many fans, however, could not abide by the show depicting the rape of a major teenaged character that does not occur in the books—that of Sansa Stark on her wedding night in the fifth season of the series. Before this episode, Sansa is meek and constantly made to suffer. Afterwards, she stops passively existing within her narrative and letting other people make decisions for her and, motivated by her desire for revenge, works with her siblings to destroy her husband and all of her

other enemies to become queen. Her character arc begs the questions: Why did the writers feel it was necessary that she be raped? Why is her rape the event that makes her “strong” enough to become an active heroine and achieve her goals? Men on *Game of Thrones* become powerful by doing harm to others, but Sansa becomes powerful by having harm done unto her.

Chapter two of this thesis will analyze *Game of Thrones*’ frequent mishandling of sexual violence in the series to prove that its creative team had no understanding of how to represent it responsibly or of the impact such imagery had on its audience. The chapter will then analyze Sansa Stark’s life of suffering, culminating in her rape revenge narrative and rise to power to illustrate how Sansa’s sexual abuse from her husband, which is portrayed solely to elicit shock from the audience, is the only factor that makes her “strong” enough to become a queen. Moreover, once her revenge narrative is complete, the series portrays the myth of rape revenge by having her demonstrate no emotion regarding her trauma ever again.

Another, but less popular, HBO epic series features sexual assault as the stimulus of its heroine’s rise to power. Within the Old West theme park of *Westworld* lives the wide-eyed farmer’s daughter and robot designed for human pleasure, Dolores Abernathy. Dolores is shockingly dragged off to be raped in the first fifteen minutes of the series’ pilot, which introduces the show’s protagonist as a victim, and sets her up on her journey to personal freedom, violent revenge, and authority over the other robots and humans in the park. Since Dolores’s rape in the pilot episode (one of many she experiences) is one of the first events that happens in the narrative, the series very clearly denotes her rape as a starting point for her journey as a character, and thus, a major catalyst for her rise to leadership. Because the show focuses on the violation of robots, rather than humans, it cannot depict the mental health effects sexual assault has on survivors, and instead focuses on Dolores’s vicious quest for revenge

against the humans who have enslaved and raped her for decades. According to the logic of *Westworld*, the robots have to suffer in order to achieve sentience, and so Dolores endures rape and abuse for decades to become a sentient being. To borrow Projansky's wording, rape literally "frees" (*Watching Rape*: 150) Dolores to take action. Many other robots join her on her quest, driven by their anger at having been under human control for so many years, but Dolores is the only major character who is incentivized by rape revenge, which should make the viewer question if that narrative motivation is necessary for her at all. Chapter three will examine how rape literally enables Dolores to become a leader, and with her rape revenge narrative makes her a ruthless, rather than justified, and unsympathetic victim-hero, whom the audience struggles to root for despite sympathizing with her suffering at the beginning of her narrative.

Jessica Jones, one of a small handful of female superheroes in the Marvel universe and one of only two with her own television series, gains her superpowers after her parents are killed in a car accident—a common backstory for superheroes. However, after gaining her powers, she is put under mind control, kidnapped, sexually assaulted, and held in captivity by her rapist for months. The series picks up after these events. *Jessica Jones* has been lauded for its complex depiction of sexual trauma and the effect it has on victims—The Guardian even hailed it as "one of the most complex treatments of agency in the wake of victimhood that the small screen has seen" (Loofbourow). However, those who praise it fail to question why her assault is necessary to her backstory. Jessica does not accept her role as a superhero before she is kidnapped; she only decides to use her powers to save others and defeat a villain during her rape revenge narrative. Is it a coincidence that one of the only female Marvel superheroes finds empowerment after sexual assault? Why must she endure the tragedy of her parents' deaths *and* a sexual violation? Jessica's rape is a departure from the source material, in which the supervillain



psychologically abuses her, but never physically or sexually harms her (Fitzpatrick). While *Jessica Jones* sensitively portrays PTSD and the toll sexual assault takes on a survivor, it still upholds the idea that rape makes someone stronger by acting as the narrative catalyst for Jessica's superhero journey. Chapter four will explore all of the feminist aspects of *Jessica Jones*' representation of sexual assault and sexual trauma. However, it will also demonstrate how this series gives way to the same pitfall as *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld*: a gratuitous rape narrative in order to empower a woman character and transform her into a leader.

I am by no means advocating for censorship of imagery of sexual assault on-screen, but since such imagery can have visceral effects on those watching, it must be handled sensitively, so that it focuses on the trauma of rape and not the spectacle of the act. Graphic depictions of rape can be triggering for viewers who have experienced similar trauma, but those same viewers can find empowerment from seeing how a sexual assault survivor manages to survive. Rape narratives must depict how survivors struggle, heal, and how they endure after being assaulted. Sansa and Dolores become stoic and unfeeling after their attacks, indicating that in order to become leaders, they must adopt masculine traits and abandon their emotions, which disallows the audience to watch them undergo any mental healing. Even worse, their character arcs imply that they have no healing to undergo. Their rapes make them strong, "masculine subjects" whose healing comes solely from violent acts of revenge, insinuating that their attacks had no effect on their mental health. Jessica's rape narrative, while still gratuitous, at least demonstrates the long road to mental healing for a survivor, even if that survivor has superpowers.

By contrast to the gratuitous representations of rape in *Game of Thrones*, *Westworld*, and *Jessica Jones*, Jane Campion's series *Top of Lake* features a woman leader whose rape in her backstory is not unnecessary to the trajectory of her character. Detective Robin Griffin (Elizabeth

Moss) returns to her small New Zealand hometown to investigate the disappearance of a pregnant twelve-year-old girl. Throughout the investigation, the audience learns that Robin left her hometown after being gang-raped when she was a teenager and has dedicated herself to helping survivors ever since as a special victims detective. Through Robin's subjectivity, the show examines her painful journey as she is reminded of her own rape while she is investigating the girl's disappearance, depicting the attack only in the form of a traumatic flashback. Rape is never presented as having made Robin stronger; by contrast, it illustrates Robin's strength as her ability to work through the damage her trauma has done to her. The concluding chapter of this thesis analyzes this feminist example of rape in a woman leader's backstory and argues that the trajectory of victim to someone who advocates for victims makes Robin a richer character. Robin is an example of how rape can be used as a backstory for women characters that delves into the horrors of sexual assault, the pain of being a survivor, and the strength it takes Robin to pursue her feminist goal of helping others like her.

In summation, this thesis's argument is twofold. Firstly, in order to portray a feminist representation of sexual violence, sexual violence has to be essential to the narrative. It cannot merely be a stimulus for a woman's empowerment or a method by which to make her "stronger." It must directly correlate to the end of her character arc as it does with Robin's. Secondly, feminist rape narratives cannot illustrate rape as a spectacle; to ensure a portrayal of sexual violence is sensitive to viewers and the subject matter itself, it should be depicted as a traumatic memory, which highlights the survivor, their emotions, and their subjectivity. Alongside the actual depiction of the assault, the narrative must include depictions of how rape survivors attempt to recover from their attacks. If a female rape survivor is supposed to be presented as an

example of an empowering woman character, then she must be a three-dimensional character, not an unfeeling fantasy of a survivor. Rape does not make someone stronger, but it can prove their endurance and resilience to be able to survive afterwards. Referring back to the quote at the beginning of this chapter: “[Women] don’t need abuse to be powerful. We already are,” and thus, victim-hero leaders such as Sansa Stark, Dolores, and Jessica Jones, whose power stems from violent sexual abuse, are not empowering or feminist representations of female leadership.

## Chapter Two: Sansa Stark the Little Bird

In the fourth episode of the final season of David Benioff and D.B. Weiss's world-renowned epic series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), Sansa Stark (Sophie Turner) encounters former knight The Hound (Rory McCann) for the first time in years. He makes a rude remark to her, and she is unfazed; instead of engaging, she simply smirks and stares him down. The Hound is surprised and responds: "Used to be you couldn't look at me," implying how much stronger she has become since he last saw her. Then he adds: "Heard you were broken in. Heard you were broken in rough."

The Hound is referring to Sansa's marriage to the monstrous and sadistic Ramsay Bolton (Iwan Rheon), who repeatedly raped and abused her. Sansa eventually escapes Ramsay and, with the help of her brother Jon Snow (Kit Harrington), defeats his army and feeds him to his hunting dogs, hence Sansa's response to the Hound: "And he got what he deserved. I gave it to him." Her retort upholds the myth of rape revenge: all it takes for a victim to get over their trauma is to violently kill their attacker, and thus, the repercussions of the rape die with the rapist. The myth is reinforced further by Sophie Turner's unemotional performance—she is not perturbed by the Hound's remarks because her suffering at the hands of Ramsay has no effect on her anymore. Her reaction is unsurprising, as *Game of Thrones* does not dedicate a moment of screen time to depict Sansa dealing with the aftermath of her trauma. The series equates Sansa's strength with dispassion, implying that a strong woman is stoic and does not show emotion. This trope is seen again and again in other strong female characters like Daenerys Targaryen (Emilia Clarke), Arya Stark (Maisie Williams), and Cersei Lannister (Lena Headey), all of whom become less empathetic as the series progresses. By contrast, male characters like Tyrion (Peter Dinklage)

can scream and demonstrate emotion at inappropriate but understandable times, such as during his trial in “The Laws of Gods and Men,” and are not considered irrational or weak.

The Hound reminds Sansa that if she had run away with him when he offered seasons before, she never would have been raped and abused by Ramsay. Sansa smiles and responds: “Without Littlefinger and Ramsay and the rest, I would have stayed a little bird all my life.” She then stands up and is framed in a low angle shot—the angle of the shot empowers her at this moment. Her dialogue, however, completely disempowers her. With this response, *Game of Thrones* articulates about which *Westworld* and *Jessica Jones* do not dare to be so overt: according to Sansa, sexual violence made her the woman she is in the present. Had she not been raped and abused, she argues, she would not be as strong as she currently is. She needed to be “broken in” by a man, as the Hound describes it, in order to become the Queen in the North. The show does not offer any answers to the question: Why does her empowerment depend on her being brutally violated by a man? Her brother Rob (Richard Madden) does not need to be assaulted in order to become the King in the North—he is easily accepted because he is his family’s oldest son. Sansa does not have as easy a journey to the throne as the oldest daughter.

Based on the popular fantasy book series *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin, *Game of Thrones*’ epic portrayal of the mythical land of Westeros, whose seven regions—loosely modeled after Medieval Europe—are constantly at war with one another, became one of the biggest television series in the world in 2011. In Westeros, noblemen and women vie for power amidst fire-breathing dragons, bloodthirsty zombies known as “white walkers,” and witches raising people from the dead with blood magic. The show portrayed massive fight scenes, in which knights engage in expert sword fighting, and the audience remained captivated

as gruesome, gory violence played out on their screens. *Game of Thrones* features an ensemble cast of dozens of characters, and so most episodes feature multiple independent storylines, forcing viewers to pay close attention to each episode so that they can keep up. The production was, as an understatement, ambitious, and that ambition paid off. In 2017, HBO revealed that, on average, 32.8 million people watched *Game of Thrones*, both on the cable channel and its digital platforms (Koblin). In addition to its record-breaking ratings (Koblin), *GOT* was also lauded with critical acclaim. Throughout its tenure, *Game of Thrones* was nominated for 160 Primetime Emmy Awards and won a total of 59 (“Game of Thrones”).

A surprising aspect of this otherwise “masculine” violent fantasy series is that it features so many strong women characters. Brienne of Tarth (Gwendoline Christie) can defeat any knight in combat; she not only becomes the first woman to be knighted but by the end of the series, she becomes the highest-ranking knight in Westeros. Arya Stark trains to become the world’s greatest assassin, ultimately saving all of Westeros by killing the king of the White Walkers. Queen Daenerys Targaryen rules over armies, rides dragons into battle, frees thousands of slaves, crucifies their masters, and lights her enemies on fire. Queen Cersei Lannister is one of the most complex villains in the series as we see her commit cunning atrocities such as blowing up a Sept (the *Game of Thrones* equivalent to a cathedral) filled with her unsuspecting enemies or secretly poisoning her abusive husband, but we also see her vulnerability through her love for her children and her desperation to gain power in such a misogynistic world. Finally, Sansa Stark is introduced as a naïve preteen who dreams of becoming a princess, and ends the series by negotiating the autonomy of her region, something her brothers failed to do, becoming the first legitimate Queen of the North. What is *not* surprising from such a “masculine” show that features copious amounts of sex, violence, and nudity is that rape is a frequent plot device in

*Game of Thrones*, and almost every significant female character is raped or almost raped at some point throughout the series.

With Sansa's "little bird" line, *Game of Thrones* confirms what it has hinted at since Daenerys is sold to her husband and then becomes the Mother of Dragons in season one: women cannot be queens in this universe unless they are also victims because only rape will make them "strong" enough to rule. They must be victimized on-screen, by men they know, in order for the audience to accept them as authority figures because a woman who is a leader in her own right is too threatening in our patriarchal world. In the first episode of the series, "Winter is Coming," Ned Stark (Sean Bean) wants to make Sansa's younger brother Bran (Isaac Hempstead Wright) stronger by having Bran watch him execute a criminal. As Ned raises his sword to decapitate the man, Jon Snow whispers to Bran: "Don't look away." With this moment, *Game of Thrones* sets the standard, as early as the pilot episode, that men become strong through enacting violence. Through the character arcs of queens Daenerys, Cersei, and Sansa, the series reveals the other side of that standard: women become strong by enduring violence done unto them. They have to be "broken in" by men. Thus, Sansa's rape is a right of passage for her; it is the catalyst that enables her path to leadership. All three queens of the series follow the same path, with the same starting point. The series makes clear that in order for women to rule over men, they must first be victimized by one.

In order to fully understand this trope of rape making women stronger within *Game of Thrones*, one must examine the series' ubiquitous, shocking, and often gratuitous use of sexual violence against women. *Game of Thrones* never explores the effects of rape on its survivors, and often only employs it to elicit shock value. This chapter will analyze some of the most

controversial rape scenes of the series: that of Daenerys Targaryen, Cersei Lannister, Meera Reed (Ellie Kendrick), and Sansa Stark to demonstrate the carelessness and lack of understanding of the *Game of Thrones* creative team regarding sexual violence. With these examples, this chapter will prove that the series employs sexual violence as a source of spectacle, a path to empowerment for its women characters, or as a way to advance a third-party man's narrative, even when the narrative could proceed without the rape. Sansa's rape encapsulates all three of the series' above anti-feminist uses of sexual assault in that her rape was portrayed to produce shock value, it gives Sansa the obstacle she needs to become a "strong" woman leader, and it is used to torture the man who is forced to watch. Despite all of the ways Sansa's rape scene functions within the narrative, this chapter will demonstrate that it is still unnecessary to her character development, and thus, a gratuitous rape narrative.

