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THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: THE  
AVENGING-WOMAN NARRATIVE IN POPULAR TELEVISION AND FILM

by

Lara Stache

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Communication

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2013

ABSTRACT  
THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT: THE  
AVENGING-WOMAN NARRATIVE IN POPULAR TELEVISION AND FILM

by

Lara Stache

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2013  
Under the Supervision of Professor John W. Jordan

In this critical rhetorical analysis, I examine the contemporary avenging-woman narrative in popular television and film. As a rhetorical text, the avenging-woman narrative can be read as a representation of cultural constructions of female empowerment. In this project, I situate the contemporary avenging-woman narrative within the context of a contemporary third wave feminist culture, in order to articulate how the representations of female empowerment in the texts may be a negotiation of cultural tensions about feminism. The four primary texts chosen for inclusion within this study are made up of two television shows, *Revenge* (2011-present) and *Veronica Mars* (2003-2007), and two films, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Colombiana* (2011). Each text features a woman depicted as transgressing social norms of traditional female behavior, usually through violence and with the purpose of exacting some form of revenge.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that although the image of the avenging-woman can be read as representative of female empowerment, the narratives simultaneously portray her as a cautionary tale against subversion within the system. I critique the depiction of female empowerment at the intersection of violence, a lack of homo-social relationships, a representation of sexualized feminine strength, and the objectification of the female body via fetishized technology. An analysis of each theme shows the complications that arise with the linking of women and power in the avenging-woman narrative. The representation of female

empowerment is thus ultimately hegemonic, serving to reinforce the system the protagonist is depicted in the narrative as attempting to subvert. Although offering a pleasurable tale of justice and revenge, the avenging-woman text is also an example of how a rhetoric of female empowerment is problematic when it does not support political changes within a patriarchal system.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2010, Melissa Silverstein authored a column on Forbes.com with the headline: “Lisbeth Salander, The Girl Who Started a Feminist Franchise.” Describing the main character of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* as “a diminutive, bisexual, punked-out and kick-ass 20-something superhacker,” Silverstein emphasizes the multi-faceted identity of the powerful female protagonist (para. 1). Lisbeth Salander belongs to a growing category in cinema: the avenging-woman. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, an adaptation of the first novel in the trilogy by Stieg Larsson (2008), is a contemporary example of the avenging-woman narrative. The fact that the best-selling novel has been made into a feature film twice, once in 2009 by Danish director, Niels Arden Oplev, and remade in 2011 by American director, David Fincher, serves as a testament to the popularity of both the book and the character of Lisbeth Salander.

As a rhetorical text, the avenging-woman narrative can be read as a representation of cultural constructions of female empowerment. For example, one consistent theme within avenging-woman narratives is violence, where “women appropriate male power in the forms of weaponry and physical prowess” (Dole, 2001, p. 78). Traditionally, violence has been culturally viewed as a form of active male power, while women are encouraged to deal with anger passively (Heinecken, 2001). However, starting in the late 70s, images of the violent woman began appearing more frequently in blockbuster films such as, *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Their more prominent inclusion in storylines led to scholars examining the avenging-woman texts as representative of cultural conversations about women’s role in society (e. g., Projansky, 2001; Read, 2000). In the decades hence, avenging woman narratives have found their

way into numerous media representations, and have evolved with and responded to changes within the larger culture itself.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I contend that representations of gender in popular media can be read productively as rhetorical constructions of cultural ideologies. Based on this premise, I then ask how the construction of female empowerment in the avenging-woman text can be read as a rhetorical message about women and power in contemporary culture. Scholarly readings of previous avenging-woman narratives have analyzed how the texts can be read as a negotiation of corresponding cultural tensions about feminism (Creed, 1993; Read, 2000; Projansky, 2001). In this project, I analyze the contemporary avenging-woman narrative within the context of a third wave feminist culture, in order to articulate the representations of female empowerment in the texts that may be a negotiation of cultural tensions about contemporary feminism. I examine the depiction of women and power, and in particular, via a feminist reading of the texts, I question how the construction of female empowerment reflects tensions regarding feminism in contemporary culture.

I analyze a variety of texts to explore these questions, investigate their representations and contexts, and critique their rhetorical messages and implications. The four primary texts chosen for inclusion within this study are made up of two television shows, *Revenge* (2011-present) and *Veronica Mars* (2003-2007), and two films, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Colombiana* (2011). Each text features a woman depicted as transgressing social norms of traditional female behavior, usually through violence and with the purpose of exacting some form of revenge. Although the woman's transgression suggests the opportunity for empowerment through subversion of social

norms, I argue that the depiction of violence, a lack of homo-social relationships, a representation of sexualized feminine strength, and the objectification of the female body via fetishized technology complicate the linking of women and power.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that although the image of the avenging-woman can be read as representative of female empowerment, the narratives simultaneously portray her as a cautionary tale against subversion within the system, which offers the opportunity for an alternative reading of women and power. Through the alternative reading, the depiction of female empowerment is thus ultimately hegemonic, serving to reinforce the system the protagonist is depicted in the narrative as attempting to subvert. Although it constructs a pleasurable tale of justice and revenge, the avenging-woman text can also be read as an example of how a rhetoric of female empowerment is problematic when it does not support political changes within a patriarchal system. For example, the pleasure of the revenge narrative comes at the expense of actually addressing the broader cultural and systemic problem of rape. Ultimately, I see the contemporary avenging-woman narrative as providing scholars opportunities to tease out what it means to be an empowered woman in our current cultural climate, and to question how representations of particular feminist perspectives may both help and hinder this process.

In the next section, I define a contemporary cultural construction of female empowerment. In particular, I discuss the depictions of female empowerment within a third wave context and present the themes of violence, community, sexualized strength, and technology as gendered concepts of power. I then detail the relevance and appropriateness of these four texts, and offer a brief synopsis of each. I conclude this

introductory chapter with a preview of the larger project and a brief outline of each of the proceeding chapters.

### **A Contemporary Cultural Construction of Female Empowerment: Third Wave Feminism**

Feminism is sometimes theorized within a metaphor of a wave, indicating a continuation of the feminist movement with historical peaks emphasizing specific cultural contexts. For example, the first wave peak of feminism coincides with the suffrage movement in the early 1900s, and the second wave peak can be attributed to the increased political focus and the first attempted passage of the Equal Rights Amendment in the 1970s. In each case, the “wave” is classified through a variety of characteristics, which are intended to embody the overall goals of the movement, but cannot possibly describe every feminist advocate or action that occurred during the respective times. In this sense, the wave metaphor describes a specific and somewhat limited construction of feminism during the various peaks. However, the wave metaphor allows scholars to define a specific type of feminism through which to critique positive and negative messages about women and power culturally. There is a body of feminist scholarship that theorizes contemporary representations of feminism in a third wave, and it is within this context that I examine the avenging-woman narratives (e.g., Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Riordan, 2001; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001).

The third wave does not define all of contemporary feminism, but it does describe a pervasive, and I argue problematic, depiction of female empowerment that can be read within media narratives including the avenging-woman text. The label of “third wave feminism” defines a specific conceptualization of female empowerment that focuses on

choice and individuality, in ways that are sometimes critiqued as problematic for not creating necessary systemic changes for women (Riordan, 2001). In this third wave context, feminism is defined as embracing “ambiguity” and “individual complexity,” when it comes to identifying as a feminist, and strives to be inclusive to members from a variety of backgrounds and racial, economic, and gendered identities (Walker, 1995, p. xxxiii). To be empowered is “to be whoever you are – but with a political consciousness” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 56-57). A third wave conceptualization of female empowerment is about making conscious choices in everyday actions in an attempt to confront a gendered oppression, but without denying other identities of race, religion, and class.

This all-inclusive goal distinguishes the third wave from what is seen by some as the “strictly defined and all-encompassing feminist identity” of the second wave women’s liberation movement (Walker, 1995, xxxi). There have been a variety of stereotypes attributed to the rhetoric of the second wave feminist movement, which have sometimes created a negative connotation for the word “feminist.” For example, one result stemming from the perceived rigidity of the messages from the second wave movement is the creation of the cultural stereotype of all feminists as man-hating, anti-marriage, business-suit-wearing, angry women (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). This stereotype is exemplified in comments from anti-feminist, Rush Limbaugh, who regularly refers to women advocating for gender equality as “feminazis,” and states “feminism was established so as to permit easier access to the mainstream [for] unattractive women” (Limbaugh, 2012). When Limbaugh refers to the origins of feminism, he speaks in the past tense suggesting that he attributes the beginning of feminism with the 1970s

movement. A wordsmith he is not, but the sentiment is clear that it is un-feminine women, or those who do not fit his definition of “attractive,” who embrace feminism. The types of messages from the second wave movement that provoked this kind of critical stereotype of feminists is a refusal of traditional markers of femininity such as make-up, mini-skirts, and high heels, which were viewed as instruments of patriarchal oppression. However, it is these same markers of patriarchal oppression that some women re-appropriate as signs of female empowerment in contemporary feminism.

A third wave movement does not renounce all of the outcomes of the second wave movement, as many of the goals within the second wave focused on advocating for a variety of legal policies to protect women and “transforming the personal into the political” via consciousness-raising sessions (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 14). At consciousness-raising sessions, “women shared their secrets, stories of injustice, and mundane frustrations – most of which could be chalked up to sexism,” and worked to highlight the commonalities among the women’s experiences (p. 14). Contemporary feminists have criticized prior feminist political activists for rigidly defining all women via one voice (predominantly that of a white middle-class woman) and instilling strict limitations on empowerment, but “at the same time, they continue to build upon a feminist legacy that challenges the status quo” (Walker, 1995, p. xxxv). A contemporary construction of feminism perceives systemic gender inequality as a still prevalent problem, but in response to criticisms of feminism as too restrictive, female empowerment emphasizes an individual freedom of choice as political and relies less on collective action (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

Choice is a symbol of empowerment because “being empowered in the third-wave sense is about feeling good about oneself and having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are” (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195). Girl power is an illustrative enactment of choice because it “powerfully demonstrates the contradictions of tensions that structure Third Wave feminist politics” (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 120). Coined by the Riot Girls in the 1990s, the term “girl power” is used to label the rhetoric of a third wave movement that re-appropriates second wave examples of female subordination as signs of empowerment. For example, girl power embraces feminine sexuality as a sign of empowerment, as opposed to oppression. However, in an article with feminist magazine, *Bust*, feminist and actress Mary Elizabeth Winstead explains, “It’s not that we can’t be sexy, but we have to be more than that, so young girls know that *they’re* more than that” (Thompson, 2012, p. 55, original emphasis). Critics of girl power (and of third wave feminism more broadly) argue that this is precisely the problem: when the individual act of embracing sexuality stands in for necessary political action (Dow, 1996; Riordan, 2001).

The enactment of these types of individual choices as empowerment in contemporary feminism creates a necessary dialogue between second and third wave critics. This is because the contemporary emphasis within feminism to embrace both traditionally feminine values and progressive feminist politics can create contradictions when viewed through a second wave feminist lens. For example, the re-appropriation of push-up bras and high heels as signs that a woman is personally empowered by her sexuality creates an ambiguous line between the resulting images of the woman as a sexual subject versus a sexualized object.



However, the conceptualization of girlie within third wave feminism offers an explanation for this seeming contradiction contending that women “shouldn’t have to make the feminine powerful by making it masculine or ‘natural’” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 135). This representation of feminine power is exemplified in cultural images like that of racecar driver, Danica Patrick, who is spoken of specifically in terms of her *feminine* athletic body. Patrick discusses her sexuality stating, “I like to just express the different sides of my personality through what I do...sometimes it’s kind of edgy, and more sexy, and feminine and, a little bit funny” (Nelson, 2012). Patrick presents the display of her sexualized body as a choice for personal expression, and does not suggest that her choices have also been compromised by patriarchy. In fact, the attention that Patrick has received is attributed to the fact that she has “gone further than any other female racer before her in playing up her gender and sexuality through racy photo shoots for men’s magazines” (Clarke, 2010, para. 2). The juxtaposition of Patrick’s feminine sexuality with her traditionally masculine occupation as a racecar driver reflects the third wave ideology of feminine feminism. Feminist scholars have pointed to feminine feminism as a reinforcement of patriarchy via hegemony (Dow, 1992), but the seeming contrast between the two ideas is representative of the ambiguity constructed within some of the images of a third wave female empowerment.

The conceptualization of a third wave of feminism is frequently identified with media and celebrity representations of female empowerment at the “intersection of culture and feminism” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 136). For example, the ever-changing persona of Madonna is representative of contemporary female empowerment, telling women to “be what you want to be, and then be something else that you want to

be” (p. 131). Similarly, “hip-hop diva Missy Elliot, soccer pinup Brandi Chastain, and the movie star Angelina Jolie” have “all parlayed their sexual selves into power in feminist ways” (p. 103). To be sexual is feminine, but to be powerful with that sexuality is constructed as a feminist choice.

Additionally, the main characters from television shows like, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), and *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), have all been touted as contemporary feminist icons, and feminist scholars have critiqued these representations (e.g., Ouellette, 2002; Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Shows like *Buffy* and *Xena* in particular “have inspired third wave feminists through the use of empowered female characters; audiences come to believe that women are capable of the same kinds of action packed adventures as men,” but without having to become masculine (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 544). If previous avenging-woman narratives inspired third wave feminists, then scholars may be able to examine current avenging-woman texts for examples of “girl power” and feminine feminism that are occurring within cultural conversations about feminism.

The third wave movement “draw[s] on the experiences of their predecessors,” and recognizes problems within a patriarchal system; however, contemporary feminists that embrace a third wave girl power ideology also “adapt their rhetorical strategies to new situations and cultural contexts,” which includes aligning with powerful female popular culture icons (Sowards & Renegar, 2004, p. 538). In this sense, the empowered woman that emerges within the avenging-woman narrative offers a reflection and negotiation of cultural conversations about feminism. These mediated representations can be read as a

type of cultural template for female empowerment; they are feminine and feminist, powerful and sexy.

The empowerment of women is an important goal in our contemporary culture. Images and messages encouraging female empowerment are necessary when we continue to have gender inequities within our social, legal, and political systems. According to The White House (2011) report on the status of the American woman, women make \$0.75 for every \$1.00 a man makes. In the political realm, women represent 51% of the population, but make up just 17% of the US Congress (Newsom, 2011). And, in 2012, women's reproductive rights were hindered when Planned Parenthood funding was cut and multiple states passed new abortion laws that require a woman to receive a transvaginal sonogram and wait 24 hours after hearing the baby's heartbeat to obtain an abortion (Ramshaw, 2012). The compilation of these statistics point to a, still prevalent, gendered inequality, where women's rights are being threatened within a patriarchal system of oppression.

One of the scariest reminders of why we need to have political change comes to us after a woman has been victimized via rape or domestic abuse. One way that feminists attempt to confront the problem of rape within a patriarchal system is via Take Back the Night marches, which aim to re-empower women who have been raped. At the marches, women (and some men) gather to take back the night from rapists and sexual abusers (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). Another example of anti-rape activism that occurs in contemporary culture is the Slut Walk. Slut Walks began in 2011 after a Toronto policeman stated, "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised" (Greer, 2011, para. 1). As a result, women banded together and organized a series of

marches, where women dress provocatively and make “a defiant display of their inner slut” (para. 2). Similar to the goals of the Riot Girls in the early 90s (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010), the Slut Walk is a challenge to a socially held notion that women who dress provocatively or enjoy sex are “sluts,” and are therefore, asking to be raped. The marchers attempt to re-appropriate the insult of “slut” and alter its connotative meaning from a misogynist insult to a title of female empowerment.

The goal of both anti-rape marches is to articulate the difference between sex and rape. Power is directly equated with having a choice. A choice is how women may dress or use their bodies, but not how their bodies may be used against their will. Marchers argue that just because a woman may wear a short dress and/or drink alcohol at a party, these choices do not imply that she has also made a decision to have sex that night. A rape represents the loss of choice and a defining marker of disempowerment within a patriarchal system.

Some fictional media narratives also tackle the issue of rape within a patriarchal system. One media example is the avenging-woman text, which “can be understood as feminist narratives in which women face rape, recognize that the law will neither protect nor avenge them, and then take the law into their own hands” (Projansky, 2001, p. 60). The avenging-woman is first disempowered through a type of physical, financial, social and/or legal victimization, and then re-empowered through the act of revenge. However, instead of finding a support group, or joining a march to raise her voice against the violence inflicted against her, she doles out a vigilante punishment to her attackers. The avenging-women are “strong female lead characters who actively disobey the patriarchal culture of disarmament, in an apparently feminist display of empowerment and

resistance” (Stringer, 2011, p. 269). The avenging-woman actively rejects the idea that collective agency or awareness is the best path to reclaim her power, breaking from the ideology of the second wave, which emphasized the necessity of collective action.

Additionally, the avenging-woman is also depicted as embracing her sexuality, which rhetorically aligns her image with the third wave ideology of feminine feminism. Thus, the contemporary representation of the avenging-woman is an extreme example of an empowered woman, who chooses to individually and physically take matters into her own hands, rather than work within the traditional channels of the system.

The avenging-woman’s act of revenge is presented sympathetically to the viewing audience because of the initial depiction of injustice. After witnessing her rape or victimization, and understanding the limited options available to her if she wants justice for the crimes against her, the text rhetorically constructs her turn to vengeance in a way that persuades the audience to root for her success. But, this contingency presents a problematic depiction of female empowerment by perpetuating a rhetoric of misogyny. Although the avenging-woman “disrupts the sexist script of feminine victimhood, articulating instead female agency and the capacity to fight back against male violence” at the same time she is also “figured a[s] a grievous misrepresentation of feminism” (Stringer, 2011, p. 280). The narrative storyline first disempowers the woman so that she can then be empowered. This rhetorical move creates a troubling construction of an empowered woman where victimization is required before strength, and conveys a problematic depiction of women and power when an audience is persuaded rhetorically that her turn to vengeance is a sign of empowerment.

Critical scholars suggest that the problem with contemporary conceptualizations of female empowerment is that they utilize an empty rhetoric with no political potential or goal to change the system (Fixmer & Wood, 2005; Radner, 2011; Riordan, 2001). It is collective action against the victimization of women that is necessary for deep systemic change, as opposed to the individually empowering “girly” actions favored by some feminists within a third wave (Douglas, 2010; Riordan, 2001). For example, Ellen Riordan (2001) cautions women to challenge the language of “power” because “when it is commodified, empowerment can come at the expense of actual change” (p. 295). She argues that women buy into the media depictions of “girl power,” without demanding change within a system that denies them power in structural or legal decisions. Consequently, scholars must be critical of cultural sites where the rhetoric of female empowerment may work to reinforce the dominant patriarchal system.

Contemporary depictions of female empowerment promote a problematic rhetoric that valorizes individuality above all else, even if those personal choices reinforce a patriarchal system or limit the options of empowerment for other women. This contradictory rhetoric can be read in media depictions of the empowered woman. Media texts do not frequently claim to be a feminist representation. Instead, they can be analyzed for “the way in which, in particular, they live out the contradiction between discursively constructed ideas of the feminine and the feminist and, in doing so, produce popularly available and accessible version of feminism” (Read, 2000, p. 7). Media narratives can be read as “cultural texts founded on contradiction and struggle,” which “help make sense of, the contradictions in our lives” (p. 6). I therefore find it beneficial to analyze specific constructions of empowered women in media, to determine how the

texts can be read as a cultural negotiation regarding contemporary depictions of women and power, and to question how these representations may ultimately limit social change.

In an analysis of the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, I draw upon the above-mentioned depictions of contemporary feminism in an attempt to highlight the political limitations of female empowerment that focuses on choice and individuality. The problems with this rhetoric can be located most specifically in the themes of violence, community, sexualization and technology.

### **Violence and women**

Each of the female characters in the avenging-woman narratives for this analysis is depicted as using violence, to some degree, and this action appears to be subversive of traditional roles of femininity. Culturally, women are not expected to be violent, as they are conditioned to deal with anger submissively (Heineken, 2001), and the image of the violent woman is intended to disrupt traditional views about women. Frequently, the legal authorities, within avenging-woman narratives, initially assume the women's crimes to have been committed by a man, "underlining the unexpectedness of a woman vigilante" (Stringer, 2011, p. 273). This gendered expectation is not unreasonable, considering that the impetus for revenge on the part of the avenging-woman is due to some form of violence (physical and/or emotional) against her first. Both off and on-screen, women are more frequently the victims, rather than the aggressors, in crimes of power like rape and domestic abuse (Rabin, 2011). Thus, the avenging-woman's turn to violence establishes a sense of empowerment as she refuses to be subordinated as a victim.

In order to critique the intersection of violence and empowerment, the contemporary avenging-woman narratives can be read as representative of a culture of violence against women that is labeled by many feminist scholars as a “rape culture” or the “complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi). Inclusive in rape culture are acts against women that make them victims of oppression. This involves not just the physical act of rape, but also pseudo-rapes of emotional and physical strength. Jacinda Read (2000) links rape narratives to similar texts that feature violence against women in her analysis of *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) where “rape is replaced by a more generalized domestic violence” (p. 69). Rape is a “topic, image, narrative, trope, or metaphor” (Projansky, 2001, p. 1) for the “continuum of sexual [verbal/physical] violence that women confront on a daily basis” (p. 9). In this project, in order to analyze the contemporary avenging-woman narratives, I consider this broader representation of rape as both physical and emotional violence against women presented in a way that it warrants her response of violent retribution.

According to many feminist scholars, rape discourse is pervasive in all aspects of our culture, including media (Buchwald, 2005; Buchwald et al., 2005; Projansky, 2001). Sarah Projansky provides an excellent historical accounting of rape discourses in popular culture prior to 2000 in her book, *Watching Rape*, and contends that historical images of rape in media texts “justified violent masculine sexual and racist spectatorial pleasure” (p. 5). However, within feminist discourse, rape is not about the sexual act but rather about issues of power and dominance. Rape discourses can be understood as “a social narrative through which to articulate anxieties, to debate, and to negotiate various other



social issues” like feminism and gendered power (p. 11). The revenge-narrative is therefore a well-suited text to analyze constructions of femininity and feminism, because discourses of rape are frequently intertwined with depictions of women and power.

Media perpetuate a rape discourse even in seemingly positive attempts to advocate for women. The notion of rape as a metaphor came to light recently during public discussions regarding the passing of new abortion laws in Virginia. Writer Garry Trudeau, who pens the comic strip *Doonesbury*, equated the requirement of a transvaginal sonogram, administered through a tool that he called a “10-inch shaming wand,” with rape (Associated Press, 2012, para. 5). In this sense, a woman’s autonomy over her own body is threatened by the passing of laws that dictate how her body will be used, thus equating the new required procedure with a metaphor of rape. Some newspapers refused to run the comic strip altogether, but other media outlets picked up on the language and ran the story comparing the new abortion law requirements to rape. Although many critics of the abortion law applauded Trudeau’s actions, feminist writer, Carole Joffe (2012), argued that comparing a transvaginal sonogram to rape misses the point, because it incites terror in women, some of who may be obtaining an abortion because they were raped in the first place. It is the pervasiveness of rape discourse that highlights the tenuous political potential in criticisms like that in Trudeau’s.

Even more problematic than the use of rape as a metaphor in pursuit of political protest, is the misinformation being shared with the public by those in legal and political power. On August 19, 2012, Missouri Representative, Todd Akin, told reporters that pregnancy could not result from a rape (Moore, 2012). Akin’s justification was “if it’s a *legitimate* rape, the female body has ways to try to shut the whole thing down” (para. 3,

my emphasis). Although public outrage ensued and Akin's comments were denounced by his own party, that did not keep him from gaining conservative supporters (Eligon & Schwartz, 2012). Months after Akin's comments, the debate continued about how women's bodies respond to rape when a California judge contended that if a person does not want to be raped, "the body will not permit that to happen" and therefore if a rape occurred, then the woman "didn't put up a fight" (USA Today, 2012, para. 1). Even though there was again public outrage, these comments from men in decision-making positions of power underscores the misinformation about rape and debate about women's autonomy over their own bodies that reinforces a rape culture.

In the avenging-woman narrative, violence is frequently intersected with empowerment due to the lack of response or unwillingness of the legal system to get involved in the initial crime against the woman. Scholars have interpreted previous avenging-woman narratives from the 80s and 90s, like *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Dolores Claiborne* (1995), as cautionary tales about what happens when the legal system ignores violence against women (Dole, 2001; Grindstaff, 2001). Violence from women in these previous texts is presented as a consequence of the legal system ignoring justice in the handling of cases of abuse against women, and emphasizes the need for a change in the legal system's response to the crime of rape and victimization of women. In contemporary texts, revenge is similarly juxtaposed with a lack of response from the legal system and a sense of injustice, but the turn to violence is presented as a choice that the woman makes; an empowering moment where she chooses to become an avenger as opposed to a victim. However, I question how the intersection of violence and choice represents an empowering moment, when the legal system leaves the woman no other

choice but to avenge. Her turn to violence is not a choice then, but rather, the only option the system has left her with if she wants justice for the crimes against her. The rhetorical construction of this message is that the woman can only become empowered when the patriarchal system allows her the opportunity. In the contemporary avenging-woman narrative I critique the intersection of violence and empowerment as a reinforcement of a rhetoric of misogyny and the patriarchal system.

### **Individuality in lieu of community**

A second theme that exemplifies the problems within a contemporary feminist rhetoric is the focus on individual action in lieu of community. One of the depictions of female empowerment within a third wave context that is most pervasive, is the individual act of identifying with popular culture icons and utilizing media. For example, third wave feminism is defined as encouraging activism in limited-reach outlets like blog posts and niche magazines, or through embracing the rhetoric of popular culture icons, like the Spice Girls and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Sowards & Renegar, 2004). Third wave feminism is emphasized by a “vigorous assertion of one’s individuality” (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195). Embracing individual “girl power” identities is representative of making a choice to be empowered, even if that choice is as simple as touting Buffy as a strong feminist role model. Feminists in a third wave “debunk the stereotype that there is one lifestyle or manifestation of feminist empowerment, and instead offer self-possession, self-determination, and an endless array of non-dichotomous possibilities” (Walker, 1995, p. xxxiv). Instead of focusing efforts on changing the system, as those did within the second wave, the third wave re-appropriates

traditional constructions of femininity and individual enactment as signs of feminist empowerment.

However, the focus on individuality in the third wave movement has critics questioning the political opportunities that a lack of cohesion and community strength brings to a feminist movement. Consequently, there is concern from many feminist scholars regarding the political potential of the individuality emphasized in a third wave feminist rhetoric (Gill, 2007; Riordan, 2001; Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001). Part of this concern has to do with the contradictions that emerge from the idea that collective action by feminists is no longer necessary in a society where “patterns of sexism persist” (Gill, 2007, p. 2). Criticizing the focus on individual acts as social movements, some scholars cite the “limited impact” that a third wave has in creating structural changes in society (Fixmer & Wood, 2005, p. 252). Even in the various anti-rape marches, a goal to raise awareness among victims is not specifically focused on policy change, which would more broadly define and punish the crime of rape. Therefore, a third wave construction of empowerment tends to focus on the individual actions and ignores the necessity of collective action to make systemic changes.

Scholars have specifically noted the portrayal of a female community in previous avenging-woman narratives as a demonstration that “toughness in women does not have to be antithetical to friendship” (Inness, 1999, p. 168). Sharon Ross (2004) draws on *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as well as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, commenting that both series “break through traditional patterns of heroic toughness that prioritize individualism, isolationism, and emotional withdrawal; these shows offer new visions of women coming together in harmony and community rather than envy and competition”

(p. 248). Having power as a woman should not mean that she has to do it alone, and it certainly should not mean that only men can be relied on for help. The depiction of a community of female supporters in previous avenging-woman narratives has been touted as a positive representation of a feminist sisterhood and female empowerment.

Additionally, discourse between female characters can articulate larger social issues within the context of the smaller plot in the text. Ross (2004) comments on media's depiction of the "importance of [female] heroes being flexible about morality and truth" and working through the ethical options together (p. 240). She cites the play *A Jury of Her Peers*, where a neighbor has been taken in on charges of murdering her abusive husband. The women of the community come together at the accused woman's house and through "activities as mundane as talking and gossip" the group pieces together the story and "resist what patriarchal law and ethics inform them is true" when they hide evidence of the neighbor's guilt (p. 239). Similarly, Sarah Projansky (2001) highlights the conversations between the titular characters in *Thelma and Louise*, as representative of a cultural conversation reaffirming that rape is never the woman's fault. Discourses from previous mediated narratives, where women are united against a gendered system of oppression, have been read as a positive depiction of the benefits of community and sisterhood for achieving feminist goals (e.g., Grindstaff, 2001; Projansky, 2001; Ross, 2004).

In contrast to previous narratives, the contemporary avenging-woman narrative suggests female empowerment occurs in light of a lack of homo-social relationships. Each of the women in the contemporary avenging-woman texts in this study is represented as socially isolated, with few or no female friends. The rape-revenge

narrative does support the depiction of the lone wolf, as vigilante justice is typically done alone. However, each of contemporary female avengers has men in her life that help her, which suggests that help is acceptable, as long as it comes from a man. The absence of homo-social relationships results in little to no discourse among women in the contemporary avenging-woman text, thus limiting the construction of female empowerment in the text to an individual achievement. I read the intersection of empowerment with a lack of female community in the contemporary avenging-woman texts as a reinforcement of a patriarchal culture. The message is that women can rely on men, but other women are not to be trusted.

### **Sexualized power: feminized feminism**

The third wave concept of feminine feminism constructs female empowerment as an individual achievement and responsibility, which may inadvertently reinforce the isolation of women from female friends. To be a feminized feminist, a woman plays up her sexuality and beauty, utilizing the corresponding attention as power currency within a patriarchal system (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). The third wave “Girlie” movement best expresses the cultural discussion that women can be both feminine and feminist. Unhappy with the second wave argument that beauty products are a metaphorical chain around the neck of women within a patriarchal culture, the Girlies embrace the “traps” of lipstick and nail polish, while still asserting a sense of empowerment (p. 161). The Girlie movement encourages expressions of sexuality asking women to wear what makes them feel sexy, and in turn, this choice translates into power.

The sexualized empowerment of the third wave Girlie movement then perhaps reinforces a sense of competition among women, focusing on the individual who is able

to achieve a level of beauty and sexuality that can equate to power. For example, the Miss America pageant is perhaps the most traditional and literal example of the cultural ubiquity of competition among women. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) contends, “the Miss America pageant has for most of its history been dedicated to making a claim on national feminine identity” (p. 26). The winner must pass a variety of stages, including events focused on determining her talent, intelligence, and beauty, which constructs her as a feminine citizen (Banet-Weiser, 1999). Second wave feminists vehemently argued against the continuation of the Miss America pageant, citing the practice of parading beautiful women on stage for critique as a reinforcement of the patriarchal system and a sign of women’s subjugation. However, Bonnie Dow (2003) contends that in the 1990s, feminist attitudes toward the Miss America pageant utilized “a tone that acknowledges the pageant as an anachronism at the same time that it validates it as an empowering vocation for women who continue to compete in it” (p. 129). The Miss American pageant simultaneously draws on traditional markers of femininity within a patriarchal culture, while also presenting an image of empowerment for the contestants. Thus, I read the Miss America pageant as an example of a cultural representation of the feminized feminism that is central to a third wave feminist movement.

Nonetheless, even some third wave feminists suggest that the Girlie movement needs to find some course of action that goes beyond purchasing sexy clothes and “empowering” merchandise (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 164). A critique of feminine feminism may reveal the political potential and limitations of that rhetoric of empowerment. Scholars should not only question whether the public display of female sexuality is powerful, but must also consider whether that power results in policy changes

and political actions that address gendered oppression. Drawing on Ellen Riordan's call to consider the political potential of messages about women and power, I examine the contemporary avenging-woman narrative as drawing on feminized feminism and question whether this depiction is actually a reinforcement of patriarchy via a rhetoric of female empowerment.

