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**Being “The Man”:  
Becky Lynch, Gender Equity, and the Most Loaded Moniker in Pro Wrestling**

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Being "The Man": Becky Lynch, Gender Equity, and the Most Loaded Moniker in Pro Wrestling

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

AUTHOR: Jacob A. Jardel

TITLE: Being “The Man”: Becky Lynch, Gender Equity, and the Most Loaded Moniker in Pro Wrestling

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With her victory at WrestleMania 35, superstar Becky Lynch won both the SmackDown and Raw Women’s Championships in the first all-women’s main event at the biggest show of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) schedule. To get here, though, she underwent a major character change, evolving from a heroic superstar lost in the shuffle of the women’s division into an antihero fan favorite with a new nickname: “The Man.” In adopting this moniker, though, she adopted with it a conversation about gender in the WWE, a pop cultural microcosm of the permeating zeitgeist (especially considering the company’s relationship with current US President Donald Trump). As such, two questions are posed: what are the implications of “The Man” nickname, specifically in relation to Becky Lynch and her leading of the women’s division? More importantly, how do these implications reflect the position of women in such a masculine—even anti-feminine—performance sport?

Literature regarding professional wrestling is admittedly limited, though what research there is combines with research into other women’s athletics to show a strict adherence to traditional gender roles, with female athletes expected to fit a societal expectation of femininity or receive negativity for transgressions against gender. For decades in WWE, this paradigm was apparent, with idealized women performing as eye candy to serve male colleagues and audiences. While Lynch’s “The Man” character is not the first to break through this paradigm, it serves as the most apparent sign of gender deconstruction in WWE to date. As such, it stands to

reason that Lynch's character has adopted many typically masculine traits in the process of becoming "The Man" while simultaneously subverting the gendered paradigms in place within the industry as part of an authoritative discourse between Lynch, WWE Creative, and the fans.

This rhetorical analysis is based in four theories. Burkean and Foucauldian theories provide the basis for discourse and meaning-generation, and intersectional feminist theory from hooks and Butler provides the critical analytical lens that serves as the foundation for the present research—and all three work as an intertwined entity. In conducting this research, three points became apparent. While Lynch adopted various traits of hypermasculinity prevalent in WWE, she also subverted the perception of gender within the company. As such, "The Man" is a discursive construct used in a triadic discourse between Lynch, the WWE Creative team who create her stories, and the fanbase that approves or disapproves of the product through their reactions and their attention. Thus, research upheld the proposed thesis statement wholesale, adding further nuance to the name and character of "The Man."

In the present research, "The Man" represents a selection of society, one that represents the gender essentialism in which we live—and that many progressive activists are fighting to mitigate or even eradicate. As such, rhetoricians would do well to analyze not only WWE but also other microcosms of popular culture—particularly those characterized with apparent or tacit hypermasculinity (comic book fandoms or gaming culture, for example), thus rife with similar rhetorical implications. By examining hegemonic representations of certain (marginalized) groups within the verbal and performative discursive habits of these groups, scholars could approach larger, often more complex ideas through more familiar lenses.

*Being “The Man”:  
Becky Lynch, Gender Equity, and the Most Loaded Moniker in Pro Wrestling*

## Significance

On February 4, 2020, United States Representative Tim Ryan (D-Ohio) tweeted that he walked out of President Donald Trump's State of the Union Address that night. He continued, "I've had enough. It's like watching professional wrestling. It's all fake" (Ryan). For those in the know of the sports entertainment industry, the Congressman's tweet is loaded with deeper connotations, especially when considering the President's connection to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and its chairman Vince McMahon. Trump, enshrined in the celebrity wing of WWE's Hall of Fame, has had an impact on the organization since the late 1980s when the business magnate hosted WrestleMania IV and V in Atlantic City's Trump Plaza. He also participated in a storyline with McMahon that culminated in a WrestleMania 23 storyline where the two competed—by way of their professional wrestler proxies—in a "Battle of the Billionaires." Once the cameras stop rolling, McMahon and Trump share a close professional relationship, leading to a large mutual influence on each other's business and, in Trump's case, political ventures.

One of the most notable parallels between Trump and McMahon's socio-business practices involves their treatment of the women who work with or for them. The President's misdeeds involving Miss Universe contestants and other women have been public knowledge since Trump's initial ventures into politics in the mid-2010s. Of lesser note, though, has been McMahon's treatment of women since his acquisition of the then-World Wrestling Federation (WWF) from his father in the early 1980s. During this era, few women had any prominent presence within the company besides those who also took advantage of backstage politics. In the younger McMahon's WWF, female talent were managers who followed the male talent to the ring, often signifying good or evil characters based solely on aesthetics. Things changed in the

late 1990s, when women's wrestling returned to television but brought with it a level of objectification and titillation that reflected the edgier cultural zeitgeist.