For eight seasons, Daenerys Targaryen captivated audiences. Her compassion for the disenfranchised, unwavering strength, ability to rule over masses, and make powerful men on their knees before her, not to mention her wielding of three massive dragons, affected fans so much that some named their daughters after her. Part of the reason she is so compelling is that viewers watched her progression from a scared, abused fourteen-year-old girl to the fearless Mother of Dragons. She is sexually assaulted in the pilot episode, and thus her introduction to the audience is as a rape victim. Daenerys has to overcome the obstacle of being a woman in a world where rape is seemingly inevitable for them, and, up until the final season, she does. She becomes powerful and independent in ways that made women viewers rally behind her. However, Daenerys reaches this point through incredibly problematic means. Daenerys moves on from her rape by falling in love with her rapist, and she receives her dragon eggs as a wedding



present, indicating that she would not have become the Mother of Dragons if she were not married off as a teenager.

Daenerys is sexually assaulted in her very first scene of the series. While preparing for her wedding in the distant continent of Esos, her brother Viserys (Harry Lloyd) takes her dress off of her, comments on her new “woman’s body,” and runs his hand over her naked breast, which is fragmented from the rest of her body and framed in close-up. Dany gazes off into the distance with an expressionless face, implying that this violation is a common occurrence. In the following scene, Viserys presents his sister to her future husband, Khal Drogo (Jason Momoa), who silently stares at his teenage bride and then rides away. The Targaryen translator assures Viserys that Khal Drogo likes Dany, affirming that her worth is purely measured at face value. When she tells her brother that she does not want to go through with the marriage, he responds: “I would let his whole tribe fuck you. All 40,000 men and their horses, if that’s what it took [to go back to Westeros].” The audience understands, from Dany’s very first moments, that she is truly powerless. Her brother, the one person she trusts to protect her, expects her to be raped by the man to whom he is selling her so that he may become king. She is immediately established as a passive, helpless pawn in another man’s quest for power.

Later in the same episode, Daenerys’s groom rapes her on her wedding night. Khal Drogo circles her terrified body multiple times as he undoes her dress, and then wipes away a tear from her face, an act that might be interpreted as tender if he does not subsequently disregard her persistent crying, push her down on all fours, and have sex with her anyway. During this scene, Doyle argues, the audience is “invited to understand what rape is, purely through witnessing the pain and powerlessness of one teenage girl.” Before he rapes her, Dany realizes that “no” is the only word of the “common tongue” (English) that Drogo knows. This addition to the scene is

ironic given that Dany is acutely aware that she does not have the ability to say “no” to him at this moment, just like she did not have the ability to say “no” to her brother when he decided to marry her off in the first place. The choice to include this scene in the pilot episode and have it introduce the audience to one of the series’ most significant characters defines an aspect of “the show’s moral cosmos” (Doyle). Part of the world-building in the pilot episode is dedicated to illustrating the prevalence of sexual violence in the diegesis, preparing the audience to see more characters be assaulted on-screen (Doyle).

An overwhelming number of articles on *Game of Thrones* discuss, if not focus entirely on, how effectively the series is adapted from George R.R. Martin’s book series. This chapter will examine the adaption of certain episodes, not for fidelity, but to demonstrate how the *GOT* creative team mishandled the visual representation of sexual violence again and again.

Daenerys’s rape is an adaptation worth examining: the series decided to have Drogo rape Daenerys on her wedding night, whereas in the book the scene is based on, *A Game of Thrones*, her wedding night is depicted as “a sexual awakening and revelation for Daenerys about the power of her desire and sexuality” (Rodriguez). The scene in the novel portrays a more complex and sympathetic version of Khal Drogo rather than the savage man of color towering over and terrorizing a helpless blonde teenager as the show depicts him. On the one hand, the show’s alteration from the source material makes more sense in that it is hard to believe a fourteen-year-old virgin would be comfortable having sex with an adult male stranger. On the other hand, the brutality of the portrayal in the show makes it much harder to understand why Dany would fall in love with him just a few episodes later. The only explanation the series offers is “a tender consensual scene between Daenerys and her husband,” but this scene “occurs only after he has repeatedly, graphically raped her and she has learned seduction techniques in order to take back

control” (Ferreday, 24). The implication being: all it takes for Dany to fall in love with her rapist is to stop being raped by him. Moreover, her love for him is not explained as the result of any manipulation of Dany or some sort of Stockholm Syndrome. In fact, Daenerys and Khal Drogo are portrayed as one of the series’ greatest love stories. Dany falling in love with her rapist in this manner is the series’ first example of its complete lack of understanding of sexual trauma or survivors.

The *Game of Thrones* creative team demonstrated their ignorance towards sexual violence and its implications once again in season four, during one of the most controversial rape scenes in the series, between brother and sister Jaime (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) and Cersei Lannister. The scene was especially controversial because it was, as Christopher Orr describes, “essentially a mistake.” In the episode, entitled “Breaker of Chains,” Cersei grieves over her son’s dead body in the Sept. Jaime comforts Cersei with a hug, and then kisses her. She kisses him back at first, but then pulls away, clearly disturbed, and goes back to her son’s body. Jaime becomes frustrated and calls her a “hateful woman” for rejecting him, then grabs her, pins her against the altar where their son lies, and puts his weight against her so she cannot escape. Cersei says: “Jaime, not here, please,” but he does not stop. She says, “please” again, and Jaime rips her dress. She begs him to stop three more times, and he responds: “No.” They kiss for a moment until Jaime brings her to the ground and gets on top of her—all while she is telling him to stop. Jaime starts to rape her, and she says: “It’s not right,” to which he responds, “I don’t care.” Cersei then starts crying as Jaime continues. The scene ends with Cersei crying, pushing Jaime’s chin away from her face with her hand, and Jaime saying, “I don’t care.”

To the surprise of the showrunners and director Alex Graves, viewers were immediately outraged by Jaime's rape of his sister. According to them, the *Game of Thrones* creative team never intended for this scene to depict a rape. They were trying to reproduce the sex scene in Martin's book *A Storm of Swords*, in which Cersei knows what they are doing is wrong and is worried about getting caught, saying, "quickly, quickly, now, do it now, do me now" (Martin, 850)—a sharp contrast from Cersei's obvious resistance and Jaime's subsequent disregard for it in the episode. Martin, himself, thought the scene differed so much from the original source material that he felt it necessary to apologize to any viewers who found the scene disturbing for "the wrong reasons" (Gjelsvik, 61), meaning disturbed by the rape rather than the incest or proximity to their son's corpse. In a now-infamous interview with Vulture, Alex Graves defended the scene, arguing that the scene was never intended to depict a rape and that the sex "became consensual by the end" (Martin). He insisted that:

"The consensual part of it was that she wraps her legs around him, and she's holding on to the table, clearly not to escape but to get some grounding in what's going on. And also, the other thing that I think is clear before they hit the ground is she starts to make out with him. The big things to us that were so important, and that hopefully were not missed, is that before he rips her undergarment, she's way into kissing him back. She's kissing him aplenty." (Martin)

With this statement, Graves reveals just how ignorant and insensitive the *Game of Thrones* creative team is to this subject. Yes, Cersei does not grab the table to escape, but that is because she cannot escape—a much larger man's (who happens to be a soldier) full weight is on top of her. A victim not trying to escape from an attack is not a standard for consent, especially when their rapist is physically overpowering them. Additionally, Graves contradicts himself with his statement that the scene: "became consensual by the end" because "before they hit the ground is she starts to make out with him...before he rips her undergarment, she's way into kissing him

back.” The moment when she kisses him is not the end of the scene—it is the moment right before the actual rape begins: when he rips her dress, throws her to the ground, and starts to have sex with her despite her persistent protests. Any consent Cersei may have given when she kisses him is completely revoked once she tells him to stop. Debra Ferreday contends that Graves’ flippant word choice in his response echoes “the language often used to trivialize rape in contemporary society” (30) as he focuses on Cersei’s meaningless acts in order to discredit the survivor and ignores the most important part of the scene: Cersei crying and telling Jaime to stop while he continues to have sex with her. Whether she is telling Jaime to stop because she thinks it is wrong to have sex there or because she does not want to have sex with him at all, it is still an unambiguous portrayal of rape, and most of the audience realized that while watching the scene when it aired.

Benioff and Weiss also denied that the scene depicted a rape, despite Benioff saying in the Inside the Episode commentary for “The Breaker of Chains” that, “You see that Cersei is resisting this. She’s saying no, and he’s forcing himself on her.” By acknowledging that Cersei resists, yet Jaime still forces himself on her despite that and not admitting that these facts make the scene a rape, Benioff proves the fundamental disconnect in the *Game of Thrones* creative team’s understanding of what rape is. This disconnect may provide some explanation as to why the series handles sexual violence with such a lack of sensitivity throughout all eight seasons. Furthermore, if they lack such a basic understanding of what actually constitutes rape, then they should not be playing with what they believe are the grey areas of consent.

Some fans defended “Breaker of Chains,” arguing that the events on-screen did depict rape, but they “belong to the distant past and are no longer relevant to the off-screen experience” (Ferreday, 30). The argument that *Game of Thrones* is merely trying to replicate the medieval

past is a common refrain among fans trying to defend the show's constant misogyny and racism. This contention immediately falls apart the moment a dragon or a White Walker appears on-screen. *GOT* is *not* representing the past; it is depicting a fantastical—not historically accurate—world which contains problems that are very much “relevant to the off-screen experience.” This connection to the real world makes the show so popular, as Megan Kearns describes it: *Game of Thrones* is “fantasy for people who aren't really into fantasy,” because of its complex characters and political intrigue. Viewers can argue that the events of the series do not apply to the real world, but its depiction of rape culture is incredibly relatable to viewers. Ferreday illustrates just how applicable Cersei's rape scene is to real-world rape culture, arguing:

“Cersei is raped in her own home, by a family member, and in circumstances where it is possible for both parties to subsequently deny that the rape really happened, where the victim's sexuality is already the subject of censorious gossip (and hence any claim to have been raped is unlikely to be believed) and where justice is unlikely” (31).

The circumstances of this scene do not “belong to the distant past,” but are based on the all-too-familiar reality for some survivors in our world. Thusly, it relates to these survivors and anyone who knows of a story similar to Cersei's (Ferreday, 31). The episode could be credited for representing such a poignant and thought-provoking portrayal of domestic rape and incest if it were at all intentional or ever dealt with by Cersei afterwards.

So far, this chapter has discussed the portrayal of a survivor falling in love with her rapist and a rape that the showrunners and director did not intend to be one. In keeping with this pattern of mishandling sexual violence, the series also includes an attempted rape that serves to build up a male hero and completely disregards the survivor. Major female characters are not the only women raped in the *Game of Thrones* universe; several minor and even nameless characters are

raped in order to set a horrifying tone for a scene. One such example occurs in “Oathkeeper” when Karl Tanner (Burn Gorman) and his men take over Craster’s Keep—a house formerly inhabited by a man and his daughters turned wives—and rape women in the background of the scene while Karl chants: “Fuck ‘em till they’re dead!” These women are introduced to the series as victims of their father and are now depicted on-screen as the victims of strangers. They possess no agency, not even names. The climax of this brief storyline occurs in the next episode, “First of His Name,” when Karl ties up Bran and his traveling companions, siblings Jojen (Thomas Brodie-Sangster) and Meera Reed and threatens Meera with rape.

Karl’s build-up to attacking Meera is incredibly drawn out: his men tie her hands above her head and hang them from a hook so that she cannot run away while Bran fruitlessly protests. Karl and his men taunt both Meera and her brother with her inevitable gang rape: “Can you see what I’m going to do to your sister? Can you see what *they’re* going to do to your sister?” He then tells Jojen not to close his eyes while it is happening. Jojen is provided the agency to sass Karl, but Meera says nothing—she simply hangs helplessly, looking terrified. Directing threats at Jojen is an example of *GOT* making rape about the torture of men close to victims, rather than the victims, themselves.

Meera is saved from her attackers by the arrival of Jon Snow and his Night’s Watchmen. It is refreshing that Meera is not stripped, beaten, or otherwise assaulted on-screen; however, “the scene strengthens a male character (Jon Snow) at the expense of a female character (Meera)” (Gjelsvik, 61). The strengthening of Jon Snow refers back to Cuklanz’s “basic plot” of rape narratives on television. Much like the formula she describes, the beginning of this scene “emphasizes the rapist’s intense depravity, which is condemned by the (male) protagonist and contrasted with his own actions, beliefs, and character” (Cuklanz, 6). Karl’s taunts, chants of

“Fuck ‘em till they’re dead!” and previous rapes all serve, it is revealed in this scene, to strengthen Jon’s character as a noble, morally-upright, justice-seeking hero. Moreover, the story of Meera’s attempted rape ends, as Cuklanz’s formula defines: “when the...protagonist has completed his work, that is, when the rapist is caught or killed” (6). Karl and his men’s entire storyline has nothing to do with Meera or Craster’s wives, but with building Jon Snow’s character through a sharp contrast to these abhorrent men.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on Sansa Stark rather than the other women mentioned above because her character arc hinges on the physical and sexual abuses she suffers at the hands of men. Unlike Daenerys, who has supernatural abilities to strengthen her, Sansa’s strength comes solely from her endurance of rape and abuse, and unlike Cersei, whose initial sexual abuses at the hands of her husband, Robert Baratheon (Mark Addy), are only hinted at as part of her backstory and not depicted on-screen, Sansa’s rape on her wedding night is presented in shocking detail to the audience.