The contemporary avenging-woman is both feminine and feminist, sexualized and empowered. Using Lara Croft as an example, Cristina Stasia (2004) argues that the contemporary female action hero is "shot in ways which focus on her breasts, thighs and butt. She is thus figured as primarily object before subject" (p. 177). Predominantly more girlie than her predecessors, the new female action-hero is ultimately subjected to the male gaze as spectacle, where women are coded as the feminine other via the gaze of the camera (Mulvey, 1992). Within the avenging-woman texts in this analysis, each of the women is subject to a sexualized view, through camera angles, wardrobe choices, or both.

It is important to question depictions of a sexualized empowerment within the context of a rape culture, especially when power and sexuality are intimately linked. The representation of feminized feminism within mediated texts offers an opportunity to critique the intersection of empowerment with sexuality and explore how the avenging-woman narratives "contribute to a discursive production of feminism that keeps it fragmented" (Projansky, 2001, p. 61). If the avenging-woman narrative is embraced by the third wave as a representation of female empowerment, then I ask what message is conveyed about her power when the narrative itself emphasizes the male gaze. I critique this subsequent sexualized representation of female empowerment within revenge texts



that first make the woman a victim of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. Not only does the narrative underscore the victim's sexuality, but the women's sexualized bodies are also used to sell the product via the marketing messages of the film itself. This is particularly troubling when the women in the film are first constructed as victims. In this project, I argue that the contemporary avenging-woman text can be read as a problematic depiction of third wave feminized feminism by reinforcing a masculine gaze and hiding an underlying rhetoric of misogyny.

### **Technology and power**

The fourth theme that exemplifies the problems within a third wave rhetoric is the focus on technology as an opportunity for female empowerment. Technology has been debated as a mode of empowerment for women within feminist scholarship (Adams, 1996; Plant, 1998; Soukup, 2009). Contemporary feminists embrace the potential of technology as tools and spaces for female empowerment because "in cyberspace, a realm in which the body is not physically present, where confirmable identity markers such as anatomy and skin color are no longer visible, the fluidity of identity is thrown into high relief" (Herrup, 1995, p. 241). Thus, for some feminists, technology offers opportunities to trouble the gendered dynamic of empowerment within a gender-free zone. This is not entirely unproblematic as men dominate many technical industries, but the potential for technology to be empowering for women is present. Ednie Garrison (2000) contends that an increase in "information technologies...multiplies the cultural locations where political activities can occur in the Third Wave" (p. 142). For example, producing blogs and online 'zines where women can have a space to voice frustrations with a patriarchal

society and reach other women globally, is cited as an action of empowerment by women via technology.

However, not all scholars see technology as offering an escape from gender binaries. Instead, some contend that there is a “fairly insistent history of representations of technology that work to fortify – sometimes desperately – conventional understanding of the feminine” (Doane, 2000, p. 110). A reinforcement of patriarchal definitions of women’s roles can be depicted in a variety of ways within television and film. Sometimes, it occurs in overt representations of a technologically created woman, as an android or cyborg. Similarly, the cyborg can also be a metaphor for the mere use of technology by the body via weapons or tools. It is this construction of the metaphor that is most prevalent in the avenging-woman narrative, when the technology that she uses shapes how her empowerment is constructed.

The metaphor of the cyborg is important to analyze as Anne Balsamo (1996) suggests “the cyborg challenges feminism to search for ways to study the body as it is at once both a cultural construction and a material fact of human life” (p. 33). Mary Ann Doane (2000) argues that “it is striking to note how often it is the woman who becomes the model of the perfect machine” particularly within cinematic depictions of women and technology (p. 110). In mediated representations, the woman who takes on the qualities of the machine is objectified rather than empowered.

Technology also objectifies the body via the lens of the camera by the simultaneous sexualization of woman and machine via a techno-scopophilic gaze. As defined in Charles Soukup’s (2009) work, techno-scopophilia is the voyeuristic pleasure that an audience receives upon viewing sexualized women utilizing technology. Some

audience members may find it “relatively easy to shift between a scopophilic gaze of the sexualized body and a scopophilic gaze of technology, as both are viewed through the lens of power” (p. 30). Soukup focuses specifically on technology as weapons, such as guns and robotic equipment, but uses a “sexualized woman as machine” metaphor to broaden the definition of technology and further his claim of techno-scophilia (p. 30). Soukup argues that the sexualized female action-hero “takes on the characteristics of the conquering machine. She is still eroticized but also exhibits machine-like precision and power. She becomes the manifestation of scopophilic pleasure *and* technological power” (p. 30, original emphasis). In Soukup’s analysis, the female-action hero who utilizes technology demonstrates how the gaze of the camera constructs a representation of objectified sexuality as opposed to sexual empowerment.

In contemporary rape and revenge narratives, the avenging-woman is frequently depicted as utilizing technology to further her plans for vengeance. Tasers, guns, computers, and cameras are all weapons of choice by the avenging-woman, and she frequently uses technology in a way that suggests she is empowered and even dominates her enemies because of it. However, technology is not just a tool, but also “helps to endow our world with meaning” (Pacey, 1999). I therefore analyze the depiction of technology in the contemporary avenging-woman text for representations regarding a gendered power in terms of how she uses technology and how technology, in turn, uses her, shaping how she is viewed. While technology can be a powerful weapon and the avenging-woman utilizes it to her advantage, the depiction of the woman through a techno-scophilic gaze has the potential to minimize the risk that female empowerment presents to a patriarchal system by representing her as a machine. Thus, by showing the

avenging-woman empowered by technology, she may also be objectified through this depiction, which ultimately reinforces the patriarchal system, rather than challenges it.

### **The Contemporary Avenging-Woman Narratives**

In this project, I argue that the contemporary avenging-woman narrative is a media text that depicts a type of female empowerment that can be analyzed within the cultural themes of violence, community, sexualization, and objectification via technology. Contemporary revenge narratives can be understood productively as relevant representations of contemporary conceptualizations of female empowerment. Although the narratives do not claim a third wave identity, or specifically a feminist identity, the themes of violence, a lack of female friendship, sexuality, and objectification via technology are observable in their construction of female empowerment. Because of the similarity in themes, I analyze the construction of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narratives as a negotiation of the cultural constructions of contemporary feminism. The contemporary avenging-woman narratives exist in a culture that is dominated by third wave images of the empowered woman, particularly within media, and depicts a complexity through a reading of female empowerment that mirrors a similar ambiguity about third wave feminist rhetoric.

Women who identify with the construction of a third wave feminism tend to view popular “consumer culture as a place of empowerment,” which supports media as representative sites for feminist critical analyses (Banet-Weiser, 2004, p. 122). The construction of a third wave feminism embraces contradiction and ambiguity with the goal of allowing women to define feminism based on making their own choices. The contemporary avenging-woman narrative draws on a number of cultural themes of

women and power, due in part to the victimization of each of the women prior to vengeance. Thus, the contemporary avenging-woman text is particularly well suited as a representation of female empowerment that can be read as a negotiation of the cultural construction of feminist rhetoric in depictions of women and power.

It is important to critique the resulting definition of female empowerment that emerges from the ambiguity of choice common in a third wave feminist culture. If the contemporary private avenging-woman text is a construction of female empowerment, I then ask how those narratives may reveal problems with a third wave “girl power” rhetoric. Each of the narratives suggests that the women’s opportunity for empowerment comes after she has been victimized. The initial disempowerment of women so that they can be empowered, is similar to a third wave rhetoric that re-appropriates sexuality as empowerment, only after she has been objectified for centuries. In the avenging-woman narratives, I analyze how female empowerment is constructed and I argue that the representation of the empowered woman in the avenging-woman narrative is ultimately problematic, because it reinforces a patriarchal system by drawing on a rhetoric of misogyny. In this way, a critical analysis of the avenging-woman narrative highlights the problems within a third wave feminist rhetoric that focuses on choice and individuality above collective political action.

In this next section, I provide a brief background of *Revenge* (2011-2012)<sup>1</sup>, *Veronica Mars* (2003-2007), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), and *Colombiana* (2011) in order to detail the basic storyline of each of the texts prior to its use in the

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<sup>1</sup> In my critique of the television texts, I draw on examples from all three seasons of *Veronica Mars*, but with *Revenge*, I only analyze the first season, running from 2011-2012, as it is the only completed season to date.

analysis chapters. The themes of violence, lack of female community, sexualization, and objectification via technology appear in each of the texts chosen for this analysis.

Drawing on previous rape and revenge narratives, each text features a female lead that avenges her own rape and/or the murder of a loved one because the system will not help her. The male antagonist is still a feature of most avenging-woman narratives, but in some cases women are the targets of vengeance. After the synopses of the texts, I then briefly summarize the common threads of vengeance among the four texts.

### ***Revenge***

Premiering in the fall of 2011, *Revenge* is the story of Amanda Clarke who follows the “roadmap for revenge that led [her] to the people who destroyed” the lives of her and her father, David Clarke (Kelley, 2011). When Amanda was a little girl, her father’s business partners at Grayson Enterprises framed him for funding a terrorist organization with company money, resulting in a life-sentence in prison. Amanda Clarke was sent to live in the foster care system and was brainwashed by those closest to the Grayson’s to believe her father was guilty. At the age of 18, Nolan Ross, a young technological expert and entrepreneur within whom Amanda’s father invested prior to his incarceration, shows up with a gift and the news that David was killed during a prison riot. The gift is a box from Amanda’s father containing photographs, journals, and a variety of clues that David compiled as he tried to put together the plot that landed him in prison.

Amanda’s solitary goal is to put the pieces of the puzzle together and seek revenge on the Graysons and all those that participated in the cover-up of her father’s

framing. She moves to the Hamptons under the name of Emily Thorne<sup>2</sup>, as a neighbor to the Graysons. She quickly starts a relationship with Daniel, the twenty-year-old son to Victoria and Conrad Grayson, giving her access to the Grayson network. She begins picking off her father's enemies one by one, by destroying the public and private lives they have built from profiting off her father's false imprisonment and death.

### ***Veronica Mars***

The *Veronica Mars* series begins with Veronica's junior year at Neptune High and reveals the trying times that have led up to the present. The previous year, her best friend Lilly Kane was murdered, and Veronica's father, Sheriff Keith Mars, blamed the girl's father, Jake Kane, for the murder even though his wife, Celeste Kane, confirmed his alibi. The public turned against Veronica's father and the Mars family, and life as she knew it unraveled.

Each episode features a new mystery that must be solved and money to be made as Veronica saves up to attend Stanford, and escape the town of Neptune. There is also the much larger mystery of Lilly's murder, as well as the identity of Veronica's rapist, when she was given GHB, a date rape drug, at a party and woke up with no memory and missing underwear. When she tried to report the crime to the new local Sheriff, he said with the lack of evidence she should just stop crying and "go see the wizard [to] ask for a little backbone" (Thomas, 2004a). Serving as the last straw, Veronica did stop crying and got mad as she began seeking revenge on those who had wronged her, her family, and whoever killed her best friend. When asked by one of her clients how she handles

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<sup>2</sup> At one point in the first season of *Revenge*, the woman that Amanda/Emily switched identities with enters into the plot and takes the name Amanda Clarke. In order to mitigate any confusion, throughout the rest of this analysis, the avenging-woman of *Revenge* will only be referred to as Emily.

the poor treatment by the community and classmates, Veronica suggests, “Here’s what you do. You get tough. You get even. Works for me” (Thomas, 2004b).

### ***The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo***

Lisbeth Salander is the girl with the dragon tattoo in the film of the same name. The original title for the book when it was released in Sweden was *Män som hatar kvinnor*, which translates to *Men Who Hate Women*, and the film narrative is replete with examples of misogynist male characters. Relatively early in the film, Lisbeth is raped by a man who has power over her financially and physically and she plots and exacts her revenge in graphic detail.

The remainder of the first film follows her relationship with Mikael Blomkvist, the recently convicted journalist, whose computer she was hired to hack into. Mikael has been hired to solve the forty-year-old mystery of the disappearance of his client’s favorite fourteen-year-old niece, Harriet Vanger. Mikael convinces Lisbeth to come with him to Sweden to help with the case, and they begin a sexual relationship. The mystery is solved when the two find out that the young Harriet murdered her father in self-defense against sexual abuse, and ran away in order to escape continued abuse at the hands of her brother, Martin, who witnessed her crime. When Martin tries to escape, Lisbeth chases after him on her motorcycle causing him to crash and burn to death in the wreckage.

### ***Colombiana***

The fourth text that I analyze in this project is another feature-length film featuring the female protagonist, Cataleya. Cataleya is an assassin who requests an initiation into the profession as a young girl. She arrives in America after witnessing the brutal gunning-down murder of her father and mother, who were trying to escape the



world of Colombian drug trafficking. At the time of the killing, Cataleya is pursued by her parent's killers, but makes it to the US Embassy where she hands over the files that her father has told her are her "passport" to escape (Besson, 2011). Cataleya then finds her Uncle Emilio, a hit man in Chicago, and tells him her only goal in life is to avenge her parent's death. Emilio trains Cataleya to join his profession, but hopes she will forget her pursuit for personal vengeance, as he knows the men who killed her parents are ruthless and dangerous. Unable to forgive and forget, Cataleya enacts a long and exhausting plot to bring her parents' killers to the surface and ultimately murders them, losing all those she loves in the process. The FBI attempts to track down Cataleya but she escapes after placing one last phone call to her lover, Danny, explaining that she chose revenge over a life with him, and he understands.

### **Common threads of vengeance**

These four texts were chosen to be the primary texts for my dissertation because of how they represent empowerment and femininity being articulated together, not unproblematically, in a larger cultural conversation. Of the four texts, *Revenge* is the most recent manifestation of the avenging-female and is unique in the restraint from physical violence that the main character shows in her acts of revenge. She is capable of sparring with powerful men head to head, and yet, she frequently chooses less physically combative means. Veronica Mars on the other hand specifically comments on her personal lack of physical strength (she is small enough to fit through a dog door in the final episode of the series) and is therefore required to find other means of intimidation, as she has no other choice. And, yet, she is sometimes forced into violent situations where she defends herself physically from attack with aide from many of her male

counterparts. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth is complex in terms of her sexuality (depicted as bisexual) and gives viewers one of the most graphic rape scenes in recent cinema history. *Colombiana* similarly embraces female-violence but is punished for it by being forced away from the man that she loves.

These women are each constructed as the type of woman that is not to be messed with and yet, each is presented as sexually attractive and desirable by males. Each character is represented as gaining power, but is simultaneously objectified and denied any significant female relationships. Though she is portrayed as smart and resourceful, by relying on technology, agility, and her sexual wiles, in the end, the avenging-woman is refused long-term intimate relationships with others.

### **Preview of Chapters**

In the next chapter, I detail the methodological and theoretical lens through which I make sense of the rhetorical construction of the contemporary avenging-woman in popular television and film. Through a critical feminist analysis of popular films and television series that feature an avenging female lead, four themes emerged in relation to the construction of empowerment. Chapters 3-6 each explore one of the four themes across the avenging-woman narratives and detail the conflicting messages that are reflected within a dominant rhetoric of empowerment.

In chapter 3, I analyze the rape and revenge narrative in relation to the gendered depiction of female violence. I detail the representation of victimization intersected with empowerment and discuss the implications of violence as a tactic of feminist power. Chapter 4 details the lack of homo-social relationships within the avenging-woman narrative. While there are sometimes other women in the plots of the episode or film,

when the female hero is in trouble, she frequently turns only to the men in her life for help. Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the texts in light of a third wave rhetoric of empowerment that suggest women should be able to draw upon traditional signifiers of femininity and still be considered as challenging patriarchal norms. Chapter 6 extends the critique from the subsequent chapter with a specific focus on the technophilic lens as each avenging woman is depicted as being empowered via her technological expertise, but also objectified.

Each theme is consistent in all of the films or television series that I use as my text in this dissertation. Within each thematic chapter I utilize the best representation of the respective theme, which may involve a greater emphasis on just one or two of the primary texts. In the final chapter, I discuss the scholarly and political implications of contemporary representations of the avenging-woman and suggest a new paradigm for female empowerment.

## Chapter 2: Methodological/Critical Perspective

In order to critique the depiction of female empowerment within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, I conduct a critical rhetorical analysis. By describing this project as a critical rhetorical analysis, I am attempting to “unmask or demystify the discourse of power” within my chosen media texts (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). This task may be accomplished in a number of ways, but I have specified a rhetorical feminist lens through which to view media’s depiction of the avenging-woman. Bonnie Dow (1996) states, “a study of television’s treatment of feminism is, to some degree, a study of mass-mediated cultural attitudes toward feminism” (p. xxii). Dow’s work suggests that media analyses can reveal what society likes, fears, or rejects. I argue that if we exist within a culture that presents choice and feminine feminism as signs of female empowerment, then an analysis of the specific construction of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative can be read as an example of broader cultural attitudes about women and power. It is the critical scholar that makes an argument “for the possibility and the usefulness of understanding a text in a particular fashion” (p. 5). My choice of a critical feminist lens does provide a methodological limitation, in that I am looking for examples of how the narratives contribute to the reinforcement of patriarchy. Within this critical analysis, I start with the acknowledgment that my reading of the narratives is one of many possibilities, but that I can provide solid evidence to support my claims. The remainder of this chapter is intent on setting up the framework to do just that.

In this analysis, I draw heavily on the work of critical rhetorical feminist Bonnie Dow to further an understanding of how popular media “works rhetorically” to represent

feminism (p. xv). In her book, *Prime-Time Feminism*, Dow analyzes the rhetorical negotiation of social issues, specifically exploring representations of feminism in prime-time sitcoms. Dow views “television discourse about feminism as situated and constrained by the relationship to other forms of culture discourse about feminism” (p. 7). The idea that television and film are a representation of cultural negotiations about feminism is also the starting point for critical feminist scholarship by Jacinda Read (2000) and Sarah Projansky (2001), who both study the avenging-woman in popular media. I attempt to extend the work of Projansky and Read in my analysis. In assessing the avenging-woman in television and film, I am reading the narratives for the appearance of cultural themes of a third wave female empowerment.

In this chapter, I first detail various theoretical approaches to the rhetorical study of media texts in order to define the ideological foundation of a critical feminist analysis of the avenging-woman texts. I articulate a rhetorical construction of gender via the gaze of the camera, as well as the meaning-making function of hegemony. Next, I detail scholarly literature on the rape and revenge narrative and discuss the call from Jacinda Read (2000) to utilize representations of empowerment within the avenging-woman text as an opportunity to question feminism.

### **Theories of Rhetorical Criticism of Media**

Critical scholarship is invested in analyzing messages within a text in terms of issues of power and authority. Asking not “how a communicator influenced, but rather how [s]he helped the system to maintain equilibrium” examines questions of power and authority (Becker, 1999, p. 29). Thus, communication is used as a means of sustaining the status quo, and can be analyzed to determine how the message accomplishes this goal.

The critical scholar must go beyond the words that are spoken, to understand how and why a message reinforces the dominant system.

Replacing “communicator” with “rhetor,” Becker’s sentiment is the starting point for Wander’s (1984) argument about the “ideological turn in rhetorical theory” suggesting that critics need to address “what is beneath the surface” (p. 212). As opposed to understanding how communication maintained the status quo, Wander suggests that the critical scholar must figure out who is benefiting from the equilibrium. Every text has a dominant message, and the critic’s job, in the ideological turn, is to make an argument for who is being left out or silenced by that message. As a major focus of some of the work that has been produced in the last few decades, critical rhetorical scholars have analyzed the larger social implications of the dominant message and have pointed to the importance of analyzing who is being excluded or dominated by the messages within media texts, including the viewer herself.

As some scholars have argued, a text may contain multiple messages beyond the dominant one (e.g., Fiske, 1986; Hall, 1980). Polysemy is a theory posited by Fiske (1986) that suggests that there are multiple meanings available to audiences within any given text. Audience members will “generate meanings from it that meet the needs of their own subcultural identities” especially if they go against the dominant message (p. 392). Providing the basis for understanding how audiences engage in the production of a text, Fiske’s work draws on cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s (1973) encoding/decoding model (see also Gill, 2007). Hall’s (1973) model proposes that a text can be encoded in multiple ways, messages have at least one other meaning besides the dominant one, and messages are open to individual decoding. Both Fiske and Hall start from the idea that

the audience members are not injected with meaning, but instead are active participants in the meaning-making process. Fiske (1986) reasons that television series can only remain popular, and pleasurable, if they are “open text[s]” with enough ambiguity to generate multiple meanings beyond a dominant message, thus appealing to a variety of audiences (p. 392). It is this resistance to the dominant message, within the “gaps, spaces, and contradictions” of the text, where Fiske sees the potential for political change (Dow, 1996, p. 20).

While applauding the positive construction of audience power within a polysemic theory, Celeste Condit (1989) argues that critics have not fully assessed the limits of polysemy that can be found by examining the text (p. 105). Through a rhetorical analysis, Condit evaluates the freedom of the audience to debate the dominant message in her critique of polysemy, and makes a persuasive argument for understanding audience involvement through a theory of polyvalence instead. Polyvalence is a term used “to describe the fact that audiences routinely evaluate texts differently, assigning different value to different portions of a text and hence to the text itself” (p. 108). However, Condit argues that all viewers, regardless of social background or personal beliefs, understand the dominant message within a text. Condit suggests that the audience is more likely to resist or agree with the dominant message, and interact with the text based on their own ideological boundaries, than they are of creating an entirely new interpretation of the message.

Condit’s theory of polyvalence does not dismiss the potential for polysemy as a valuable theory. Instead, she suggests, “the claim perhaps needs to be scaled back to indicate that response and interpretations are generally polyvalent, and the texts

themselves are occasionally or partially polysemic” (p. 107). Thus, Condit suggests that the texts, as opposed to the audience members, may reveal polysemic or underlying and alternative meanings to the dominant message. Drawing on a similar argumentative justification by Dow (1992), I focus on the texts within this study “as rhetorical entities that can be interpreted as performing particular functions at particular times. These are persuasive functions that work to make some ideas, positions, and alternatives more attractive, accessible, and powerful to audiences than others” (p. 7). A narrative functions within the historical context in which it takes place. In addition to analyzing the message(s) within a text, the critic should analyze the symbolic environment of television and film that is “not separate from the social experience of a subculture or a dominant culture but interacts with, affects, and is affected by, both” (p. 15). Therefore, a television or film text offers a rhetorically persuasive dominant message based on the cultural environment in which it exists, but also based on expectations from previous narratives that have come before it. The rhetorical feminist critic’s goal is to offer a reading of the text as an indication of larger meanings in society, and then interpret those meanings in relation to issues of power and oppression. In this study, I argue that the dominant reading of the avenging-woman narrative conveys a representation of female empowerment, but an analysis of the “gaps, spaces, and contradictions,” suggests that these depictions are constrained to opportunities for women and power within a patriarchal system.

### **The screen and gaze**

Television and film are valuable sites to analyze issues of power and oppression, because the small and large screen narrative is uniquely constructed. Feminist film



scholar, Laura Mulvey (1992), distinguishes cinema (both large and small screen) from other media as “shifting the emphasis of the look” (p. 32). She points to the example of the cinematic conceptualization of the passive female to connote “*to-be-looked-at-ness*,” where the female character is objectified under the male gaze (p. 27, original emphasis). Mulvey further comments, “Going far beyond highlighting a woman’s to-be-look-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (p. 32). This is done through a variety of different gazes.

According to Mulvey’s theory, the cinema is comprised of three types of gazes: the camera, the audience, and the characters within the film. It is the third gaze that is made possible solely via cinema and that Mulvey highlights as the identifying moment that snaps the spectator back from the “invisible guest” to voyeur (p. 33). The gaze from the characters within the film is conveyed in the way the camera highlights the gaze of the male character upon the female character in the scene. In “strip-tease, theater, shows and so on” the third element is not as clear perhaps because there is not a cut-to-cut camera lens that lingers upon the male character’s facial expressions and watches his eyes move across the woman’s body (p. 32). In this sense, the cinematic gaze, both between characters on screen and via the lens of the camera, indicates to the viewer how they also should view the characters. The persuasive construction of the gaze makes it a distinctly rhetorical concern.

The cinematic and televisual gaze persuades the audience to view the characters through a particular lens, or within a specific construction. For example, rape and revenge films post-1970 visibly depict rape scenes to such a graphic extent that critics have been outraged at the level of violence (Ebert, 1980; Schubart, 2007); however, I

argue that the violence within the text serves a persuasive purpose to create sympathy for the avenging-woman and justify her turn to violence. Based on the gaze of the camera, the audience is cued into a specific perspective in a film or television show through which they are given a view of the characters (Mulvey, 1992). The avenging-woman narrative therefore, can be analyzed for how the gaze of the camera creates a persuasive construction of female empowerment.

The camera gaze may also be analyzed for the way that the construction of female empowerment is controlled via a patriarchal lens. Laura Mulvey's frequently cited work draws upon John Berger's (1972) discussion of "seeing" as a cultural record. Berger contends that images are a "record of how X had seen Y" (p. 8) and critics have used his argument in *Ways of Seeing*, to analyze the underlying or overt oppression via the gaze of an "X." Feminist scholars have attributed the dominant-male gaze to an implication of women's objectification within patriarchy (Mulvey, 1992). A rhetorical analysis is concerned with how the text constructs a persuasive narrative for an audience, which utilizes cultural codes that reinforce or subvert traditional norms of power. The small and large screen cinema offers a rhetorical construction of gender that can be analyzed for visual and dialogic messages of empowerment and oppression.

### **Critical feminism in media**

Media texts have been read by a variety of feminist scholars as constructions of dominant messages about women's place in society. Critical feminist scholars examine both the dominant and potentially subversive messages in an attempt to understand how "texts limit, even omit, some aspects of feminist ideology while emphasizing others" (Dow, 1996, xxiii). This overarching critical view has been illuminated in a variety of

different texts, through a variety of different arguments. For instance, critics like Dow have analyzed the representation of feminism within media focusing on the portrayal of types of feminism over time (see also, Projansky, 2001; Read, 2000). Others have analyzed a text as representative of a specific feminist perspective like third wave feminism (e.g., Fixmer & Wood, 2005; Riordan, 2001) or postfeminism (e.g., Dubrofsky, 2002; Joseph, 2009; Ouellette, 2002). Critics, unhappy with the current labels, have also created other “types” of feminism, like Hilary Radner (2011), who explores the use of consumerism in “girly” films through the lens of neo-liberalism dubbing the movement, “neo-feminist” (p. 2).

Some scholars voice particular frustration with media representations of women that utilize a rhetoric of feminism to promote what they contend are anti-feminist ideals. For instance, Radner is specific in her argument that neo-feminism is not actually a feminist movement, but instead describes “the tendency in feminine culture to evoke choice and the development of individual agency as the defining tenets of feminine identity” (p. 6). She argues that this is accomplished through the incorporation of “catch-phrases, such as ‘empowerment’ and ‘self-fulfillment’,” which appropriates feminist language for capitalistic ends (p. 2). Ellen Riordan (2001) concludes with a similar argument in her study of popular music groups that tout a third wave feminist rhetoric of empowerment, with no political goals. In this context, third wave female empowerment becomes an empty rhetoric that works to create the impression of power, without actually making changes within the patriarchal system.

The variety of scholarship that has grappled with the contradictory depiction of women and power in media is due in part to the complexity of influences within the

entertainment industry. Dow (1996) addresses the complex challenges facing media texts, and consequently scholars, stating:

Ultimately, one of the biggest challenges to commercial television entertainment... is the need to respond to social change and the desire of audiences for representations of “the new woman” (as she is defined at different moments in time) while working within perceived economic and institutional constraints. (p. 21)

If the themes of a third wave feminist rhetoric appear in representations of empowered women in media, where women can be both empowered and girly, sexualized and in control, then contemporary television and film narratives can be read as a depiction of this new (or current) woman. The avenging-female character that continues to dot the media landscape can be read as an indication of where the empowered woman fits in this larger social context.

### **Hegemony**

In this project, I reference Dow’s discussion of feminist media research to highlight examples of hegemony within mediated discourses about women. Dow advances a critical theory of hegemony to understand the “functions of this programming as part of cultural debates about feminism” (p. 22). I draw on this discussion of hegemony in my own analysis of representations of the avenging-woman in popular media.

Hegemony is the process “through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are able continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology

oppresses” (Dow, 1990, p. 262). This is accomplished by incorporating “small amounts of oppositional ideology” in a way that both acknowledges the radical/oppositional viewpoint and “protects the dominant ideology from radical change” (p. 262). In the avenging-woman text, I argue that the image of the avenging-woman initially appears subversive, nodding to limitations within our contemporary legal and social system. Ultimately however, the theme of violence, the lack of a female community, sexualization, and objectification, “protects the dominant ideology from radical change.”

Hegemony is a concept that also illustrates the evolution of culture and representations of gender because “hegemony allows us to see film as the site where dominant and oppositional meanings are negotiated and transformed” (Read, 2000, p. 247). The fact that women are now depicted as an avenging lead in television and film speaks to the progress that has happened over the past century within the rape and revenge narrative (Projansky, 2001). However, change can be slow, both culturally and within media. The avenging-woman narrative offers an opportunity to understand how a contemporary ideology of female empowerment may be represented, but also critiqued for how a seemingly progressive depiction of women and power reinforces traditional social norms. In this sense, hegemony works as “an analytical construct that stresses the issues of domination and subordination” within a cultural production of “shaping meaning and values” (Carragee, 1993, p. 331). Similarly, Christine Gledhill (1988) defines hegemony as a model of meaning-making where “meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (p. 68). For example, a third wave female conceptualization of empowerment must be negotiated in tension with a dominant

patriarchal ideology. In this project, I analyze how the contemporary avenging-woman text, as an illustration of contemporary conversations of female empowerment, ultimately serves a hegemonic function by utilizing a rhetoric of girl power to reinforce a patriarchal system.

### **Criticism of the Avenging-Woman Narrative**

The avenging-woman character in contemporary popular television and film offers a complex construction of femininity. She is both woman and hero, physically appealing and physically aggressive; dichotomies that go against traditional gendered norms of femininity. Previous studies have analyzed the representation of the avenging-woman as a depiction of masculinized femininity, or the powerful woman within the context of gender troubling, as she struggles against traditional norms of femininity (Clover, 1992; Brown, 2001). However, contemporary scholars are moving away from the feminine/masculine dichotomy, and toward Jacinda Read's (2000) call to examine what the depictions of empowered women in media tell us about what it means to be a woman. I contend that the avenging-woman character portrays a representation of female empowerment, and within that depiction is an opportunity to analyze the intersection of women and power, to ultimately question feminism.

In order to move away from placing the avenging-woman within a gendered binary, Jacinda Read (2000) specifically analyzes the avenging-woman texts of the 1990s in light of the feminist movement from the 1970s, arguing that the "rape-revenge cycle might usefully be read as one of the key ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing shape of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period" (p. 241). Similar to Bonnie Dow's approach, Read places prior rape-revenge

narratives within the context of a specific and prior feminist movement and makes a call to “bridge the gap between theory and politics, the academic and the public” (p. 249). Increasingly, however, television and film texts are less overtly feminist, and Read contends they “exhibit such a high degree of self-consciousness about the kinds of theoretical paradigms that have been used to analyse them” that analyses tracking the effects of the women’s movement over time are proving to be less helpful in understanding contemporary conversations about gender (p. 246). Instead, Read suggests that the avenging-woman might be more usefully read as representative of ongoing conversations about feminism and empowerment within the culture in which the text exists.

This does not imply that critics should ignore previous criticisms or representations of empowered women in media to understand contemporary depictions. Cultural texts are a site of contemporary struggle, but are also representative of prior historical choices, criticism, and representations. Therefore, contemporary representations of the avenging-woman are a nuanced depiction of the avenging-woman from the past. We cannot have Veronica Mars without the characters of Thelma and Louise, but we also cannot have a contemporary representation of the avenging-woman without the criticisms of previous depictions.