This paradigm in which aesthetics and sexuality vastly outweighed talent continued for nearly two decades, with women's matches being an afterthought amid the more heavily promoted men's bouts. Contests that involved stripping opponents down to their underwear were omnipresent in the women's division, and female talent served more as objects in men's storylines than they were featured as competitors. Outside of some exceptions, the organization, rebranded WWE in 2002, gave little reason to watch women compete unless there was some potential for aesthetic stimulus. This pattern was also apparent in the company's recruiting strategies, wherein scouts were tasked to focus on finding highly attractive, athletic-looking women for their brand. As such, the fanbase paid little attention to the women's division.

In the mid-2010s, though, a newer, more inclusive paradigm of women's wrestling began to emerge. WWE's developmental brand NXT began to showcase more women more frequently—women whose talent rivaled that of the men on the card. Soon, these competitors became major parts not only of NXT but also of the main WWE roster on flagship shows *Raw* and *SmackDown*. In time, women climbed the card, participating in numerous firsts while increasing their own drawing power as the company's stock began to rise in the mainstream zeitgeist once again. Under the lead of WWE CBO Stephanie McMahon-Levesque and WWE Executive Vice President Paul "Triple H" Levesque, the women's revolution became a major part of the organization's direction, a trend that continues to this day.

The banner carriers of the women's division in the modern era have been the Four Horsewomen (a name alluding to a groundbreaking wrestling faction from the pre-WWF days) of NXT. Two members, Sasha Banks and Bayley, led the charge in the developmental brand. On

*Raw* and *SmackDown*, Charlotte Flair, daughter of original Four Horseman Ric Flair, became one of the most dominant women's competitors both in the company and in the world, with title wins and landmark matches befitting her family name. The other member of the Horsewomen, Becky Lynch, played more of a supporting role during the early days of the women's revolution, being the only one to not win the NXT Women's Championship and, after becoming the first ever SmackDown Women's Champion, fading into the background of the women's division in her first two years on the main roster.

However, Lynch began an undefeated streak in early 2018, gaining attention from fans and critics—but not WWE executives. Lynch, portraying a heroic character, did not let Creative's seeming ignorance of her success adversely affect her title match against then-SmackDown Women's Champion Carmella until it turned into a triple-threat match including Flair, her on-screen best friend. When Flair won the match, Lynch attacked Charlotte in an attempted turn to evil. However, when fans reacted positively to her attack, Lynch's character evolved in an anti-establishment hero who made it her goal to gain recognition for her talent and her presence as the top draw in the company—or, colloquially in wrestling circles, “The Man.” Lynch made the moniker a major part of her character, a persona fans backed all the way to her triumph against Flair and former Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) trailblazer Ronda Rousey in the WrestleMania 35 main event.

Lynch's rise to prominence is, arguably, the present epitome of progress in women's wrestling in the WWE. As the winner of the first women's match to headline the company's largest show of the year, she reached a pinnacle of exposure previously unattainable for other female superstars. Furthermore, she set a precedent for other women in the company to become the main draw at the same level as their male counterparts. This evolution is apparent in the

unprecedented fan response to the product women's wrestlers are producing in the ring. Just as importantly, though, she brings into focus discussions on gender previously unexplored not only in public discourse but also within academia—all because of the nickname and persona she attached to this rise to the top of the card.

By adopting the character of “The Man,” Lynch took along with it many gendered expectations inherent in the hypermasculine—almost anti-feminine—environment surrounding professional wrestling. The connotations behind such a nickname create a gendered dissonance to many fans, with a woman taking on the brazen antiestablishment qualities of such antiheroes as Stone Cold Steve Austin and Daniel Bryan. Thus, she redefines not only drawing power but also gender roles in wrestling, since Lynch broke through a proverbial glass ceiling in a way no other woman in the WWE had before. However, even in her redefinition of the idea of “The Man” from a presentation standpoint, her character still adopts many typically masculine qualities to reach the top, whether in her confrontational nature or her tendency to power posture in both her actions and her words. All the while, her subject position as wrestling talent leads to another form of dissonance, one attached to the power dynamics inherent in the moniker “The Man.” Though Lynch had proven herself a major draw in the company, she does not have sole possession of the gimmick and the associated moniker. Between WWE executives' power over her creative trajectory, fans' power over her staying power, and other women's name-value power over the booking patterns of the women's division, she may be the main draw, but she does not wield the whole power associated with such a moniker.