Sansa begins *Game of Thrones* as a stereotype of a girl of noble birth who is dreaming of a fairytale. She trains to become a perfect lady, falls in love with Prince Joffrey (Jack Gleeson), and wants to marry him and become queen. Her princess fantasy is destroyed at the end of season one when Joffrey has her father beheaded in front of her, and Sansa begins her nightmare journey to return home to Winterfell. For the following two seasons, Sansa is held hostage by the Lannisters and betrothed, against her will, to the sadistic Joffrey and then to the much older Tyrion. While engaged to Joffrey, he threatens to kill her in the throne room as retaliation for her brother’s attack on the Lannister army in the episode “Garden of Bones.” After deciding to spare her life, he instructs his knight to beat her in front of everyone, but to “leave her face.” The



knight beats Sansa to the ground and then, at Joffrey's instruction, rips her dress. Just as he raises his sword over her, Tyrion enters the throne room and puts a stop to the attack. Sansa is on the ground, covered by a drape, shivering and crying—this moment is the first time the audience sees her victimized, but certainly not the last. Tyrion asks Sansa if she wants to call off her engagement, and she responds: "I'm loyal to King Joffrey, my one true love." Even though she is still pre-pubescent, she already knows that she has to silently suffer through her fiancé's abuse in order to survive. Tyrion reaffirms this fact when he responds: "Lady Stark, you might survive us yet."

A few episodes later, Sansa is threatened with rape for the first time in "The Old Gods and the New." When Joffrey instigates a riot in the middle of the capital, Sansa is separated from the rest of the royal family and their guards. With nowhere to run but an alleyway, four men pursue her into a dead end. She feebly hits one of them, and, in return, he strikes her so hard that she falls to the ground. She desperately tries to crawl away on her stomach but is pulled back by her attackers, who then rip her clothes. Her desperate cries, kicks, and facial expressions are, to borrow a phrase from Carol Clover regarding the Final Girl of slasher films: "abject terror personified" ("Her Body, Himself," 84). All four men pin Sansa down while one lifts her dress up. Right before he can rape her, the Hound disembowels him and then kills the rest. He then turns to Sansa and says: "You're all right now, Little Bird." In both this scene and the one in the throne room, Sansa is saved right in the nick of time by a man with either physical or authoritative power. These scenes draw the inevitable conclusion that in this world where rape is so pervasive for women, there will be a time when Sansa will be attacked, and a man will not be there to save her.

Such a moment occurs in the season five episode entitled “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken.” The episode title stems from the Martell house slogan, which the viewer at first attributes to the episode’s earlier subplot about the Martell family. The title takes on a much darker meaning during the last scene when Sansa is literally bowed, bent, and broken by Ramsay over their bed on their wedding night. The episode immediately sparked widespread outrage and controversy as fans debated the implications of portraying sexual violence on television (Hannell, 2), especially that of such a beloved character. When it aired, it was the most controversial episode of the series, prompting the show’s ratings to drop by a million viewers from this episode to the next—a drop so severe, the following received the lowest recorded ratings for a *Game of Thrones* episode (Hannell, 4). Figures such as US Senator Claire McCaskill and the president and founder of the Rape Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) felt compelled to respond to the episode. The president of RAINN announced that his organization “receives an influx of calls following the portrayal of sexual violence in popular programs such as *Game of Thrones*” (Hannell, 4), proving that not only was this episode upsetting to viewers, it was actually triggering to survivors of sexual assault. The episode’s director Jeremy Podeswa was surprised by the intense backlash to the episode and stated at a press conference that he and the showrunners “were aware ahead of time that it was going to be disturbing but we did not expect there would be people in Congress talking about it” (Robinson). Either they did not comprehend the impact their series has on viewers, which I find hard to believe since they are well aware it was a global phenomenon with a dedicated fan base, or they did not understand how disturbing watching the violent rape of a teenager would be for the audience.

Many viewers were upset with the rape of Sansa because they felt it was unnecessary. Sansa is not raped in the book series; in fact, she and Ramsay never meet in the books. Benioff

and Weiss decided to victimize her because they thought it would be “hugely dramatically satisfying” (Hannel, 3). The rape scene is not needed to demonstrate how monstrous Ramsay is, as the audience has already seen him torture and castrate Theon Greyjoy (Alfie Allen) and hunt people for sport. His rape of Sansa also does not serve to illustrate the chivalry of another male character, as Karl Tanner does for Jon Snow. Apart from producing shock value for viewers who had grown to care for Sansa in the previous five seasons, this scene serves two main purposes: it is the climax of Ramsay’s psychosexual torture of Theon and, as Ramsay says in the scene, it makes Sansa a woman.

In the scene, Sansa, Ramsay, and his servant Theon enter the couple’s bedroom together. Ramsay instructs Sansa to take off her clothes and forces Theon to stay and watch. He then tells Theon: “You’ve known Sansa since she was a girl. Now watch her become a woman.” The camera cuts to Sansa crying as Ramsay comes up behind her and rips the back of her dress. He pushes her down onto the bed, and the camera briefly shows her terrified face in close-up as she realizes that she has no choice but to passively accept what is happening. She whimpers and gasps, then the camera cuts to medium-close-up of Theon’s tear-stricken face as sounds of Sansa crying in pain are played in the background.

Sarah Projansky contends, “representing a rape scene from a woman’s point of view...may be the most explicit way to incorporate a woman’s perspective on rape” (*Watching Rape*, 153). Amanda Spallacci cites Projansky in her work on representations of rape and rape trauma in film and television, and notes two main types of framing during a rape scene:

“[A rape scene] may foreground the protagonist’s [the victim] emotional response during the rape through close-up shots of the protagonist’s face, which may invite sympathy from the audience. Alternatively, the rape scene might emphasize the physical occurrence

of the assault, usually through close-up shots of the protagonist's body parts while clearly depicting the rapist, which can elicit feelings of disgust from the audience.” (3)

Jeremy Podeswa utilized neither of Spallacci's representational tactics and instead chose to spend the entirety of Sansa's rape on a shot of Theon's face. Podeswa stated that this choice was meant to not “exploit” Sansa and that the scene “was handled as sensitively as it could possibly be; you could hardly see anything” (Robinson). Once again, and unsurprisingly, a decision made in a *Game of Thrones* rape scene had unintentional consequences: the choice to focus on Theon makes the scene about *him*, not Sansa. Even though *she* is the one being attacked—that it is *her* cries of pain the audience hears—the scene is not about her rape, it is a continuation of the torture to which Ramsay has been subjecting Theon. It is the apex of *Theon's* story arc of torture, once thought to be his castration. For Sansa, this scene is not her narrative climax, but just the beginning of a marriage worth of torture.

In this scene, Sansa is a pawn in Ramsay's sadistic game with Theon—much like Clover's assessment of the gang rape of Jennifer in *I Spit On Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978) in which the four men involved are trying to prove who among them is the most masculine through the act of rape, goading each other on to see which of them can best dominate their victim. They especially encourage their mentally disabled, virgin friend with comments such as “Show us what you got!” and “Go! Go! Go!” until he loses his erection and has to pull away from Jennifer. According to Clover, in this film, “gang rape has first and foremost to do with male sport and male pecking order and only secondarily to do with sex” (“Getting Even,” 122). The other rapists already believe that he is the least masculine of the group because of his status as a virgin and his mental disability, so they use this opportunity with Jennifer to further prove their superiority over him. In the same vein, Ramsay uses his rape of Sansa to more fully exert his masculine dominance over Theon, whom Ramsay has already made inferior by making him his servant and

castrating him. Thus, on her wedding night, Sansa is nothing more than Ramsay's "playing field" (Clover: "Getting Even," 122) in his sadistic game with Theon.

The other purpose of this scene is to make Sansa "a woman," notably a "strong" woman, through sexual assault. Ramsay's comment about Sansa becoming a woman refers to, at surface level, his act of taking her virginity. However, the fact that he violates her at the same time reinforces what it means to be a woman in the world of *Game of Thrones*: women should always expect to be, even if they have been already, sexually assaulted because rape is so ubiquitous. Akin to how Sansa realizes what it means to be a princess when Joffrey kills her father, she realizes what it means to be a woman on her wedding night. Following this episode, Sansa transitions from a timid girl to a stoic, unfeeling woman who has built up her emotional defenses so much that she cannot feel any pain. Through this transformation, the series implies that Ramsay has rid Sansa of her emotions with his violation. If the *Game of Thrones* creative team felt they had to include this rape scene in order to transform Sansa from a "little bird" to a "strong woman," they could have at least made her rape scene about her, rather than Theon.

Sansa never discusses what Ramsay did to her or how it has affected her mentally. In fact, as far as the show is concerned, it has not affected her at all. The closest Sansa gets to discussing the repercussions of what happened to her occurs during a conversation with Littlefinger (Aiden Gillen) in "The Door," as he tries to get back in her good graces after arranging her marriage to Ramsay. She is so furious that Littlefinger married her off that she takes this encounter as an opportunity to tell him everything that Ramsay did to her. She begins by asking him: "Would you like to hear about our wedding night? He never hurt my face. He needed my face, the face of Ned Stark's daughter." This line references when Joffrey beat her in

the throne room and told the guards to avoid her face, cementing that her value has always been measured in her beauty and noble lineage. Sansa continues: “But the rest of me? He did what he liked with the rest of me.” She is shot from a low angle, with Brienne of Tarth standing behind her at-the-ready with her sword, emphasizing Sansa power over Littlefinger in this scene when juxtaposed with the high angle shots of him. Sansa then asks him what he thinks Ramsay did to her. After avoiding the answer, Littlefinger timidly responds that Ramsay likely beat and cut her, and Sansa confirms that he did. The audience never sees Ramsay commit such atrocities but is now aware of the full extent of his physical abuse of Sansa. The fact that his abuse was so inordinately horrifying makes the lack of depiction of how she deals with the aftermath of her trauma all the more disappointing. The choice to not depict her trauma further proves that *GOT* is only providing these details of Sansa’s horrors to shock the audience, not to illustrate the depth and complexity of her character. Finally, Sansa says: “I still feel it. I don’t mean in my tender heart it still pains me so. I can still feel what he did in my body standing here right now.” The cutting nature of this line, compounded once again by Turner’s stoic performance, drives home the point that Sansa is no longer a cliché girl of noble birth living in a fairytale, but a survivor. This scene is the only time Sansa discusses what happened to her, but it is not for cathartic or healing purposes—it is to make the man who sold her to a rapist suffer. In this way, it is her first act of rape revenge before she kills Ramsay.

After escaping Ramsay, Sansa enlists the help of her brother Jon to take back Winterfell and defeat Ramsay’s army. Though her goal is to regain the North for her family, her desire to kill Ramsay is very much an act of rape revenge, and the gruesome way in which she attains this revenge is in the spirit of the classic 1970s rape revenge films. After Ramsay loses the battle to Jon and Sansa, he wakes up, bloodied and tied to a chair in a dog kennel, with Sansa standing

over him. He says to her: “You can’t kill me. I’m a part of you now.” His words are disgusting, but what he is saying is somewhat true. The trauma of Sansa’s extended, repeated abuse will stay with her until she dies. It is not something a person can just move on from, even if they have the privilege of watching their rapist die a gruesome death. Ramsay’s hunting dogs start to eat him, and the audience gets brief flashes of the dogs tearing his flesh apart as his screams are heard in the background of Sansa’s smiling face. While the act of setting Ramsay’s hounds on him is incredibly satisfying for a viewer, it takes agency away from Sansa by not allowing her to commit the act of violent vengeance against Ramsay, herself. She does not inflict reciprocal, intimate, penetrative acts of violence against him as the heroines of the 1970s and ‘80s rape revenge films such as Jennifer from *I Spit On Your Grave* or Chris from *Lipstick* do to their rapists. Thus, Sansa is denied the most cathartic aspect of rape revenge.

After this scene, Sansa never brings up what Ramsay did to her again. She occasionally has brief, detached conversations about it when others bring him up, but she never broaches the topic herself. Sansa’s lack of emotion towards Ramsay after he dies upholds the myth of rape revenge: the trauma of rape dies with the rapist. It is notable that her conversation with Littlefinger occurs before Ramsay dies because no such conversation is necessary after she kills him. When Sansa reunites with her brother Bran in “The Queen’s Justice,” and discovers that he has gained the ability to see events throughout time, he admits that he saw her be raped, apologizing for what happened and that it had to happen in their childhood home. He then says that she looked beautiful in her wedding dress, and the camera dollies in on Sansa’s horrified face as she realizes her brother watched her be raped. Sansa immediately leaves, clearly upset, but never addresses this moment again. The episode does not even portray how Sansa handles learning this disturbing revelation. This scene does not remind the audience of Sansa’s rape to

illustrate how it has affected her, but rather to make the audience and Sansa incredibly uncomfortable by having her brother say that he watched it happen. It adds nothing to the overall narrative and is yet another example of *Game of Thrones* using rape for shock value.

In “The Dragon and the Wolf,” Sansa and Arya have a candid conversation after executing Littlefinger. Sansa asks her sister if she is bothered that Sansa is the Lady of Winterfell. Arya responds, “I was never going to be as good a lady as you. So I had to be something else.” The viewer has been aware of this difference between the sisters since the pilot episode: Arya’s entire character arc is spent defining her as a renegade tomboy who wants to exist outside the law and have nothing to do with politics. However, Arya is implying something else with this statement when she adds: “I never could have survived what you survived.” With this line, Arya is not saying that she is too independent and masculine to be a lady; rather, she is insinuating that in order to be a lady, a woman must endure sexual violence. Arya admits that she always knew what Sansa learned on her wedding night regarding what it takes to be a woman in this world, and she is articulating what the series has already presented through the paths to power endured by Daenerys, Cersei, and Sansa. Sansa responds simply with: “You would have. You’re the strongest person I know.” Sansa makes no mention of her trauma, the effect it has had on her, or how she found the strength to survive it herself. None of that is necessary to be said, because, as the series makes abundantly clear, Sansa has moved on from her trauma. Her pain died with Ramsay.

In the final moments of the series finale, Sansa processes through the Winterfell throne room as rows of men kneel before her. A crown is placed on her head as she sits on the throne to the chants of “The Queen in the North!” This scene is reminiscent of those in which the



Northmen chanted “The King in the North!” for her brothers Rob and Jon, but this scene holds a different weight because Sansa did what they were unable to do. She made the North an autonomous region—something both Rob and Jon promised to do—and became its queen. The subversion of the oft-heard “King in the North!” chant is enough to give even the most conscious and critical feminist viewer chills. While a woman may watch Sansa’s coronation scene and feel a surge of feminist pride, such a feeling is misguided. Sansa’s character arc, designed by men who have proven time and time again that they do not understand sexual violence or how it affects survivors, is no model for women’s empowerment. Sansa acknowledges that the violence done unto her by men is exclusively what made her stronger. *Game of Thrones* insists that Sansa’s continued abuse makes her stronger, and it transforms her into what Projansky describes as an “independent masculine subject” (*Watching Rape*, 144). In line with Projansky’s argument, discussed in the Introduction, Sansa becomes a postfeminist fantasy of an empowered woman, which is to say, one who acknowledges and accepts her place as lesser within patriarchy in order to achieve a position of power. Sansa lacks emotional depth and becomes a female leader that male viewers can be comfortable watching because they have seen her “put in her place” within patriarchy by Ramsay. In this sense, her victimization is essential to her rise to power because it downplays her authority to the audience and thus does not disrupt power dynamics between men and women in our misogynistic society. By turning her into this “masculine subject,” the series does not portray the impact her trauma has on her. Instead, it implies that her strength comes from rape, and her healing comes from killing her rapist.