Employing an avenging-woman character, the revenge narrative is replete within contemporary popular media taking a variety of different forms. The protagonist in each of the four texts for this analysis, *Revenge*, *Veronica Mars*, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, and *Colombiana*, ends up on the path of revenge because of a sense of injustice regarding acts committed against her. Rape is a prominent image or metaphor within the

texts, sometimes represented via the victimization of children during the death of a loved one. Because of the pro-women's rights message embedded in an avenging-woman narrative, there is frequently an overt or implicit tone of feminism within the text.

Feminist scholarship on the history of the rape and revenge narrative indicates that the avenging-woman text serves as a temporal marker of women's power and roles in society for the given time period in which it was produced.

### **The revenge film as historical marker of women's roles**

Revenge narratives have existed since the beginning of cinema but have served different functions in response to cultural anxieties. The rape and revenge narrative in film appeared at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in one of the first feature films: D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) (Read, 2000). Within early silent films (pre-1930s) "rape sequences are far more heavily marked by the relationship between rape and race" with the white male protagonist avenging the rape of a white woman by an African American or Native American man (Read, 2000, p. 79; see also, Projansky, 2001). Most frequently, it was male characters that were avenging the rape of a loved one because in the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century politics, a raped woman was a ruined woman and "rape was tantamount to death" (Read, 2000, p. 80). She could not avenge herself, and therefore the rape represented a weakened physical, mental, and social strength. Read argues that with the signing of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1919, the "emancipated new woman" first emerged as the victim who was complicit in her own rape because she was testing the boundaries of her conventional sphere (p. 82). Thus, in even the earliest film narratives of rape and revenge, the act of rape served as a symbol of political anxiety about women's place in society.



Anxiety over the emergence of the “new woman” is further articulated in revenge films from the 1930s-1970s. In a post-war era, the rape and revenge narrative signaled urgency in America for working women to return to the home sphere (Read, 2000). Read describes the need to reinforce the family domain stating,

The desire to return women to their roles as wives and mothers consequently also arose from the belief that the working woman compromised the moral integrity of the family/nation, from the fear, in other words, that the working woman was not only financially independent but sexually independent and available as well. (p. 84)

Within rape and revenge films prior to the 1970s, rape primarily functions as a means of reinforcing traditional norms of femininity. In films like *Outrage* (1950), for example, instead of giving a voice to women’s stories, the woman is put on trial, both legally and socially, and forced to prove that she did not invite the rape by being impure, or unfeminine. The films within this era articulate a definition of femininity in the representation of both the pure and impure women. It is the films resulting from the second wave feminist movement of the 70s that began to articulate discourses of rape and victimization as issues of power.

### **The avenging-woman narrative: post-1970**

The women’s liberation movement of the 1970s focused a necessary spotlight on discourses about rape and domestic abuse. Scholars and feminists “began to challenge the male definitions of rape and gender” found in mediated narratives, and “in the process, they contributed not only to making rape speakable but to the construction of the female avenger herself” (Read, 2000, p. 97). Feminists in the 1970s focused attention on

women's voices, especially those that were expressing anger and frustration with the current patriarchal system. Carol Clover (1992) contends that one of the main contributions from the 1970s women's liberation movement to the revenge film "is the image of an angry woman--a woman so angry that she can be imagined as a credible perpetrator...of the kind of violence on which...the status of the full protagonist rests" (p. 17). It is the revenge films of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, created in response to rape discourses emerging out of the women's liberation movement, that began to prominently feature the violent woman.

The emergence of the violent female-avenger met with overwhelmingly negative critical reception. Rikke Schubart (2007) in his analysis of the female action hero in television and film, *Super Bitches and Action Babes*, highlights the most notable representations of 1970s rape and revenge films including *Hannie Caulder* (1972), *Rape-Squad* (1974), *Lipstick* (1976), and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). In each film, it is the female rape victim(s) who seeks vengeance, specifically in the form of violent reciprocation. In the goriest of the early violent female avenger films, *I Spit on Your Grave*, professional writer Jennifer is repeatedly gang-raped by four men near a country house she rented for the summer. Instead of going to the police, Jennifer decides to seek vengeance against the men by murdering them viciously one at a time. The violence includes a bathtub castration scene where she first plies the man to her home with sexual promises and then leaves him to bleed to death in the bathroom as she listens to music downstairs. Critics of the film were astounded at the level of violence, with Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert "warn[ing] that the film inspired violence against women" (Schubart, 2007). Ebert (1980) further proselytized in his article in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that the

film was “sick, reprehensible and contemptible” (para. 1) and condemned those that may have enjoyed watching the film as having “suffered a fundamental loss of decent human feelings” (para. 8). He cites not only the violence of Jennifer’s vengeance, but also more specifically the violent representations of the repeated (there are three) gang-rape scenes leading up to the revenge.

Regardless of the negative critical reception, the 1980s and 90s continued to showcase the violent avenging-woman and brought her to a mainstream cinema audience with films like *Ms. 45* (1981), *The Accused* (1988), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), and *Eye for an Eye* (1996) as well as the made for TV movie, *The Burning Bed* (1984), and the television show, *Le Femme Nikita* (1997-2001). As the violent avenging-woman continued to appear, scholars began to question the appeal of the narrative. Similar to Ebert’s concern about the viewers who enjoyed watching such violent re-creations of rape and subsequent revenge, academic scholars questioned the continued iteration of the avenging-woman and began to examine how the female protagonist represents the “new woman” emerging from women’s liberation movements (Clover, 1992; Creed, 1993; Projansky, 2001; Read, 2000).

### **The avenging-(wo)man**

Critical scholars vary in interpretation and reception of previous representations of the violent female-avenger as a feminist icon. One of the first and most frequently cited studies of the avenging-woman, Carol Clover’s (1992), *Men, Women & Chainsaws*, explores the male gaze of the avenging-woman from a psychoanalytic perspective. Drawing on Freud’s psychoanalytic theory that posits that males identify with males and view females as the other, Clover questions why the early violent avenging-woman

narratives are produced for and enjoyed by male audiences. She asks why would men enjoy watching a woman take pleasure in murdering men? In her analysis, Clover contends that the appeal for male audience members to watch the violent woman is that she performs masculinity by choosing vicious revenge, thus making her essentially a man in a woman's body.

Clover's reading of the avenging-woman has met with much resistance from feminist scholars. Jeffrey A. Brown (2001) argues against Clover's assessment that it is the "experience of being brutally raped that makes a "man" of a woman" and specifically states his goal for analysis, contending that he "would like to question the suggestion that because women defeat the villain on their own they somehow represent men in drag" (p. 57). Similarly, Barbara Creed (1993) argues, "[B]ecause the heroine is represented as resourceful, intelligent and dangerous it does not follow that she should be seen as a pseudo man" (p. 127). Although Creed also utilizes a psychoanalytic method, she highlights a sense of pleasure produced by fearing the violent avenging-woman, arguing against Clover's contention that male viewers identify with her. And, Jacinda Read (2000) argues that

While Clover makes some attempt to analyze the rape-revenge film in relation to modern, and particularly feminist, debates about sexual violence, her claim...tends to be too generalized and simplistic. In particular, 'feminist politics' are taken as a homogenous and static thing rather than as an ongoing and changing debate. (p. 53)

Many critics agree that Clover's work over-simplifies the male spectator's identification with the female avenger and misreads the avenging-woman's role as a political icon for the women's liberation movement that was occurring simultaneously.

I understand the importance of not equating the representation of aggressive strength in a woman with characteristics of masculinity. Women can be strong without being masculine. However, I think that some critics have taken Clover's analysis slightly out of context and have missed a valuable contribution on the link between identification and violence. For one, her theoretical framework assumes a male-centered spectator, thus inherently limiting a feminist reading of the narratives. Clover's main goal in her project was to question, "the possibility that male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females, but with...screen females in fear and pain" (p. 5). The questions she asked were not answered by considering the female viewer, therefore it is not surprising that her reading is somewhat limited in terms of feminist potential.

Additionally, if we dismiss Clover's work as sexist or as ignoring a politically charged feminist message, we miss a valuable contribution about gender as social construction. When discussing the perceived masculinity of the raped avenging woman, Clover is specifically referencing Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender as performance. Clover argues

that the position of rape victim *in general* knows no sex, and that a film like *I Spit on Your Grave* is literally predicated on the assumption that all viewers, male and female alike, will take Jennifer's part, and via whatever set of psychosexual translations, 'feel' her violation. (p. 159, original emphasis)

This argument signifies the importance of the depiction of violence in order to foster identification among viewers. I find this part of Clover's analysis to be interesting, and I believe it offers a starting point to understand why violence might be justified and applauded by viewers, regardless of gender. I explore this idea further in chapter 3 in an analysis of the intersection of violence and empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives.

In this analysis of the avenging-woman narratives, I aim to move away from discussions of the avenging-woman as masculinized or feminized, and situate the texts within the context of contemporary feminist discourse about empowerment. Previous scholarship has debated the avenging woman as both masculine and feminine (Brown, 2001; Clover, 1992; Stringer, 2011), but she also represents off-screen political conversations about gender and power (Dow, 1996; Read, 2000). Jacinda Read (2000) argues that the avenging-woman narrative is "best understood...as constructing popular versions of feminism" (p. 49). Thus, in this analysis, I argue that the avenging-woman narrative can be read as depicting a representation of female empowerment, and I critique what the resulting messages suggest about women and power in a contemporary feminist context.

### **The rhetorical construction of the avenging-woman**

There are four consistent themes that come out of the contemporary avenging-woman texts in this study: the visualization of violence, a lack of homo-social relationships, the sexualization of the avenging-woman, and objectification via technology. In this dissertation, I explore each of these four themes as representative of a negotiation of cultural constructions of female empowerment. I argue that depictions of

empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman texts enact a hegemonic function by reinforcing the current system, and are a reflection of the ambiguous construction of female empowerment embraced by a contemporary third wave feminist movement. The problems with a third wave rhetoric of empowerment are exemplified through each of the four themes.

In the remainder of this dissertation, I study the intersection of each of the four themes with empowerment through a critical feminist lens. In doing this, I am attempting to understand how the avenging-woman in the rape/revenge narrative functions rhetorically to construct a representation of women and power that may illuminate the problems with cultural constructions of feminism. I draw on cultural conversations of third wave feminism in an attempt to understand the narratives as a negotiation of contemporary depictions of female empowerment. Current scholarship thoroughly debates the representation of third wave empowerment as productive for advancing women's rights, and I agree that images of the empowered woman in contemporary culture can be problematic. In this project, I argue that the depictions of the avenging-woman utilize a feminist language of empowerment that suggests the potential for a subversive message against a patriarchal system. However, an alternative reading of the narratives' underlying representations of the avenging-woman presents a hegemonic construction of empowerment, ultimately cautioning against subversion within a patriarchal system. In the next chapter, I explore the intersection of violence with empowerment within the avenging-woman narratives and discuss the complexities of associating power with tactics of violence.

### **Chapter 3: Violence in the Rape and Revenge Narratives - Hell Hath No Fury**

In this project, I argue that the image of the avenging-woman in all four of the texts in this study, *Revenge* (2011-2012), *Veronica Mars* (2003-2007), *Colombiana* (2011), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011), can be read as a reflection of a contemporary cultural construction of female empowerment that is problematic for feminism. The fictional avenging-woman is constructed as empowered, while she uses violence to seek revenge. In this chapter, I examine the linking of violence with female empowerment.

In our contemporary culture, women are more frequently the victims of violence, with almost 20% of women reporting having been raped or experiencing an attempted rape, and almost 25% of women reporting abuse by an intimate partner (Rabin, 2011, para. 2). In the United States, 90% of gendered violence is against women (Edwards & Guevara-Flanagan, 2012). It is these types of statistics that caused Gloria Steinem to claim that the “home in our country is the single most dangerous place for a woman,” underscoring a still prevalent and oppressive victimization of women in contemporary society (Starr, 2012, para. 1). Thus, one of the appeals of the violent avenging-woman narrative is the pleasure that comes from seeing women fight back and win against men, when women are more likely to be disempowered in real life attacks.

In the avenging-woman narrative, the female character is both the victim and the aggressor as she finds strength to fight back after abuse, frequently through violent measures. Jacinda Read (2000) suggests the women of these narratives are first “feminine” as the victim and then “feminist” as the violent avenger (p. 4). It is the act of seeking revenge against her attacker that makes the contemporary female protagonist



political. Because the avenging-woman frequently utilizes violence to exact her revenge, I critique the intersection of violence and empowerment as representative of broader cultural tensions regarding women and power. The violent avenging-woman narrative functions, at times, to highlight gendered power inequities within the current political, legal, and social system. However, I argue that the representation of empowerment and violence in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative is ultimately hegemonic, because it limits the avenging-woman's power within the boundaries of a patriarchal system.

To critique the intersection of female empowerment with violence in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, I first analyze how the visualization of violence and, at times a lack of violence in the text, creates a rhetorical argument for the audience to accept, and applaud, the woman's turn to violent vengeance. This rhetorical construction limits the women's options for empowerment to only occurring after they have been victimized. Next, I examine the construction of choice in the avenging-woman's turn to revenge, and argue that the lack of response from the legal system leaves her no other choice but to avenge, if she wants to see a punishment for the crimes committed against her. I then detail the physical and emotional characterization of the avenging-women, in order to highlight the rhetorical transformation from disempowered victim to violent aggressor. I also discuss the characterization of the male aggressors and argue that while men are characterized as morally good or bad, the women's morality is much more complex due to her turn to violent vengeance. Based on the intersection of female empowerment and violence, I conclude that the underlying messages of

disempowerment serve a hegemonic function by positioning the transgression of a traditionally non-aggressive feminine role as an undesirable path to isolation.

### **The Impact of the Visualization of Violence**

The visual impact of violence in cinematic rape scenes conveys a sense of severity of the crime being committed. Prior to the 1970s, the raped woman in television and film was frequently on trial to prove that the crime occurred in the first place. The stylistic devices of shadows and camera angles, which did not show, but instead suggested rape, worked to cause doubt about whether the rape happened within the plot of the film (Read, 2000). The viewer was left to question the validity of the woman's claim just like the characters within the story did, because they did not see it for themselves. In these early rape narratives, the focus was on the male savior who fixed the situation for the woman, frequently winning her heart in the end (Projansky, 2001). Consequently, critics of early rape/revenge narratives suggest that rape was primarily used as a function to advance the plot and accentuate the heroic qualities of the male hero (Projansky, 2001; Read, 2000). As feminist discourse from the 1970s re-focused attention to the woman's voice, the camera focus also changed in emphasis to allow the woman to seek her own vengeance.

The gaze of the camera constructs a story through which the avenging-woman narrative is told. Laura Mulvey (1992) contends that the "seeing" of the camera is not just how the male hero sees the female character, but also how the audience is persuaded to experience the story through the gaze of the camera. The camera gaze watches the male character look at the female character, and thus tells the audience how to look at the female character. Based on this theory, I argue that the camera gaze can be read as

conveying a rhetorical argument for the audience regarding the representation of women and power in the avenging-woman narrative. An analysis of the camera gaze within the texts in this study suggests a rhetorical argument for the audience to relate to the female victim's abuse and subsequent response.

In this section, I first argue that in the avenging-woman narrative, the camera gaze during the depiction of crimes against the women is a persuasive cue to the viewing audience to support the depiction of violent vengeance later in the film. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* offers the best examples of the camera's depiction of the brutality of the initial crime as a way to understand, and applaud Lisbeth's turn to violence in her retribution. I then argue that the depiction of violence during the woman's victimization also constructs a rhetorical limitation for how violent she is allowed to get in her own retribution. I primarily use examples from *Colombiana*, *Revenge*, and *Veronica Mars* to elucidate this point. Both rhetorical depictions of victimization via the camera create a problematic criterion for female empowerment, and I therefore critique the boundaries that are constructed for her violent vengeance as messages of disempowerment.

### **Setting expectations**

Although the depiction of violence in television and film narratives is not an infrequent occurrence, the audience still has to be persuaded that the reason for the avenging-woman's violence is justified in order to see her retribution as empowerment, as opposed to psychopathic. Mulvey's theory focuses on how the gaze of the camera constructs the way the woman is to-be-looked-at (p. 27), but I argue that the camera gaze also conveys a rhetorical message to the audience about how they are supposed to view the actions of the avenging-woman as empowered. Thus, the visual representations of

the woman's victimization serve two purposes: one, to allow the viewing audience to understand and justify the female avenger's desire to seek revenge. And two, the witnessing of the first incident incites a certain amount of pleasure and expectation with regard to violence administered in the payback. The combination of these two goals suggests that a persuasive argument via the gaze of the camera is necessary to construct violence as a path to female empowerment.

First, an emphasized visualization of the avenging-woman's victimization provides a rhetorical foundation for understanding the desire to seek revenge. Perhaps the most violent image of victimization in the avenging-woman texts is depicted in the rape and revenge of Lisbeth in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. In the most graphic of the two rape scenes in the film, the visual depiction of the act of the rape itself is quite brutal and disturbing. The camera frames the rape from Lisbeth's level, frequently utilizing shots looking at her face, but aimed up at Nils Bjurman, her attacker. She is chained to all four corners of the bed, face down, and gagged, and the gaze focuses on the straining chains as she attempts to escape. Bjurman strips her naked as she screams and her terror, vulnerability, and complete lack of ability to do anything to stop what is coming are conveyed in graphic detail, when the camera focuses on her anguished face and tears. Bjurman straddles Lisbeth and asks, "I've got to ask you, are you liking our sex?" and we hear her scream in pained response as he begins to anally rape her. During this moment, because the camera angle focuses on her face as well as the looming power of her abuser above her, the gaze of the camera reinforces the violence from Bjurman as an aggressor, as well as the sheer terror and pain that Lisbeth is in during the attack. There can be no ambiguity for the audience, after watching this scene, about whether a

rape has occurred. Thus, the gaze of the camera demonstrates the first purpose of the visual representation of violence; to understand the desire for revenge on the part of the victim by making the audience members “go through” the victimization with her.

I contend that the second purpose for the visualization of violence is to allow the audience to expect (and applaud) subsequent violence in the vengeance. This tactic is exemplified when Lisbeth pays Bjurman a visit after the rape. Bjurman lets her in and begins, “I feel a bit badly about the way we left it last time,” to which Lisbeth replies, “Me too” and tases him into unconsciousness, so that she can bind and gag him. After watching her victimization in graphic detail, this narrative turn conveys a sense of retribution as she takes control. When Bjurman realizes that Lisbeth has secretly taped the rape, he begins to cry, potentially in remorse for his actions, but more likely because he realizes he has been trapped. To mediate any ambiguity about his reaction, the camera switches back and forth between the view of Bjurman as victim, crying, naked, and bound, and a view that captures the video that Lisbeth is playing of Bjurman as an aggressive rapist. The alternating gaze of the camera reminds the audience of the violent and inexcusable capabilities of the man that is now being attacked, and argues that he deserves no sympathy, even as he is about to be violently sodomized by Lisbeth through the use of a dildo. The gaze of the camera then works to justify Lisbeth’s turn to violence and applaud her power through retribution.

As the scene progresses, although it was her violent rape that prompted the subsequent violent reaction, she continues to torture Bjurman in order to protect other women. Not only does this construct Lisbeth as empowered against Bjurman, but it also constructs her vengeance as empowering to other women when she states, “I am taking

the keys to this apartment because I will be checking on you. And if I find a girl in here with you, whether she came of her own free will or not...I will kill you.” To further justify her turn to violence, and position it as a public service, she becomes an advocate for any future victims when she tattoos the words “I am a rapist pig,” across his chest and stomach. Lisbeth is not just getting back at Bjurman for what he did to her, but her actions are constructed as empowering for all women against him for the rest of his life.

Lisbeth could have taken the video to the police instead of seeking vigilante justice, but the camera gaze makes a rhetorical argument by making the viewer vicariously experience her pain. This function of the camera’s gaze works to create sympathy for Lisbeth’s desire for vengeance and, on a deeper level, to appreciate her violent retribution. Additionally, the system that is supposed to protect her, has given her Bjurman. Therefore, she cannot trust the system and must correct the problem herself. The camera’s gaze that focuses on Lisbeth during her victimization via rape establishes an expectation that her aggressor should suffer comparably.

Because the visualization of the woman’s victimization serves two purposes, to create understanding for the desire for vengeance and also to justify and applaud the avenging-woman’s turn to violence, the gaze of the camera constructs her vengeance as empowering, rather than psychopathic. However, this rhetorical argument requires the price of her empowerment to be based on first being brutally victimized. In this way, the camera gaze also constructs an underlying argument that a woman can be empowered only after first being disempowered. This depiction of female empowerment is problematic if viewed as a representation of cultural conversations about women, as women’s power should not be contingent on the severity of their disempowerment.

### **Eye-for-an-eye retribution**

The purpose of visualizing violence is not only represented in the explicit physical rape narrative, but in the other narratives of victimization as well. All of the narratives in this study convey a sense of empowerment when the avenging-woman seeks vengeance against her aggressors. However, in some cases, the level of violence from the woman is far less extreme than in others. I draw on examples from *Colombiana*, *Revenge* and *Veronica Mars* to argue that the specific camera gaze of the women's victimization in each text translates to the level of violence allowed within their respective vengeance.

In *Colombiana*, Cataleya is depicted as being extremely violent in her retribution. However, this directly correlates to the level of violence enacted against her when she watches her parents get gunned down in the doorway of her house as a young child. Consequently, because the young girl (and audience via her gaze) is forced to see such a violent and bloody end for her loved ones, in an act that not only orphans the young girl, but puts her into subsequent danger, the expectation based on what the audience is forced to witness as well, is that the killers will suffer a similar fate. The audience takes this journey toward her goal with her. In addition to experiencing the murders via the camera's gaze, the viewer also sees the level of dedication on the part of Cataleya to patiently wait for the right moment, and on some level, is rewarded when the avenging-woman achieves her long-awaited goal of vengeance. The killing of the men who murdered her parents is presented as an empowering moment for Cataleya, as she violently ends their lives and gets retribution for the pain inflicted upon her parents, as well as herself as she had to watch their bloody murders.

However, a lack of violence in vengeance is also indicative of a lack of violence visualized in the original crime. In *Revenge*, young Emily is shown screaming for her father as Federal Agents arrest him and rush her out of the home. It is the last time she will ever see him. The series replays this scene, at least once, in the first twelve episodes of season one, featuring it in the opening credits, and then using it within the text of the series as necessary throughout season one. The image is thus frequently reinforced for the audience, and the pain the young girl is expressing is heartbreaking. As the viewer watches her screaming, with the camera focusing on both her face and her father's, as she looks at him for help that he cannot give, there is an understanding that the people who set him up deserve to pay. But, in *Revenge*, Emily is never physically violent with the Graysons, who are responsible for ruining her family. A possible reading for this, in light of the camera gaze and depictions of the crime, is that violence is not an option for Emily since this was not the tactic of her aggressor. This reading is supported when, in episode seventeen, a thug violently attacks her love-interest, Jack, and Emily utilizes her martial arts training to physically injure him to pay him back for the crime. Through this example, it is clear Emily is capable of physical violence, but the lack of it when it comes to the Graysons suggests that the punishment needs to fit the crime.

There is a similar occurrence in *Veronica Mars*, where we do not see her enact violence unless it is in self-defense. This can be read as a result of the fact that the rape itself is never visualized for the viewing audience. In this narrative, Veronica was drugged at a party and consequently woke up missing her underwear, and realized she had been raped. There was no graphically violent attack as far as she knows, and because she does not remember the rape, the camera only depicts the scene from Veronica's



foggy viewpoint. Therefore, I argue that the audience would not accept her as a violent avenger, because there was no visualization of violence in her victimization. Because the rape perpetrator is anonymous to both Veronica and the audience, the viewer can accept her response to disassociate from the community (because anybody could be the rapist), but would not be willing to accept the image of her killing every man she meets just because he might be her attacker. The camera gaze has given the audience an expectation for vengeance, which is rhetorically contingent upon the depiction of the crime.

The visualization of the crime against the women in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative indicates the acceptable level of vengeance that can be enacted. And, the extent to which she is visually victimized suggests the degree to which she is allowed to utilize violent tactics in retribution. The camera gaze and the visualization of victimization construct acceptable negotiations of empowerment and strength via violent tactics. This restricts the avenging-woman's options for vengeance within the parameters of her level of victimization. As a result, the construction of female empowerment in the narratives is contingent upon how the woman is first disempowered via the visualization of the camera. In some ways, this harkens to previous narrative prior to the 1970s where a woman had to prove her rape (Read, 2000). For the contemporary avenging-woman, she must be visually victimized before she can justify violence, which simultaneously provides the proof of rape for the audience members and legitimizes her aggressive behavior.

### **Victim first, vengeance second**

If it is the turn to revenge that makes the avenging-woman in these contemporary texts feminist representations (Read, 2000), then her empowerment is contingent upon

victimization. These women are victimized at least twice in the narratives. Once by the men (and woman) that attack them, and then again by the lack of help found within the legal system, which is identified in each text within a male run institution. Because the women are first attacked and then let down by the system that is supposed to protect them, the acceptability of their transformation, to borrow a word from Read (2000), from rape victim to avenger, requires the necessity to become a victim before she can have permission to become empowered. As such, the construction of female strength presented as contingent upon being a victim can be read as a negotiation of empowerment within a complex cultural system.

This construction of female empowerment can be read as drawing on a third wave feminist rhetoric, where the re-appropriation of words and labels, like “slut” to connote positive sexuality as opposed to an insult, adds to the complexity regarding representations of female empowerment. If a woman claims “slut” as a positive term, but it is used against her negatively, then this highlights the ambiguity of agency over language. Empowerment is an ambiguous term dependent upon situational factors and individual interpretation. If we now live in a culture of “flux and transformation” when it comes to understanding and defining gender, as Rosalind Gill contends (p. 2), then representations of empowerment exist within this flux as well. The contemporary avenging-woman text can be read as depicting this negotiation of empowerment, when women continue to be victimized by the system that should be helping them.

At the same time, if the extreme example of the empowered avenging-woman is only given permission to become empowered after she has been violated, then this contradiction points to a hegemonic construction of female strength. A woman must first

become a victim in order to become strong. While I choose not to read the contemporary avenging-woman text through the masculine/feminine binary, the resulting message of victimization before empowerment is reminiscent of Clover's (1992) finding that the rape makes a man of the woman. In this case, the rape makes a feminist of the woman. This construction reinforces the stereotype of feminists as the angry woman, and does not seem to adequately represent the complex construction of female empowerment. Though the rape is, on one level, a narrative function, as the woman needs to have something to avenge in order to seek vengeance, it is problematic to position female empowerment as contingent upon victimization. These cinematic limitations consequently trouble the notion of choice within the avenging-woman narrative.

### **The Rhetoric of Choice**

A language of "choice" is familiar within the rhetoric of contemporary feminism, and is found in a variety of formats. To have a political pro-choice stance on abortion is to support a woman's right to make choices about her own body. In a similar vein, participation in a Take Back the Night march is about "realiz[ing] that sex you feel obligated to have or weren't awake for is very different from sex you choose" and gives marchers a chance to vocalize women's body rights issues (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 244). The Slut Walk is an opportunity to question blame in rape cases. The marchers advocate that women should be able to dress however they choose and not be told that they are inviting rape. And, "having the power to make choices, regardless of what those choices are" is specifically attributed to the conceptualization of third wave feminist rhetoric (Shugart, Waggoner, & Hallstein, 2001, p. 195). In the context of a rape culture, messages of female empowerment are entwined with the idea of choice,

advocating that women should be in charge of their own bodies. The violent avenging-woman text can be read as a negotiation of this cultural conversation of choice.

I argue that the depiction of “choice” in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives is hegemonic in function. In each narrative in this study, the avenging-woman does have the choice to simply walk away, with the exception perhaps of Lisbeth who is tied to the state’s control and faces a continued future of abuse with Bjurman. However, in *Colombiana*, Cataleya is frequently given options to stop, including the possibility to never start her training for vengeance in the first place. Veronica Mars can save up her money and leave town, not worrying about solving her rape, or her friend’s murder. In *Revenge*, Emily can turn over all the evidence she has against the Graysons to the police, and start a life with Jack, her long-time love, and try to put her childhood of victimization behind her. However, if the women are to get justice for the violence enacted against them, they are left with no choice but to avenge the crimes. If it is the lack of choice that drives the woman to violence, then it is not her decision to avenge, but a necessary conclusion.

This does not replace a reading of the texts as commentaries against a corrupt system, but it does trouble the notion of empowerment when she can only turn to vengeance as the answer. The avenging-woman narrative provides an “opportunity for reading the representation of rape in ways that have the potential to empower characters,” but “the trick is to pay attention to how the [texts] then seek to recuperate or undermine that empowerment without giving up the potential resistant reading a feminist perspective can bring to the film” (Projansky, 2001, p. 61). The lack of choice in the avenging-

woman text challenges the depiction of her vengeance as a representation of empowerment, as it is ultimately an example of the system guiding her actions.

In each of the texts, revenge is constructed as something the women choose because the law will not help them. In *Colombiana*, Cataleya grows up in the world of drug trafficking and therefore knows that the local law is not on her side. Emily Thorne in *Revenge* has been manipulated by most of the adults in her life since the death of her father and therefore, trusts no one. And, Lisbeth in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is violated by someone within the system and consequently takes matters into her own hands. One of the most explicit examples of unwillingness to help from the system is when the sheriff in *Veronica Mars* tells her that nobody will believe her and she needs to find “a little backbone” (Thomas, 2004a). Based on the representation of the legal system, there is no choice for the women but to avenge the attack themselves if they are to have justice for the crimes committed against them. But, if the women will only be forgiven if the system will not help them, then the “choice” of vengeance reinforces the patriarchal culture before the narrative begins.

Because the avenging-woman, who cannot rely on the legal system, has been a consistent image since the 1980s (Projansky, 2001; Rapping, 1991), the subsequent vengeance in contemporary narratives can be read as a rhetorical argument. The texts make a persuasive connection between the failings of the legal system and the need for vigilante vengeance. The audience is left to conclude, with the avenging-woman, that if the legal system is presented as unwilling to protect the women, then the women must be in charge of administering violent justice themselves. However, this connection troubles

the idea of choice if the women are presented as having *no other choice but* to seek their own vengeance.

Each text specifically highlights the moment that the avenging-woman begins her revenge. In *Colombiana*, Cataleya tells her uncle at the age of ten that she wants him to train her to kill the men who murdered her parents. Emilio gives her two options, she can learn to kill now and go to jail, or go to school first and become “smart enough” to kill without getting caught. With the presentation of two options as part of the narrative discourse, this moment is constructed as a choice when Cataleya goes to school and prolongs her vengeance. However, the two options both reinforce the fact that Cataleya will kill. Emilio then trains her to become a better killer, but her choices are still limited to seeking revenge. In one scenario, she will go to jail, in the other, she will not. Although this is presented in the narrative as Cataleya’s “choice,” the only dilemma for her is how to go about her vengeance, not to ignore the desire for revenge.

Each of the other narratives constructs a “choice” in the narrative that the avenging-woman does not actually have if she wants justice. She always has the choice to walk away, but not if the aggressor is going to get punished for victimizing women. In *Revenge*, Emily trains for years to learn how to plot her vengeance. The narrative constantly works to reinforce how deep the Grayson’s pockets go so that it is clear that the only chance for punishment will come from Emily. Veronica Mars is simultaneously solving two larger mysteries as part of the ongoing plot, with one being her own rape, and the second, the murder of her best friend, Lilly. Her private detective father asks her to leave the mystery of the murder to him, but she continues to pursue the case on her own, breaking into his safe to gather information. As for her own rape, she attempts to sort out

the events of the evening to find her attacker on her own. There is never an acknowledgment by Veronica that she could just ignore the lack of justice, in either case. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth begins constructing her plan after her brutal attack, where she is shown inquiring about the expense of a tattoo machine and buying tape and cable ties. Each of these moments at the start of vengeance is constructed as something they choose to do over going to law.

Equating female empowerment with the choice of revenge is hegemonic, because meaning “arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (Gledhill, 1988, p. 68; see also, Read, 2000). She is empowered via a choice that she makes when she is left no other option by the system that disempowers her. To read the moment when the avenging-woman makes a “choice” to avenge as a depiction of female empowerment obscures an understanding of that moment as a choice made for the woman, by the system. While the vengeance itself may still represent empowerment, the construction of vengeance as a choice is reliant on the power of the system, thus giving the system control over the women’s actions. Through this construction, even when the women appear to be going against the system, they are only allowed to do so if the system refuses to help them.

It is the fight outside of the system that signifies these texts as feminist and relates the violence as a necessary means to a justifiable end (Read, 2000). The narratives’ construction of the intersection of empowerment and the depiction of “choice” can be read more broadly as a negotiation of cultural conversations about the system limiting women’s options. The appearance of choice, which overshadows the actual lack of choice within the narratives, constructs a reading of the avenging-woman texts as a

hegemonic cautionary tale against subversion within the dominant system. And, the necessity for victimization, before the women can gain power, represents tension in the construction of female empowerment. In this next section, I take a closer look at the construction of empowerment in the avenging-woman both as victim and aggressor, as well as the juxtaposition of the female avenger with the male aggressor.

### **The Construction of Empowerment**

Feminist movements, especially in reference to sexual assault, rape, and sexuality, attempt to trouble the notion of women as victims. Female empowerment is about enacting a gendered strength that says women are not victims. For example, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2010) contend that movements like Take Back the Night marches represent empowerment because “Once a woman acknowledges that she has been raped, for example, she doesn’t have to stay in the same psychic place forever as an angry or cowering victim” (p. 244). They argue that empowerment makes her a “survivor” as opposed to a “victim.” However, feminist scholars have critiqued the use of the words “victim” and “survivor” to describe a woman who has been raped, because the terms raise issues with agency (Projansky, 2001; Spry, 1995). Tami Spry (1995) argues that both labels are representative of patriarchal language used to describe a woman “in relation to the phallus; she is victim to *it* or survivor of *it*” (p. 27, original emphasis). Thus, “victim” and “survivor” take agency away from women by giving power to the attacker via the language of a patriarchal system.

While I understand the importance of interrogating how language constructs agency, those attacked during a crime are “victims,” regardless of gender. Rape, in the broadest sense used for this study, is a crime where there is a subordinate and dominant



agent of power. The use of the word victim is purposeful in this analysis in reference to both the woman who is raped and the rapist/attacker upon whom she takes vengeance, and describes the shift of power over the course of the avenging-woman narrative.

In the narratives' constructions of empowerment, the women at some point are represented as having power taken away from them and are depicted in the films as victims. Drawing on Jacinda Read's (2000) analysis, I consider the beginning of vengeance as the moment when the narrative depicts the women enacting female empowerment. The depiction of the avenging-woman in the narratives, before, during, and after the attack, is a rhetorical argument regarding the intersection of empowerment with violence. If the attack suggests a moment of powerlessness for the woman, and the turn to vengeance empowers her, then I analyze in this section how that transformation represents a negotiation of female empowerment, especially in contrast to the men in the narratives.

### **Woman as victim – pre-vengeance**

The women in the contemporary avenging-woman texts are initially depicted as victims, either as adults or as children. In *Colombiana* and *Revenge*, both Cataleya and Emily are children when their lives are ruined and they grow up into avenging adults. Although she is young, Cataleya is only briefly depicted as a victim, as within minutes of seeing her parent's murder, she stabs her attacker in the hand with a knife. Ostensibly this move allows her to escape from murder, but it also symbolizes the pending threat she poses when she returns as an adult to finish her mission.

Because a television show like *Revenge* has more time to expand on the backstory than a film does, the construction of young Emily as a victim, pre-vengeance offers

slightly more detail. She is a young blonde girl, and very small as she is carried from her home, emphasizing her innocence and vulnerability. Eventually, Emily is placed in juvenile detention, and upon her release at the age of eighteen, she has long dark hair and wears a zipped-up shapeless sweatshirt, the uniform of the angry victim, as is shown in the similar attire and dark appearance of Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

Lisbeth physically looks similar both pre-vengeance and as an avenger. She is covered in tattoos and piercings, wears androgynous and layered clothing, and her dark hair cut short. She is angry and abrupt in her communication and pushes people away through her aggressive appearance, as well as through her demeanor. During the brutal rape scene, Lisbeth is depicted as physically weaker than Bjurman. She is a small woman and the dialogue of the text hints that she is frequently accused of an eating disorder. For example, later in the plot of the film, as she is helping Mikael solve his mystery, she mistakenly interprets a police chief's question about whether she has eaten yet as a comment about her physical appearance, telling him abruptly that she has "a fast metabolism" (Chaffin, 2011). During the rape, although she attempts to claw, scream, and fight her way out of the apartment, Lisbeth's small stature is no match for the larger man. She is not represented as disempowered in terms of her willingness to fight back, as she struggles furiously with her aggressor, but her lack of power is emphasized due to the size, weight, and sheer level of constraint her assailant has over her.

If Lisbeth's level of disempowerment is emphasized by the fight she puts up during the attack, then Veronica Mars's level of disempowerment is emphasized by her lack of ability to even try to fight off her attacker. Having been unconscious during her

rape, the image of the prone Veronica is representative of helpless victimization. Similar to Emily, the narrative utilizes Veronica's long blonde hair and a white ethereal dress pre-vengeance as symbolic visual cues of her innocence. The morning after the rape, she shows up at the police station crying and does not have any information to give the police about her attack, which further emphasizes her depiction as a helpless victim. This is one of the last times Veronica is seen with her long blonde hair (in season one) or wearing anything but denim or leather, one of the many visual indications of empowerment that the women don during vengeance.

Pre-vengeance, the women/girls in the narratives are all coded for vulnerability and innocence. Even Lisbeth, who is depicted aesthetically as someone who is tough and aggressive, is visualized as so brutally victimized in the rape scene, that her vulnerability is particularly painful to watch. The young-Emily and young-Cataleya are the quintessential story of the child ripped from the arms of their protectors, and their small child bodies project the image of the helpless victim. The victimization of the women creates a particularly clear juxtaposition in attitude, as well as physical appearance for some of the women, as they go from victim to violent aggressor.

### **The avenging-woman**

The actresses who play the avenging-woman characters are all considered beautiful via Hollywood standards. Kristen Bell, Emily VanCamp, Rooney Mara, and Zoe Saldana are all consistently cast in leading roles. The characters of Veronica, Emily, and Lisbeth are all white and fit standard norms of beauty in terms of physique. Veronica is one of the only characters to comment on her own appearance, frequently making reference to her small bust size. And, although Lisbeth attempts to challenge standard

norms of beauty through superficial cues, she is frequently represented as an attractive sexualized woman in both her one-night stand with a woman at a bar, and her sexual encounters with Mikael. Cataleya is Columbian, played by Dominican Republican born actress Zoe Saldana, who self-identifies as a “black woman” (Callahan, 2012, para. 5). Although the character of Cataleya is not white, Zoe Saldana’s features fit a white western standard norm of beauty to the point where fans criticize the actress for not being “black enough” (para. 4).

The homogenous depiction of beauty among the characters of the avenging-woman narratives reinforces the idea that rape is a crime primarily against beautiful white women. However, rape is not a sexual act, but one of power and all women, regardless of race, are potential victims (Projansky, 2001). If the goal of victimization in a rape and revenge narrative is to show the transformation from victim into an avenging-woman, then the resulting image of female empowerment in contemporary narratives is primarily limited to that of a white woman.

In addition to race, the empowered avenging-woman is constructed through a variety of visual and dialogic cues. Avenging-Veronica has short hair, wears a stylish leather jacket, combat boots and jeans. She is the opposite of the ethereal victim-Veronica and is especially aggressive in her communication with members of her school. The first day of her junior year, when she cuts the new student, Wallace, down from the flagpole, she makes it very clear that her act of kindness does not imply a desire for friendship. She is attractive, a fact that is illustrated in the narrative when another new student repeatedly asks her out, but her look suggests a certain level of hardness that keeps most people away. Her motto after the rape has been to get angry and get even,

and she does not have time for any friends. When she feels there might be danger, as she tracks down clues, she brings her dog, named Backup, and a taser, but people just cause trouble.

Both Cataleya and Emily are grown women by the time they are depicted as avengers in their respective narratives. Cataleya is very slender, able to shimmy up an air-conditioning vent when necessary. She wears a tight latex body suit when she kills, but does not play the femme fatale; never trying to trick the men into thinking they are about to experience sexual pleasure prior to killing them. Instead the body suit makes her less noticeable as she moves in and out of buildings undetected and is therefore, primarily represented as a professional necessity. In the act of revenge, when she finally kills the men responsible, she is ruthless and vindictive, allowing Don Luis, for example, to be eaten alive by attack dogs.

Attempting to fit into the inner-circle of Hampton's elite, Emily Thorne is the visual epitome of an upper-crust young socialite. She is tall, thin, and blonde. Though she does not appear physically strong, her martial arts abilities are well demonstrated. She is frequently telling others that they are getting in her way, namely Nolan Ross and Amanda, who was her roommate in juvenile detention and the original Emily Thorne. Amanda agreed to switch identities with Emily so that she could take down the Graysons without them knowing who she was. Emily therefore switches her identity depending on her company, constructing a representation of empowerment in this case as the ability to maintain control over information and who knows what about her. Her strength is in not letting her emotions conflict with her plans for revenge, but part of the complexity of the story (and her subsequent representation of empowerment) is the negotiation between

managing her narrow-minded goal and the expectation from others that she express feminine emotions.

The contemporary avenging-women are all constructed as negotiating emotions as they seek vengeance, most frequently in reference to having a love life versus achieving their goals. Cataleya wants a life with Danny, but not as much as she wants to avenge her parent's death. In *Revenge*, Emily has loved Jack since she was a child, but revealing herself to him would compromise her plans for revenge against the Grayson family and she will not risk it. And, Veronica does not trust men, particularly wealthy white men, and therefore frequently backs out of romantic relationships. The emotional confliction is not about guilt or a "struggle with her conscience" as Rebecca Stringer (2011) has noted in recent female-avenger films, but rather the seeming tension between wanting a relationship and also wanting revenge. This tension serves a hegemonic function. The women can either be empowered by seeking revenge and shutting off their romantic emotional attachments, or they can be happy in a traditional relationship where the need for vengeance is presented as a contradiction. A concluding message within the narratives is that seeking revenge outside of the system and denying possibilities for placement within the home, leads the women toward loneliness.

The avenging-woman is so focused on revenge that she sometimes hurts innocent bystanders in her path. This creates a representation of ambiguous morality in regard to the avenging-woman. In *Revenge*, Emily frequently uses relationships to get what she wants with the goal of vengeance. In episode twelve, she places her "friend" Amanda into harm's way in the name of furthering her plan for revenge, by framing her for arson. As a result, she ends up victimizing Amanda in the process. Another example is in

episode ten, when she releases a video of Nolan having sex with another man in an effort to manipulate her enemy into firing someone from his company. When Nolan confronts Emily about embarrassing him and exposing his secrets, she says that he left her no choice and ends their tenuous alliance. Similarly, the lack of remorse shown by Cataleya at various points in the narrative suggests an ambiguity within the construction of morality at the intersection of vengeance.

The level of violence in the vengeance that Lisbeth Salander exacts against Bjurman also raises issues of morality. Lisbeth's power is represented less within a change of appearance, than it is within the rules and punishments she lays out for Bjurman. Within her plan, Lisbeth regains financial, physical, and emotional freedom constructed as power. Not only does she retake control of her own life, but she also controls the rest of Bjurman's life. She could have demanded that Bjurman just do what she needed to free herself from his control, but empowerment also comes when she brands him as a rapist and refuses to allow him to have sex with other women, consensual or not. She has hacked his computer and is able to survey his online activity at any moment. As the film progresses, she visits Bjurman at his office and tells him to stop looking up tattoo removal options. Bjurman whimpers at the sight of her and is visibly terrified when he realizes that she knows he is going against her orders. As a result, empowerment for the avenging-Lisbeth is represented as not just having control over her life, but that of her attacker's life as well. The extent of her payback points to a construction of ambiguous morality within the depiction of female empowerment.

Because the traditional role of the woman is that of the moral compass within a family, the representation of empowerment in tension with morality is interesting,

especially when violence is enacted. In a broad sense, the push and pull between power and morality can be read as an attempt within the avenging-woman narrative to negotiate the empowered woman in the private and public spheres. Within the context of the specific narratives, the tension between morality and vengeance speaks to a reinforcement of the system. If a woman chooses to go outside of the appropriate role, attackers will pay, but she will lose her moral value, especially when it comes to having friends or family in her life. But, a closer look at the victims of vengeance suggests that it might be worth the sacrifice to bring the aggressors down.

### **The victims of vengeance**

Men in the narratives are characterized within a binary of good/bad, which reinforces the ambiguous morality of the women in contrast to the men. There are some men who can be trusted, but ultimately most men are positioned as part of the corrupt (patriarchal) system and must be held at arm's length. The non-violent men in the avenging-woman texts are depicted as trying to stop the avenging-woman from achieving her goals so that she will not get hurt, or to convince her to let the authorities handle it. The "good" men in the narratives contrast with the ambiguous morality of the avenging-woman, as they force her to acknowledge the option to stop her revenge, and then she continues with her vengeance anyway. This construction also positions the good male characters in contrast to the sadistic bad guys.

The aggressors of the texts are depicted as corrupt and evil, also through a variety of dialogic and physical cues. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Nils Bjurman is an overweight white man, who wears a long silk robe during the rape, symbolizing the grotesque gluttony of dominance in a patriarchal culture. As the victim of Lisbeth's



vengeance, Bjurman's skin glistens with sweat and the rotundness of his body is accentuated by his involuntary nudity. It is difficult not to compare his representation of victimization with Lisbeth's, whose body was sexualized with the camera focus on her naked buttocks, the location of her body where Bjurman exacted much of his abuse. The camera never gazes upon Bjurman's body in any sexualized context, only revealing his legs, stomach, chest, and arms; all body parts acceptable for men to have bare even in public settings.

In *Colombiana*, the most prominent aggressor, Marco, is a Columbian man who appears to be in his late twenties/early thirties, but is impeccably dressed, representing power. He is not a mere gunman, but drug lord Don Luis' most valuable hit man. Marco initially saves a young Cataleya from a gunman, appearing to show compassion for the young girl whose parents have just been murdered before her eyes. He then reveals that he intends to kill her once he retrieves the zip drive her father gave her. In the end, he goes down in a violent one-on-one battle with Cataleya, where she simply out-fights him to the death.

In both cases these men are depicted as simultaneously aggressive and caring. Marco's initial show of sympathy and compassion for Cataleya is short-lived, and revealed as a sign of a continued attempt to victimize the young girl by playing on her emotions. Bjurman exhibits some compassion for Lisbeth after the rape, which seems to be in response to his aggressive behavior toward her; a sense of guilt that conveys he is aware that he is taking advantage of the situation. And, yet, the extent of physical violence progresses and guilt does not stop him from brutally raping her. On one level, this can be read as a representation of the complexity of emotions within domestic abuse

cases, but on another, it speaks to a broader level of entitlement of men within a patriarchal system. The appearance of guilt and concern gives way to true brutality. The stark contrast between the depiction of Bjurman as abuser and Bjurman as victim, weeping and sweaty as he experiences a pain reciprocal to Lisbeth's victimization, visually conveys a shift in power with her in charge.

In the contemporary avenging-woman narratives, the binary of good/evil for the male aggressors highlights the complexity in constructions of morality for women in the texts. Women as the aggressors are depicted in tension with their violent role of avenger. This tension can be read as a representation of the cultural complexities of female empowerment within a patriarchal system. It can also be read as serving a hegemonic function, in that the women's empowerment is depicted as a negotiation in relation to that of men. Whereas the men are depicted as primarily good or bad, the women are ambiguously moral based on the fact that they have turned to vengeance for empowerment. This latter reading reinforces the gendered binary of man versus woman, instead of allowing for a representation of women as empowered outside of a patriarchal system.

### **The (Dis)Empowered Violent Avenging-Woman**

The purpose of studying the contemporary avenging-woman narratives is to offer a reading of the depiction of female empowerment as a negotiation of contemporary cultural constructions of feminism. Violence in the avenging-woman narrative is a representation of the transgression of traditional roles of femininity (Dole, 2001). In this chapter, the intersection of female empowerment with violence and aggression is

constructed via the visualization of victimization, the reliance on choice, and the characterization of victims, avengers, and aggressors.

Based on an analysis of the texts, I argue that the camera gaze is a rhetorical argument, visualizing the victimization of the women in order to serve two purposes. The first is to justify a desire for vengeance. The camera gaze represents the woman as a victim, but in a way that forces the audience to confront her trauma. And, in doing so, creates a justification for her rage and subsequent vengeance. The second purpose is to construct an expectation for the level of violence in the vengeance. The amount of violence shown in the act of victimization is representative of the amount of violence utilized in the act of revenge. Therefore, the visual depiction of violence justifies the avenging-woman's tactics of revenge, and consequently, places limitations on the construction of empowerment through violent actions. The "choice" of violence is not that of the woman in the film, but the function of the camera to give her options.

Choice is a prominent central feminist concept, but is particularly enlisted in the rhetoric of third wave feminism. In the avenging-woman narrative, the appearance of choice is constructed within her relationship to the legal system. When the women are only given permission to avenge crimes against them if the system will not help them, then the depiction of female empowerment is constructed as the only option for the women. It therefore reinforces the very system that is being resisted.

Another representation in the narratives of the tension between choice and empowerment is within the construction of victimization. For women to be allowed to use violence, they must do so in response to first becoming a victim. Violence is always an extreme response, but becomes even more problematic as a tactic when victimization

is linked to subsequent empowerment. Thus, the correlation between the two seems to be that women can become strong only when they have first been weakened.

The contradictions that arise from the negotiation of choice and empowerment within the avenging-woman text underscore a hegemonic construction of female strength. Although the narratives can still be read as a negotiation of empowerment via the use of violent tactics and aggression, the contemporary avenging-woman does not represent a clear depiction of female empowerment through violence. Instead of representing the problems of the current system, the violent-woman is depicted as a cautionary tale and her fate argues against subversion of the system. In this sense, the intersection of violence and female empowerment works to “support the dominant ideology in a culture” (Dow, 1990, p. 262), when the patriarchal system is reinforced, rather than subverted. The resulting representation of female empowerment is presented hegemonically because she must lose everything in order to get revenge. The punishment for vengeance is a denial of significant relationships with others.

In the next chapter, I analyze the social isolation of the main characters further and explore what it conveys about community and homo-social relationships within a construction of female empowerment. As avengers of injustice, the women represent the lone vigilante common to narratives of revenge. However, I examine the allowance in the avenging-woman narrative that emphasizes male friends and helpers, but overwhelmingly denies any relationships of substance and support with the other women in the narratives.

#### Chapter 4: The Avenging-Woman – Man’s Best Friend

Throughout the course of cinema history, on both the small and large screen, the vigilante is depicted as a lone figure. Popular male vigilantes like, Peter Parker in *Spiderman*, Paul Kersey in *Death Wish* (1974), Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971), and Bryan Mills in *Taken* (2008), are all frequently portrayed as individual seekers of vengeance. And, the female vigilante is no exception, with characters like Erica Bane in *The Brave One* (2007), Hayley Stark in *Hard Candy* (2005), and Slim Hiller in *Enough* (2002), also depicted as primarily solitary in their acts of retribution. There is a sense of empowerment for both men and women that can accomplish their goals individually, without the need for help in achieving justice, especially with the representations of power for women. In each case, help may be offered, but the discourse from the women suggests that part of their empowerment is having agency and control in the situation. Vigilante justice enacted by female characters in particular has been read as a representation of feminist empowerment (Brown, 2001; Read, 2000).

However, the individuality of the female vigilante can also be read as a misrepresentation of feminism. In her analysis of the feminist potential of *Hard Candy* and *The Brave One*, Rebecca Stringer (2011) suggests that the lone female vigilante is actually anti-feminist due to the focus on individualism over community. Stringer argues “lone vigilantism is the very opposite of the actual strategies advocated in feminist anti-violence efforts, which have primarily assumed the form of collective political struggle” (p. 280). She cites the collective action of feminist groups campaigning for “public visibility, law reform, and resources for challenging a spectrum of forms of gendered violence” and contends that the individual female hero is not a feminist icon (p. 280).

Stringer further suggests that the image of the solitary avenging-woman is not only a misrepresentation of feminism, but is in fact detrimental to feminist goals by ignoring the collective work necessary to achieve gendered equality. Interpersonal relationships are important for collective action, so when the character of the female vigilante is rhetorically constructed as independent and isolated from others, then the resulting depiction of female empowerment limits the feminist potential of the text.

In this chapter, I analyze the representation of homo-social and hetero-social relationships in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives in relation to female empowerment. The contemporary avenging-woman narratives in this study offer a depiction of vigilantism that is not entirely solitary. Female confederates are still few and far between, but the avenging-woman frequently has a variety of men in her life that help her as she seeks out justice. I therefore critique the construction of empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative that lacks homo-social relationships and emphasizes hetero-social relationships. I argue that in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, an analysis of the representation of female empowerment intersected with community reveals a depiction of other women as untrustworthy, and ultimately, underscores the avenging-woman's power as an achievement solely via male support.

To critique the intersection of empowerment with a lack of female community, I first detail a narrative depiction of other women in the texts that establishes a rhetorical message of distrust within homo-social relationships. I then analyze the construction of the male confederates in the texts in order to explain how the combination of a lack of trust in other women, with the simultaneous, and exclusive, reliance on men creates an underlying rhetoric of misogyny. Consequently, I conclude that the depiction of female

empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative is hegemonic because it values individual achievement at the expense of other women, and reinforces, rather than subverts, a patriarchal system.

### **Depiction of Female “Friendship” in the Narratives**

The contemporary avenging-woman narratives in this study all come off the heels of two television series that specifically feature female avengers who are supported by a community of women, and some men: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1997-2001). Media texts featuring empowered avenging-women, like *Buffy* and *Xena*, have been praised for the focus on female community and conversation as central to the main characters’ empowerment (Ross, 2004). Scholars argue that an emphasis on sisterhood and ethical discussions en masse with other female characters, points to a feminist storyline that constructs empowerment via a community of women (Grindstaff, 2001; Projansky, 2001; Ross, 2004). For example, both *Buffy* and *Xena* are depicted as strategizing with a larger community, predominantly made up of women, to produce the best course of action. Similarly, both shows feature female friendships in a positive light, which “suggests there are productive possibilities when women share power and collectively resist patriarchy” (Ross, 2004, p. 249). When television and film texts show the main female character working out difficulties with or relying on other women for help, without a subsequent storyline of backstabbing, the resulting message goes against a dominant patriarchal norm that keeps women in competition with one another. The depiction of women as allies creates a message that homo-social relationships are a necessary foundation for female empowerment, and offers a

particularly progressive and positive representation of feminism in media (Projansky, 2001).

In the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, none of the main female characters have close female friends. In many cases, women are not only kept at bay, but are also used as pawns in the plans for revenge. The representation of other women in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives can be read within two categories. The first category is exemplified by a world without women, where other women are rarely depicted as existing within the lives of the avenging-woman at all. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *Colombiana* give the best examples of homo-social relationships that are constructed within this first category. In each narrative, the avenging-woman is surrounded almost entirely by men and when other women are featured, they are cast as sexualized objects or sexual competition, but usually remain on the periphery of Cataleya and Lisbeth's lives. In the second category, other women are featured, but either as stepping-stones on the path to revenge, or as inconveniences to the avenging-woman. Sometimes the other women in this category may inadvertently sabotage the avenging-woman by attempting to gain power of their own. *Revenge* and *Veronica Mars* offer the clearest examples of homo-social relationships in the second category. In this section, I analyze the development of the narratives that construct female empowerment in lieu of female friendship within these two categories, and critique the problematic depictions resulting from the different types of homo-social relationships.

### **A world without women**

For some of the avengers, other women in the narratives are depicted as sexualized partners or are rarely seen at all. For instance, Cataleya, in *Colombiana*, exists



in a world primarily without women. In addition to lacking any female confederates, other women are seldom depicted with any significance in the narrative whatsoever. She has no female relatives that serve as a sounding board in her life; her mother dies within the first few scenes of the film and she has a grandmother that her uncle accuses her of avoiding. There are no female neighbors, friends, or casual acquaintances. Homo-social relationships simply do not exist in Cataleya's life. The lack of a female community underscores the irrelevance of other women for Cataleya to become empowered, and goes against the progressive messages of female community that other media texts have conveyed in recent years.

*Colombiana* may not feature other women as a source of significant relationships for Cataleya, but other women are briefly depicted as sexualized objects for the "bad" guys. Halfway into the film, Cataleya is hired to assassinate a man who is surrounded by a harem of women, all visually sexualized by wearing only lingerie and seductively touching one another for the man's pleasure. The women's collective purpose is later explicitly depicted when the man gets up from bed and has to maneuver around their entangled naked bodies. One of the women asks him to come back to bed and the man silences her. The other women are intended as props for his sexual pleasure and are not represented with agency to make demands of their own.

In this scene, Cataleya's dominance within the situation is exemplified through a number of rhetorical narrative constructions. For one, she enters the man's home by swimming in through a shark tank, emphasizing her fearlessness. Just prior to her entrance, the man she is planning to kill explains the danger of sharks to one of the other women, who has called the animal a "fishy." In addition to reinforcing Cataleya's

bravery and sheer dedication to her goals when she willingly gets into shark-infested waters, this specific exchange of dialogue emphasizes the other woman's lack of intelligence. The unflattering depiction of the intelligence level of the other women creates a contrast for Cataleya's particular ingenuity, and indicates a second rhetorical construction of dominance as she carefully plots the man's demise. She first marks him as her next victim and guides him into a trap, where he thinks he has outwitted her, but soon realizes this is not the case. Cataleya's intelligence is not just illustrated as dominant to the man that she kills, but also as superior to that of the other women, all of whom are portrayed as brainless bimbos.

The occurrence of empowerment for one woman at the expense of empowerment for other women is also exemplified in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. The depiction of sexualized women in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is a bit more complex than that within *Colombiana*, because there is both the portrayal of another woman as sexual competition for the avenging-woman and the portrayal of another woman as a sexual partner for her. Lesbians are at once sexualized by and emasculating for the heterosexual male, who can still eroticize her relationship with another woman, but cannot possess her affections or desire for sexuality (Brown, 2001). However, bisexuality positions the woman who has sex with women and men, as both partner and competition for other women.

In contrast to *Colombiana*, which portrays other women as *sexualized* partners depicted in a way that objectifies the women, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* portrays other women as *sexual* partners in a way that both empowers and disempowers other women. I define the sexual partner as having agency within the relationship, especially

when they are depicted as being dominant sexually. There is a particularly clear example of this type of sexual power in the character of Erika Berger, who is Mikael's boss and married lover. In one scene, Erika has made a deal without consulting Mikael, and when he confronts her about it, she tells him that it is her decision. Mikael is frustrated, but she tells him that they either take the deal or the business fails, and she heads into the bedroom and takes off her clothes. Erika is clearly in charge of their sexual relationship when she reminds Mikael that she is leaving tomorrow and that he should come to bed. Mikael does not pause as he gets up from the couch and joins her in the bedroom. Although she is sexualized for the viewing audience when we see her undress in the shadow of the bedroom light, and her demand for sex could be read as an effort to use her sexuality to pacify the angry Mikael, Erika is consistently portrayed in the narrative as a sexual subject within this relationship. She beckons and he attends to her command. She is not sexually satisfied in her relationship with her husband, a fact that she comments on during a previous sexual encounter with Mikael, and therefore takes charge of her own pleasure.

Where this rhetorical construction creates the opportunity for an underlying reading of disempowerment is when Lisbeth and Erika are positioned in competition with one another for Mikael's affection. Lisbeth knows that Mikael is in a relationship with Erika, as she has hacked his computer and accessed his personal photographs and records. However, as Lisbeth and Mikael begin a sexual relationship, Erika is not pictured as part of the team. She is absent entirely until the crime has been solved and then is depicted as jealous of the relationship that has formed between Lisbeth and Mikael, when she watches over them as they talk alone. The competition between the

two women is only clearly acknowledged by Lisbeth during the last few minutes of the film, when she watches Erika and Mikael stroll away hand in hand. Lisbeth has brought an expensive gift for Mikael and upon seeing the two lovers, she throws it into a dumpster and rides off on her motorcycle alone. This scene positions the other woman as sexual competition for the avenging-woman, and disempowers Lisbeth as the one that did not “win.”

In a slightly different representation of another woman, Lisbeth engages with a female sexual partner during the course of the narrative in the film. However, even the potentially progressive portrayal of Lisbeth’s lesbian lover, is relegated to that of a sexualized partner when she dismisses her offer of help. This is exemplified in the scene where Mikael and Lisbeth first meet face to face, as he barges uninvited into her apartment and attempts to get her to help him solve his case. The night before, Lisbeth meets a woman at a bar and they have a one-night stand. The next morning, we see the lover’s naked body in the bed as Mikael knocks on Lisbeth’s door. When Mikael makes it clear he is not leaving and tells her to “get rid of your girlfriend,” Lisbeth asks the woman to leave. The woman pauses and asks Lisbeth if she would like her to stay, since it is clear that Mikael is controlling the need for her exit. Lisbeth says no and it is this moment that downgrades the potentially progressive strength of a female liaison to that of an objectified partner. Lisbeth is clearly worried that Mikael will hurt her; a fact that is revealed in the narrative when she puts a taser in the waistband of her pants for protection. Instead of allowing the other woman to stay as backup, she instead chooses to face him, and her fears, alone. Lisbeth is empowered by facing her fear that Mikael will hurt her, but also disempowered when he takes control of her space, her guest, and her

decisions. This scene can also be read as a moment of disempowerment for the other woman in the narrative, when both Lisbeth and Mikael treat her as an inconvenience and a sexual prop, easily let go at the command of a man.

These few examples of women in *Colombiana* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* emphasize a world primarily without women for both Catalya and Lisbeth. Although there are depictions of other women, they are used in contrast to the avenging woman, which creates a rhetorical message of solitary female empowerment. In this next section, I critique the two narratives in this study that do allow other women to be more integral to the plots of revenge, but still problematize any opportunity for representations of progressive female community.

### **Can't live with them...**

*Revenge* and *Veronica Mars* feature a variety of other women as part of their respective narrative arcs; however, both texts rhetorically position the women as pawns or inconveniences. In *Veronica Mars*, one of the other women in the series, who makes a somewhat regular appearance in the show, is the computer hacker, Mac. In season three, Tina Majorino, who plays Mac, is listed in the opening credits and is suddenly positioned in the narrative as Veronica's best friend. However, prior to season three, she was primarily featured as somebody Veronica relied on for her technological expertise when necessary to help solve a case and a somewhat distant acquaintance. Mac is a computer genius and can help Veronica hack into restricted sites. But, Mac is on a need-to-know basis with the cases that Veronica brings her and the two women do not discuss their personal lives. The lack of discussion about personal lives is accentuated in episode seventeen of season two, when a visibly uncomfortable Mac asks Veronica if she can talk

to her about a sexual issue, and Veronica resorts to jokes. Although she does have the conversation with Mac and tries to help her, it is a fleeting moment that is never reciprocated by Veronica sharing personal information of her own. Instead of establishing the foundation for a mutually beneficial homo-social relationship, Mac's need for advice stands in stark contrast to Veronica never talking to other women about her own problems.