Sansa begins her journey as a “little bird.” She then witnesses her father’s beheading, was held hostage, mourned the deaths of her mother and two of her brothers, and was betrayed by people she trusted. Despite all of that, *Game of Thrones* articulates that the only events that make

her stronger are the physical and sexual abuses she suffers at the hands of her fiancé Joffrey and her husband Ramsay. The series argues that Sansa's rape was crucial to her rise to power, and along with the similar character arcs of queens Daenerys and Cersei, *Game of Thrones* illustrates that a woman's *only* path to power over men in its diegesis begins with being sexually abused by a man.

Chapter Three: “I Imagined a Story Where I Didn’t Have To Be the Damsel”: Dolores  
Abernathy & Rape Revenge in *Westworld*

The opening shot of the *Westworld* (Joy and Nolan, 2016– ) pilot, “The Original,” is a long take of a naked, bruised, dead-eyed Dolores Abernathy (Evan Rachel Wood) sitting in the middle of the frame. A man’s voice asks her questions off-screen, and the audience is led to assume that he is watching her in this state, though he is not in frame. In her seminal work on the male gaze in film, Laura Mulvey identifies a dichotomy between looking at men and women in cinema: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (62). In the opening shot of the series, the *Westworld* audience stares at Dolores’s naked body—fulfilling the “passive/female” role literally, as she does not even react to a fly walking across her eyeball—in place of the male character who is watching her, forcing the audience to embody the “active/male” half of the binary Mulvey describes.

The next shot depicts Dolores waking up in her bed. She is framed in close-up from above, with ringlets of golden hair angelically tossed around her face. This shot is repeated three times throughout the episode, and in each instance, Dolores’s appearance is “coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that [she] can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 62-63), meaning her physical beauty is made into a spectacle for the straight male gaze. Dolores steps outside in a conservative, flowing blue dress and greets her father on the porch. In the old western town of Sweetwater, gentle cowboy Teddy (James Marsden) enters a saloon where a prostitute approaches him. He refuses her advances and runs outside when he sees Dolores through the window. Teddy and Dolores ride into a field and share a tender moment together, but stop short of kissing. These opening scenes establish Dolores as “chaste and virginal” (McFarland), especially when she is juxtaposed with prostitutes Maeve (Thandie Newton) and

Clementine (Angela Sarafyan), who talk explicitly about sex and wear nothing but corsets. Establishing Dolores as pure makes her “the ideal victim in need of heroic intervention” (McFarland), and such intervention is necessary when Dolores arrives home with Teddy that night and discovers two bandits have murdered her parents. Once Teddy kills the bandits, the series’ villain, the Man in Black (Ed Harris), arrives. Dolores holds a pistol up to him, but he knocks it out of her hand, slaps her face, and then drags her by the collar of her dress towards her barn to rape her. Teddy shoots him in the back in an attempt to rescue Dolores, but his bullet does no damage. Dolores begs the Man in Black not to kill Teddy, saying: “No, please, don’t hurt him. I’ll do whatever you say.” The Man in Black scoffs and says: “I didn’t pay all this money ‘cause I want it easy. I want you to fight!” He subsequently shoots Teddy in the heart and drags Dolores away while she screams.

The episode cuts to Dolores waking up in bed the next day, in the same overhead shot as before, unperturbed, and then reveals Teddy, alive and well on a train. Dolores and Teddy are robots, known as “hosts” within the Westworld theme park. They are programmed to live out specific, repetitive narrative loops every day. Each night their memories are erased, and they wake up to relive the same day again. Whenever Dolores comes home after curfew, the bandits come to her house and murder her parents. The Man in Black is a human “guest” in the park who has paid an inordinate amount of money to live out a fantasy of the Old American West amongst these hosts who can do no harm to him. As he indicates with his line about paying to have Dolores fight back, the Man in Black is staying in the park for the thrill of raping women hosts without consequences, and he is far from the only guest to do so. Many humans visit the park to indulge their most sinister fantasies, including rape and murder. Dolores is raped in the first fifteen minutes of the *Westworld* pilot, immediately establishing the show’s protagonist as an

innocent victim, the ideal prey for the show's monstrous villain, the Man in Black. The exposition of Dolores as sweet and chaste only serves to make the imagery of her being dragged away to be raped, all the more shocking for viewers.

HBO is known for eroticizing violence, particularly sexual violence against women (McFarland). The most notable, sustained, and criticized example of sexual violence on the prestige television channel was employed by *Game of Thrones*—its history of excessive portrayals of sexual violence are discussed in detail in this thesis's previous chapter. HBO hoped that its pricey, philosophical, science-fiction-Western series would fill the massive viewership hole left by *GOT* when it ended in 2019 (Goldberg). When its pilot premiered in 2016, *Westworld* faced backlash for being another HBO show to highlight rape for shock value in its first episode (Holloway). In the series, the Westworld Park, owned by the ominous Delos Corporation, is a haven for the incredibly wealthy to live out their wildest and often most evil desires at the expense of the hosts' bodies. By the end of the first season, the hosts, led by Dolores, achieve sentience and rise up against their human oppressors in a series of massacres, living out the series' motto: "These violent delights have violent ends." Throughout the first season, the hosts are raped, shot, scalped, and disemboweled on-screen for the human characters' pleasure and the audience's entertainment. It is no coincidence that *Westworld* utilizes shocking and excessive nudity, violence, and sexual violence in the hopes of following in *Game of Thrones*' footsteps—HBO is acutely aware that this type of imagery is known to garner ratings and critical attention.

Before the pilot premiered, HBO's President of Programming, Casey Bloys, responded to criticism of the episode's representation of sexual assault by stating: "I can tell you violence, it's

not just specific to women. It's indiscriminate [in HBO programming]...Plenty of men are killed as well" (Holloway). This response is profoundly erroneous and proves to be another example of HBO programming executives not understanding the implications of representing rape on-screen. Depictions of physical violence and sexual violence are not equivalent; the most important reason why is that "graphic depictions of trauma can vicariously traumatize certain viewers" (Spallacci, 6) who have experienced similar trauma. Survivors of rape can watch *Westworld* and be triggered, whereas a murdered man cannot. Additionally, graphic depictions of sexual violence contribute to society's overall rape culture. During the same press conference, Co-Creator and Executive Producer Lisa Joy responded to the same criticism by arguing:

"Violence and sexual violence have been a fact of human history since the beginning. There's something about us — thankfully not the majority of us — but there are people who have engaged in violence and who are victims of violence...And in its portrayal we endeavored for it to not be about the fetishization of those acts. It's about exploring the crime, establishing the crime and the torment of the characters within this story and exploring their stories hopefully with dignity and depth and that's what we endeavored to do." (Goldberg)

While it is true that the actual act of rape is never shown but only alluded to on *Westworld*, and therefore not fetishized, there is no doubt that the image of the Man in Black dragging Dolores by the collar to rape her is meant to be shocking. It, therefore, continues HBO's trend of depicting sexual violence to disturb the audience with graphic imagery. Moreover, excusing that depiction as an exploration of the evils of human nature is not sufficient for making rape the introduction to a series' hero. Especially because she is notably *not* human, and thus her pain is not an examination of human suffering but that of a robot. The series takes a very relatable human problem, sexual violence, and disregards the psychological and physical consequences it can have on a person by enacting it on a robot whose memory is routinely erased. Because

Dolores's memories are erased, she is denied the ability to process her attacks. She is disallowed to heal from her trauma, which this thesis argued in its Introduction is crucial to the feminist representation of rape and survivors. Even worse, because she does not remember and cannot learn from her previous trauma, she is forced to keep reliving her attacks every day in her loop.

Erasing Dolores's memories so that she can continue to be abused day after day reinforces the fact that her sole purpose in the park is to be used for human pleasure. The decision to portray a hyper-realistic female robot inherently objectifies actor Evan Rachel Wood and her character by having her play a machine instead of a human. Christy Tidwell, in her discussion of "fem-bots," takes this point farther by noting that hyper-realistic female robots in film are sexualized so that they become not merely objects but "objects of desire" (21). Fem-bots are an example of "techno-scopophilia," the voyeuristic gaze for fetishized female robots on-screen (Yee, 86). Therefore, Dolores is presented to the audience as a titillating object for male pleasure, both within the series and for the audience. The addition of fem-bots to HBO's eroticized pattern of sexual violence adds a new element of objectification and eroticization of the women characters it insists are being empowered.

At a press conference promoting *Westworld's* second season, Lisa Joy discussed how the intention of the series was to subvert the tropes of the western and its damsels-in-distress, while being mindful of how the series portrays violence (Mason). I believe, however, that like *Game of Thrones*, *Westworld* is much more invested in displaying the spectacle of physical and sexual violence rather than examining their psychological causes and repercussions. Furthermore, while unlike *GOT*, the series never displays a rape scene, it still uses rape as a narrative catalyst for female empowerment. This chapter will examine how *Westworld* consistently makes a needless

spectacle of sexual violence to propel Dolores Abernathy to become a powerful, masculine, and often unsympathetic western avenger by suffering at the hands of sexual predators.

Dolores is established as a rape victim within the first fifteen minutes of the series' pilot. Her storyline falls into the set of rape narratives that Sarah Projansky examines in her article "The Elusive/Ubiquitous Representation of Rape," which "depict women's vulnerability as leading to rape" and "suggest that women should be more self-sufficient and independent in order to avoid being raped" (66). These narratives follow the logic that if a woman were not so dependent on others for protection, then she would not have been victimized, effectively blaming her for not being able to prevent her attack—a line of thinking that more recent rape-prevention education is debunking by placing blame for rape away from victims with bystander intervention training (Linder, 34). Women in narratives like Dolores's "lack agency and therefore logically must be rescued from rape" (Projansky: "The Elusive/Ubiquitous..." 66). In Dolores's rape scene with the Man in Black, she doubly lacks agency: as a helpless farmer's daughter who needs a cowboy to rescue her and as a robot who is programmed to be physically incapable of defending herself against her attacker. The introduction to Dolores as helpless and in need of male rescue makes the audience instantly sympathize with her, and makes it all the more satisfying when she comes into her own power and strikes back at the end of the season, but she suffers a lot more abuse before she reaches that point.

Dolores is far from the only host to be raped or threatened with rape. References to rape are made casually between the hosts, such as when a bandit who murdered Dolores's mother tells his partner, "Shame of it is you killed the old woman before any of us could have a turn," to which his partner responds, "I reckon she's still warm enough." Another example occurs when a



thief towers over a terrified Clementine and tells his partner they should “take this sweet little bitch,” along with the money they just stole. The writers at Westworld Park have programmed the hosts to make these comments for the guests’ entertainment, indicating that the humans who control the hosts know sexual violence is compelling for viewers and therefore want it to be so ubiquitous in the park that kidnapping a woman and raping a dead body are considered ordinary behaviors amongst the hosts. In both instances, a third party shoots the rapists before they can commit the act. When a human wants to rape a host, however, there can be no such intervention because hosts are incapable of harming humans.

The western genre plays an extremely important role in *Westworld*; as Lisa Joy has stated, she and Jonathan Nolan set out to subvert many of its tropes with the characters in their series. *Westworld*’s aesthetics of wide-open planes, black versus white hat cowboys, and old-fashioned saloons create the perfect backdrop for the series to subvert the qualities of the classic western genre. Some subversions are successful: for example, Native Americans are often portrayed as savage antagonists in western films of the 1960s and ‘70s, but in *Westworld*, the Native American hosts are portrayed sympathetically as victims of larger structures of oppression. The season two episode “Kiksuya” follows host Akecheta and depicts how he lost his tribe of pseudo-Native-American hosts and has been helping Maeve and her daughter for years. Akecheta is not portrayed as a savage indigenous man but as one of the most morally upright characters in the entire series. Joy contends that Dolores is meant to turn representations of abused damsels “on their heads” (Mason), by watching her slowly come into her own power throughout the first season. Her and Nolan’s attempt to subvert abused-damsel-turned-rape-avenger is not successful, as evidenced by how neatly Dolores’s narrative aligns with the tropes of the female rape avenger subgenre of the western film.

In her chapter on rape revenge in the western genre, Jacinda Read states: “not only are rape and revenge standard motifs in the western, they are intimately connected” (125). Rape is an extremely common theme in western films, causing male heroes to ride off and get revenge on the rapist on behalf of the woman they love (Read, 125). In the female rape avenger subgenre of the western, women survivors ride off to get revenge for their own rapes, and Dolores conforms to, rather than subverts, many of the qualities of the western female rape avenger. Dolores “occupies a marginal, private sphere” within her society—a quality of the western female rape avenger—as a farmer’s daughter, who lives away from town and likes to paint landscapes. Furthermore, when she realizes that her society is unable to punish her villain, she takes it upon herself to get revenge. When she does so, she is asked by members of her society—Teddy and Bernard (Jeffrey Wright)—to give up her quest for revenge, which is in line with Read’s observations of the western female rape avenger narrative (Read, 128).

Dolores’s transformation from victim to avenger also aligns with the narrative trajectory of the female western rape avenger. She discovers her “special ability” (Read, 128) that helps her defeat her villains in “The Stray,” when she goes against her programming and commits an act of violence for the first time against her rapist. This scene begins in the same way as her rape scene in the pilot episode—Dolores comes home to find her father dead and is grabbed by the bandit Rebus (Steven Ogg), who punches her in the face and drags her off screaming to rape her in the barn. Except, the Man in Black does not show up this time, so Rebus tries to rape her instead. Before he drags her away, he says, “No daddy, no cowboy, no one here to interrupt us this time,” solidifying her position as the damsel in distress who needs a man to rescue her from harm. The fact that she is dragged into the barn to be raped by a host in this scene, rather than the Man in Black, indicates that her narrative loop is designed to always end in rape, whether or not a human

interferes. In this scene, the camera enters the barn with Dolores and Rebus and sees him throw her down onto a pile of hay. Her tear-stricken face is shot straight on from the side—the camera does not disempower her by shooting her helpless body at a high angle. She finds a pistol in her hand and trembles while she aims it at her attacker. It is not until she pictures the Man in Black standing over her with a knife that she is able to pull the trigger and shoot Rebus in the throat. The moment when she pulls the trigger is the first instance that Dolores has control over her actions and body and initiates her transition into an action hero.

Dolores rejects “standards of feminine behavior” (Read, 128) by refusing her narrative as a damsel in distress and instead choosing to transform into a gun-slinging cowboy. In the season one episode entitled “Contrapasso,” Dolores and William (Jimmi Simpson) are in a brothel, having a conversation in a room where an orgy is taking place—an example of *Westworld* employing shocking sex and nudity for no explicit narrative purpose. The couple exits the brothel and gets stopped by four host confederate soldiers, who pin William to the wall. William yells at Dolores to run before she can get hurt, but instead she stands her ground with a steely-eyed expression and shoots all four hosts from the belt, a staple shooting technique of the cowboy in the western genre. The camera displays Dolores in a high angle long shot, wearing a loose button-down shirt, pants, and boots—a masculine departure from the blue dress she wears in Sweetwater—holding her pistol in front of the men she just killed and showing no emotion. She tells William in a much deeper voice than that which she normally uses: “You said people come here to change the story of their lives. I imagined a story where I didn’t have to be the damsel.” This scene solidifies Dolores’s transformation from the damsel of the western genre to the cowboy action hero.

Dolores is a more complicated, but not subversive, example of a female western rape avenger because she is a robot. The series reveals at the end of season one that she contains two separate host narratives, that of Dolores, the meek painter and farmer's daughter, and that of Wyatt, a vicious army general who enacts atrocities against other hosts. Arnold Webber (Jeffrey Wright), the co-creator of the Westworld park along with Robert Ford (Anthony Hopkins), implanted the violent Wyatt code in his favorite host Dolores 35 years ago in order to groom her for action. Her "Dolores" code is incapable of violence, but with the addition of Wyatt to her programming, Dolores is able to become vicious. Before the park opened decades ago, Arnold realized that hosts are able to achieve sentience and because they can, forcing them to be slaves to human pleasure would be unconscionable. Robert, however, insisted on opening the park anyway. With no other options, Arnold adds Wyatt's code to Dolores so that she could kill him and every host in the park so that Westworld would not be able to open. Through Teddy's distorted flashbacks and Ford's narration, the audience sees Dolores wearing the same blue dress that the Man in Black dragged by the collar while she shoots Arnold and then herself with an unemotional expression. Despite her massacre, the hosts are revived, and the park opens. However, Arnold leaves a "maze" for hosts to follow in order to achieve consciousness, and Dolores spends over thirty years unknowingly trying to reach its center. Ford rationalizes that it is morally acceptable to open the park because he "posits that it's suffering that creates the basis for our consciousness, because it gives us the desire to experience better" (Mason), so by making the hosts suffer for decades, he is providing them with the tools they need in order to become sentient beings. In fact, Ford tells his host Bernard, "In order to escape this place, you will need to suffer more." Therefore, in the world Ford has created, Dolores must be beaten, raped, and

murdered over and over again in order to reach the center of Arnold's maze and achieve consciousness.

Dolores spends the entire first season of *Westworld* trying to reach the center of the maze, and when she does, she remembers the massacre she committed before the park opened and her violent Wyatt half. The final episode of season one is entitled "The Bicameral Mind," referring to the two halves of Dolores's programming. In that episode, the Man in Black confronts Dolores at the center of the maze, where she begins to achieve true consciousness and access both halves of her coding. Once she taps into the Wyatt half of her code, Dolores is able to fight back against the Man in Black when he grabs her. She throws him to the ground and drags him by the collar, just as he did to her in the pilot. The parallel imagery of this scene with the one from the pilot marks a clear turning point in Dolores's character from rape victim to rape avenger. Before she can deliver a final, fatal blow to him, the Man in Black stabs her, leaving her helpless and once again in need of Teddy to ride in and rescue her. She must suffer one more time in order to truly achieve sentience and take revenge over the humans who have wronged her.

Ford revives Dolores after the Man in Black stabs her, and she sits face to face with herself in the blue dress. In this scene where she confronts herself, she gains the ability to be guided by her own voice, not her code, and truly achieve human consciousness. Once she can make her own decisions, she decides to become a rape avenging action heroine. Her first act as such is to shoot Ford in the head and open fire on a crowd of humans. As far as the audience knows, none of the people she kills in this scene have raped her, but they have all been complicit in the violations she has endured for the last 35 years, and thus they are just as responsible for her rapes as her rapists are.

In his analysis of gender in the action film, Jeffrey Brown articulates a binary in the genre that “situates men as active, women as passive; men as violent, women as having violence done unto them” (53). Dolores’s split coding embodies the binary Brown notes. Rather than be a female host who acts out violence in response to having violence done to her, *Westworld* chooses to explain Dolores’s violent tendencies on the male half of her coding. As Dolores explains to a human she is about to kill: “The rancher’s daughter looks to see the beauty in you; the possibilities. But Wyatt sees the ugliness and disarray.” Her male half is coded as a hero, and her female half is coded as a victim. The series clarifies that Wyatt is male through images of him as a male general in Teddy’s flashbacks—he is a male character who is implanted in a female host. Since Dolores has these two halves to her programming, the only aspect of her that makes it clear she is female is her body, so when she is raped, the only distinctly female part of Dolores is being attacked. Her Wyatt half may allow her to be an action hero/avenger, but her Dolores half allows her to be violated. The more she leans into her Wyatt half and becomes an avenger throughout the second season, the more she loses her feminine-coded qualities, such as compassion and empathy. Much like Sansa Stark, who is discussed in the previous chapter, Dolores is an example of strength being equated to stoicism and masculine traits in a female character, and her embodiment of these traits, *Westworld* argues, makes her a better leader.

In her first scene in season two, after she murders Ford, Dolores rides in an open field while expertly shooting humans in the back as they run away from her. The episode then cuts to Dolores standing before three humans who are balancing on wooden posts with their hands tied together and nooses around their necks. She taunts a terrified man with the phrases humans said to her in order to keep her sutured into her reality as a host: “Do you know where you are?” “You’re in a dream.” Dolores’s face is out of focus, framed in golden light and a tight close-up

shot. Her face comes into focus as she says: “You’re in *my* dream.” This shot poses a sharp contrast to the angelic shot of Dolores waking up in her bed every morning, indicating her departure from the sweet, wholesome Dolores Westworld forced her to be, as she journeys to take control of herself and the park. She ignores the humans as they beg for mercy and rides off, leaving them stranded on top of the wooden posts with the choice to either starve to death or step down and hang themselves. In this first act of revenge, Dolores retains the moral high ground over the people she is torturing because she is making them suffer in an equivalent manner to how she suffered for decades. Dolores loses such moral authority in the penultimate episode of season two, “Vanishing Point,” when she has her men massacre a group of Ghost Nation hosts, the Westworld Park’s replication of a Native American tribe. In a reference to the United States’ practice of Manifest Destiny and Native American genocide, Dolores opens fire on the Ghost Nation members when they refuse to let her pass so that she can reach “The Valley Beyond.” She shoots the leader of Ghost Nation in the head after telling him: “Not all of us deserve to make it to the Valley Beyond.” In this moment, Dolores is not killing humans out of revenge, but killing her own kind in order to further her own goals. Notably, she is killing hosts of color and embodying the racist trope of the cowboy who massacres Native Americans in order to steal their land. Dolores’s actions in this scene are so horrific that they cause Teddy, her most loyal follower, to lose all faith in her and her mission. A major component of Dolores’s character in season one is her compassion and ability to see the beauty in the world. Her character arc in season diverges completely from the wide-eyed farmer’s daughter the audience has known. She becomes merciless as she taps into her Wyatt side, and as she commits more and more atrocities, she becomes a less sympathetic protagonist.

As she sheds her feminine traits, Dolores realizes that retaining them can be a liability to those with her on her journey. In the season two episode, “Akane No Mai,” Dolores takes Teddy to a slaughterhouse and tells him that he will not survive with his kind heart. She has her men hold him down and reprogram him, bringing his aggression up all the way and his compassion all the way down—this way he can be more of a ruthless killer like her. Her decision to alter Teddy’s programming is part of her rape revenge in that she needs him to be more aggressive so that he can aid her in her vengeance. Her choice also reinforces the notion that qualities coded as feminine cannot be powerful—the series illustrates that compassion and empathy are not leadership qualities and they will hinder Dolores’s journey to take over the park. In order for people to succeed in *Westworld*’s diegesis, they must be unfeeling, calculating, and they cannot care about the needs of others, as evidenced by Dolores’s massacre of the Ghost Nation. Teddy is punished for being too feminine for a man, and Dolores becomes much more masculine as she is guided by a man’s programming in order to be a “strong” leader. The sweet, caring Dolores of season one, the show argues, could never be a successful avenger or leader of the hosts.

Four episodes after he is reprogramed, Teddy kills himself and blames his decision to do so on Dolores altering his code—the knowledge that he is a cyborg designed to suffer and die for human pleasure does not cause him to commit suicide, Dolores does. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes that the rape section and the revenge section of a rape-revenge narrative must maintain an “ethical symmetry” (178). If the revenge is less intense than the rape, “there is a suggestion that the film may be siding with the rapists because they have not been justly punished;” however, if the revenge is more intense than the rape, the narrative “risks making the revenge potentially ‘less defensible’” in the eyes of the viewer (Heller-Nicholas, 178). With the atrocities Dolores commits described above, *Westworld* makes Dolores appear unhinged and power-hungry rather



than a woman justified in taking revenge against those who have wronged her, and therefore, causes the audience to lose sympathy for her.

*Westworld* is a series about consciousness and humanity: What makes someone human? If something suffers, is it human? What if it makes its own decisions? If it has empathy? Where do we draw the line between machine and person? By the *Westworld* universe's logic, Dolores must suffer in order to achieve sentience, meaning she must be violently raped, beaten, and even murdered again and again in order to be able to make decisions for herself. One could write off the sexual violence done unto Dolores in the beginning of the series because she is a robot created for the pleasure of the park's guests to do with what they will. However, on-screen, the audience is watching a female body "artificial or not, being used and damaged by male bodies" (Rense).

No matter what philosophical reasoning the show uses to explain it, *Westworld* is yet another example of a television program using rape to drive female character development, and it makes her so vindictive in her quest for revenge that she becomes no longer sympathetic to the audience. Lisa Purse lists three conventional calls to action for women in film: "maternal instinct, rape revenge, and terrorization by a serial killer" (188). These narratives are considered acceptable, according to Purse, because they code aggressive women as mothers or victims and thus maintain their place within patriarchy. While rape revenge is an acceptable catalyst for a woman's aggression on-screen, if that woman becomes *too* violent, emotional, or loses sight of her moral compass, she can be interpreted as an example of why women should *not* have agency by our imbalanced, misogynistic society. If *Westworld* is so dedicated to portraying how artificial intelligence can be human, then it should start by making its protagonist more complex,

by allowing her to have emotions and empathy alongside her justifiable anger, rather than simply portraying its victim-hero as a bloodthirsty avenger.

#### Chapter Four: *Marvel's Jessica Jones*, Rape Revenge, and Representing Trauma

“For me, if I never see an actual rape on a screen again it'll be too soon. It's becoming ubiquitous, it's become lazy storytelling and it's always about the impact it has on the men around them. It's like, ‘Oh his wife was raped and murdered so he's going to go out and destroy the world.’ That's so often what it's about, just this kind of de rigueur storytelling to spice up often male character.”

–Melissa Rosenberg, creator of *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (Fienberg)

In the pilot of *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (Rosenberg, 2015–2019), “gifted” person and private detective Jessica (Krysten Ritter) enters a hotel suite and finds a young woman, Hope Shlottman (Erin Moriarty), sprawled out in bed, saying she cannot get up. Jessica carries Hope out of the suite despite her persistent protests and takes her to the safety of her apartment, where Hope recounts what happened to her. Hope was under the control of the supervillain Kilgrave (David Tennant), who employs his mind-control abilities to force people to do literally whatever he says, so when he told Hope “don't move,” she laid motionless in bed until Jessica rescued her. Kilgrave kidnaps Hope by putting her under his spell and subsequently forces her to enter into a relationship with him, culminating in his rape of her in the hotel room bed. He does not physically force her, but rather he hypnotizes her into consenting to sex with him, even though she does not want to. Jessica knows where to find Hope because the same thing happened to her a year before: Kilgrave held her captive for months, and she was only able to escape when she finally broke free of his mind-control.

After rescuing Hope, Jessica forces her to say: “None of it is my fault.” Jessica makes Hope understand that even though she literally consented to sex with Kilgrave, there is no way she could have made that decision for herself while under his mind-control. Jessica is the best person to convince Hope it is not her fault because she can empathize with her situation.

The pilot episode ends with Hope, unbeknownst to Jessica, still under Kilgrave's control. Hope kills both of her parents in Jessica's elevator under Kilgrave's orders, effectively ruining her life. Jessica is on her way to the airport to run away from Kilgrave, but instead vows then and there to "do something about" him and save Hope from a murder conviction, setting up a rape revenge narrative for the rest of the season.

*Jessica Jones*, based on the Marvel comic book series of the same name, is a neo-noir Netflix show with a superhuman twist. It stars the title character, the hard-edged and sassy Jessica, who gains superhuman abilities while being non-consensually and unknowingly experimented on as a teenager after being in a car accident that kills her entire family. The experiments give her super strength and the ability to leap from great heights and land unscathed on her feet. Since then, she has become a private investigator with her own firm, Alias Investigations. Until she meets Hope Shlottman, she only uses her powers to benefit her superficial investigations: perching on the sides of buildings to take pictures of cheating spouses, pushing locked doors open with her bare hands, and even lifting a car to serve someone a court summons. Her jet-black hair, dark clothing, and signature leather jacket enable her to work the streets of New York City at night, as she hides in the shadows so she can use her special abilities to intimidate witnesses and take photos of unsuspecting people. She is no typical superhero. As she often says: she is not the superhero you want her to be because she never wanted to be a superhero. It is not until Kilgrave kidnaps Hope that Jessica is motivated to use her powers to save people.