Other women in *Veronica Mars* serve as clients, or as school authorities, but Veronica never confides in any of them with details about her life. In episode 8 of season 1, Veronica comments to her client, Meg, that nobody has ever asked for her side of the story, when the town turned on the Mars family for accusing Lilly Kane's father of murder, or apologized for treating her badly. Meg responds, "It's because people are afraid of you," to which Veronica replies, "Then something's working" (Thomas, 2004b). Again, Veronica takes this moment, where Meg seemed open to hearing her side of the story, and dismisses the opportunity in favor of remaining outside of a homo-social relationship. This move rhetorically keeps Veronica estranged from other women, even though she is depicted as close enough to reveal details about her rape and her suspicions about Lilly's death on multiple occasions to other men in her life.

In some cases, she actively uses the other women just to get what she needs. In addition to utilizing Mac's hacking skills, Veronica also leverages their "friendship" to get access to the principal's office (season 2, episode 19). In this episode, Veronica convinces Mac to go to Prom with the principal's nerdy son, even though she knows this is not something Mac wants to do. In this way, Veronica disempowers Mac, who wants to help Veronica but is also visibly and verbally unhappy with her role, in order to

continue with plans for vengeance. This points to a consistent rhetorical theme within the contemporary avenging-woman narratives, where female empowerment is conditional to only one woman at a time.

*Revenge* has a regular cast of female characters and long-term relationships between women that hint at the potential for progressive homo-social depictions. But, *Revenge* also ultimately constructs the other women as pawns and inconveniences. In the pilot episode, the audience meets Emily Thorne, who has grown close to Victoria Grayson's personal assistant, Ashley, during her summer in the Hamptons, and the two women appear to be good friends. Within the first episode it is clear that Ashley offers an open door to the Grayson's life, and that Emily is utilizing that relationship to get closer to the family at the detriment to any relationship with Ashley. In episode 4 of season 1, Emily sabotages Ashley's opportunity to advance in her career when she replaces a presentation DVD with one that helps with her plans for revenge, consequently ruining the charity benefit that Ashley has put together for Victoria Grayson. Again, the avenging-woman disempowers the other woman in favor of her own empowerment, and reinforces the message that women are positioned in competition with one another for power.

The relationship between Emily and Ashley is superficial and newly started at the beginning of the series, but *Revenge* also offers the depiction of a more long-standing homo-social relationship between Emily and Amanda. Amanda is Emily's former roommate in juvenile hall and the woman who exchanged names with Emily so that she could avenge in secret. The narrative constructs their relationship as genuine on Amanda's part and, used for convenience on Emily's side. For example, in episode

seven, Amanda kills a man that is digging into Emily's past and sends Emily scrambling to fix the resulting complications. She is visibly and verbally angry with Amanda, and yet, is shown controlling her reactions and telling Amanda what she knows she wants to hear. When Emily tells Amanda that she is getting her set up with some money and a new identity so that she can start a new life, Amanda says, "I like being Amanda Clarke. It's our connection" (Scott, 2011). She would do anything for Emily and indicates that she knows Emily would do the same for her. The audience has seen the nonverbal reactions behind Amanda's back and it is clear that Emily would *not* do the same for her, particularly if it affects her own plans for revenge.

Amanda represents the opportunity for a homo-social relationship for Emily where the women protect one another through mutual respect and open communication. This type of homo-social interaction is a progressive representation of community and female empowerment (Grindstaff, 2001; Projansky, 2001). However, Emily rejects this relationship and manipulates Amanda to try to get her out of the picture. As a result, Amanda ignores Emily's wishes that she leave, and asserts her own power in deciding to stay. Consequently, Emily is disempowered in her plans for revenge, as Amanda's choice to stay in the Hamptons makes things very complicated. Through this narrative, Amanda is empowered by taking charge of her own life, but challenges Emily's power in doing so. This narrative construction reinforces the message that women cannot rely on one another for genuine support, and even more troubling, that female empowerment is an individual achievement at the expense of others.

Another particularly interesting aspect about the construction of homo-social relationships in *Revenge* is that Emily has to fake a genuine friendship with the other



women. In the texts in this study, none of the other avenging-women openly fake a close relationship with a woman in order to get what they want, even if they may sometimes use women to their advantage. Therefore, the audience is given clear examples of Emily performing the behavior of a “good girlfriend,” but this only reinforces her lack of reliance on women. When the narrative depicts Emily as being able to mimic the behavior expected in a homo-social relationship, which is conveyed by a show of support for romantic relationship problems, career difficulties, and the need to reciprocate emotional connection, the underlying message is that female friendships are false and that women are not to be trusted. The lack of trust is not just in how Emily feels about the other women’s reliability, but distrust is an underlying message about Emily herself in her behavior toward the other women. Consequently, the avenging-woman’s empowerment is portrayed as contingent on disempowering other women and rejecting opportunities for strength within a female community or dyad.

### **Depiction of the Confederate Male**

While the representation of female friendship in the texts creates a rhetoric of distrust regarding women, this is only amplified when placed in juxtaposition to the extensive reliance on men in the narratives. In previous rape and revenge narratives, men have served a variety of roles outside of that of the aggressor, including savior, lover, and trainer (Projansky, 2001; Schubart, 2007). At times the men are represented as ignorant to the avenging-woman’s plans, and other times, they are confederates, serving either as a helper, or as the “master, father, and creator” of the avenging-woman (Schubart, 2007, p. 207). In this section, I critique the representation of the men who serve as confederates in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative.

The avenging-women in this study all have a number of men in their lives that help them in some way with their vengeance. This either comes in the form of hands-on help, via professional expertise, or through sharing information and talking about problems and plans. The confederate males in the avenging-woman narratives frequently have a relationship with the women as platonic friends, sexual partners, or that of a father figure. Next, I detail the relationships with men that appear empowering on the surface, but through an analysis of the rhetorically constructed messages in the text, I argue actually suggest a form of disempowerment and patriarchal control. These constructions fall into two categories: those who train the women for battle and the non-threatening male confederate.

### **Training for battle**

The prevalence of the male parental figure as trainer, constructs female empowerment as that taught to women, by men. This is not necessarily a new figure in television and film narratives, as exemplified by characters in texts like *Charlie's Angels* (2000), who are all trained and directed by Charlie, *Enough* (2002), when Slim is trained in Krav Maga by her male trainer, *Kill Bill vol. 1 & 2* (2003, 2004), when Beatrix (a.k.a. Black Mamba; a.k.a. The Bride) is trained by both Pai Mei and Bill as an assassin, and, when Ziva on *NCIS* (2003-present) is trained by her father as a Mossad agent. However, an analysis of the role of the male trainer suggests an interesting construction of female empowerment for the avenging-woman (Schubart, 2007). *Revenge*, *Colombiana*, and *Veronica Mars* each feature an older adult male in the women's lives that guides them toward being able to follow through on their plans for revenge. Though some men are more resistant to being helpful than others, as in the case of Veronica's father and

Cataleya's uncle, the men ultimately serve as teachers for the women in how to become powerful. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Mikael serves this trainer role for Lisbeth in a much more limited capacity as he guides her through his own mystery. In this section, I focus on the role of the trainer in *Colombiana* and *Veronica Mars*. I argue that the consequence of placing the women's empowerment in the hands of men serves a hegemonic role by reinforcing the power of men within a patriarchal culture.

*Colombiana* and *Veronica Mars* offer very similar representations of the male trainer. Both narratives have a familial man that teaches the avenging-woman to defend herself and to be aggressive. Keith Mars, Veronica's father, who is unaware of her rape throughout the series, wants her to be able to fight back defensively if she is ever in danger and knows she carries a taser, but he also teaches her how to investigate a crime and collect evidence, all necessary offensive skills in her strategy for revenge. And, Cataleya's Uncle Emilio is a hired hit man that understands the desire to avenge the death of a loved one, as he sought out vengeance against the men that murdered his son. He begins training Cataleya as a hired killer at the age of eight. By placing empowerment training in the hands of men, the avenging-woman narrative positions the locus of female power within a patriarchal center. None of the women are shown carrying on this message of empowerment, or teaching techniques for self-defense to other women, as was depicted in previous avenging-woman narratives like *Buffy* and *Xena*. Therefore, the trainer is constructed as the man who gifts empowerment to the woman, but not in a way that conveys the skills should be transferred to empower more than one woman.

Eventually, both Keith and Emilio voice regret at teaching the women the path to empowerment. At one point in each of the narratives, the trainer cautions against the

danger that comes with vengeance and tries to focus the avenging-woman on trying to have a “normal” life. In *Colombiana*, this occurs when Emilio realizes she is using the hired hits to send a message to her parents’ killers. Emilio tells her, “I still pray that you find a life away from this” as he asks her to stop her vengeance and move on with her life (Besson, 2011). Veronica’s father, Keith, also tries to keep his daughter from placing herself in harm’s way and urges her to try to live a normal life as a teenage girl, which he equates with going out with friends and focusing on school. Consequently, while teaching the women in their lives to be empowered, the men also seem to be struggling with what the power does to them when they become isolated and face danger. Both men want the women to live “normal” lives, which can be read as fitting into a socially normative role of the non-aggressive woman. The regret then is about how the woman handles the power she is given, as the men only have control over teaching her the moves, not in making decisions about how she will then use that power.

This narrative construction creates a rhetorical message regarding the necessity for men to teach women how to become powerful. Consequently, a resulting message within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative is that women not only cannot find power through the help of other women, but also that power is something inherent only to men. Additionally, the avenging-woman is constructed as not being able to handle the power that she receives from the trainer, according to the men’s estimation. The hesitation by both men at what their training has turned the avenging-woman into, points to an underlying message that vengeance is not an ideal course of action, but also that giving power to women may result in regret.

### **The non-threatening male confederate**

The role of the trainer is not the only male confederate in the lives of the avenging-woman. All of the texts in this study have a non-threatening male that is in a relationship with the avenging-woman. By non-threatening, I am defining a construction of masculinity that does not attempt to actively disempower women, and is, in fact, frequently dominated by the avenging-woman to some degree. Cataleya has her lover, Danny; Veronica's platonic friend, Wallace, is sensitive and helpful; Emily somewhat reluctantly includes Nolan as a confederate in her revenge; and, Lisbeth has a relationship with Mikael that starts as a business arrangement and becomes sexual, and then later, emotional, when she saves his life and then watches him walk away with another woman.

Relationships between men and women are frequently understood in terms of power. Feminist writer, Danzy Senna (1995), recalls a memory from her childhood that contrasts the difference she felt within a homo-social environment to that of a hetero-social environment. She comments that when men entered the situation, "the energy of the room shifted from a finely choreographed dance of womentalk, where everyone participated in but no one dominated the conversation, to a room made up of margins and centers" (p. 6). Thus, traditionally, conversations and relationships between men and women are defined through physically or verbally coded signifiers that create gendered power structures within the relationships. Senna argues that men create a dominant (center) gender in hetero-social interactions. I classify the non-threatening male confederate as one that reinforces the avenging-woman's power, rather than attempts to exert control, and places her at the center, as opposed to the margins. However, I argue

that the depiction of a non-threatening male as the helper to the empowered avenging-woman ultimately reinforces a patriarchal system of gender and power.

In this section, I specifically detail the construction of Mikael and Nolan as the non-threatening male confederates, with significant focus on Mikael and Lisbeth's narrative. Both men offer a level of intellectual and professional expertise in the quest for vengeance, but both are depicted as non-threatening males. In the case of Mikael, Lisbeth initially joins his quest to solve the mystery, but ultimately it is she who avenges the crimes. For Nolan, he desperately wants to help Emily, but he also tries to keep her from following through on her plans a number of times. Both men frequently do as the women tell them to do and do not fit the characteristics of a dominant, alpha-male masculinity. Additionally, Nolan and Mikael's lives are both saved by the avenging-woman at one point in the narrative. I detail the narrative choices that construct the male confederates as non-threatening and allow the women to appear empowered, while simultaneously softening any serious potential threat of female empowerment toward a traditional construction of masculinity.

The first time Mikael meets Lisbeth, he dominates the situation and exerts a certain level of control over her by barging into her home. However, once Lisbeth expresses her ability to hurt him and he looks shocked and tells her that violence will not be necessary, Mikael is immediately positioned as a sensitive non-threatening man in her life. He tells her that although what she did, by hacking his computer was illegal, he is just asking her to hear him out and then he will be on his way if she chooses not to participate. His behavior and attitude are non-threatening to Lisbeth, who has been manipulated and disempowered within her initial relationships with other men thus far in

the film. This narrative construction, where Mikael gives her a choice, represents a moment of empowerment for Lisbeth, who then makes her own decision about becoming involved in the case. The way that Mikael phrases his request for her help is telling of his expectation for her abilities as well as his presumption that she will be able to identify with being a victim: “Lisbeth...I want you to help me catch a killer of women” (Chaffin, 2012). In addition to his faith that she can bring some technological skills to the address the problem, the fact that he focuses on how she can help women who have been disempowered creates a narrative construction that shows Lisbeth gaining power over the course of the film.

Mikael is contrasted with the other men in Lisbeth’s life in terms of his masculinity, but specifically when it comes to the way he treats her. Played by the attractive actor, Daniel Craig, Mikael certainly embodies a socially idealized masculinity through his physical appearance. Instead, his non-threatening masculinity is most clearly presented in his behavior toward Lisbeth. After she has agreed to help him with his case, he offers to take her bags and she turns him down. He then offers to make her a sandwich and asks her to please smoke outside, and she ignores him. He barely misses a beat and does not attempt to convince Lisbeth to do anything she does not want to do. He does not exert control in the relationship, and instead allows Lisbeth to dominate him to some degree, as she continues to do as she pleases, even if it is against his wishes.

The clearest examples of Mikael as the non-threatening male are when he reacts emotionally and irrationally in situations, and Lisbeth remains calm and collected. The first instance of this is when Mikael finds his murdered cat on his front porch and he yells and backs inside the house. Lisbeth immediately jumps up to see what has happened and

then calmly gets the camera and documents the evidence. In this situation, Mikael reacts emotionally and then attempts to keep himself from vomiting, as Lisbeth remains detached emotionally from the situation, and approaches it like another clue in the mystery. This is not an unusual reaction for Lisbeth, based on the construction of her character throughout the narrative, but the immediate contrast with Mikael's physical and emotional reaction establishes a power dynamic between the two that positions Mikael as a non-threatening male.

Mikael is a bit bumbling in some ways, and this is especially clear in the scene after he has been shot in the woods. With Lisbeth's help, he is getting very close to solving the mystery, and at one point he is shot as a warning to back off the case. Mikael bursts into the cottage, bleeding and alarmed, as Lisbeth gets up to take care of his injury. Although Lisbeth portrayed as caretaker suggests a traditionally feminine role, the way that he responds to her commands position him as having less power than she does in the situation. For example, he sits shirtless under the water wincing at the pain as Lisbeth pulls out floss and begins to stitch up his injury. Mikael asks, "Couldn't we just use tape or something?" to which Lisbeth replies, "No." and hands him a bottle of vodka and commands him to "Drink." He does everything she tells him to do, and even though he questions her authority stating, "You are not a doctor," he does not stop her. In this same scene, while he is still trying to emotionally come to terms with the fact that he has been shot, Lisbeth decides she wants to have sex with him and begins to take off her clothes. When he realizes her intentions, he protests that this is not a good idea because they work together, and she disagrees and lies down on top of him. In this scene Mikael is doing exactly as she commands: drink, take off your pants, we're having sex. He goes along



with it, and while he does question her authority on some requests, he still does exactly as she asks, which asserts her level of power in their relationship.

In each of these situations, Mikael is depicted as more emotional and irrational than Lisbeth. This creates an important contrast of gendered empowerment in the narrative, as the viewing audience has to see Mikael as non-threatening, when previous representations of Lisbeth with other men have been incredibly disempowering for her. This rhetorical move serves two purposes in the narrative. For one, it indicates that Lisbeth is becoming more and more empowered, not just due to her vengeance against Bjurman, but also in relationships with other men. And, two, after such a graphic rape scene and violation of Lisbeth, we have to see the sexual relationship with Mikael as not just her decision, but also happening at her instigation as well.

Mikael is also presented as non-threatening in his masculinity in relation to other men. Toward the end of the film, Martin, the killer of women, catches Mikael when he stumbles and draws attention to himself in his backyard. Mikael is the “only man” that Martin has forced to the torture chamber in his basement. This comment made by Martin, again brings into question Mikael’s masculinity when he was caught as easily as a woman. This is accentuated when it is Lisbeth who comes to Mikael’s aid and hits Martin with a golf club across the face. Martin escapes and drives away, and Lisbeth turns to Mikael and asks permission to chase after and kill him. Again, her empowerment in this situation is featured in relation to the other men. She was physically able to overpower Martin and save Mikael from being murdered, but then she feels as if she must get permission from Mikael to continue her punishment on Martin. Mikael, being the non-threatening male, does not diminish Lisbeth’s power and stop her

from chasing Martin, but he does give her permission by nodding yes. In the end, Lisbeth does not have to follow through with murder, as Martin crashes his car and is engulfed in flames. But, it is Mikael's non-threatening masculinity that accentuates Lisbeth's empowerment against Martin, the threatening male.

In *Revenge*, Nolan Ross offers a slightly different portrayal of masculinity than the physically masculine Mikael. Nolan is depicted as effeminate in many ways, commenting in episode seven that he registers "a three on the Kinsey scale," which means he claims an "ambiguous sexual identity" (Perry & Fazzio, 2011). Emily easily controls Nolan, and he is frequently used as a confederate in her plans for revenge, but as opposed to Amanda and Ashley, he is included in the larger communication about her intentions. She trusts him to take care of some of her plans on his own, and he is the only person besides Amanda that knows Emily's true identity. However, Emily does not manipulate him by telling him what he wants to hear, like she does with Amanda; she is openly controlling and commands him to help when she needs it. He is a non-threatening male in Emily's life, allowing her to have the power in their relationship. And, in his role with her, he is an active helper with his technological expertise. He can provide a skill that she does not have, but he does not attempt to disempower Emily and instead, he seems to be happy to just be included in her life as a confederate.

And, Emily eventually rewards his trust by saving his life, which is a narrative construction that again reinforces her power in relation to that of Nolan as the non-threatening male. He is easily caught off guard and kidnapped. Emily is represented as not only more prepared, but as far superior in planning revenge than Nolan when she convinces his kidnappers to take her as well, and then unravels a sleeve of her sweater to

reveal a lock pick. Nolan, upon seeing this tactic, laughs and tells her, “I am not worthy,” which is exactly the goal within the narrative. Emily is empowered in relation to Nolan’s disempowerment, but only because he is the non-threatening male. When the kidnapper, a threatening male, returns, Emily’s power is again ultimately in question as even Nolan warns her that she is “way out-matched” by the other man’s strength. She eventually convinces Nolan to leave so that he can continue with the next step for revenge, as she stays and prepares to face a physical battle without him. In contrast to the relationship between Lisbeth and Mikael, Emily never asks permission from Nolan. In this sense, she is always empowered in comparison to Nolan. Because Nolan is non-threatening, the contrast between them accentuates Emily’s power, whereas in her relationship with Amanda, the two women are positioned as vying for power and both wanting control. Nolan knows his place in the power hierarchy with Emily and does not attempt to change that dynamic, thus making the non-threatening male much easier to control than other women.

In some ways, the representation of the non-threatening male confederate in the avenging-woman narratives creates a message that not all men are bad and that they can, in fact, be helpful to the empowered woman. This establishes an emotional, and sometimes physical, connection with other human beings, which is better than the “posttraumatic struggle with vigilantism” that the lone female hero is sometimes portrayed as going through (Stringer, 2011, p. 273). Feminism is not about women claiming dominance over men, but about establishing a mutual opportunity for equality for both men and women. Therefore, the representation of the men as confederates, who

do not attempt to disempower the avenging-woman, can be read as a progressive narrative that depicts men and women as reliant on one another.

However, the portrayal of support from the non-threatening male also suggests that the woman can be empowered only among men that allow her that power. When the avenging-woman is represented as empowered in contrast with a non-threatening man, this narrative choice softens the potential threat that female empowerment may pose for traditional masculinity. The non-threatening male that “allows” for the avenging-woman to be empowered, actually “protects the dominant ideology from radical change” (Dow, 1990, p. 262). In this way, the representation of the non-threatening male does not offer a progressive reading, but instead reinforces a hegemonic function to maintain the status quo. Women can be empowered within situations when allowed, but men will still have control should they choose not to be dominated.

### **The Intersection of Community with Female Empowerment**

In this chapter, I have argued that the frequency of male versus female friends troubles a reading of the contemporary avenging-woman narrative as a representation of female empowerment. The depiction of power for the avenging-woman is ultimately hegemonic by reinforcing an underlying message of female disempowerment within a patriarchal system. The resulting representation of the avenging-woman is constructed to suggest that in order to be powerful, she can rely heavily on male support, both physically and emotionally, but women are not valuable allies.

An analysis of the intersection of empowerment and a lack of female community suggests a number of problematic depictions. The first is how other women are constructed in the narratives, which seemingly depicts an empowered woman. Other

women are positioned as both disempowered and empowered in contrast to the avenging-woman, but never simultaneously with one another. In this way, the avenging-woman narrative reinforces a rhetoric of misogyny that undervalues mutually respectful homosocial relationships among women and instead promotes competition.

Other women serve a variety of narrative functions in the avenging-woman texts, where they are sometimes depicted as helpful confederates in the plans for revenge. Frequently, these women are treated as victims by the avenging-woman or objectified. It is rare that other women are depicted as empowered without disempowering the avenging-woman, which highlights a troubling theme within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative of conditional female empowerment. Only one woman can be empowered at a time. This goes against the call of feminist scholars who suggest that media representations of women should emphasize a strength in community where the female hero is depicted as “‘tough enough’ to fight patriarchy when she learns to listen to other women’s perspectives on the world and when she values her emotional bonds with other females as a sources of strength” (Ross, 2004, p. 231). Ultimately, the avenging-woman narrative constructs an underlying message that suggests that empowerment comes at the cost of female friendship.

A second problematic reading is located within the depiction of men in the avenging-woman narrative as both trainer and non-threatening males. Although the portrayal of relationships with men, and the representation of the vigilante as not entirely solitary, can be read as a progressive narrative support of female empowerment, the consequence of both types of male confederates reinforces women’s power at the center of patriarchal control. The trainer that teaches the avenging-woman how to be

empowered is a man that chooses to help her. This man is frequently depicted as regretting his decision to empower the woman, and the women are consequently depicted as not knowing how to handle power. In contrast, the non-threatening male confederate is positioned as comfortable with the avenging-woman's empowerment. However, the non-threatening male confederate is a safe representation of the dominated male, because he is not constructed as a threatening alpha-male, who may challenge the woman's opportunities for power.

A third problematic reading comes from the combination of the narrative depictions of other women and confederate males, that suggests that men are the only people women can turn to for aid. Though this is specific to plans for vengeance in the narratives in this project, more broadly this interpretation suggests that women cannot be relied on to solve problems. Scholars have detailed the progressive feminist representation of women who do rely on other women to solve problems in television and film narratives (Grindstaff, 2001; Projansky, 2001; Ross, 2004), and therefore the lack of reliance on women, with the exclusive reliance on men, suggests a rhetoric of misogyny that reinforces a patriarchal system.

In some ways, the representation of the avenging-woman's empowerment, as a consequence of other women's disempowerment, relates to the critiques of contemporary feminism's reliance on individuality and girl power. The contemporary avenging-woman narratives focus on empowering one woman at a time, and frequently at the detriment to other women's goals. This narrative construction reinforces competition among women, which maintains the status quo and serves a hegemonic function by "shaping the meaning and values" of female empowerment in a way that does not challenge the current

patriarchal system (Carragee, 1993, p. 331). Simultaneously, the representation of men in the narratives also “protects the dominant ideology from radical change” by showing women empowered in contrast to non-threatening males (Dow, 1990, p. 262).

Because the avenging-women are only empowered as a result of almost exclusive male aide, I argue that the resulting message is one of disempowerment for women. An analysis of the intersection of female empowerment with community in the avenging-woman narratives reveals an underlying rhetoric of disempowerment for women. The lack of a female community or any genuine homo-social relationships in the life of the avenging-woman troubles a reading of the contemporary texts as examples of female empowerment, and underscores a problematic message of disempowerment that downgrades the value of female friendship. Additionally, the combination of the lack of a female community with the reliance on men, serves a hegemonic function in the narratives to reinforce, rather than challenge, a patriarchal system.

In the next chapter, I analyze the theme of the sexualization of the avenging-woman, who is both victim and aggressor. Sexuality can be empowering for women; however, I argue that the sexualization of victimization creates an underlying message of disempowerment and a contradictory message about violence against women. This development is prominent in the narrative of the texts, but also within the marketing of the two films in this study. I therefore, critique the intersection of sexuality with empowerment and detail the problematic representation of feminized feminism in rape and revenge narratives.

## Chapter 5: Feminized Feminism and the Avenging-Woman – Bustier, Lipstick, Taser

In November 2012, actress Emily VanCamp, who plays Emily Thorne on *Revenge*, posed for *GQ Magazine* and discussed her role as Hollywood's newest "femme fatale" (Richdale, 2012, para. 1). In a photo intended to capture her on-screen character's "salty-sweet" persona, VanCamp posed in a pair of white shorts, black bra, and open red cardigan, while brandishing two plastic toy guns. In the photo she is holding one gun down by her groin and another one pointed off to the side of her shoulder, placing the viewer's focus at the middle of the picture on her cleavage and bare stomach. The combined message of the interview and photograph suggests that the image of the avenging-woman is provocative and sexy. Emily is certainly not the first female avenger to highlight her sexuality, as scholar Rikke Schubart (2007) details the widespread public and critical commentary about Lara Croft's large breasts and *Charlie's Angels* stars Demi Moore and Cameron Diaz's bikini bodies. The "salty-sweet" avenging-woman evokes sexuality, which is depicted as part of her empowerment.

However, academic scholars are divided about whether sexuality can truly offer women an opportunity for empowerment. Some feminist scholars contend that women can be empowered via an enhancement of sexuality, including wearing clothes that show off a woman's breasts and buttocks, utilizing makeup to achieve a specific feminine look, and undergoing cosmetic procedures (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010; Brooks, 2004). In a third wave context, this combination of power and femininity aligns with the concept of feminized feminism, where a woman can be both politically motivated for gendered equality, while also embracing her sexuality and the traditional markers of femininity,



like body-revealing clothing, long hair, and make-up (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010). Other scholars contend that enhancing the body to convey sexuality is reinforcing traditional norms of femininity that are dictated by an oppressive patriarchal culture, and thus disempowering to women (Brush, 1998; Newsom, 2011; Wolf, 1991). The contemporary avenging-woman text conveys a combination of female strength and sexuality that provides an opportunity to critique whether feminized feminism can be a representation of empowerment.

In this chapter, I evaluate the depiction of female empowerment that intersects with the sexualization of the avenging-woman through a construction of feminized feminism. Each of the avenging-women in this study is highly sexualized within the context of their respective narratives. I analyze the overt message of a sexualized female empowerment that masks contending messages of disempowerment, in a narrative that first makes the woman a victim of sexual, physical, and/or emotional abuse. I argue that the sexualization of the avenging-woman offers an example of how a rhetoric of feminism is utilized in place of actual political change, by reinforcing, rather than subverting, a patriarchal system.

To critique the intersection of female empowerment with sexualization, I first detail the narrative depiction of the avenging-woman in the texts that constructs a message of female empowerment via sexuality. I then evaluate the messages within the marketing material of the avenging-woman texts, with an emphasis on the two films in this analysis, *Colombiana* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, in order to emphasize the hegemonic function that the depiction of sexualized empowerment plays in the selling of the narratives. Both films highlight the avenging-woman's sexuality to advertise the

texts to the public, which is problematic for narratives that seem to address rape and victimization of women as a cultural problem. Based on this critical analysis of the texts, I conclude that the depiction of the sexualization of female empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman narrative serves a hegemonic function, by ultimately cloaking a rhetoric of misogyny behind a rhetoric of feminism.

### **The Avenging-Woman Narrative as Feminine Feminism**

Going against the tough as nails, “man in drag” persona of some previous representations of women in media, the female characters in the texts for this analysis are all represented as possessing sexualized feminine characteristics. For example, contemporary representations of the avenging-woman’s body are far less visibly muscular, and therefore, more feminine than the female action heroes of the 1980s and early 90s. Christa Stasia (2004) borrows the phrase, “muscular cinema” from Yvonne Tasker (1993, p. 1), to describe the characters of Ripley from *Aliens* (1986), and Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991). Scholars argue that both women are masculinized due to prominent muscles and a far less feminine appearance than previous female action heroes. Ripley and Sarah are both filmed with a focus on their muscles, as opposed to a focus on the traditionally coded feminine body parts like buttocks or breasts (Brown, 1996). By comparison, the contemporary avenging-woman is feminized through an emphasis on her sexuality via the cinematic gaze and to manipulate men in the plots of revenge, which results in a type of self-exploitation and the promotion of a rhetoric of misogyny.

### **The sexualized body and the cinematic gaze**

The sexuality of the avenging-woman is conveyed through a number of visual signifiers highlighting her body. In *Colombiana*, when Cataleya gets back to her apartment after a successful hit, she decides to turn on music and dance. She dances very slowly and sensually; her movements are sexually suggestive and eroticized by her thin clinging tank top and no bra. She is alone in the apartment, so the implication is that she is dancing for herself, thus emphasizing her sexuality in this scene as a moment that gives her individual pleasure. Narratively, this scene suggests that she feels safe enough in her apartment that she can let herself go and relax. However, the gaze of the camera, and subsequently the audience, is a voyeur of her erotic dance as “cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (Mulvey, 1992, p. 32). The camera gaze constructs a rhetorical message about her sexuality so that, although she may derive personal pleasure through her eroticization, she is also displayed for the gaze of others. The “narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world,” further emphasizing the eroticization of the image for the voyeur (p. 25).

There are other examples of Cataleya’s sexualization throughout the narrative. Near the end of the film, when she is in the final physical battle scene with her parents’ murderer, her hair is loosened from its tie and the visual image of her long flowing curls serves as a reminder of her femininity in the midst of her aggression. She is also shown dressing and undressing six times in the 107-minute film, with a focus on her naked back, and the repeated putting on and taking off of her bra. It is notable that she is the only character depicted getting dressed or undressed in the film, with the exception of one sexual encounter with Danny, where he takes off his shirt. The focus on Cataleya’s

naked and eroticized body throughout the film emphasizes her femininity and overt sexuality in alignment with her aggressive occupation and desires for vengeance. This visual emphasis in the narrative creates a rhetorical message that connects sexuality to female empowerment.

Lisbeth is sexualized in her empowerment as well, when she is featured completely nude in her sex scenes with Mikael. In the first sexual encounter, while he is depicted in only his boxer briefs, she is fully exposed and the camera is positioned in a way that focuses on her naked body, particularly her breasts. This camera angle is different from that utilized in the rape scene, gazing slightly up at Lisbeth while she is on top of Mikael. This position rhetorically constructs a sense of power for Lisbeth who is asserting control in her relationship with Mikael. But, the contrast between her level of bodily exposure and Mikael's also conveys a scopophilic gaze from the camera to "create pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object" (Mulvey, 1992, p. 32). While Mikael is mostly covered up and exposing only the skin that would be bared in a swimsuit, Lisbeth is entirely naked. The camera angle hides Mikael's body and emphasizes Lisbeth's naked breasts, genital area, and buttocks; all the parts of a woman that are commonly coded for eroticization in film (Stasia, 2004). She is depicted as empowered via her sexuality within her relationship with Mikael, but not necessarily in her relationship with the gaze of the camera.

The camera's gaze creates an ambiguous representation of sexualized empowerment, as the women are eroticized. The women of the contemporary avenging-woman texts are constructed within the male gaze of spectatorship and convey Mulvey's (1992) "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (p. 27, original emphasis). They are "simultaneously

looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (p. 27). Mulvey argues that the eroticization of the women via the gaze of the camera places the woman as passive object against the man as active subject. When women are eroticized in cinema, this then represents a sense of disempowerment.