Created by Melissa Rosenberg, *Jessica Jones* is one of two Marvel series to feature a female lead, the other being *Agent Carter* (Markus and McFeely, 2015–2016). Despite the rich

backstory of Jessica's human experimentation, the first season of the series does not focus on how or why Jessica has her powers, but on hunting down and killing her rapist, Kilgrave. Critics have praised the series for its complex depiction of sexual assault and posttraumatic stress disorder (Truong), which are illustrated immediately as part of Jessica's introduction to the audience.

In the pilot episode, Jessica drinks heavily and has trouble sleeping. The episode provides some explanation when Jessica has a dream, framed in tight close-up on her sleeping face, that the shadowed face of Kilgrave licks her cheek, causing her to bolt awake instantly. Before Kilgrave appears on-screen, the shot is bathed in a purple light—his signature color, which appears in lieu of his entire body whenever she imagines him in this episode. The use of light in these flashbacks and dreams indicate that Kilgrave's presence inhabits and terrorizes Jessica's thoughts even when his physical body does not. Jessica's tough persona breaks down for the first time on camera after this dream as she holds back tears and breathes deeply in an effort to calm herself down. She then recites the names of the streets on which she grew up and relaxes. When Jessica sees Kilgrave for the first time since escaping him in the episode "AKA The Sandwich Saved Me," the camera dolly-zooms in on her face to portray her chaotic interiority at that moment and convey her immediate panic at the sight of him. Jessica then looks away and once again recites her hometown street names. Jessica always recites those street names when triggered; she reveals it is a coping tactic for her PTSD that she learned in therapy, indicating that her trauma is such a pervasive part of her life that it was necessary for her to go to therapy and develop such a routine to cope when she has flashbacks and nightmares. Her responses to triggers are not always so composed, as evidenced when Jessica punches a subway window after having a flashback in episode two, "AKA Crush Syndrome." Or by her persistent alcoholism,

which she even explains to Kilgrave is “the only way I get through my goddamn days after what you did to me” in the episode “AKA WWJD.”

The above examples employ narrative and cinematographic methods to represent Jessica’s trauma and are thusly in line with Rosenberg’s intention for the show as she stated in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter: that it not be about the act of rape but about its impact and “healing, survival, trauma, and facing demons” (Fienberg). Rosenberg’s intention was successful. The series is not about the spectacle of Jessica’s rape, but about the pain she suffers in its aftermath and how she struggles to regain her personal identity and power after Kilgrave stripped them away from her. Even its rape revenge narrative does not uphold the myth of rape revenge because killing Kilgrave does *not* heal Jessica—in the season that follows, she is still affected by what he did to her.

*Jessica Jones* offers a powerful depiction of how a woman can be active, independent, and effective while struggling with sexual trauma and how that trauma can drive her to help others like her. The first portion of this chapter focuses on how the series drives home feminist messages through Jessica’s rejection of traditional femininity, gender roles, and domesticity, as well as offering a progressive version of the often-problematic rape revenge narrative. However, this chapter ultimately argues that despite the series’ positive feminist attributes, it still presents a gratuitous rape narrative as a springboard for a woman’s empowerment and her status as a hero, utilizing the anti-feminist call to action of rape revenge for women on-screen, which reinforces that a woman can only be a hero in film or television if she is a victim-hero.

Hope Shlottman is the driving force behind Jessica’s rape revenge narrative. Jessica wants to clear Hope’s name for the murder of her parents, and in order to do that, she must

expose Kilgrave and his mind-control abilities to prove that Hope did not kill them of her own free will. Jessica is *not* out for revenge for herself. In fact, when she learns that Kilgrave is still alive, her first instinct is to run away and only decides to stay when she realizes that she is the only one who can help Hope. Even though Hope no longer has a family and is in prison awaiting a murder trial, the stakes of her situation are raised *even* higher when she realizes she is pregnant with Kilgrave's baby. Hope unsuccessfully pays a fellow inmate to beat her so badly as to cause a miscarriage. She contends she would rather die than have his baby, saying of the fetus in the prison hospital ward: "Every second it's in there, I get raped again and again." Jessica does not judge Hope's decision to abort her fetus. She sneaks abortion pills into the prison for Hope, and says to the audience in voice-over: "Some assholes would call what Hope did selfish," condemning any viewer who would frown upon Hope's decision. In one of multiple instances of feminist subtext in *Jessica Jones*, Jessica, and by extension the series, sympathizes with Hope's decision to abort her rapist's fetus, acknowledging that it is a painful one to make, but ultimately no one else's but the survivor's.

During her rape revenge journey, Jessica is willing to put herself in extreme danger to vindicate Hope and exact revenge on Kilgrave. One of her more desperate plans to lure Kilgrave to her and reveal his powers to the public is to lock herself up in a super-maximum-security prison. She knows he is so obsessed with her that he will use his abilities to break into the prison to see her, and she hopes the security footage within the prison will display his powers to the authorities. Her assumption about his obsession is warranted since Kilgrave has been stalking her for weeks. He has been forcing people to take pictures of her for him, and harming any man he thinks is close to her. Jessica is willing to subject herself to a punishment reserved for society's most heinous criminals just for the *chance* to expose Kilgrave. Before she can enact this plan,

however, Kilgrave lures her to her childhood home, which he has bought and restored to look exactly as it did when she lived there with her parents in the hopes that she will want to live there with him. When she goes to the house, Jessica proves that she is willing to risk putting herself back under his psychosexual control indefinitely just to get the evidence she needs for Hope.

Jessica finally confronts Kilgrave for raping her while staying in that house with him in the eighth episode of the series. Kilgrave is shocked when she screams at him for raping her, and responds: “What part of staying in five-star hotels, eating in all the best places, doing whatever the hell *you* wanted is rape?” to which Jessica answers, “The part where I didn’t want to do any of it!” This scene illustrates a great difficulty for survivors of rape: rapists often do not consider what they did to be rape and attempt to change or re-contextualize the narrative of what happened in an effort to invalidate the survivor’s accusation. Jessica stands her ground in this scene, repeating again and again that Kilgrave raped her and forced her to do things against her will, but Kilgrave tries to elicit sympathy from her. He argues that he never knows if people do things for him because they want to or because they are under his mind-control. He then shows Jessica footage of how he got his powers, which he claims were the result of painful experiments performed on him as a child by his parents, who later abandoned him. The audience watches as a little boy screams in pain while a needle is injected into his spine. In this episode, both Jessica and the audience feel sorry for Kilgrave and perhaps even look at what he did to Jessica in a new light, given what they just learned about him. Moreover, Kilgrave claims when Jessica arrives at the house that he will only do what she is comfortable with, wanting her to *choose* to stay with him rather than put her back under his control, making Jessica and the viewer wonder if maybe he actually has changed.



The series upholds its feminist dedication to survivors in the following episode, “AKA Sin Bin,” when all of the sympathy garnered for Kilgrave is flipped on its head and Jessica discovers everything Kilgrave told her is a lie. His parents were not evil scientists but were performing life-saving treatments on Kilgrave who was born with a fatal disease, and they did not abandon him but instead ran away after he tried to kill his mother. Additionally, Kilgrave does not refuse to put Jessica back under his control because he wants her to be with him of her own free will, but because he knows she has developed immunity to his powers, even though she is not aware that she has. He is desperate to control her again but is simply unable. Kilgrave’s persistent torture of innocent people in this episode and the following—from commanding his house staff to not blink for hours on end to forcing his own mother to stab herself with scissors dozens of times—all reinforce that he is an evil person deserving of no sympathy. The series allies with and believes its survivor’s account of the rape even after hearing the rapist’s side of the story. Jessica’s truth is a fact of the narrative, not open to debate. *Jessica Jones* may allow a moment of sympathy for Kilgrave when he narrates his false backstory, but he is never excused for raping Jessica and her account of what he did to her is ultimately not questioned.

After conceding to Kilgrave’s desires and living out his domestic fantasy for an episode in her childhood home, in the following episode, Jessica takes control back from him and enacts violent rape revenge. She kidnaps Kilgrave and places him in a military interrogation room filled with shallow water, taunting him to use his abilities so that she can record it and show it to Hope’s prosecutors. She shocks him with an electric current if he ever tries to harm someone in the room with his powers. She keeps him in there for hours shocking and beating him with viciousness often found in rape revenge films: punching him in the face, kicking him, throwing him against walls, and making him spit blood and beg for mercy. Her revenge against Kilgrave

maintains the “ethical symmetry” (178) for which Heller-Nicholas calls because the series has depicted Kilgrave committing heinous crimes against Jessica and other innocent people all season—his torture feels deserved. Throughout the first season, Jessica maintains that she is not a murderer and refuses to kill Kilgrave, reflecting that she is morally not opposed to torture but she is opposed to murder. When he escapes the interrogation box and causes Hope’s death, however, Jessica has no choice but to kill him.

In order to kill Kilgrave, Jessica plays into his deepest desires. In “AKA: Smile,” she pretends that his powers once again have an effect on her and does whatever he says. Kilgrave tests whether he really can put Jessica back under mind-control by threatening to kidnap her best friend and adoptive sister, Trish (Rachael Taylor), and taunts Jessica: “From your perspective, I’ll be raping her every day.” When Jessica calls his bluff and refuses to react, Kilgrave believes he really has put her back under his spell and rejoices, proving that he never wanted Jessica to willingly be with him, he just wanted to be able to control her again. Once he lets his guard down, Jessica lifts him up by the chin and snaps his neck with her bare hands, using her pure strength to kill her monster.

In a subversion of the typical rape revenge narrative, murdering Kilgrave neither ends Jessica’s story nor does it relieve her of the symptoms of PTSD. In fact, murdering him presents a new demon for Jessica to battle: she struggles to accept the fact that she has actually killed someone of her own volition, even someone as deserving of it as Kilgrave. She is still just as miserable and resentful in season two as she is in season one. The only difference is she no longer has to worry about Kilgrave hurting her or someone else ever again. In the episode “AKA God Help the Hobo,” Jessica attends court-ordered anger management where she is encouraged to share her pain with the group by war veterans, victims of child abuse, and troubled teenagers

who claim she is no different from them—they are all people struggling to contain their anger by bouncing a rubber ball while recounting their stories to the group. Jessica proves them wrong when she describes all of the traumas she endured, from her family dying, to her non-consensual experimentation, to being raped and abducted, and gets so angry that she shatters the rubber ball they were using. This scene illustrates how murdering Kilgrave does not alleviate the pain he caused Jessica, and thereby highlights the myth of rape revenge—that the trauma of rape dies with the rapist. The deficiencies of that myth are further emphasized in the episode “AKA Three Lives and Counting” when Jessica is haunted by images of Kilgrave. She imagines him taunting her, appearing out of nowhere, and she even holds conversations with visions of him. Even though her rape revenge narrative ends when she snaps his neck in the season one finale, Kilgrave still affects Jessica. As she imagines him putting it: “I’m inside you forever.” Killing him did not erase the impact he had on her—his effect is so profound, it lives on long after he is gone.

In the midst of *Jessica Jones*’ rape revenge narrative is Jessica’s clear, outright rejection of traditional gender roles and domesticity. This thesis’s previous chapter on *Westworld* discussed an example of a rape narrative that falls under the category Sarah Projansky defines as “those that depict women’s vulnerability as leading to rape,” (“The Elusive/Ubiquitous...,” 66) because Dolores Abernathy is so helpless as a host within the Westworld park that she is susceptible to being attacked. *Jessica Jones* is an example of the other category of rape narratives Projansky defines: “those that depict the rape of an independent woman as making her vulnerable” (“The Elusive/Ubiquitous...,” 66). In this set of narratives, rape is used to punish and tame strong women by “depicting the women’s strength or independence as an explanation

for why the rape took place” (“The Elusive/Ubiquitous...,” 68), i.e. the act of rape makes these women question whether they are safe in their independent lifestyle. When Kilgrave finds Jessica, she has a quick wit, lives alone, is tied to no one, and has superpowers. Kilgrave comes across Jessica as she lifts two armed attackers off of her neighbor Malcolm (Eka Darville), and throws them across the sidewalk. Kilgrave sees that she is literally a “strong,” “empowered” woman, because she has super strength, and so he uses his mind-control abilities to ensure that she will only use her powers for his benefit, not her own. He puts her under his complete control, strips her of her independence, and makes her live with him as his dotting housewife.

Kilgrave forces Jessica to conform to traditional notions of femininity within a domestic life with him, made clearest perhaps by his constant commands that she smile for him, playing into the oft-heard phrase by misogynists to women: “You’d look prettier if you smiled more.” In the flashbacks of her time under his control, the audience sees Jessica wear dresses and high heels—a complete departure from her usual leather jacket, jeans, and boots that allow her to scale buildings and leap from tremendous heights. Projansky notes that the tension between a woman’s independence and her vulnerability is normally resolved in rape narratives by putting the woman into a “stable family setting” (“The Elusive/Ubiquitous...,” 66) by the end of the film. *Jessica Jones* subverts this potential resolution by portraying a domestic relationship as a horror for Jessica and the manifestation of a monster’s greatest fantasy and returning her to her independent lifestyle by the end of the rape revenge narrative.

In a flashback to her time living with Kilgrave, Jessica wears a long yellow dress and high heels, with her hair uncharacteristically curled at the ends—an ultra-feminine appearance for the traditionally masculine Jessica. In this scene, Jessica is released from Kilgrave’s mind-control for only a few seconds. As soon as she is free, she plays the role of housewife by smiling

and telling Kilgrave that she will clean up so that he will leave her alone. Akin to the scene where she kills him, Jessica knows she can outsmart Kilgrave by pretending to be the passive, devoted feminine partner he wants her to be. Once he is gone, Jessica takes the opportunity to try to run away. She climbs onto the ledge of the terrace and imagines jumping off, getting on a white horse, and riding away. Her only escape from this domestic life with her rapist is to jump off a roof. She is stopped when Kilgrave puts her back under his control and calls her down from the ledge. Kilgrave thinks he can trust Jessica to stay with him without being under mind-control—that she is happy in this life with him. This scene proves, however, that she would take any opportunity she could to escape him, bolstering Jessica’s insistence that he forced her to do everything she did with him against her will. The series demonstrates a feminist message of how the patriarchal fantasy of an always-smiling, ever-accommodating housewife who does whatever her husband tells her is a suffocating and dehumanizing role for women by presenting those values as the desires of the evil Kilgrave. This horrific portrayal of female domesticity departs further from the common narrative resolution that sees rape survivors placed in secure domestic settings.