To some degree, the sexualization of the avenging-woman is a facet of the genre within which the action narrative takes place. Yvonne Tasker (1993) specifically analyzes the gaze within action cinema stating, “popular cinema is as much concerned with visual pleasure as it is with narrative development and in the action cinema visual display is elevated to a defining feature of the genre” (p. 6). The avenging-woman narrative is part of a genre in which the body is traditionally gazed upon. And, in a third wave context, the visualized sexuality of the avenging-woman does not necessarily diminish her power, because when a woman uses her sexuality “the way she could a gun or a paintbrush or some other power tool that is usually the province of men,” then she is in control, and thus, empowered (Baumgardner & Richards, 2010, p. 141). The avenging-woman then is not just powerful, but is also coded as beautiful with a focus on her feminine body parts.

However, when women are sexualized to a greater degree than men in the narratives, then this indicates a disproportionate level of gendered eroticization. In the contemporary avenging-woman narrative, the lack of nudity on the part of men, with a simultaneous close-up focus of the women’s body parts, can be read as striking an imbalance between the eroticization of women versus men. Because the women’s bodies are eroticized to a greater extent in comparison to that of the men in the narratives, I argue that the avenging-woman’s empowered sexuality can be read as masking an

underlying message of disempowerment. The gaze of the camera troubles the notion of an unambiguous depiction of sexualized female empowerment and constructs a problematic connection between sexuality and power in the avenging-woman narratives.

In *Veronica Mars*, the avenging-woman is explicitly portrayed as disempowered via the gaze of a camera, when her sexuality is filmed against her will. In the third season, Veronica's dorm room is bugged and she unknowingly makes a sex tape that is then widely distributed on campus. The sexual encounter itself is represented as a moment of empowering pleasure for Veronica, as she straddles her boyfriend and asserts sexual control in the situation. The actual camera filming the narrative for the audience cuts away before any clothes are removed and thus, Veronica is shown taking charge of her sexuality without exploiting her body for the gaze of the camera. However, the camera's gaze via the illegal and non-consenting taping of her sexual encounter diminishes Veronica's power when her pleasure is subjected to the gaze of unauthorized others. This episode of *Veronica Mars* highlights the problematic depiction of a woman's sexuality via the gaze of the camera. If the avenging-woman represents an empowered woman and the depiction of her sexuality via the gaze of the camera eroticizes her as spectacle, then the intersection of female empowerment with sexuality can be read as an example of exploitation rather than power.

### **Sexuality as a tool of manipulation**

The avenging-women are not only exploited via the gaze of the camera, but they are also depicted as using their sexuality to manipulate or control men in a type of reverse sexism. In reverse sexism, the tactic is to "turn the tables" on "male bad behavior," and give them a taste of their own medicine (Gill, 2008, p. 54). Sexuality is depicted as a tool

to be used to manipulate men as a type of empowerment for women, but what feminist scholar, Rosalind Gill (2008), suggests is really self-exploitation. For Emily, in *Revenge*, this comes in the context of her choice in sexual partner when she has sex with Daniel Grayson, somebody who she is just using in her plans for revenge. In the scene where they first have sex, Daniel tells her all he can think about is getting her into bed and Emily responds, “What are you waiting for” (Toscano, 2011)? Though she is not depicted as being particularly aggressive within this dialogue, the fact that the audience knows she is not actually interested in a relationship with Daniel conveys the message that Emily uses her sexuality to get what she wants out of the situation. She is thus empowered via her sexuality, but in a way that troubles the notion of feminine feminism as feminist progress, as she assumes a traditionally familiar female role of a prostitute or gold-digger when she makes the choice to have sex with Daniel. She uses her sexuality to get what she needs from a man, which disempowers her within a patriarchal culture when she is depicted as wielding her body as currency. If her character is constructed as only using her sexuality to get what she wants from men, then this is not a step forward for women within a patriarchal system, but instead an example of packaging the same stereotypes in a rhetoric of empowerment.

Similar to the false relationship Emily builds with Daniel in *Revenge*, Veronica frequently goes undercover as a ditzy blonde schoolgirl in order to trick men into giving her information. These are the only times that Veronica is not in her jeans and leather jacket uniform, when she wears a short skirt and tight-fitting top, ostensibly to try to distract the men by taking on a traditionally attractive feminine appearance. She also speaks in a way that makes her sound unintelligent and helpless, ending her sentences as

questions and trying to convince the men that she needs their help. In the same way, Emily plays the part of the perfect girlfriend for Daniel Grayson. She is thoughtful and kind, attending to his emotional needs and helping him remember gifts for his family members, while, behind the scenes, she is manipulating his actions and convincing him to trust her. Both women specifically use their sexuality to fool men in order to get information and advance their plans for revenge.

At the same time, the depiction of men as so easily manipulated by sexuality conveys an unflattering and sexist message. For example, Daniel never questions the fact that Emily would want to have sex with him, or that she might have ulterior motives for getting into a relationship with him. They are engaged within months of meeting and she comes out of nowhere and plants herself into the Grayson's lives, and Daniel never questions the fact that she might not be as interested in him as she pretends. Emily easily tricks Daniel, but in season one, he has no idea what his parents did to her father. This makes his trust in Emily all the more painful to watch as she takes advantage of his devotion and convinces him that she is in love with him. In this sense, the avenging-woman is empowered via her sexuality, but at the detriment to creating equality with men, when she is positioned as dominant over men and they are depicted as easily manipulated by her sexual prowess. Thus, if the avenging-woman's use of sexuality is read as an empowering depiction for her, then men are disempowered and positioned as mere casualties of war.

The avenging-women are also disempowered when they are depicted as always being ready for sex, in lieu of establishing an emotional connection with their partners. In each of the narratives, not only is the consensual sexual activity constructed as the



avenging-woman's choice, but it is also presented as something she is always ready to do. Rosalind Gill (2008) suggests that in this depiction of women, they have a voice, but that voice says that women have to want sex all the time and should be the ones demanding it from their sexual partners. Gill calls this the "performance of confident sexual agency" (p. 53). This type of performance is prevalent in the avenging-woman narratives, particularly in the depictions of sexual agency within *Colombiana* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

In *Colombiana*, Cataleya is the aggressor when it comes to sex, depicted in the narrative in two different scenes where Danny stops her sexual advances to try to get to know her better first. At one point in the film, as Cataleya is kissing him, Danny stops her and asks if they are ever going to go on a real date, as opposed to just having sex. She ignores him and continues kissing him, while taking off her clothes. In a later scene, she starts kissing Danny and he forces her to talk to him first. When they begin kissing again, he says, "let me this time," as he undresses her, because she has previously always been in charge of their sexual encounters. In these scenes, Cataleya is featured as the demanding sexual partner who is always ready to get into bed. As a narrative choice, this makes sense with her character, as she avoids any type of emotional connection with another person and relies on the physical contact instead. However, it also constructs her empowerment as that which is conditional upon her sexualization. Danny is in love with her, and yet, he does not know anything about her, other than she likes to have sex. She is constructed as having power in her relationship with Danny because she does not demand emotional, but rather, physical intimacy. Although feminist scholars have consistently argued that women should be sexually empowered (Koedt, 1973), the

construction of the avenging-woman in these contemporary narratives suggests that an empowered woman is one that is always ready for sex and does not need an emotional connection with her partner.

This is further exemplified in the resulting consequences of the second sex scene with Danny, when Cataleya eventually does allow him to have some control in their sexual encounter. While this scene with Danny could be read as a narrative attempt to soften the avenging-woman and allow her to start to emotionally connect to another person, it is this night, where she lets her guard down, that ultimately puts her on the FBI's radar. The morning after Danny takes control, Cataleya oversleeps and he takes a picture of her while she is sleeping. Throughout the narrative, Cataleya is depicted as carefully avoiding cameras so as not to end up in any legal databases. Eventually, the picture that Danny took is uploaded to a federal database and the FBI realizes she is the killer they have been tracking. As a result of allowing Danny to have some control over her sexually, she is punished. She sleeps in because she got comfortable and did not make sure she was up before he was, as she had done every time before this encounter. She therefore sacrifices necessary precaution by allowing him to take charge and as a result does not see him take the ill-fated picture. When she is in charge of her sexuality, then she is empowered; relinquishing her sexual power translates into a temporary state of disempowerment as she is almost trapped and caught, all because she let her guard down with Danny. The narrative then constructs Cataleya's power as partially centered within her role as that of sexual aggressor.

Lisbeth is also presented as the sexual aggressor in her relationship with Mikael, where he at first protests, and then gives in to her sexual advances (very) willingly. In a

second scene, Lisbeth and Mikael are still trying to figure out the loose ends of the mystery. They are having sex, with Lisbeth on top, and Mikael begins to talk about the case. Lisbeth covers his mouth with her hand and quiets him, while she climaxes to orgasm. She then rolls over and allows him to continue his thought. Again, the avenging-woman is depicted as always ready for sex, and empowered when she refuses to forgo her orgasm, even when Mikael begins to talk. However, she is also having sex with a partner that is seemingly not interested in the sexual encounter with her, as he is concentrating instead on how to solve the case. The sexualization of the avenging-woman constructs an ambiguous depiction of female empowerment, as she is objectified as a sex machine and denied emotional attachment, or mutual reciprocation of feelings, within her depiction of power. In both cases, the men in Lisbeth and Catalaya's lives are constructed as an "other" to which they cannot ever really get close emotionally, and toward which they are highly sexualized.

Collectively, these moments can all be read as a woman using her sexuality to get what she wants, and this points to a certain depiction of female empowerment that is not necessarily progressive. Using female sexuality as currency, depicting the avenging-woman as always ready for sex, and tricking men into doing what they want by distracting them with their sexuality, are all problematic constructs of female empowerment. Although this draws on the third wave idea of sexuality correlated to female empowerment, the messages within a feminist rhetoric are about embracing sexuality for a woman's own pleasure. When sexuality is used as a tool or a weapon against others, this defeats the purpose of being individually empowered. Therefore, this is not a depiction of feminist empowerment, when a woman uses her body, but rather a

depiction of female power within a patriarchal system, by reinforcing the traditional role of women, rather than challenging it.

### **Enlightened sexism and the trouble with sexy**

In a third wave feminist culture, sexuality is about choice and when a woman dresses provocatively, or has sex with someone, she is empowered when her actions are of her own will, and for her own benefit and pleasure. But, the gaze of the camera underscores the woman as a spectacle, which eroticizes her and diminishes a positive connection between sexuality and female empowerment. Because the narratives construct the avenging-woman in a way that presents her as empowered via her sexuality, it obscures a core message of self-exploitation. The women willingly sexualize themselves, which results in an exploitation of the self in the name of power. The self-exploitation of women within contemporary media texts creates, what scholars call, a knowing wink to the spectators that helps to mask the underlying disempowerment of enlightened sexism (Douglas, 2010; Schubart, 2007). I borrow the term, “enlightened sexism,” from Susan Douglas (2010), who argues that the media constructs the sexualization of women as a form of empowerment, when in actuality, it is supporting the same system of production that has always capitalized off of women’s bodies. Enlightened sexism makes women complicit within their own objectification, but via the language of feminism when women are depicted as empowered by their (objectified) sexuality.

The complicity of women in their exploitation, constructs the sexual objectification as acceptable and creates a false knowing wink to the audience that sexuality is being used to empower her; she knows what her sexuality can do to men and

this gives her power over them, even while men think they have power. This is most clearly depicted in *Veronica Mars* and *Revenge*, but to some degree in the demands for sex in *Colombiana* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, as well. Scholars like Douglas argue that the knowing wink perpetrates the sexism that has always been inherent in historical constructions of gender, particularly in the media, and masks them in contemporary media as empowerment.

Although the concept of a “knowing wink” is frequently attributed to a postfeminist culture, the avenging-woman narratives suggest a similar nudge of the elbow, but within the context of a narrative that highlights a cultural disempowerment of women. Whereas postfeminism is an academic concept that suggests a cultural mindset where equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer necessarily (Levine, 2007), I place the contemporary avenging-woman narratives in this study within a third wave feminist context, which strongly contends that women still live within a system of gendered oppression. The victimization of the avenging-woman, and the lack of response from the legal authorities in the text, suggest that there is a feminist message within the narratives about the strides still needed for gendered equality. And, the sexualization of the avenging-women also fits within a third wave context, when eroticism is constructed as an opportunity for empowerment. In a third wave context, a woman is empowered when she takes control of her own sexuality, and this sexual agency can be a political message about women and power. This makes the knowing wink all the more detrimental to women, when it is utilized in a narrative that seems to be promoting feminist empowerment.

The conflation of sexualization with female empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives is ultimately disempowering. This type of enlightened sexism within the avenging-woman narrative serves a hegemonic function, as it presents the illusion of progress and female empowerment, while actually reinforcing a traditional patriarchal structure. In the next section, I further explore the paradox of the sexualization of women within narratives that highlight the problem of a rape culture.

### **Victimizing the Avenging-Woman to Sell a Story of Victimization**

One particularly troubling aspect about the sexualization of the female body in the narratives within this analysis is the fact that rape and victimization play a predominant role in all of the texts. Rape, in this study, is a metaphor for the victimization of women through a variety of contexts. In the avenging-woman narratives, each of the women is victimized, either through the actual act of rape, or as young children when her parents are murdered or she is taken from them. Sarah Projansky (2001) argues that rape narratives “help inscribe a way of looking, the conditions of watching, and the attitudes and structures of feeling one might have about rape [and] women” (p. 7). It is important to critique the rape and revenge narrative for implications regarding the sexualization of women that may reflect broader cultural messages about power.

To extend the above critique regarding messages of female (dis)empowerment conveyed in the narrative, I now question a reading of female empowerment in the contemporary narratives that use the sexuality of the avenging-woman to sell the story of victimization. Scholars argue that we exist within a rape culture, where sexual violence and rape against women are part of underlying and overt “beliefs and practices that beget sexual violence” (Buchwald, Fletcher, Roth, 2005, p. 8). The conflation of sexuality with

victimization is a problematic depiction in media, as a rape culture is constructed upon an underlying message that no doesn't always mean no and that women are made available for the male gaze (Buchwald, 2005). As a disturbing example of how enlightened sexism works within a rape culture, advertisers for the films use the sexualized representation of Cataleya and Lisbeth to sell the respective narrative of the victimized woman.

Increasingly over the past few decades, scholars have critiqued advertisements as a reflection on and construction of women and power (Gill, 2008; Kilbourne, 1999). It is not a new phenomenon that sex sells, “and advertising has long been indicted for contributing to the silencing of women’s desire by presenting women primarily as objects for male consumption and pleasure” (Gill, 2008, p. 38; see also, Kilbourne, 1999). However, Rosalind Gill (2008) has critiqued a more recent construction of femininity in recent years that focuses on women’s sexual agency in advertising, and she argues that a focus on an empowered sexuality is, in part, a response to contemporary feminism. A contemporary feminist focus on choice and embracing sexuality as an opportunity for empowerment has translated into advertisements. Gill contends that although women may be depicted in some advertisements as having sexual agency, in actuality the use of the women’s sexualized bodies is not that different from what has always been featured in advertising, where women are invited to imagine themselves “through an internalized male gaze, as desirable” (p. 42). Thus, the image of the empowered sexualized woman in advertising is subjected to the male gaze and her body is used to sell the product. This is a particularly problematic occurrence, when the “product” is a story about rape.

In one of the movie posters for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth is featured naked to advertise a film where she is raped once via coerced oral sex, and then

brutally raped in a subsequent scene. As discussed above, Lisbeth is depicted within the film as sexually empowered, after she avenges her rape. However, as in the film narrative itself, the use of her nude body to market the film, again in comparison with Mikael's lack of nudity, suggests a disproportionate female eroticization. For example, the layout of the visual pays close attention to the main character's body. On the poster, Lisbeth is visible in the frame, nude from the top of her hipbones and up. Lisbeth's nudity stands in stark contrast to the fully clothed Mikael, who wraps his arm around the top of her bare chest. It is not clear whether his gesture is predominantly protective or possessive, and it consequently creates ambiguity over whether to read her nudity as a personal choice or coercion. This is particularly problematic when the associated film narrative challenges women's disempowerment in a rape culture, and cautions potential attackers about the possible consequences of using a woman's body without her consent.

If we assume that movie posters are meant to entice an audience to view a film, as advertising is intended to convince people to purchase, then the poster can be read as a rhetorical artifact through which to analyze the intended appeal. Before the audience sees the film, the movie poster suggests the intersection of evil and sexuality, when the tagline of the poster, next to Lisbeth's nude body, states, "EVIL SHALL with EVIL BE EXPELLED" (Lang, 2012, original emphasis). The gaze of both characters is striking. She stares into the camera, directly at the viewer, eyes heavy with dark liner. Mikael also stares directly at the viewer as he holds Lisbeth toward him. Though the effect of both gazes gives a sense of challenge or foreboding, Lisbeth's gaze, when coupled with her naked body and Mikael's embrace, is also sexual. Thus, the conflation of sexuality and victimization begins with the poster, and continues into the film. Neither character is



smiling and the effect is ominous, daring the viewer to find out what makes either or both of these people “evil.” And, yet the promise of nudity, via the illustration of Lisbeth’s bare breasts, suggests that, at the very least, evil will be sexy.

Similarly, the DVD cover for *Colombiana* proclaims, “REVENGE IS BEAUTIFUL” and offers “A scandalous blend of action, sex and violence” (Besson and Megaton, 2011, original emphasis). The first quote plays on the idea that watching revenge provides pleasure, especially when somebody has been violently wronged. It also suggests, via the image of Cataleya on the cover, that she makes revenge beautiful because she is sexually attractive. This phrase emphasizes the femininity of the female action-hero, calling attention to her physical appearance and sexuality, but is then accentuated with a promise of “action, sex, and violence.” The promise of sexuality within the marketing of the film, explains the frequency with which Cataleya, and no other character, gets dressed and undressed in the actual narrative. Cataleya’s nudity is used to provide the “scandalous blend” that the producers of the narrative have promoted in order to entice the audience. However, the linking of sex and violence as titillation for viewers also problematizes the subsequent narrative that victimizes Cataleya at the receiving end of violence.

The static images used in the marketing material offer a clear depiction of the male gaze. The avenging-women are eroticized within the marketing images, and yet, also represented as tough and violent. Lisbeth is naked, but her tattoos and piercings are visible, creating a feminized sexuality in contrast to her hardened punk appearance. Cataleya is promised to provide sexuality and violence. Even Emily is featured on the season one DVD cover of *Revenge* in a tight-fitting formal dress that flares out at the

bottom into a thicket of thorns. She is depicted as a woman that can be looked at, but not touched without getting hurt. This image embodies the eroticization of the cinema image that Mulvey (1992) critiques, where the viewer as voyeur can gaze upon the woman, but cannot possess her. The lack of ability to possess the woman does not diminish the disempowerment of the gaze upon her and in fact, emphasizes the position of the audience viewer as engaged in a fantasy (p. 31).

The sexualization of the avenging-woman, as highlighted in the still images in the marketing material, suggests that perhaps her empowerment is entirely contingent upon her appearance. Sexuality has always played an important role in the marketing of the action hero narrative, in addition to the expectation of heavy-action sequences. Yvonne Tasker (1993) writes that the sexualization of 1970s female heroines occurred because “producers often sought to allay, if not resolve, uncertainties posed by the action heroine through the sexualisation of her persona” (p. 20). Thus, the women were sexualized in order to keep them from appearing too masculine, but also to assuage any fears that the empowered woman was stronger than men. Sexualizing women keeps them at a subordinate level, when they are gazed upon as objects. In the contemporary narratives, the avenging-women are all represented as empowered women through their ability to fight and their level of intelligence in plotting out complicated plans for revenge. But, each woman is sexualized during the course of her empowerment as well.

The marketing material highlights the conflation between the woman’s sexuality and power, which creates a complicated contingency for empowerment. This contingency can be read two ways. One, an unattractive avenging-woman would not appeal to the audience, who is expecting beautiful revenge via both meanings of the

phrase. The message then implies that people want to see attractive actresses on screen, and this is hardly a new concept. And, two, the avenging-woman cannot truly be powerful unless she is sexualized. It is this second reading that I focus on for posing a problematic depiction of women and power. Sexuality and physical attractiveness have frequently been the only tool for women within a patriarchal system, and are consequently the reason that feminists say that drawing on traditional norms of femininity are detrimental for women (Brush, 1998; Newsom, 2011; Wolf, 1991). If the avenging-woman is only represented as being empowered when she is sexualized, and the sexualization of the avenging-woman disempowers her, then this is an example of a double bind that has plagued women for centuries. Instead of offering a depiction of an empowered woman that challenges a rape culture, the avenging-woman narrative reinforces the sexualization of women within a rape culture.

The rape and revenge narrative has the opportunity to promote a very important message about the problems of a rape culture when revenge “becomes women’s only viable response to rape” (Projansky, 2001, p. 60). And, the contemporary avenging-woman narratives punish the antagonists to such a degree that they do initially suggest that the texts are cautionary tales about what can happen when a woman is victimized. There is a sense of empowerment within the avenging-woman narrative when she does not just move on with her life, but demands retribution. However, a critique of the sexualization of the avenging-woman as a source, or support, for her empowerment highlights the problematic representation of the sexualized woman in a narrative of victimization. The image of the sexualized avenging-woman conflates sexuality with violence against women, a message that is already too common within a culture of rape.

Consequently, the audience is asked to initially view the avenging-woman via a sexualized marketing message, while the texts introduce the characters as victims of violent scenarios like rape. The contemporary avenging-woman narratives conflate sex and rape problematically, creating tension in relation to a political message about women's rights. All of the narratives seem to be arguing that if a woman is victimized, the aggressor will be punished, and yet, the producers of the media sexualize the women to sell the film. The result is that the avenging-woman narrative is a function of hegemony, when narratives that suggest female empowerment actually work to disempower the women instead.

### **Misogyny in Feminist Clothing**

In this chapter, I have argued that the sexualization of the avenging-woman offers an example of how a rhetoric of female empowerment can be used to reinforce a patriarchal system. The problematic linking of power and sexuality for the avenging-woman is representative of a larger social burden on women within a culture that embraces contradiction and ambiguity. Third wave feminism rhetorically juxtaposes patriarchal ideology, such as standard norms of beauty and an embracing of sexuality, with messages of female empowerment. While I am not opposed to women wearing the “girly” symbols of make-up and nail polish, I strongly agree with feminist critiques that deride the use of a feminist language to promote anti-feminist goals that harm women (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Radner, 2011; Riordan, 2001). I have extended this critique to the representation of female empowerment within the avenging-woman narrative.

An analysis of the intersection of sexuality and power suggests a number of problematic representations of female empowerment within the contemporary avenging-

woman narratives. The first is the eroticization of the avenging-woman as a spectacle via the gaze of the camera. Even when the woman is depicted as finding pleasure in her own sexualization, the narrative provides a number of indicators that suggest an underlying rhetoric of disempowerment. This is particularly prevalent in the depiction of the avenging-woman's body and a focus on traditionally coded feminine parts such as the buttocks and breasts. While she may be empowered via her sexuality, the lack of nudity and focus on the body for the male counterparts in her narrative, suggests a gendered inequity when it comes to the level of spectacle that the female body provides for the camera.

Additionally, the depiction of the avenging-woman as the sexual aggressor and as always being ready for sex is also a problematic depiction of empowerment and sexuality. In order for the avenging-woman to claim sexual empowerment, she is portrayed as denying emotional attachments with men. For Lisbeth and Cataleya, who have sexual encounters with the same man, this connects the woman's empowerment to sex, but not to a relationship that offers an emotional connection. In the end of the narratives, both women are alone and neither is presented as particularly happy about that fact. The sexualization of the avenging-woman appears progressive, in that she is presented as getting what she wants out of the sexual encounter with men physically, but ultimately, she reinforces a link between female empowerment and a woman's sexual drive.

Similarly, the avenging-woman is portrayed as using her sexuality to manipulate men and further her plans for revenge. This could be read as empowerment, where the avenging-woman re-appropriates her sexuality to trick men. However, I have argued that

these scenes of empowerment, where women use their sexuality to get what they want, actually serve a hegemonic function by reinforcing women's traditional roles in a patriarchal system. *Revenge* offers the most specific example, when Emily is empowered via her sexuality by having sex with Daniel. This construction of the empowered woman positions her as a prostitute, but instead of selling her body for money, she is using it to advance her plans for revenge.

Each of these depictions of the sexualization of the avenging-woman as empowerment reinforces the “the male gaze and woman as objects-to-be-looked-at [and] contribute to a culture that accepts rape” (Projansky, 2001, p. 9). And, this objectification starts with the marketing material for the narratives, which conflate sexuality and victimization problematically. Ultimately, an analysis of the intersection of sexuality and empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative cloaks an underlying rhetoric of misogyny, by using the language of female empowerment. Each narrative suggests a reading of the texts as a representation of female empowerment, when the women appear to be controlling their own sexuality and asserting dominance in sexual situations to demand personal pleasure.

However, through a critical analysis of the texts, the sexualization of the avenging-woman can be read as an example of Douglas' (2010) enlightened sexism, which presents self-exploitation as empowerment. As a result, the sexualization of the avenging-woman reinforces a patriarchal system, rather than offering a progressive portrayal of female empowerment. The sexualization of the avenging-woman is hegemonic in function, because it appears to be presenting female empowerment, but in a way that does not disrupt the system. For the contemporary narratives, the marketing

material depicts a message about the sexualization of victims in a way that reproduces the ideology, which supports a rape culture “while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses” (Dow, 1990, p. 262). In this sense, self-exploitation as enlightened sexism makes the women complicit in their oppression, but by utilizing the language of feminism without political change. Ultimately, the sexualization of the avenging-woman is disempowering and reinforces a rape culture, which is particularly discouraging in a text that appears to address the problems of victimization.

In the next chapter, I continue an analysis of the sexualization of the avenging-woman, but through a technophilic lens. I detail how the avenging-woman is first constructed as empowered via technology, but argue that this masks an underlying message of disempowerment when she is used to sexualize the technology and constructed as a human machine, devoid of emotions. I explain how the connection of empowerment from the body of the avenging-woman to technology, also transfers back to the woman’s body from the technology, to make her a contemporary incarnation of the cyborg. The cyborg woman is a familiar representation in cinema subjected to the male gaze and sexually objectified in order to sell technology. I argue that the contemporary avenging-woman is disempowered via a techno-scopophilic gaze, which minimizes the risk she poses to a patriarchal system.

## **Chapter 6: Technology, Techno-scopophilia, and the Cyborg - Say Hello to My Little Friend**

Technology is often theorized by feminist scholars as both a gender-equalizer (Plant, 2000), and as another tool of oppression against women (Adams, 1996; Squires, 2000). But, technology is much more complex than the binary of power/oppression indicates, as it can be both powerful and oppressive, depending on the context. For example, Pierre Lévy (2001) reminds us of how “the steam engine enslaved workers in the textile factories of the nineteenth century, whereas the personal computer increased the individual’s ability to act and communicate during the twentieth” (p. 5). Technology can offer opportunities for empowerment, but it can also shape the user and the world in ways that may subvert that power. Drawing on McLuhan’s work, Diane Keeling (2012) contends, “in our construction and use of new technologies, technologies, in turn, construct and use us” (p. 137). In a mediated text, the way that technology is represented as empowerment can tell us about the culture in which it is produced. It is therefore important to critique representations of empowerment via technology, in order to understand how that same technology is constructing the user in ways that may subvert that power.

The technophilic body, or the integration of technology with the human body, has been a frequent theme within cinema and television for decades (Frentz & Rushing, 2002; Keeling, 2012; Tomas, 2000). In its most technical definition, technophilia indicates a surgical augmentation of the body with technology, or the replacement of a human body part with machine-made parts like prostheses (Tomas, 2000). However, some scholars have interpreted the linking of humans and technology in a broader sense, which includes



how technology is constructed in a way that results in representations of dis/empowerment (Brown, 2001; Soukup, 2009). The intersection of technology and the sexualized female body, in particular, has been read as objectification, when a technoscophilic lens merges “the meanings associated with technological commodities and organic sexualized bodies” (Soukup, 2009, p. 20). Technoscophilia is the eroticization of technology by linking it to the sexual coding of a body, typically a woman, who is then disempowered as an object by association (Soukup, 2009). Sometimes this creates a contemporary representation of the cyborg, where the woman begins to take on the machine-like qualities of technology. Media texts may depict the linking of technology with the body in a way that suggests empowerment, but the construction of the cyborg and a technoscophilic gaze can be read as creating underlying messages of disempowerment.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the intersection of sexuality and power within the context of feminized feminism. In this chapter, I analyze another theme emerging from the texts that reinforces sexual and gendered objectification, but through the intersection of technology with empowerment. Technology is utilized at various points by all the women in the narratives in this study, and often serves as a tool and a weapon to further the avenging-woman’s plan for vengeance. This linking of technology with the body can be read as a representation of female empowerment when the technology helps her achieve vengeance. However, I argue that the depiction of technology and women also suggests an underlying message of disempowerment, which reinforces women’s traditional roles within a patriarchal system.

To critique the representation of empowerment via the intersection of technology and women, I first discuss how the use of technology by the avenging-women, as both tools and weapons, constructs a message of empowerment. This is most clearly depicted in examples where the various technologies mediate gendered physical limitations, or when the avenging-woman needs to rely on the element of surprise. I also discuss the use of surveillance technologies as both powerful and oppressive for the avenging-woman in order to illustrate the limitations of the reversal of the male gaze for female empowerment. I then detail the way that technology also shapes the woman as an object, in order to explain how the narratives create an underlying link between empowerment and technology that is problematic. I argue that this disempowerment is constructed through a techno-scopophilic gaze and via the creation of the cyborg woman. Based on a critical analysis of the texts, I conclude that the intersection of technology with female empowerment in the narratives is ultimately hegemonic, by masking the underlying objectification of the women via a rhetoric of empowerment.

### **The Avenging-Woman Uses Technology**

For many contemporary feminist scholars, technology is a tool of the oppressed, offering opportunities to subvert a patriarchal system (Garrison, 2000; Herrup, 1995; Plant, 2000). For example, over the past few decades, the advancement of the Internet has provided increased access to a variety of feminist outlets via online blogs and websites, in a way that opens a dialogue about gender inequality and creates opportunities for global change (Garrison, 2000). From this viewpoint, the use of technology by women is highlighted as a sign of empowerment for both a platform of discussions and an information-seeking aide. Additionally, the increased use of technology and technical

skills by women works to circumvent the “myth of an all-powerful technological masculine” (Frentz & Rushing, 2002, p. 67), by creating a gender-free domain. At times the use of technology by the avenging-women in the narratives does construct a message of empowerment, and sometimes, the use of technology by the women highlights the problems of a rhetoric of female empowerment that positions technology as a feminist tool. Therefore, in this section, I examine the representations of the avenging-women as empowered through her use of technology, and analyze the underlying message regarding gender and power.

Technology is a broad label for a variety of inventions, but in this study, I focus on the use of technology via machines in the form of cameras, computers, guns, and tasers, as well as programs like encryption software and email. In this section, I examine the overt message that emphasizes the empowering potential of this type of technology for the women. In many ways this depiction is progressive, as the women are all physically smaller than those whom they are seeking to harm and the use of technology gives a non-corporeal advantage. The depiction of female empowerment via the use of technology occurs within two uses of technology in the narratives: technology as a tool and technology as a weapon.

The avenging-women use technology as a tool to gather information throughout the course of their vengeance. This occurs via the lens of cameras, when Veronica Mars photographs clues, and when Emily, in *Revenge*, captures video surveillance of her enemies. Or, via computers, in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, when Lisbeth gathers information on Mikael and keeps track of Bjurman’s activities by hacking into their personal computer files. And, this also occurs in *Colombiana* via a tracking and

surveillance system, when Cataleya gets advanced notice that her phone has been traced and the FBI is on its way. In each case, technology is constructed in the texts as a means to information and knowledge that keeps the women stealthily informed and one step ahead of their enemies.