The clearest subversion of the “stable family setting” narrative resolution occurs when Kilgrave buys Jessica’s childhood home for the two of them to live. Buying and restoring the only tangible remains of Jessica’s deceased family could be viewed as a sweet gesture were it not provided by Kilgrave. Rather than restore the memory of her family, Kilgrave taints it for Jessica, and, in fact, she cannot recite her hometown street names to calm down again. Kilgrave offers this life with him in her childhood home as a solution: he will stop killing and torturing the people Jessica cares about if she moves in with him. Both Jessica and the audience know that beginning a domestic life with Kilgrave again would be a return to imprisonment under his

control and continuous rape. During the few days she lives in the house with Kilgrave, she does not conform to his notions of femininity, refusing to smile, eat or speak “like a lady,” and even cuts up the dress he wants her to wear. Jessica is aware that giving into his demands and starting a life with him is the easiest way to end the suffering of those about whom she cares. However, she rejects that resolution, opting instead to force him into the interrogation box and subject him to her own torture. She admits that she would rather die than be with him again.

Samira Nadkarni goes so far as to argue that *Jessica Jones* indicates “suburban spaces are often sites of hidden abuse and violence” (77) in our world. The episode “AKA WWJD?” demonstrates her point both with Kilgrave and Jessica’s time together in her house, where he continually threatens her and his staff with harm, and with the hostage situation they discover in another house across town. In that suburban home, a father holds his wife and children at gunpoint in their living room, and Jessica forces Kilgrave to help her rescue the family. The context surrounding the hostage situation is never provided and these characters are never revisited, implying that a father holding his family at gunpoint requires no narrative explanation, and further demonstrating the horrors of domesticity for women.

Rosenberg’s adaptation made a significant change from the *Jessica Jones* comic books: in the source material, Kilgrave does not rape Jessica while she is in his possession but makes her suffer an unrequited desire for him and forces her to watch as he rapes *other* hypnotized women (Fitzpatrick). I believe Rosenberg’s choice to change this rape narrative is beneficial in that it makes the story more personal to Jessica; however, I am still not convinced that rape is necessary to Jessica’s backstory. Kilgrave tortures innocent people in almost every scene he stars in: he forces people to become addicted to heroin, beat each other to death, stab themselves, cut their

own throats, and even has his father dismembered while still alive. He is thoroughly established as a monster, even without the knowledge that he repeatedly raped Jessica over the course of a year. A major driving force for Jessica in season one, alongside vindicating Hope, is that Kilgrave forced her to kill an innocent woman, who turns out to be the wife of Jessica's love interest. She feels enormous guilt for murdering this woman that is only furthered and complicated when she develops feelings for the woman's husband. Is that not enough for Jessica to want revenge against Kilgrave? Is it really necessary for Kilgrave to rape Jessica on top of forcing her to murder for him? I believe the series would proceed in almost precisely the same way without the addition of rape to Jessica's backstory, especially because season two focuses away from Kilgrave after he dies in the season one finale and on the origin of Jessica's superpowers. Gratuitous rape narratives are not limited to Jessica. The series reveals in its second season that Trish was raped by her director when she was a fifteen-year-old celebrity. This backstory for Trish is superfluous to the series—it is not handled with the complexity and sensitivity as Jessica's rape narrative, but rather, it feels as if the writers just wanted to incorporate a #MeToo narrative into this season which aired in 2018.

By adding a stereotypically gendered trauma to Jessica's backstory, *Jessica Jones* succumbs to the same pitfall as *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld*: that a woman leader must be a victim-hero, and one of the most acceptable calls to action for a powerful woman is to get revenge on her rapist. Despite having superpowers that could result in limitless opportunities for Jessica to be a hero, she chooses to use her powers for rape revenge, one of the three “conventional negative narrative explanations for female aggression” Lisa Purse notes (188), as discussed in the previous chapter. Even as a superhero, Jessica is constrained to a stereotypical narrative motivation that is deemed acceptable because it allows a woman to be simultaneously a

hero and a victim, thereby retaining her place as less powerful than men within patriarchy. When she engages in feats of strength to get revenge on her attacker, the audience is reminded that she is only doing so because he has violated her. *Jessica Jones* takes a smart, sharp-tongued woman who is strong enough to bend metal with her bare hands and makes her abilities less threatening to patriarchy by incorporating a man's sexual abuse of her and having that be her sole narrative motivation throughout her introductory season.

*Jessica Jones* does not justify its use of a rape narrative, because it could easily proceed in the same way without it. At least, however, the series takes the time and care to acknowledge the effects that sexual violence has on a person. It ultimately leaves the audience with the message that sexual trauma is difficult to overcome for any survivor—even if she has superhuman strength—and a survivor can still be unbelievably powerful while struggling with that trauma.



## Chapter Five: Unbelievable Women Detectives

Special Victims detective Robin Griffin (Elizabeth Moss) arrives in her hometown of Laketop, New Zealand, just in time to investigate the disappearance of a pregnant twelve-year-old girl named Tui (Jacqueline Joe). Throughout the investigation, the audience watches Robin deal with the misogyny among the police officers who refuse to view her as an authority figure. During Robin's first debrief with the precinct about Tui's case, she is interrupted multiple times by male officers who believe her plan to find Tui would be too much work. When Robin explains that if Tui gives birth out in the bush, where they think she is hiding, she will likely die, one officer believes she is exaggerating, then adds while chuckling, "In any case, though, more than likely she's already dead." Robin asks to speak with this officer in the hall, thereby exerting her authority that is immediately undermined when the other officers end the meeting and leave once she steps outside the room.

The audience also sees what a competent detective she is through the compassion and empathy with which Robin handles Tui's case—attitudes that are desperately needed within this precinct of ill-informed and apathetic men. When Robin enters the precinct for the first time in the pilot episode, she sees Tui in an interrogation room, laying her head on the table and staring off blankly in the distance, while three police officers stand next to her, talking as if she is not in the room. Their blasé attitude towards the pregnant twelve-year-old sitting next to them is indicative of their indifference towards her and her case throughout the rest of the season. Robin asks that the one-way glass be covered so that Tui can have some privacy from the other male officers' gaze, and then enters the room. She sits down next to Tui, getting on her level rather than standing over her, and offers her a piece of chocolate to get her talking. The male officers say Tui had not said a word to them, but Robin gets her to speak within a few seconds of

entering the room by treating her with compassion. She tells Tui that none of this is her fault, that she just wants to help her, and comforts her while she gets a sonogram. Robin immediately makes clear that she cares about Tui, and refuses to give up on the case or get frustrated with her, even when Tui writes a note that says “no one” raped her and leaves that as the investigation’s only clue. In the fourth episode of the series, the show reveals that the reason this case resonates with Robin so much is that when she was fifteen, she was gang-raped, which got her pregnant and forced her to give the baby up for adoption. Robin has a special connection to all the sex crimes cases she works because of her history, which her sergeant views as a liability, but the show maintains it makes her a better and more empathetic detective.

*Top of the Lake* (Campion, 2013–2017), which aired on the BBC in the United Kingdom and on Sundance TV in the United States, takes place in the fictional New Zealand town of Laketop. The town provides an eerie backdrop for Jane Campion’s disturbing examination of sexual assault, pedophilia, their survivors, and their perpetrators. *Top of the Lake* offers complex depictions of sexual predators as men who can be damaged, sympathetic, or even trustworthy, as the series’ ultimate villain turns out to be Al Parker (David Wenham), the police sergeant with whom Robin has worked so closely throughout the investigation. The series makes explicit that Robin’s rape did not make her a stronger woman, nor is it something she looks back on as “making” her the woman she is today, as Sansa Stark does. Additionally, unlike the gratuitous rape narratives in *Game of Thrones*, *Westworld*, and *Jessica Jones*, Robin’s backstory is essential to her character development because it helps her to be an empathetic advocate for the survivors for whom she works—it is not just added as an unnecessary detail of her tragic past. The series’ portrayal of her rape through flashbacks and its emotional depiction of Robin dealing with her

trauma all these years later produces a feminist representation of sexual assault and its trauma as well as a survivor who channels her suffering into helping survivors like her.

*Top of the Lake* represents sexual assault through the flashbacks of Robin and her high school sweetheart, Johnno Mitcham (Tom Wright). While staying in Laketop, Robin reconnects with Johnno, and they recall the school dance they went to together in high school. Robin is reluctant to remember the dance but provides the audience with desaturated and often out of focus flashbacks of her and Johnno (played by Phoebe James and Fletcher Boswell, respectively) dancing together. The first shots of the flashback are of the dance's wall decorations, Robin wrapping her arms around Johnno's waist, and Robin's heels, indicating that Robin is focusing on the details of the memory rather than the content, which is clearly painful for her to revisit. After some prodding from Johnno, the episode depicts the entire memory from Robin's subjectivity. The beginning of the flashback is sweet: Robin and Johnno nervously share their first kiss while dancing. It takes an ominous turn when Johnno leaves Robin to smoke a joint with his friends—we see Robin look around the dance by herself, unsure of where to go next. Then she hesitantly leaves, and adult Robin's voice-over asks Johnno: "Where'd you go off to?" adding a sense of foreboding to the scene, as if Johnno leaving caused something bad to happen.

In the present, Robin drinks whiskey and then recalls walking alone in the fog that night. Her younger body is in silhouette and framed in a wide shot from behind as she walks away from the camera in slight slow motion, implementing suspense to the scene that is heightened when a truck pulls up in front of Robin and the men inside offer her a ride. When Robin says, "I didn't notice how many men were in the truck," the series makes clear, without explicitly stating, that these memories are the precursor to Robin's rape, which explains why they are so anxiety-

inducing. The flashbacks do not continue, as Robin clearly cannot bear to think about this night any longer, but they are revisited in the following episode from Johnno's perspective.

Johnno managed to sneak into the back of the truck to ensure that Robin would be safe, but he was unable to protect her—Robin never even knew he was there. In the same desaturated, hazy, and slightly slow-motion style of the previous flashbacks, the audience sees Robin struggle to run away from the four men in her heels in a wide shot from Johnno's point of view. Johnno is locked in the back of the truck and is so terrified by seeing the men grab Robin and hearing her scream that he pees himself. Since the memory is depicted from Johnno's perspective, it stays focused on the men pushing him around and overpowering *him* while he cries, completely helpless. This choice allows the audience to witness how vicious these men are without depicting what they are doing to Robin. In fact, the men harassing Johnno are strategically placed in frame to block Robin's entire body that the audience assumes is lying on the ground behind them, but her screams are heard throughout the entire flashback. By alluding to the rape in this way, the episode does not allow for the audience to partake in a voyeuristic gaze that "implicates the viewer as a bystander who bears witness to the graphic rape but cannot intervene" (Spallacci, 6) because the viewer witnesses no such graphic assault scene. This representational strategy is an example of what Heller-Nicholas refers to as "intensity by association" (162). She illustrates this concept with the film *Straightheads* (Reed, 2007) that contains a scene in which its protagonists Alice (Gillian Anderson) and her date Adam (Danny Dyer) are brutally assaulted by a group of men on the hood of her car after getting in an accident. The men beat Adam before Alice is gang-raped, and "the film focuses on that preliminary act in gory, visceral detail. It then only briefly shows the beginning of Alice's assault" (Heller-Nicholas, 162). Thus, through "intensity by association," the audience understands that "Alice's rape is *at least* as violent as horrific as

Adam's beating" (Heller-Nicholas, 162), without actually having to see what happens to her. The flashback of Robin's rape scene operates in the same way: by portraying the men as they overpower and harass Johnno, the audience gets an idea of how they are overpowering and abusing Robin without having to watch it happen.

While Robin's rape scene is depicted from a third-party perspective, it differs from Sansa Stark's scene, in which the camera dollies in on Theon's face as he watches her be raped, in significant ways. Firstly, the scene is still a traumatic memory—it is not portrayed in the present tense. It happens to be portrayed through Johnno's memory of the trauma he endured vicariously through Robin by watching her assault unfold and being unable to save her. He has felt cowardly and guilty about not being able to help Robin ever since, even though he was a teenaged boy against four grown men, and therefore obviously would not have been able to help. Secondly, we have previously had access to Robin's subjectivity regarding this night—these particular memories are just too difficult for her to revisit. Because the series goes to great lengths to illustrate the emotional toll the attack has had on Robin, it is evident why she would not want to narrate her assault from her perspective. Finally, the scene is not shocking. Sansa's rape surprises the audience and acts as a devastating twist to the narrative—*Top of the Lake* provides ample warning and context so that when the audience does finally see the night of her rape, it is emotionally devastating, but not unexpected. Moreover, Sansa's rape scene is composed entirely in close-up shots, whereas Robin's is always wide, providing enough physical distance from the actual violence so that it is not made into a spectacle. The wide shot allows the audience to look at other things in frame besides Robin's attackers—it enables the viewer to look away from the upsetting and potentially triggering imagery. Sansa's scene, by contrast, holds on a close-up shot

on Sansa's terrified face as Ramsay pushes her onto the bed, forcing the audience to experience the suspense of her impending rape with her.

In her article "The Female Authorial Voice," Kaja Silverman calls for the exposure of female authors "'inside' the text" (58) of their films and contends that a woman director can expose her authorial voice on-screen through "formal configurations which provide the cinematic equivalent of the linguistic markers through which subjectivity is activated" (Silverman, 65-66). The stylistic choice to illustrate Robin's assault through a series of memories is an example of Campion articulating her authorial voice. She focuses the flashbacks on the subjectivities of those traumatized, not the perpetrators or any other third-party spectators, indicating her understanding of the need to portray sexual assault in a sensitive, non-spectacular manner. She gives the audience fair warning for the assault scene they are about to watch and indicates that she knows not to trivialize the subject matter by sensationalizing the actual rape.