As a result, all of the women are empowered via technology to some degree by their ability to access important information. Technology then becomes a rhetorical symbol of agency for the women, as they become the active subjects in vengeance. Even when others utilize technology to help the avenging woman, as is the case for both Veronica with her hacker “friend” Mac, and Emily with her non-threatening male confederate, Nolan, that technologically savvy person becomes a resource and tool of technology for the avenging-woman. Although Nolan frequently claims that he will no longer help Emily, like when she gets him in danger or when he is upset with her, he always ends up encrypting a file or hacking into a database to help her out. Lisbeth also has a hacker-friend, who helps her with the technological equipment that she needs to succeed in her plans. Even with the occasional help of others, the women are all depicted as skilled in the use of technology themselves, and empowered via these skills. These representations promote a rhetorical message that the use of technology is a beneficial skill, not just in plans for vengeance, but also more broadly as a path to empowerment.

In addition to being used as a tool for information, technology is also used as a weapon, both for self-protection and aggression by the avenging-woman. One example of technology as a weapon is when it is used to mediate the physical limitations that are posed by a feminine body. At one point in *Colombiana*, Cataleya needs the architectural schemata of her enemy’s house and convinces the hesitant city planner that she is serious

about her request when she produces a gun. This offers a specific example of how the weapon overshadows a physical danger, when the city planner initially threatens Cataleya with forcible removal from his office. His threat creates a moment of disempowerment, as she is small in comparison to the large man looming in the doorway; however, the sight of the gun in Cataleya's hand terrifies the man and removes the limitations of the physical power imbalance, when he ultimately gives her what she wants.

Similarly, Lisbeth uses a taser to overcome the physical power imbalance that Bjurman's body creates in relation to her small frame. Knowing that she cannot physically force him into his binds if he is able to resist, she immobilizes him first and is then able to work without a physical limitation. Her vengeance against him is contingent upon getting the upper hand through the element of surprise when he does not see the taser in her hand, as well as through the elimination of physical size as a constraint. Veronica also uses a taser, but primarily as protection, as opposed to aggression. However, there is one instance in season two when Veronica uses her taser because she does not like the aggression of a man who has hit on her, but it is after he has left her alone (Enbom, 2006). When she sees him aggressively pursuing another woman, she zaps him with her taser in the middle of a party, and walks away. All of these scenes emphasize how technology is rhetorically constructed as giving the women an advantage during acts of physical aggression against them. The men may have bodily strength over the women, but the use of technology by women can give them an opportunity to fight back. These moments are empowering for the women because the use of a weapon constructs the depiction of female agency against physically more powerful men.

*Revenge* offers a slightly different example of technology as a weapon, when Emily primarily relies on cameras and encrypted files to plot her vengeance. As I argued in chapter three, Emily is frequently restricted to non-physical retribution, but technology can be violent without shedding blood or threatening corporeal pain. Emily is depicted as using technology to viciously destroy other people's lives. For example, in episode four, Emily ruins the life of the psychiatrist that placed her in a mental institution as a child, when she secretly tapes the client's sessions with prominent socialites and then releases the secrets at a public event. These scenes are emphasized as a representation of empowerment, when they are prefaced with flashbacks to the cruelty of the psychiatrist toward Emily as a child. The narrative rhetorically constructs the adult-Emily as empowered against an aggressor by technological ingenuity, but in a way that emphasizes her seeming innocence to others around her.

The use of technology as a weapon constructs the avenging-women as empowered by giving them the ability to retaliate or to be an aggressor. In the rape and revenge narrative, the physical size of the women is frequently a factor in their disempowerment, when their aggressors are able to overpower and victimize them. It also provides a non-physically violent alternative to revenge that is equally brutal and destructive. Technology as a weapon gives the women an opportunity to threaten anybody who may choose to disempower them, or has done so already.

However, sometimes technology as a weapon creates an ambiguous representation of empowerment for women, when surveillance creates opportunities for reverse sexism. This occurs through the reverse of the male gaze, when the women survey men. The use of surveillance by the women is most clearly emphasized in

*Revenge*, *Veronica Mars*, and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, but is also featured to a limited degree in *Colombiana*. Cataleya uses surveillance for her personal safety, but both Veronica and Lisbeth monitor their aggressors via technology. Veronica records hidden audio of those that she thinks may be involved in her rape, as well as her best friend's murder, and Lisbeth spies on Bjurman's online activity. Additionally, Lisbeth continues monitoring Mikael, even after she has taken a job with him. In one scene, she is looking through photographs that she found while hacking into his computer, and she quickly closes the browser windows as he comes into the room. This moment constructs Lisbeth as the voyeur of men, in opposition to the traditional male gaze that watches women. But, her hesitation at getting caught by Mikael indicates that she knows that this behavior is not acceptable and she does not want him to know she is gazing.

Traditionally, the cinematic gaze is depicted as empowering for the active gazer, because "the image of a woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man" represents a gendered power imbalance in favor of men (Mulvey, 1992, 32). The reversal of the gaze is discussed in terms of an empowering tool, when women re-appropriate it and turn the tables on the men, but the underlying message can also be read as one of disempowerment (Gill, 2008). Lisbeth is depicted as having an obsession with the life of Mikael, as she knows everything about him through the gaze of her computer (as opposed to a camera). However, "unlike Mulvey's prime male mover, the woman in these cinematic narratives is often sidelined" and denied the satisfaction of possessing the male other (Frentz & Rushing, 2002, p. 78). Although she does have an intimate relationship with Mikael, and thus "possesses" him to some degree, when her gaze of others stops being helpful and they have solved the mystery, Lisbeth's gaze over Mikael is no longer

empowering. At the end of the film, Lisbeth has used the information gleaned from her active gaze to buy him an expensive leather jacket that she found in a picture on his computer. This reversal of the male gaze does not empower Lisbeth, but instead makes her heartbreak all the more painful as she watches Mikael walk off with another woman, when she trashes the coat and rides off on her motorcycle. Although she views the betrayal without the aide of technology, it is the preemptive affection and hope that she has upon buying him the expensive gift that makes this moment disempowering. Her hope that the jacket would show him how much she appreciates their relationship is underscored by the fact that her voyeuristic gaze ensures her that he will like the gift, as he essentially chose the jacket himself. The male gaze is theorized as a function that empowers the gazer, and disempowers the one who is gazed upon. However, in the reversal of the gaze in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, the gazer (woman) is disempowered and the one who is gazed upon (man) is empowered by choosing another woman. Thus, the reversal of the gaze does not reverse gendered power, but instead reverses the power of the gaze so that women are continually disempowered from either end.

Even narratives that do not show the female gazer as romantically attached to the other, who is gazed upon, can be read as disempowering for the avenging-woman. In *Revenge*, Emily reverses the male gaze, disempowers a man, and gets what she wants, but in a way that also disempowers her. When Emily makes sure that Conrad Grayson finds out about Nolan's sex tape in episode ten, she uses the cinematic gaze to her advantage. This is a particularly complex example of the reversal of the male gaze because the sex tape features Nolan with another man. Nolan created this video as insurance against the



man who was trying to blackmail him and had no intention of allowing it to go public.

The eroticization of the two men is used to get Conrad Grayson to do what Emily needs him to do, fire the other man in the video, in order to fulfill her vengeance. In this way, she is empowered via the reversal of the gaze.

However, this representation of empowerment is problematized when she uses the gaze to hurt Nolan. In this example, when technology is depicted as a tool of empowerment for the women, it is done in a way that constructs the women's use of technology as morally questionable. Nolan did not give her permission to leak that information, and is furious with Emily, yelling, "I trusted you!" The re-appropriation of the male gaze by the avenging-woman creates a type of reverse sexism, which is not progressive, as it just turns the tables in a way that furthers gendered inequality, with men as the oppressed (Gill, 2008). This is further problematized when the avenging-woman oppresses the non-threatening male. She is not necessarily empowered by using the gaze against the oppressive male, but instead uses technology to oppress those that do not pose a threat to her.

A feminist representation of female empowerment is not achieved by disempowering men. Instead, feminism is an attempt to achieve gendered equality in a way that "create[s] a fully human paradigm of 'masculine' and 'feminine' together" (Steinem, 1995, p. xxiii). When the linking of technology with women's power is constructed to the detriment of men, especially those that are not the aggressors, then this depiction draws on stereotypes of the man-hating feminist who wants to rule the world. The re-appropriation of the male gaze within the avenging-woman narrative contributes to the creation of a type of reverse sexism by empowering women but only at the

detriment of men. Reverse sexism perpetuates stereotypes and creates a problematic representation of the empowered woman.

On the surface, the depiction of technology can be read as providing a rhetorical representation of empowerment for the avenging-woman as she uses it as a tool and a weapon in her plans for revenge. However, the use of technology by the women does not tell the entire story. I next critique the narratives in order to detail how the “technologies, in turn, construct and use” the avenging-woman (Keeling, 2012, p. 137). Although the avenging-woman’s use of technology may illustrate power, the narratives also depict the link between the female body and technology in a way that is disempowering and anti-feminist. In the next section I critique the way technology constructs the avenging-woman as object, even as it appears to be used by her as an active subject.

### **Technology Uses the Avenging-Woman**

While the technological power that the avenging-woman appears to have speaks to arguments that visualize technology as an opportunity for female empowerment, I argue that the women are disempowered when their sexualized bodies are used to fetishize the technology and depict women as cyborgs. Extending Charles Soukoup’s (2009) research on techno-scopophilia within public-hero action films, I first analyze a similar trend within the avenging-woman narrative, with a focus on *Colombiana*. I contend that the avenging-woman’s sexualized body is used to humanize her via technology, which ultimately ends up objectifying her. I then critique the construction of the avenging-woman as an emotionally disconnected machine, which explains the need for her humanization. I utilize the metaphor of the cyborg to argue that the representation

of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative is problematic, when having power requires her to disconnect from others.

### **Techno-scopophilia**

Both men's and women's bodies have been used to "fetishize" products on the large and small screen via a scopophilic gaze (Soukup, 2009). Scopophilia is the Freudian term for "taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze," and producing "the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object" (Mulvey, 1992, p. 24). The cinema has eroticized both male and female bodies since the beginning of film, but Charles Soukup (2009) notes the increased sexualization of women in relation to technology through a techno-scopophilic gaze. He argues that while men's bodies are also eroticized in relation to technology, "the use of the filmic techno-scopophilia code realized its full potential when filmmakers also began emphasizing the female body's relation to technology" (Soukup, 2009, p. 26). Soukup gives examples from a variety of female action films including, *The Italian Job*, *Entrapment*, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, and *The Matrix*, where he argues that the sexualized body of the women in the films "is carefully placed in relation to technology, to evoke the fetishizing of both the actress and the technological object" (p. 26). Soukup's conclusion is that the women's bodies are objectified as commodities to sell the power of technology.

In this analysis, I am less concerned with the selling of technology's power, than I am with the rhetorical function of the objectification of the women's bodies via the technology. In the avenging-woman narratives, the women's bodies are frequently eroticized in relation to technology in a way that connects her sexuality to the technology

she is using. As an extension of Soukup's work, I argue that the eroticization of technology with the avenging-women's bodies serves the purpose of first humanizing the women by accentuating their sexualized femininity, which then paradoxically objectifies them and reinforces women's traditional role as sex objects within a patriarchal system.

At times, the women are depicted as being more connected to their technology than they are to other people. For example, Emily and Veronica are both eroticized in relation to technology to some degree. For Veronica, the frequency with which she threatens men with her taser is a reminder that she is vulnerable to rape and sexual aggression, but for the technology that keeps her safe. In *Revenge*, Emily can destroy people via a push of the button on her phone, while wearing a figure-hugging cocktail gown. In episode 22, Emily plants a camera in her own bedroom to convince Daniel that people are spying on them. The show only airs footage of Daniel and Emily sleeping in bed, but the implication is that the camera has been capturing much more intimate moments. The linking of voyeurism with the machine and the sexualized woman's body reinforces a techno-scopophilic gaze even through an imagined eroticization of the woman's sexual body caught on tape. In both television shows, the women's sexuality is linked to the same technology that they use for empowerment, even in very subtle ways. As the women are using technology, the technology thus sexualizes the women. For Veronica, the image of the taser serves as a sign that she could be raped, and for Emily, the lens of the camera serves as an erotic code of what could have been captured on the tape.

This intimacy of the women with technology is also reinforced in one of the opening scenes of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, when Lisbeth's boss describes her as

anti-social and says, "I find it is much better if she works from home" as a computer hacker, because the other people in the office do not like her. She is not sociable in relationships with others, but she excels in her relationship with the computer, as she is described as the best investigator the company has. Her technological skills supersede her interpersonal skills. The connection and reliance on technology is further reinforced when her guardian, Nils Bjurman rapes her the first time in his office via coerced oral sex, and Lisbeth turns to technology via a hidden camera in order to catch him in the act the next time. She makes a choice to use technology as opposed to telling someone what is happening. In this way, the technology again reinforces the lack of intimacy for the avenging-woman in interpersonal relationships.

However, this linking of woman to technology also works to reinforce Lisbeth's humanity, when she begins to be sexualized and depicted in a consensual sexual relationship with Mikael. In one scene in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth is in her underwear and a t-shirt, using her computer to spy on another woman's online activities as Mikael comes up behind her and puts his hand up the back of her shirt. He asks her about the person she is tracking on the computer as he removes his hand, and she nods and says, "Put your hand back in my shirt." Her command emphasizes the desire for erotic touch, feeding the scopophilic drive of the voyeur to see her body touched. At the same time, Lisbeth is the voyeur of another's activities via her computer; while her disrobed surveillance is sexualized, Mikael's touch is what makes this depiction sexual. Previously, technology had been a way for Lisbeth to disconnect from others, but in this case, her use of technology has brought her closer to another person, which is emphasized through the erotic touch. This emphasizes the technology as part of Lisbeth's

humanization, when she is connected to another person via her skills; however, this scene also reinforces the sexualization of Lisbeth when sexual touching is entwined with her use of technology. She is both voyeur, and object of voyeurism.

The most overt depiction of techno-scopophilia in the avenging-woman narratives occurs within two scenes in *Colombiana*. In Cataleya's sexy dancing scene, where she erotically makes her way around her apartment in body-clinging clothing, she turns multiple times to reveal the gun in her back waistband. Cataleya is sexualized through her movements and wardrobe, but the repeated sight of the gun also emphasizes her as somebody who is dangerous. The audience has just seen her kill a man with that same gun, and now her sexuality is being reinforced. The combination of the power of the technology and her sexuality constructs a rhetorical message where Cataleya "becomes the manifestation of scopophilic pleasure *and* technological power" (Soukup, 2009, p. 30, original emphasis). However, it is also this moment, where her sexuality humanizes her again for the audience. Up to this point, Cataleya has been depicted as a master of technology when she shimmies up an air conditioner vent, constructs a water-release timer out of a plastic cup and a spoon, and when she shoots an unarmed man in cold blood, showing no emotion. Similar to Lisbeth, Cataleya's depiction in relation to other people up until this point in the film has been rather estranged. When she gets home and chooses to dance erotically around her apartment, the sexualization of her body in conjunction with the gun softens her depiction of the cold aggressor. Even though she has just committed a violent murder, she is humanized through her sexualized body. Paradoxically, it is the reinforcement of her humanity via her sexualized body that ultimately objectifies the avenging-woman.

The objectification of her body through the visualization of her sexuality linked with technology is further emphasized in a subsequent scene where she must escape from her apartment as the FBI closes in. When Cataleya gets an alert on her tracking system letting her know they are coming for her, she is in her underwear and another clinging tank top. Her hair is flowing and slightly mussed, constructing an erotic image. As she snaps into action, she takes off down the hall, in her underwear, to collect the stockpile of ammunition that she has stored in the apartment building. Cataleya climbs up on a bathtub ledge with the camera angle at the floor level looking up at her, emphasizing her long bare legs as she begins pulling out an enormous gun from its hiding place. She then ties an ammunition belt around her waist, which is loaded with guns and grenades, as she sets an explosive device to blow out the wall blocking her escape route. When the explosion goes off, the camera shows her in the hallway, ostensibly to avoid the heat and debris of the blast, but again focuses on her long bare legs as she waits. Cataleya then escapes through the garage as she climbs in and out of ventilation systems, with the camera travelling up her legs and emphasizing her bare arms through shots of her massive collection of ammunition. Previous narratives have been critiqued for linking sexuality to technology in a way that “does more to eroticize the gun” than it does to empower the women (Brown, 2001, p. 63). In this scene with Cataleya, her agency, and subsequently power, over her own body comes into question as she is used to erotically enhance the power of technology. But, the sexualization of Cataleya also humanizes her at a moment in the narrative when she turns to violent technology as weapons.

Feminists have always advocated for “a woman’s ability to control her own body as a fundamental right” (Silver, 2002, p. 69), and this has certainly not changed in

contemporary representations of feminism. However, when a narrative of female empowerment is constructed in a way that objectifies the woman, while using a rhetoric of power, or visual codes of empowerment like technology, then the woman's control over her own body can be questioned. Her sexuality is not used to empower her, as an initial reading of the text may suggest, but rather to eroticize her in relation to the technology in an effort to humanize her. Because the avenging-woman is depicted as relying more on technology, as opposed to people, the sexualization can be read as a rhetorical move in the narrative as a way to make her more relatable. In this sense, she becomes the object through which technology is given power, and perpetuates representations of women as sexualized props packaged in a rhetoric of empowerment. The message of female empowerment is hegemonically constructed to obscure an underlying depiction of disempowerment and objectification, which reinforces women's traditional role in a patriarchal system.

### **Woman as machine: The cyborg**

The reading of the avenging-woman through a techno-scopophilic gaze also reinforces the depiction of the avenging-woman as a cyborg. While the linking of technology with sexuality humanizes the avenging-woman, the necessity to make her more relatable is a result of her taking on the machine-like qualities of technophilia. In relation to the ambiguous moral code that she follows through her acts of revenge, the avenging-woman is frequently depicted as cold-hearted and lacking emotions. The lack of emotion and morality from the avenging-woman constructs her as a revenge machine, stopping at nothing to achieve her plans. In some sense, this focused ambition suggests empowerment, when obstacles are not a problem. However, in another reading, the lack



of emotion and, sometimes, thoughtless disregard for other's needs, constructs a disempowered representation of the avenging-woman as a machine.

When the avenging-woman takes on the qualities of the machine, then she also begins to take on the qualities of a cyborg, where technology and human are melded together. The creation of the cyborg is reinforced via the techno-scopophilic gaze "by simultaneously fetishizing both the character's body and her/his technological objects, [whereby] these characters become part human and part machine" (Soukup, 2009, p. 28). A critique of this construction of the avenging-woman is beneficial because "the cyborg is like a symptom – it represents that which cannot otherwise be represented" (Gonzalez, 1999, p. 541). If female empowerment is associated with the machine-cold metaphor of the cyborg, then it is worth analyzing the implications of that representation of women and power.

At some point, all of the women are discussed in terms of their lack of emotion or disconnection from others. Lisbeth is victimized because of this, when Bjurman knows that her emotional case history will keep her from being believed should she tell anyone of his abuse. Additionally, after she saves Mikael's life, she tells him that she tried to burn her father alive and shows no remorse. Mikael does not verbally respond, but he looks disturbed by the potential of her capabilities. Even though she clearly cares for him and saved his life, he knows that she is also capable of murder and this moment reveals to him that her attempt on Martin's life was not the first. Veronica Mar's client, Meg, tells her that others are afraid of her due to her lack of emotional connection, and her boyfriend, Logan, repeatedly tells her that she needs to trust him. Veronica is depicted as

easily casting others aside in pursuit of justice and the truth, and is therefore depicted as rather aloof in her interpersonal relationships.

In *Revenge*, Emily is frequently depicted as briefly conflicted by her lack of connection with others, but then always finding a reason to brush her emotional reaction aside, and reassert herself to her efforts of revenge. For example, the scene in episode ten, between Nolan and Emily, also emphasizes the link between a lack of emotions and a need for vengeance. During their argument, Nolan comments, "I'm done playing your evil games" as Emily follows him to the door and tells him that she never wanted him to help her in the first place. She is attempting to justify her behavior toward him and disregards his anger against her for using his personal life in her plans for vengeance. We see a glimmer of emotion from Emily when Nolan tells her that he is glad her father is not alive, "because at least now he can't see what you've become." Although she sheds a tear, she quickly wipes it away as she goes into the house. She is struggling not to allow her emotions to interfere with her plans for vengeance, and she therefore has to remain disconnected from others. Although this representation of ambition can be read positively, in that she is not afraid to be aggressive, the lack of emotion and disconnection from others also constructs her as an object; specifically, as a machine.

The metaphor of the machine is a common construction of the emotionless avenging-woman. In *Colombiana*, Cataleya is depicted as a killing machine, and this is reinforced through her occupation as a hired assassin. Her boyfriend, Danny questions Cataleya about her distance from him asking her to talk to him about "Anything...I'm not going to hurt you. I just want to know a little bit more about you. About what you feel inside, what you feel about me. Anything. Just a little." At this point he claims to be

madly in love with her, but he has no idea where she lives, what she does for a living, if she has a family, or what her personality is like in any way. Her distance is reinforced narratively through the rhetorical construction of her relationship to her technology. She is able to relax in her own apartment because she has a surveillance system that will alert her to trouble. She dances with her gun, depends on it for survival, and is depicted in the narrative as using her free time to thoroughly clean and care for her technological equipment. In contrast, her relationship to Danny is much more superficial than the deeper connection she appears to have with her technology. Danny and Cataleya have never even been on a date; they just have sex together and he never knows when she is going to show up. Danny is in love with the emotionless woman that likes to have sex with him and not talk, and although he is depicted as trying to change this lack of communication in their relationship, he is essentially in love with a machine.

If the empowered woman is stripped of her human qualities and depicted as a revenge machine, then this construction works to temper the threat of female empowerment. The representation of female empowerment in the depiction of the avenging-woman as the cyborg is problematic for two reasons. For one, it constructs a representation of female empowerment that is dependent upon ignoring emotions and connections with others. For another, the construction of the cyborg minimizes the threat of the empowered woman because machines can be controlled and they are therefore objectified.

When the avenging-woman is depicted as a cyborg, this shows her as lacking in not just human characteristics, but also as a woman when the feminine is traditionally constructed to show empathy, compassion, and caring for others. Her lack of emotion

then could be read as a denial of the gendered restrictions of her feminine role in a patriarchal system, but it also constructs her as inhumane and psychopathic.

Contemporary representations of feminism depict women as being able to be both a caretaker and a feminist, but the avenging-woman narrative indicates that in order to truly be empowered as a woman, she must sacrifice family and the feelings of others in order to get what she wants. In comparison to women, mediated representations of the cyborg male, “create the impression that manliness is improved by aggression and a lack of emotion” (Keeling, 2012, p. 142). But, this does not translate to women. In the case of the avenging-woman, womanliness is not improved by aggression, and her lack of emotion instead constructs her as someone who is lonely, manipulative, and calculating. Not only does the representation of the emotionless cyborg create a problematic depiction of female empowerment, but it also reinforces the lack of community that the avenging-woman has in her life, which goes against feminist goals of collective action and sisterhood.

Another reason why the representation of the avenging-woman as a cyborg is problematic is because this type of construction of female empowerment tempers the potential threat she poses to a patriarchal system. The depiction of the avenging-woman as a cyborg results in “a woman who is a powerful sexualized machine (object)” (Soukup, 2009, p. 31). An object can be controlled, and disempowered at the will of the subject. Therefore, the woman as machine creates female empowerment as something that can be controlled by others. If the cyborg is indeed a “symptom,” then the avenging woman narrative conveys both an anxiety about female empowerment, as well as an underlying message about the ability to control strong women in a patriarchal system.

Thus, the rhetoric of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narratives is hegemonic when it reinforces a patriarchal system, as opposed to disrupting standard norms.

### **The Problematic Disempowerment of Women and Technology**

Although an analysis of the intersection of technology and empowerment does construct some positive depictions of women and power, there are also underlying messages of disempowerment that circumvent any positive feminist gains. The avenging-woman narrative constructs positive representations of empowerment via the use of technology by the women, but this depiction is not reinforced through an analysis of how technology constructs the woman. In many ways, the linking of technology with the female body is objectifying and hegemonic, in that the underlying messages of the avenging-women's disempowerment reinforce women's role in a patriarchal system.

The texts reinforce a number of messages about female disempowerment, which serve a hegemonic function by maintaining the status quo. The first is the occurrence of the reversal of the male gaze. Although the re-appropriation of the male gaze appears to promote female empowerment, when women are able to gaze as voyeur upon the male other, instead it shifts the gaze in two ways. For one, the power shifts with the gazer and promotes a type of reverse sexism. An analysis of the depictions of the reversal of the male gaze in the avenging-woman narratives in this study suggests that the women are not empowered in the role as gazer. The women are in fact disempowered, with the men's power accentuated, as opposed to diminished, through her gaze. In a second type of shift, there are moments in the text when the women are depicted as seemingly empowered via the reversal of the male gaze but, instead contribute to a type of reverse

sexism where women simply replace the power position of men, as opposed to promoting gender equality.

A second depiction of the avenging-woman that can be read as a representation of female disempowerment is the depiction of disempowerment when the intersection of the avenging-woman and technology is viewed as techno-scopophilia. The linking of the sexuality of the avenging-woman's body to the technology creates a depiction of empowered sexuality about the technology, as opposed to the woman. Instead of being empowered by the technology, the women's sexuality is used to empower the technology, relegating the avenging-woman to that of a sexual prop and object. The depiction of the avenging-woman's body linked with technology is particularly problematic, in that it creates a gaze of techno-scopophilia. Techno-scopophilia is disempowering because it appears to represent female empowerment, but actually underscores the objectification of women.

Taken together, the depictions that occur at the intersection of technology and female empowerment in the avenging-woman narratives suggest a number of problematic implications for women and power. For one, the construction of the avenging-woman with technology results in a cautionary tale for women who might become too empowered. In the end of the narratives, each woman is punished for her lack of emotional connection to others. Cataleya loses her family and Danny. At the conclusion of season one, Emily does not end up with her long-time love, Jack, and she also breaks off her engagement with Daniel. Veronica also ends up without a romantic partner at the end of the series and has ruined her father's chance at re-election as Sheriff due to her quest for vengeance. And, Lisbeth scares Mikael to some degree with her lack of

remorse, ending up alone at the end of the film. Thus, female empowerment is conceptualized within the figure of the cold emotionless woman and appears to place her on a path to isolation.

An additional problem with the depiction of the avenging-woman at the intersection of technology and female empowerment is a reinforcement of a patriarchal system when the women are objectified as a machine. The construction of the avenging-woman as a machine creates a contemporary representation of a cyborg that presents a disempowering construction of women and power. If the sexualization of the avenging-woman furthers the representation of her as an object, rather than subject, then this objectification also adds to the construction of the woman as a contemporary vision of the cyborg. The woman as machine is easily controlled and therefore, does not present a realistic threat to a dominant masculinity. In this sense, the representation of female empowerment intersected with technology is an example of hegemony, where “technology does not create new possibilities but assists in more efficient maintenance of the status quo” (Keeling, 2012, p. 138). Women are depicted as empowered via the use of technology, but disempowered through an analysis of how technology is used to construct the women.

In the following concluding chapter, I review the resulting arguments that occur at the intersection of female empowerment with each of the four themes analyzed in this study: violence, lack of homo-social relationships, sexuality, and technology. I have argued that the avenging-woman narrative presents a representation of female empowerment that is overtly positive, but through a critical analysis actually suggests underlying messages of disempowerment that are problematic to feminist goals. In a

world that is dominated by a rape culture, I now discuss the implications of representations of empowerment that work to cloak an underlying hegemony of female disempowerment.



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

The contemporary avenging-woman narratives in this study each offer an initially appealing representation of female empowerment. Lisbeth, in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Veronica, in *Veronica Mars*, Emily, in *Revenge*, and Catalaya, in *Colombiana*, are all strong women who are smart, beautiful, and aggressive. Each fights back (and wins) against men who have beaten, assaulted, and victimized them; and, they do it through physical combat and technological savvy in a narrative that persuades the viewer to root for her success. Additionally, she accomplishes her goals while looking sexually attractive, ostensibly for her own pleasure as well as others. This representation draws on a contemporary feminist language that promotes choice and feminine feminism as signs of female empowerment. However, despite the overt rhetorical construction of the avenging-woman as empowered, I have argued that the representation of her power is superficial and, upon deeper analysis, actually reinforces the patriarchal system that she seems to be subverting.

Throughout this critical feminist analysis of the narratives, I have detailed examples of how the avenging-woman offers a limited feminist representation of female empowerment, and serves a hegemonic function by “protect[ing] the dominant ideology from radical change” (Dow, 1990, p. 262). A study of the intersection of female empowerment with violence in chapter three reveals an emphasis on the avenging-woman’s choice for vengeance, which positions her power as contingent upon her victimization and the level of violence enacted against her. In chapter four, the intersection of female empowerment with a lack of homo-social relationships depicts other women as untrustworthy, or, in some cases as direct competition, and results in an

emphasis exclusively on men for achieving female empowerment. An analysis of the sexualization of the avenging-woman in chapter five, draws on the contemporary cultural trend for women to be empowered via their sexualized bodies. However, the woman's empowerment is positioned with her as a sexualized object for the male gaze, in a way that fosters self-exploitation. And, in chapter six, a critique of the intersection of female empowerment and technology reveals an underlying techno-scopophilic gaze and a depiction of the powerful woman as a machine. The underlying disempowerment of the avenging-woman works to objectify her and creates a cautionary message about what happens when women become powerful. As a result, the depictions of female empowerment reinforce, rather than subvert, the status quo of women's roles in a patriarchal society. The avenging-woman narrative then represents female empowerment in a way that is constrained by the boundaries of a patriarchal system, sidestepping a chance to depict a positive portrayal of feminism.

This critique of the avenging-woman narrative offers the opportunity to question contemporary constructions of female empowerment and feminism, because the rape and revenge stories “and the business of analyzing them, work to produce and construct various popular, public understandings of feminism” (Read, 2000, p. 248). Based on this premise, in this final chapter, I first expand on and evaluate the problematic depiction of the contemporary avenging-woman narrative that emerged through this analysis and explain how her turn to revenge is hegemonic. I then discuss how the representation of the avenging-woman can be read in light of the larger cultural conversations about feminism, and argue that superficial messages of female empowerment within a rape culture are particularly detrimental to women. I conclude with suggestions of what a new

paradigm of female empowerment could look like in order to better address feminist goals.

### **Women and Power: Reading the Avenging-Woman**

The contemporary avenging-woman narrative constructs a problematic depiction of female empowerment as a result of violence, a lack of homo-social friendships, the sexualization of the victim, and technology. The depiction of violence in the avenging-woman narrative constructs two rhetorical limitations on the women's power. The first is that the woman must be victimized before she can be empowered, and the second is that the women are only allowed to use the same level of violence that is used against them first. I argue not only that representations of female empowerment contingent upon victimization are problematic, but a broader implication is also that women are only allowed to be aggressive if they are being treated badly. The rhetorical construction of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative reinforces a traditional role of femininity where women are supposed to deal with anger submissively or hide their aggression (Heinecken, 2001)

There is also a problematic depiction through the visualization of violence as a primary rhetorical validation for the woman's behavior. I have argued that the depiction of violence in the avenging-woman narratives suggests the rhetorical role of the camera's gaze, which convinces the audience that the woman's turn to violence is acceptable. As a viewer, this rhetorical goal does not fully align with Carol Clover's (1992) reading of identification with the avenging-woman, as critics have indicated the problems with an argument that states audience members must see her as a masculine hero in order to relate. Especially since the contemporary image of the avenging-woman is frequently

feminized in media, which Jeffrey Brown (2001) argues, goes against Clover's masculinized-woman character. Neither does this meet the criteria from Barbara Creed (1993) where women are positioned as the ultimate fear of all men. Instead, mixed-gender viewers are persuaded to accept and to some degree, applaud, the avenging-woman's need for revenge precisely because the audience has witnessed and been made to experience the violent attack against her.

Although I do not think the male and female audience members need to identify with the victim differently simply based on gender, I do think Clover's linking of audience identification with the woman in a rape/revenge narrative is an important starting point to analyze the gaze of the camera. The camera aids in identification, but for what purposes? Mulvey (1992) contends that the gaze of the camera, as it focuses on body of the female character, works to objectify the woman for the audience from the point of view of the male character. Whereas Mulvey's work focuses on the male-centered gaze as voyeuristic, and Clover advances an argument for the male-centered gaze as a moment of identification, in this analysis I have argued that the camera gaze is a rhetorical message in itself regardless of the viewer's gender. The camera aids in identification, but in order to justify violence from a woman. Thus, the brutality of the woman's victimization is graphically presented (or not) and rhetorically limits the corresponding ability for the women to respond. If the woman is going to be violent in her vengeance, she must be violently victimized first and this must be visualized for the audience. These limitations perpetuate the visualization of rape in media and consequently reinforce the message that empowerment comes after victimization.

A second problematic depiction of female empowerment in the contemporary avenging-woman text is constructed in conjunction with the lack of female friendships in the narrative. Overwhelmingly, the message within the avenging-woman narrative is that women cannot be relied on or trusted, but men can be. This is an especially pervasive representation in the interactions of the avenging-woman with men who are depicted as docile and compliant. But, even the non-threatening man may hurt her if she gets emotionally attached. The construction of the vigilante as solitary is not unusual (Stringer, 2011), but the almost exclusive reliance on men as opposed to women is a giant step back from the positive representation of female friendship in prior avenging-woman narratives. In discussing the positive representation of female empowerment in both *Buffy* and *Xena*, Shari Ross (2004) contends “the representation of collective action supported through female friendship in both of these shows allows for a redefinition of tough heroism as communal, respectful of emotions, and something to be taken quite seriously” (p. 237). Instead, the relationships with men in the avenging-woman narrative construct the woman’s empowerment as an individual achievement and reinforce the depiction of other women in the narratives as untrustworthy and competitive.

Additionally, not only is a collective community of women not represented in the contemporary narratives, but the training of empowerment for the avenging-woman is also kept from other women. For example, when Amanda needs help, Emily offers her money to get out of the way. She does not teach her how to carefully plan and cover her tracks. Previous avenging-woman narratives like *Buffy*, *Xena*, and *Thelma and Louise* all included representations of positive (non-competitive and non-backstabbing) female friendships as well as a depiction of the female trainer passing on her power; Buffy

trained Willow, Xena trained Gabrielle, Louise trained Thelma. The depiction of empowerment for the contemporary avenging-woman is a solitary achievement and one that is not shared with other women to empower them collectively. This representation of individual female achievement in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives illustrates the criticism of feminist scholars who argue that the reinforcement of individual choice over collective action is problematic within a third wave rhetoric of feminism.

The appearance of the third wave ideology of feminine feminism within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative offers another problematic representation of female empowerment, when it links sexuality with power. The avenging-woman is depicted as empowered via her sexualized body, and to some degree successful in her quest for vengeance because of it, but she is also put on display for the gaze of others. I have argued that the feminized feminism depicted within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative is disempowering, when she uses her sexuality to manipulate men as opposed to embracing it for her own pleasure. Additionally, the linking of sexuality and female empowerment constructs the avenging-woman's sexualization for the gaze of others as complicit, thus reinforcing a message of self-exploitation. Self-exploitation is particularly problematic in a rape culture, because it positions the objectification of women as empowering, via an ironic knowing wink, while still relying on sexism as a way to sell products. The discrepancy of nudity by the female avenger from that of any of the men in the narratives also reinforces a gender imbalance when it comes to the sexualization of bodies. The overt message of the sexualized avenging-woman's body is

that she is empowered via her sexuality, but a deeper reading conveys a disempowering reinforcement of women's traditional role in a patriarchal culture.

The contemporary avenging-woman narratives in this study offer a broad spectrum of the visualization of rape and victimization of women. In *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, there is no question that Lisbeth is violently raped; however, even in the most graphic of scenes, the camera emphasizes her body in parts, focusing on her buttocks and naked back. In *Veronica Mars*, Veronica is drugged at a party so that she appears drunk, and then wakes up without her underwear. While the camera does not visually sexualize her, the response of the Sheriff when she tells him she has been raped suggests that it is her own fault for going to a party and drinking. This conflation of victimization with sexualization highlights both the reflective and reinforcing function of media. Although the avenging-women are shown as not accepting the "reality" of a consequence-free rape culture that they find themselves in, they are sexualized, either visually or through the dialogue, which does not change the systemic structure that has put them in a position of subordination in the first place.

A final problematic depiction of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative that I have detailed through the analysis of this project is the construction of empowerment via technology, which obscures the underlying disempowerment of the woman by technology. Even though the use of technology by the women portrays a primarily positive representation of empowerment, I have argued that a technophilic gaze works to humanize the avenging-woman, by highlighting her sexuality in relation to the power of technology. In this way, the aggressive avenging-woman is softened, but also objectified, which places her in a role of subordination. Additionally,

the lack of emotion that the avenging-woman is allowed to reveal in the narratives, and the punishment that she sometimes receives for allowing her emotions to get in the way of her vengeance, constructs the empowered woman as a cyborg. Through the depiction of the cyborg, the avenging-woman is again objectified as a machine, and ultimately reinforces the traditional role of the objectified woman within the patriarchal system she appears to be trying to subvert.

At the end of each of the narratives, the women lose everything in their efforts for vengeance. The sight of Mikael with Erika crushes Lisbeth, and she rides off on her motorcycle alone. Veronica Mars ends up alone, ready for a brand new career, but harms her father's future career opportunities in the process. At the end of season one, Emily loses both her "real" love interest, Jack, and her "fake" love-interest, Daniel. And, Cataleya calls Danny and tells him that she hopes they meet again some day as she boards a bus out of town. None of the women are depicted within an intimate relationship, either via a romantic partner or within friendships, and family ties have been broken or strained through her quest for revenge. They are all successful (or still succeeding, in Emily's case) in their plans for revenge, but nobody appears to have found satisfaction or happiness at the end of the journey.

Because the avenging-woman narrative presents a depiction of female empowerment that is ultimately disempowering, I argue that the contemporary narratives work hegemonically to reinforce a patriarchal system. Hegemony occurs through the depiction of her empowerment via vengeance, which is also the moment in the narrative that is supposed to symbolize the current limitations of a patriarchal system for women. Instead, the avenging-woman is depicted in a way that reinforces the system and the



feminine role of the victim, by casting her story as a cautionary tale when she ends up alone at the end. In this way, the avenging-woman's power reinforces the traditional role of the passive female, and "protects the dominant ideology from radical change" (Dow, 1990, p. 262). We see empowerment, but not in a way that suggests happiness or political progress being made about the victimization of women in society. Thus, the moral of the story is that vengeance does not get her the satisfaction of a better life; it just gets her revenge.

It is the moment of victimization that allows the avenging-woman to become powerful, at least on the surface. She is then denied female friendships, sexualized in a way that suggests she is complicit in her objectification, and becomes an emotionless machine. By presenting empowerment after a crime of victimization, in a way that then objectifies the women, the avenging-woman narrative reinforces the status quo of a patriarchal system. These hegemonic messages work to perpetuate a rape culture, rather than challenge it, by using a rhetoric of female empowerment that is void of any representations of systemic change or discussion. Jacinda Read (2000) utilizes hegemony as an "attempt to theorize the relationship between feminism and film, the political and the popular, the contextual and the textual" (p. 247) and she understands popular culture as "one of the primary ways in which feminism is now lived and experienced by the majority of women" (p. 251). Unfortunately, the hegemonic messages within the contemporary avenging-woman narrative reinforce the identity of empowerment as a stand in for feminist politics, within a culture where women continue to be objectified.

### Contemporary Feminism and the Rhetoric of Girl Power

The image of the avenging-woman underscores the problematic depiction of contemporary representations of feminism when a “feminist *identity*” is conflated with “feminist *politics*” (Dow, 1996, p. 207, original emphasis). A feminist identity presents an image of female empowerment by, for instance, embracing “girl power” as a personal motto and asserting “an assumption that a ‘seize the power’ mindset and more vigorous individualism will solve all women’s problems” (p. 207). In contrast, feminist politics are about making choices that affect systemic changes for gendered inequality. For example, the avenging woman is constructed as someone seeking revenge after the authorities do not or cannot help her, which suggests the potential for the texts to represent a political message about the victimization of women and the lack of resources available in situations of rape and assault. However, in chapter five, I examined how the same narratives then use the avenging-woman’s sexualized body to sell the story to the public. Instead of continuing an important political message about the strength of women and the limitations of our current legal system, which the avenging-woman’s turn to revenge suggests, the texts use a rhetoric of feminism to objectify her and reinforce women’s traditional role within a patriarchal system. Depicting the identity of a woman who gets back at those who have victimized her as empowered, is not the same as encouraging political changes within a system that currently limits women’s power.

A similar trend can be found within the rhetoric of contemporary constructions of feminism and is the dominant critique against media depictions of third wave feminism’s conceptualization of girl power (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Radner, 2011; Riordan, 2001). Media play a large role in the pervasiveness of “girl power,” where the image of

empowerment is contingent upon a rhetoric of “beauty and sexuality as power, rather than encouraging girls to develop other means of acquiring power” (Riordan, 2001, p. 291). These criticisms against media representations of women are about narratives that are not necessarily positioned as potential feminist political messages. For example, Susan Douglas (2010) analyzes representations of women in popular culture that particularly appeal to young girls, starting with the 1990s hit *90210* airing at what she sees as the beginning of enlightened sexism, which makes the objectification of women acceptable. Hilary Radner (2011) critiques the illustration of women in the romantic comedy film narrative, where women are supposed to be empowered but not necessarily in a way that hints at any kind of systemic gendered inequity that they had to fight against first. And, Ellen Riordan (2001) studies the popularity of the musical group, Spice Girls, who she argues “attract a significant number of girls who are already socialized to focus on physical looks while offering messages that seem to suggest empowerment” (p. 291). In each analysis, the texts are ambiguous toward feminism and lack an overt political message about women’s place in a patriarchal system.

These critics argue that this is precisely the problem: many popular culture narratives aimed at women and young girls only hint at female empowerment, which then reinforces a politically empty rhetoric of girl power. Ellen Riordan (2001) sees a problematic conflation between girl power and feminism when “the rhetoric of empowerment contributes to rearticulating dominant patriarchal and capitalistic values, while not substantially disrupting power relations” (p. 282). Susan Douglas (2010) and Hilary Radner (2011) both refute the idea that representations of empowered women in the media are feminist, even to a limited degree. Douglas, labeling the trend she sees as

enlightened sexism, argues that the contemporary representation of women in the media “insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women” (p. 9). Radner uses the term neo-feminist to refer to the increase in “girly” culture and a focus on making “the right” consumer choices as an individual, which she argues constructs the identity of a woman as an empowered consumer, but not feminist (p. 6). Both Douglas and Radner draw on a postfeminist theory, which promotes the message that gender equality has already been achieved and feminism is no longer necessary.

However, in the avenging-woman narratives, I read the texts as more overtly feminist in that they acknowledge a still persistent gender inequity and the potential for continued abuse against women. A specific example of this occurs in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, with Lisbeth’s stipulation to Bjurman that he cannot bring any more women, consensually or not, to his apartment. She recognizes the cycle of abuse that will continue with this man against, not just her, but also others if she does not stop him. In this context, the avenging-woman narrative appears to be attempting to represent female empowerment within a culture that disadvantages women, thus suggesting the political potential of such texts. This makes the use of the language of female empowerment, in lieu of representing feminist goals, all the more problematic, within texts that are explicitly positioned to address issues of women and power.

The empowered identity of the avenging-woman can be read as drawing on the rhetoric of third wave feminism. She embodies the individuality of the contemporary empowered woman, especially in relation to her disempowerment of other women. She

is also depicted as making a choice to avenge, although the representation of “choice” is problematic when the legal system leaves her no other choice but to seek revenge, if she wants her aggressor to be punished. The avenging-woman also represents the feminized feminism that is touted as empowerment within a third wave feminist culture, where sexuality is embraced as a way to exert personal autonomy over one’s own body. Each of these themes relates to the construction of female empowerment within a third wave feminist rhetoric, and yet, a critical analysis in the avenging-woman narrative suggests an underlying reading of disempowerment that is decidedly anti-feminist. The representation of individual action, as opposed to collective, the focus on revenge as a choice, and the depiction of feminized feminism in the avenging-woman narrative highlights why the construction of female empowerment can be problematic within a third wave feminist rhetoric. If the avenging-woman narrative can be read for examples of broader cultural attitudes about women and power, then it is important to understand how the representation of third wave feminist concepts of empowerment are ultimately disempowering.

Based on our contemporary political climate and current legislative decisions, there is still a hard battle to be fought against gender inequity as our current culture is engaged in “a war on women” (Zengerle, 2012). This is exemplified within our economic, political, social, and legal systems. In contemporary culture, women’s rights are being threatened by a legal and political system that places emphasis on the role of women as mothers and takes away rights over her own body. These limitations are a result of what scholars call a rape culture, which perpetuates the objectification of women’s bodies (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005). The avenging-woman narratives

offer rhetorical feminist scholars the opportunity to examine how the individuality and the embracing of sexuality within third wave feminism is problematic, when the rhetoric of female empowerment is used to support female subordination in a patriarchal system.

When feminism is associated with a rhetoric of empowerment that actually subverts feminist goals, then the result hinders progress toward gender equality. For example, when media images of women rely on the construction of a sexuality that objectifies them, especially in narratives where a woman is victimized, this creates a problematic conflation between women as victims and as sexualized objects. I read the disempowering depiction of the contemporary avenging-woman as symptomatic of a rape culture, because it problematically reinforces the women as victims and men as aggressors and consequently perpetuates and “supports violence against women” (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi). The image of female empowerment within the media particularly matters in a rape culture, and “feminist media scholarship needs to respond to, make sense of, challenge, and work against the insidiousness of rape representations” (Projansky, 2001, p. 231). The representation of the avenging-woman as a sexualized victim turned sexualized avenger does not address the problems of sexualization as a method of objectifying women. Instead, the rhetoric of female empowerment is used to perpetuate the same representations of women that have disempowered them for centuries.

The appropriation of a feminist rhetoric to promote anti-feminist goals is problematic for achieving feminist progress. The image of the avenging-woman as an empowered woman dilutes the power of feminist rhetoric when it is used to stand in for female empowerment without political change. Already, just ten years after *Buffy* and

*Xena* have been off the air, one of the most frequently cited markers of positive feminist readings in the texts, the depiction of a strong and supportive female community, has been done away with in favor of the male helper. This consistent narrative choice in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives exemplifies how a language of feminism is used in place of depicting a necessary marker of feminist progress, like collective action. The third wave equation of female empowerment with individuality is represented in the contemporary avenging-woman narratives. The resulting image exemplifies how the language of feminism, which ignores the feminist goal of collective action and troubles the notion of choice, can diminish the power of feminist rhetoric.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

After an analysis that contends that the representation of the empowered woman in television and film is in fact, disempowering to women, the future may seem a little bleak. However, as problematic as the contemporary avenging-woman texts are as representations of female empowerment, I do not think that people should stop watching the television shows and films. These texts provide a pleasurable viewing experience, and it is fun to watch an evil person get punished for something reprehensible they have done. But, I do think that viewers should question whether the representation of women in these narratives is one that should be held up as an example of empowerment, or if it should be discussed as the limited and anti-political message that I argue it is. It is the critical analysis of media that is important, and this needs to be done in conjunction with the enjoyment that comes from viewing a mediated text. For example, I personally am a fan of the James Bond film series and have been since I was a child. I will continue to watch these films, but that does not mean that I do not also recognize the problematic

constructions of gender and the disempowering male gaze of women in the narratives. However, I can still get pleasure from watching the films, as well as from critiquing the representations of gender.

Action stories are exciting to watch and the rhetorical construction of a well-developed plot should be appreciated. I applaud (and marvel at) the rhetorical function of a narrative that convinces me, a feminist, to root for Veronica Mars to end up with Logan at the conclusion of season three, when, in the first episode of season one, he took a baseball bat to her car's headlights. But, that does not mean that I should not also question my devotion to their love story, or figure out how and why the narrative has convinced me that he is the one for her, when he clearly has anger issues and supports the idea that men who are mean are just in love. As Bonnie Dow (1996) contends, "I study television because I think it is important, because I think it could be better, and because I want people to take it seriously. I also study it because I like it" (p. xiii). Media narratives rhetorically construct representations of female empowerment in popular culture, and these depictions need to be better. Men and women both need to see depictions of powerful women who are not evil, heartless, manipulative, overtly sexualized, and mechanical.

I am encouraged by the idea that these representations of female empowerment in the avenging-woman narrative are well intentioned. Susan Douglas (2010) suggests "what we see and hear from the media comes from the most noble intentions of certain writers and producers to offer girls and women strong role models" (p. 18). It is a step in the right direction to show women capable of winning in combat against men, both through physical strength and technical prowess. The goal of media producers is not to



bring women down, but if the avenging-woman is supposed to represent empowerment, especially within the specific depictions of the victimization of women and young girls, then we have a long road ahead for gendered equality.

What we need is a new paradigm of female empowerment. One that does not construct power in relation to how badly a woman is first disempowered. We need to see narratives of female empowerment that allow other women to be relied on in times of trouble, and does not construct female relationships as inauthentic and competitive. Women should engage in dialogue and problem-solving discussions with other people, preferably in groups of men and women. A new model of female empowerment should allow women to exist within positive relationships with other people, both men and women, where a balance of power and equality is emphasized over competition and control. Narratives about empowered women should not present emotions, other than rage and anger, as signs of weakness. An empowered woman should wear clothes that make sense for her character, but the camera should not emphasize her breasts and buttocks. And, it is not enough to wink at the audience as if she is in on the joke, as this only complicates messages of objectification, when the woman appears to be exploiting herself. And, ultimately, rape should not be sexualized in media, especially in narratives where women are only empowered after they have been brutally victimized. The sexualization of rape reinforces a rape culture and dismisses the important value and political potential of media texts that address rape as a social problem.

The avenging-woman narratives of television and film are just one outlet for the way that the language of feminism is used in place of promoting feminist politics. The feminist movement cannot make progress when the cultivation of identity replaces the

necessity for political change, and “an ‘every woman for herself’ philosophy denies feminism’s core as a collective social movement created to ameliorate the collective wrongs that afflict women” (Dow, 1996, p. 213). Critics, academics, media writers, and viewers need to question representation of empowered women in media that dress misogyny in feminist clothing, because, as Rosalind Gill (2008) questions in her analysis of the depiction of women’s roles in magazine advertisements, “If this is empowerment, we might ask, then what does sexism look like” (p. 55)?

This project has demonstrated the necessity to look beyond the dominant message of a text, to understand how the hegemonic depictions of female empowerment contradict even well intentioned goals. Through this work, I hope to have added to feminist scholarship on the rape and revenge narrative and to have highlighted the rhetorical function of female empowerment that reinforces the status quo and circumvents political action. As scholars, educators, parents, and/or citizens, we have to start discussions about the representation of female empowerment in the media with those around us, and cultivate a social media literacy that at least promotes awareness of the detrimental effects of a rhetoric of female empowerment that denies women equality and basic rights.

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series episode]. In M. Kelley (Producer), *Revenge*. Los Angeles, CA, United

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*One* (2007) and *Hard Candy* (2005). In H. Radner and R. Stringer, *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Cinema* (268-282).

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episode]. In M. Loy (Producer), *Veronica Mars*. United States: Warner Bros.

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Walker, R. (1995). *to be real*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Wander, P. (1984). The third persona: An ideological turn in rhetorical theory. *Central States Speech Journal*, 35, p. 197-216.

Wolf, N. (1991). *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Zengerle, P. (2012, September 4). Democrats charge republicans with “war on women” at convention. *Reuters.com*. Retrieved from

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/05/us-usa-campaign-women-idUSBRE88401T20120905>.

## Curriculum Vitae

Lara Stache  
 Department of Communication  
 University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee  
 P.O. Box 413  
 Milwaukee, WI 53201  
 Office: Johnston 234

### **Education**

University of Wisconsin <i>PhD Communication</i> <i>Rhetorical Leadership Certificate</i> 2011	Milwaukee, WI	2013
Northeastern Illinois University <i>M.A. Communication, Media &amp; Theater</i>	Chicago, IL	2009
University of Illinois <i>B.S. Advertising – College of Communication</i> <i>Minor in English</i>	Champaign, IL	2004

### **Employment**

University of Wisconsin <i>Teaching Assistant</i>	Milwaukee, WI	Aug 2009 – present
Northeastern Illinois University <i>Graduate Assistant</i> <i>Assistant to the Director of Graduate Studies</i>	Chicago, IL	Aug 2008 – May 2009
Marketing Contractor <i>PartnerCentric - Affiliate Program Marketing Director</i> <i>4Paws Marketing – Affiliate Program Marketing Director</i>	Telecommuted	Sep 2007 – Aug 2009
Sears Holdings Corporation <i>Website Promotions Manager</i>	Hoffman Estates, IL	Feb 2007 – Sep 2007
Market Day <i>E-Commerce Marketing Manager</i>	Itasca, IL	Nov 2006 – Feb 2007
MBM Company <i>E-Commerce Marketing Manager</i> <i>E-Commerce Marketing Coordinator</i> <i>E-Commerce Marketing Assistant</i>	Chicago, IL	Jan 2006 – Oct 2006 Jan 2005 – Jan 2006 Aug 2004 – Jan 2005

### Awards & Honors

Eliana Berg Award First Place	--	2013
NCA Doctoral Honors Seminar	--	2012
Departmental Research Award	--	2012
Distinguished Graduate Fellowship Recipient	--	2011-2012
Departmental Service Award	--	2011
P.E.O. Scholar Nominee	--	2010
Chancellor's Award	--	2009-2010

### Research Efforts

Distinguished Graduate Research Fellowship <i>University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee</i>		2011-2012
Research Assistant to Dr. Kathryn Fonner <i>University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee</i> Conducted quantitative and qualitative research focused on alternative workers and communication of boundary tactics.		2010-2011

### Publications

Fonner, K. L., & Stache, L. (2012). All in a day's work, at home: Teleworkers' management of micro role transitions and the work-home boundary. *New Technology, Work, and Employment*, 27(3), 242-257.

Fonner, K. L. & Stache, L. (2012). Boundary management strategies of home-based teleworkers. In S. D. Long (Ed.), *Virtual Work and Human Interaction research: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Stache, L. (2011). The rhetoric of Anonymous: Identity, strategy and morality. R. C. Rowland & J. Howell (eds.). *Reasoned Argument and Social Change: Selected Papers from the 17<sup>th</sup> Biennial NCA/AFA Conference on Argumentation*, 671-677.

Stache, L. (2011). A merger and a manager. J. Wrench (eds.). *Casing Organizational Communication*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 73-78.

#### In Review:

Stache, L. Contemporary Discussions of Sex in Online Chat Forums: Women's Agency and Sexual Roles Within Marriage. Submitted to *Gender and Language*.

#### In Progress:

Stache, L. A Rhetorical Construction of Botox: Botox Parties, *Real Housewives*, and the Female Body from a Technophilic Lens

Stache, L. The construction of empowerment in Alternative Pornography: Reifying Social Norms of Femininity on SuicideGirls.com.



### Published Book Reviews

Review of *Internet and Society: Social Theory in the Information Age*, by Christian Fuchs. *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 15, no. 2 (2012): 383-38.

Review of *Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and The Reproductive Rights Movement*, by Christa Craven. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 35, no. 2 (2012): 228-230.

Review of *The Notorious Dr. Flippin*, by Jamie Q. Tallman. *Journal of American Culture*, 35, no. 4 (2012), p. 383.

### Presentations

Stache, L. (2013, June). *The Construction of Femininity in Reality Television: Bridalplasty as a Narrative of Resistance*. Paper to be presented at the 2013 International Communication Association Conference, London, England.

Stache, L. (2013, April). *The Wedding Dress as Visual Ideograph*. Paper presented at the 2013 Central States Communication Association Conference, Kansas City, MO.

Stache, L. (2013, April). *Internet Education as a Panoptic Rhetoric: An Analysis of the Think Before You Post Campaign*. Paper presented at the 2013 Central States Communication Association Conference, Kansas City, MO.

Stache, L. (2012, November). *Contemporary Discussions of Sex: Women's Agency in Marriage*. Competitively Selected Paper presented at the 2012 National Communication Association Conference, Orlando, FL.

Stache, L. (2012, November). *The Rhetorical Potential of Alternative Pornography: A Case-Study of the SuicideGirls.com*. Paper presented at the 2012 National Communication Association Conference, Orlando, FL.

Stache, L., Davidson, R., Cole, A. & Yamada, K. (2012, October). Panel: Women's Roles, Agency, and Power in Public and Private Spheres, 2012 Women's Studies, LTBO, Osh-Kosh, WI.

Stache, L. (2012, July). *A Rhetorical Construction of Botox: Botox Parties, Real Housewives, and the Female Body from a Technophilic Lens*. Paper presentation at the 2012 NCA Doctoral Honors Seminar, L.A., California.

Stache, L. (2012, May). *A Definitional Argument of Marriage: A Rhetorical Case Study of Sister Wives*. Paper to be presented at the 2012 RSA Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

Stache, L. (2011, November). *Power, Truth and Authority in Online Chat Forums*. Paper presentation at the 2011 National Communication Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Stache, L. & Burrell, N. (2011, November). *Metaphors of Friendship in Real Housewives of New York*. Paper presentation at the 2011 National Communication Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Joosten, T., Al-budawai, D., England, N., Hawkins, J., McNallie, J, Stache, L., Allen, M. (2011, November). *Student Response Systems: Impact of Clicker Technology on Learning*. Paper presentation at the 2011 National Communication Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Stache, L. (2011, October). *Chatty Kathy: The Portrayal of Mother/Daughter Communication in Gilmore Girls*. Paper presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Association, Milwaukee, WI.

Stache, L. (2011, July). *The Rhetoric of Anonymous: Identity, Strategy and Morality*. Paper presentation at the 2011 ALTA Conference, Utah.

Stache, L. (2011, April). *Becoming the bride: How websites use narratives to create a bridal identity*. Paper presentation at the 2011 Central States Communication Association Conference, Milwaukee, WI.

Joosten, T., Allen, M., Al-Budaiwi, D., Benoit III, E., England, N., Glocka, J., Groppi, J. et al. (2011, April). *Student response systems: Impact of clicker technology on learning*. Paper presentation at the 2011 Central States Communication Association Conference, Milwaukee, WI.

Stache, L. (2011, March). *Wedding dress vs. the bride: Creating a gendered identity online*. Panel: Constituting Gender in Contemporary Mediated Spaces, presentation at the 2011 Women's Studies, LTbQ, Madison, WI.

Stache, L. (2010, November). *Pink truth: The women who want to bring down Mary Kay®*. Paper presented at the National Communication Association Convention, San Francisco.

Stache, L. (2010, October). *Best friends forever? Female friendships and Bride Wars*. Paper presented at the Midwest Popular Culture Association, Minneapolis, MN.

Stache, L. (2010, April). *Theknot.com and community: Reinforcing expectations one bride at a time*. Paper presented at the Central States Communication Association Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Stache, L. (2010, April). *Incorporating relevant media & encouraging civic engagement in the interpersonal classroom*. Panel presentation at the Central States Communication Association Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Stache, L. (2009, October). *Evaluating autonomy and identity in the virtual workplace*. Paper presented at the Organizational Communication Mini-Conference, Evanston, Illinois.

In Review:

Stache, L. (2013, November). *Medical Authority Over a Woman's Body: A Critical Analysis of the "Octomom" Controversy as Reproductive Rights Rhetoric*. Paper submitted to the 2013 National Communication Association Conference, Washington D.C.

Stache, L. (2013, November). *The Abortion Law Debates: Rhetorical Tactics of Mirroring/Matching and Reductio ad Absurdum*. Paper submitted to the 2013 National Communication Association Conference, Washington D.C.

### Teaching Experience

University of Wisconsin  
Teaching Assistant

Milwaukee, WI

<i>JAMS 111 – Gender and the Media</i>	Spring 2013
<i>COMM 335 - Critical Analysis of Communication</i>	Fall 2012-Spring 2013
<i>COMM 103 – Public Speaking</i>	Fall 2012-Spring 2013
<i>COMM 101 – Interpersonal Communication</i>	Fall 2009-Spring 2011

Northeastern Illinois University  
Teaching Assistant

Chicago, IL

*CMT 214 - Business and Professional Speaking* Fall 2008

### Invited Lectures:

Stache, L. (May 2, 2013). Invited lecture on the avenging-woman and female empowerment. COMMUN 402: Gender and Communication – University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI.

Stache, L. (October 2, 2012). Invited lecture: Introduction to Rhetorical Criticism. COMM 107: Human Communication – Upper Iowa University, Fayette, IA.

Stache, L. (February 21, 2012). Invited lecture on organizational climate and office gossip. COMMS 318: Advanced Organizational Communication - Edgewood College, Madison, WI.

### Teaching Workshops Attended:

*Low Stakes Assessment: Transparency and Assessment in Every Class* July 8, 2011

*The Truth about Rubrics: What They Are and Aren't, What They Can and Can't Do*  
July 15, 2011

*Beyond Techniques: Easily Adapt Your Course Session to Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle*  
November 4, 2011

*Combining Active Learning, Higher Learning and Lecture: A Must-have Tool*  
August 3, 2012

**Service**

Departmental: 2012	--	Organized departmental peer-to-peer feedback exchange (once per semester)
2010-2012	--	Rhetorical Society of America Student Chapter at UWM (President).
2010	--	Organized fundraiser for Student Research/Travel Funds
2010, 2012	--	Judge at Public Speaking Showcase of Undergraduate students
2009-present	--	UWM Student Graduate Advisory Committee (President, 2010; Vice-President, 2009, Faculty liaison, 2011)
2009-present	--	Volunteered with recruitment for UWM Comm Depart (on-campus visits, Graduate Fair at NCA)
Community: 2012	--	Volunteered at Holiday Event at Milwaukee Journey House
2009-present	--	In-2-Books Online pen pal reading program for a child in Milwaukee public grade school.
2010	--	Participated in food drive for families in need in Milwaukee.

**Professional Development**

2013	--	Invited guest panelist, Milwaukee Public Television Community Cinema, <i>Wonder Women: The Untold Story of American Superheroines</i> .
2012-present	--	Reviewer for <i>Journal of American Culture</i>
2012, 2013	--	Student representative for the NCA Feminist Studies Division
2012, 2013	--	Reviewer for NCA Feminist & Women's Studies division.
2012	--	Reviewer for auto-ethnography book chapter, Left Coast Press.
2012	--	Writing workshop with Cara Finnegan at RSA Conference, Philadelphia, PA. G.I.F.T's
2012, 2010	--	Attended UW Teaching and Development Conference
2011	--	Reviewer for CSCS Convention Rhetorical Theory division & G.I.F.T's
2011	--	Attended CIPD Teaching & Learning workshops, UWM.
2011	--	Accepted into/attended workshop at RSA Conference, Bolder, CO.
2011	--	Attended lectures by visiting professors, Cate Palczewski & Kirt Wilson
2011	--	Chair for Media Studies panel at CSCA, Chair for Basic Course panel at NCA
2010	--	Reviewer for CSCS Convention Media & G.I.F.T's; NCA Convention Student Papers Division
2009	--	NCA Convention Volunteer

**Professional Association Membership**

Central States Communication Association (since 2009)

National Communication Association (since 2009)

Rhetorical Society of America (since 2010)

Association of Internet Researchers (since 2010)

Organization for Research on Women and Communication (since 2011)

Society for Cinema & Media Studies (since 2012)