Campion expresses her authorial voice further in a dinner scene between Robin and Al. Robin believes Tui was trying to say that she was gang-raped with her note that "no one" raped her, as in no singular person did it. When she tells Al her theory, he says he thinks she is letting her past affect her judgment, revealing that he knows about her assault. He then admits that the entire precinct, whose officers have been undermining her authority since she arrived, knows as well. Robin is mortified that everyone knows her darkest secret and then horrified when Al describes how he and other powerful men in Laketop personally "bloody well punished" her rapists fifteen years ago: the men hauled the boys in, "whacked them around, stripped them" gave them a "hiding." They then forced Sarge (Oscar Redding), the ringleader of the gang rape, to lick the other boys' assholes, adding elements of homophobia (why else would licking another man's asshole be the most severe punishment they could think of?) into Al's already

misinformed understanding of justice for survivors. Even as a police officer, who is aware that vigilante justice—besides being illegal—is not comparable to criminal justice, Al views this beating as fair punishment for their crime. When Robin states her disgust that her rapists are still free and on the streets, Al seems surprised that she thinks they should face any further punishment after what they endured.

Robin averts her gaze from Al as he describes the punishment he felt fit for her rapists, holding back tears and her disgust at having to hear about them again, but when she tells her side of the story, she stares Al down. Unlike the scene between Sansa and the Hound in *Game of Thrones*, when Sansa shows no emotion while the Hound reminds her of her rape, Robin maintains a harsh, steely-eyed gaze at Al that is coupled with tears when she tells him about how the rape has affected her ever since. Specifically, she explains how the daughter she gave away writes her letters wanting to know about her biological father and Robin does not know what to say. Throughout the scene, she laughs in disbelief, she cries, and she gets angry. Moss gives a powerful performance in this scene that conveys her strength and her struggle to maintain composure while still eliciting emotion. Laura Mulvey articulates a power dynamic between men and women on-screen: male characters are able to look while women are merely looked at (62). When women stray from this passive position in film and wield their own gaze, Linda Williams contends they are often “punished...by narrative process” (17). Through Robin’s piercing but emotional gaze at Al, Robin retains power in the scene by looking back at the man who is emotionally tormenting her in this moment and has disallowed her to get justice in the past. In this scene, Campion is articulating her authorial voice through Robin’s gaze, giving her narrative power in a situation that Al has designed to make her feel helpless, by reminding her of the moment of her life in which she was most powerless. Simultaneously, Campion is portraying

how women can be powerful while still emoting, which counters earlier examples in this thesis that depict women's strength through their stoicism.

The ways Robin's rapists are punished for their crime is indicative of the myth that physical assault and sexual assault are equal forms of violence. This notion does not take into account the aftermath the rape of a woman can have on a survivor that a beating cannot, and *Top of the Lake* portrays the deficiencies of this belief with the pregnancies of both Robin and Tui following their rapes. Additionally, while a beating can also result in posttraumatic stress disorder for its victim, in the case of Sarge, it certainly did not, as the episode makes clear when he and Robin meet again a few scenes later, and he does not remember what happened. By contrast, Robin is constantly triggered and struggling with her trauma caused by her rape. Al is actually surprised that Robin still recognizes Sarge after all these years, perhaps because he does not recognize her.

Later in the same episode, a clearly distressed Robin is trying to find solace at the local bar, but its male patrons keep harassing her. One of them is Sarge, who cozies up next to her at the bar and tries to hit on her, saying, "I know you from somewhere, don't I?" and then after brief contemplation adds: "Did we fuck or something?" He has no memory of raping her, which leads the audience and Robin to two conclusions: 1) Al beating him up evidently neither had a lasting effect on him nor did it make an impact on his memory, and 2) She is likely not his only rape victim, since she does not stick out to him. Robin cracks, unable to bear that her rapist and potential father of the child she gave up for adoption does not remember committing the act that has haunted her for fifteen years. She breaks her glass against the bar and stabs him with it in the stomach, screaming: "You remember me now, asshole?!" Johnno drags her out of the bar and drops her into the shallow end of a lake to calm her down. This episode exposes the deficiencies



of the myths that “secondary” rape revenge and “primary” rape revenge (Read, 95) can lead to healing or justice for a survivor. As stated above, the act of secondary rape revenge committed by Al and the townsfolk against Sarge and his accomplices was ineffectual punishment and provided no justice for Robin. Robin enacts primary rape revenge when she stabs Sarge, but it does not heal her or make her feel any better. In fact, it makes her feel worse about her trauma, resulting in her sobbing and shouting, “What’s wrong with me?” to Johnno in the lake. Robin’s road to healing is a winding mental journey that involves talking about what happened, helping other survivors, and often alcohol, as we see her drinking copiously in this episode when faced with the memory of her rape, but it does not include physical acts of violence against her attackers.

### **Unbelievable**

As stated in the Introduction, Lisa Cuklanz claims that detective shows are historically, “the primary masculine television genre, with a predominantly male audience” (19). *Top of the Lake* subverts the notion that the detective series is a masculine genre by making a detective series starring a woman fighting against misogyny in her precinct and featuring the issue of violence against women. Another show that subverts the “masculine” detective series is the Netflix mini-series *Unbelievable* (Grant, 2019–2019), which stars Detectives Grace Rasmussen (Toni Collette) and Karen Duvall (Merritt Wever) as they chase down a vicious serial rapist. This series is another compelling example of a rape narrative utilized to subvert rape culture by exposing the horrors of how that culture functions within America’s legal system through the story of Marie Adler. The series was created by showrunner Susannah Grant and based on an actual 2008 case of an eighteen-year-old girl who was raped by a stranger who broke into her

home, accused of making the story up, and fined for false reporting a rape that actually happened to her. All the while, her rapist was continuing to victimize more and more women across several states. The young woman did not find justice until three years later when a pair of women detectives identified a pattern between all of these assaults and arrested the serial rapist. The series is made all the more “unbelievable” to viewers when they remember that this story actually happened—that Marie (Kaitlyn Dever) is a real person who was actually, as the show puts it: “assaulted twice: once by [her] attacker and once by the police.”

The first episode begins the morning after Marie’s attack. The episode provides brief glimpses into what happened to her through dark flashbacks from her point of view, composed of quick cuts, shallow depth of field, and, since Marie is blindfolded, much of the action is hidden from the audience’s view. The image is so dark, and the frame is so confined by the blindfold that it is hard for the audience to tell what is going on, but they are aided by the details Marie provides in her narration. By keeping the depiction of Marie’s assault centered entirely on Marie’s subjectivity, the series immediately prioritizes Marie’s perspective and presents it as facts of the narrative, causing the viewer to believe her even when the police do not. Throughout that episode, Marie is questioned only by male detectives and forced to recite the entire story of her assault five separate times, often in front of multiple people. By contrast, in the following episode, when Detective Duvall interviews another survivor, she does so privately in her car, and the scene cuts away before the survivor can provide any details or flashbacks. Instead, the audience learns the details of this new assault from Duvall reciting them, because she believes the survivor, and thus the audience does as well, even without a retelling from the survivor’s point of view. In episode four, when Duvall and Rasmussen interview a different survivor, they do not make her recite her assault because they read her case file—the police officers who

questioned Marie could not be bothered to share information with one another, so she had to keep repeating, and thus reliving, her trauma.

*Unbelievable* simultaneously follows two timelines: that of Marie after her assault in 2008 and that of the investigation in 2011. The timelines converge in the final episode when Marie learns her rapist has been caught, sues the city, and wins \$150,000 for what the police put her through after she was assaulted. By focusing on these two timelines, the series devotes equal screen time to how these survivors deal with the aftermath of their assaults as it does to the actual investigation, offering a unique presentation of the detective series by keeping the show centered on the survivors of sexual assault.

## **Conclusion**

In *Watching Rape*, Sarah Projansky contends that representations of rape in film and television can contribute to postfeminism by providing a backlash against second-wave feminism and women through a graphic sexual assault scene—the representation itself acts as such a backlash (121). She contends that even films with so-called “progressive” rape narratives, specifically, she refers to *The Accused*, “can participate in feminist aspects of postfeminist discourses: a violent backlash against both women and feminism” (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 121-122), by depicting an explicit rape scene. Projansky’s argument begs the question: Can a rape portrayed on-screen be utilized in pursuit of feminist goals? While the past decade has seen the continuation of gratuitous rape scenes employed for shock value in popular programming such as *Game of Thrones*, *Westworld*, and to a lesser extent, *Jessica Jones*, recent series such as *Sweet/Vicious*, *Top of the Lake*, and *Unbelievable* have employed rape narratives to achieve feminist goals by eliciting sympathy from the audience for survivors as it sheds light on the

struggle of how difficult it is to deal with the consequences of sexual assault. The contexts of the narratives and representational strategies of these series are crucial to the achievement of these goals. As this thesis has argued, if rape is included in a feminist narrative, it must be *essential* to it—rape cannot just be a side plot that could easily be replaced with another obstacle for a character. Additionally, a rape narrative must highlight the emotional aftermath of the attack for the survivor. The most effective way to do that is by presenting the assault in the form of a flashback to the trauma. The act of portraying sexual assault in flashback inherently implies that it is a part of a survivor's life that still affects them; it is not something that can be forgotten. A rape narrative should be more invested in demonstrating how a survivor heals from rape than it is in portraying the rape for entertainment.

The structure of this thesis's chapters functions in two ways. The chapters progress from least feminist example of a rape leading to a woman's position of power in a television series (Sansa Stark) to the most feminist example (Robin Griffin). They also feature women more involved behind the camera in the series discussed as the thesis advances. *Game of Thrones* has virtually no female involvement behind the camera, with two male showrunners and one woman director out of a group of several, who only directed one of the episodes mentioned in chapter two, "Oathkeeper," in which rape is portrayed in the background of a scene for no particular reason other than to make the scene more upsetting. *Westworld* is co-created and co-run by Lisa Joy, but Jonathan Nolan directed the episode in which Dolores is raped. *Jessica Jones* and *Top of the Lake* both have female showrunners, and women directed about half of the episodes in each of these series. These examples demonstrate that the more women are involved in the portrayal of violence against women, the better its representation.

Sansa Stark's transition from crying, feminine, helpless princess to unfeeling, masculine leader is the apex of the *Game of Thrones*'s creative team's ignorance of sexual violence and how it affects its survivors. *GOT*'s admittance that Sansa's prolonged sexual abuse is what made her the strong woman leader she is by the end of her narrative in "The Last of the Starks" makes its choices for Sansa's character arc more appalling, because it proves that the showrunners knew the implications of making Sansa's rape the catalyst to her strength and leadership. They thought the ends justified the means: that the fact that Sansa was abused by cartoonishly evil men for five seasons was excused because it made her strong enough to become Queen of the North. Dolores Abernathy's rape is not depicted or heard, but it is alluded to as the inevitable consequence of the Man in Black dragging her by the collar into a barn as she kicks and screams. Her path to leadership consists of her achieving sentience, which depends on her sustained suffering through various acts of physical and sexual violence. Once she achieves a position of power, she also becomes stoic and believes shedding her feminine qualities and adopting masculine ones will aid her on her journey. Both Sansa and Dolores are the products of massive HBO productions and both characters perpetuate the idea found in rape narratives that "all women are already committed to independent action, they just need rape to 'free' them to take that action" (Projansky: *Watching Rape*, 135)—their rise to personal agency and leadership hinges on their sexual assaults.

Dolores and Sansa propagate the trope that rape can act as the catalyst for a woman's empowerment in film and television narratives—rape is crucial to their ascension to positions of power because it allows these women leaders to be portrayed simultaneously as heroes and victims. Misogynistic viewers can feel comfortable watching these women become powerful because they have seen them be viciously raped on-screen in a backlash against both them and

feminism. Therefore, they are not presented as fully empowered, feminist rulers, but rather as postfeminist fantasies of women whose strength is portrayed through their ability not to feel any emotion and do not disrupt our society's patriarchal power structures. These characters' victim-hero statuses and the violent backlash against feminism featured in their assault scenes make Sansa and Dolores *postfeminist* representations of women leaders. They are not feminist characters.

*Jessica Jones* serves as an excellent middle ground between the shocking representations of rape in *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* and the careful portrayal in *Top of the Lake*. The Marvel Netflix series features a gratuitous backstory of rape for its female lead, which states that her extended sexual abuse enables her to become a superhero, but it also deals with the consequences of that assault. Despite having superpowers, Jessica struggles everyday with the abuse she suffered at Kilgrave's hands. She exhibits symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, gets triggered, has flashbacks, and drinks to cope with her trauma. As opposed to Sansa and Dolores, who seem to be made stoic by the act itself and show no signs of it affecting them emotionally, Jessica is constantly trying to maintain her composure and act as if her trauma does not affect her. She needs the support of others in order to get better. Even though she has super strength, she still needs help finding the strength to get over her trauma.

Campion's series ensures that Robin's rape is essential to her backstory by constantly reincorporating it into the narrative. Robin's trauma affects how she interacts with her coworkers, lovers, and the survivors with whom she works. If Robin were not a rape survivor, it would drastically affect the trajectory of her character, which relies on her being a survivor who wants to help others like her. That is not to say that only survivors can help other survivors, but Robin's backstory makes her a much richer character and complex detective. Whereas if Sansa,

Dolores, or Jessica were not raped, I contend their storylines would remain essentially the same. They all suffer enough abuse at the hands of evil men that enable them to pursue revenge narratives. Rape is just an extra element that gives their characters more to overcome, and since they are *women* seeking empowerment, rape functions as the obvious obstacle for them because it enables them to be simultaneously victimized (through the act of rape) and empowered (through their subsequent heroism) characters. Moreover, the articulation of Campion's authorial voice throughout the series through Robin's subjectivity and authoritative gaze leads to a more sensitive portrayal of violence against women for viewers and a more empathetic survivor.

I think it is important to use art, particularly film and television, to depict the horrors of rape in order to raise public awareness for how it affects its survivors and to continue to debunk rape myths as it has been doing since the second-wave feminist movement. However, to portray rape with the goal of eliciting shock value is irresponsible and offensive to survivors everywhere who can relate to that representation. In that same vein, insinuating that rape revenge is the ultimate resolution for a survivor is equally offensive—revenge does not erase trauma for survivors, but the rape revenge narratives of *Game of Thrones* and *Westworld* imply that they do. Depictions of rape survivors on-screen can be feminist if they demonstrate the strength of the woman survivor as her ability to cope with her trauma. Because *Jessica Jones* and *Top of the Lake* dedicate time to show how much Jessica and Robin are struggling, the characters appear stronger because viewers watch them be powerful, successful leaders even though they live with the daily struggle of their trauma. Victimization does not breed strength, but a person's inner strength can be found in how they manage to pull themselves together after being victimized and find ways to keep living.

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