The present research, then, seeks to address the multifaceted nature of “The Man.” This look into the pro wrestling business could provide more clarity into the cultural climate in which the stories they tell exist, since wrestling, like many other forms of entertainment media, serves

as a mirror into the culture surrounding it. This statement has been no truer than it is now, given WWE's unprecedented position in popular culture power, whether through wrestlers' appearances on daytime television, McMahon's growing sway beyond the wrestling, or WWE's connections to some of the most powerful leaders in the world. As such, examining the nuances of how gender is portrayed can provide insight into how social progress on this level can be achieved—or commodified—one nickname at a time.

This project also opens numerous possibilities for analysis within the field of rhetoric. Focusing on Lynch and the moniker "The Man," this examination of gender performativity reveals that gender is both an action and a form of paralinguistic communication. Her adoption of this name creates in viewers a dissonance that reveals the fluid nature of gender in the industry. Furthermore, given how wrestling portrays itself, sports entertainment can serve as a caricature of reality, especially when considering the relationship that the genre has with the culture it exists within. As such, this project's examination of professional wrestling's nuances provides the field of rhetoric with a new locus of analysis rife with an in-betweenity that warrants further examination of the genre, the industry, and its construction of meaning and reality.

## Survey of Scholarship

The scholarship on professional wrestling in general is equal parts vast and sparse, depending on the focused subfield within the research. While there is much research in the sociohistorical aspects of wrestling, research about rhetorical implications of wrestling are reserved for secondary source analysis on non-academic platforms like YouTube and *Vice*. However, there are still a wealth of sources to parse through regarding the present topic, split into three categories: rhetorical theory, wrestling history and nuances, and the intersection of wrestling (and sports) with gender.

There exists little academic primary source material surrounding women's professional wrestling, thus creating a greater need for the present research and other studies like it. However, there are a few sources that address wrestling overall, whether historically or socially. One of the seminal texts within this field is David Shoemaker's *The Squared Circle: Life, Death, and Professional Wrestling*. The author looks at the history of sports entertainment using a unique lens: death. The author separates each section into two major segments. First, he provides historical and, at times, rhetorical examination of different eras in wrestling, the timeframe serving as the equivalent of a unit in a textbook. Shoemaker looks at wrestling as far back as its carnival origins before explaining the territory system and its eventual dissolution under the McMahon wrestling machine during the Rock 'n' Wrestling and Attitude eras. He concludes his chronological look with a brief examination of the modern era. Throughout each chapter, too, are subunits that highlight different performers from the era. Shoemaker provides biographical and sociorhetorical commentary on the lives of major wrestlers from the era who have passed away. These sections also contain asides that delved more deeply into special topics within wrestling, such as race and performance-enhancing drugs. One of these asides, though, is a description of

the vocabulary surrounding wrestling, which explains to those not in the know aspects of the sport that are vital to understanding its unique role as a hybrid of sports and scripted entertainment. These aspects work to provide a near-holistic view of wrestling through the lens of its superstars and the zeitgeist in which they performed.

Shoemaker's work provides a near-comprehensive vocabulary of wrestling, and, thus, a groundwork to explain wrestling's unique rhetorical situation. Furthermore, it gives the work two things: historical origins of the sport itself, and a sociorhetorical examination of two key women intrinsically linked with their eras—the Fabulous Moolah and Miss Elizabeth. However, those two profiles are the only ones Shoemaker provides for women's wrestlers. While many major women's wrestlers may not have passed in the period during which he wrote the book, the dearth of coverage for women's wrestling in it leaves a large gap in the research. Building on Shoemaker's work, present research is based in a different primary thematic: women's wrestling. While not necessarily break new ground, the research serves as an extension both on Shoemaker's rhetorical work and on the historical viewpoints that other texts provide. This shift in lenses will also provide more in-depth analysis of women's wrestling in the late 2010s, an era touched upon in existing research but, to date, has not been analyzed in-depth. While the focus will be on Lynch and some of her predominant opponents (both in-ring and within the power structure of WWE), there will be heightened attention given to the modern era that will lay the ground for future research. Furthermore, this research contains an examination of wrestling solely from a rhetorical standpoint. While history is a vital aspect to address, the rhetorical focus will provide a fresh look at recent history and previous history alike.

There has, in fact, been some historical recounts of women's wrestling in the past, albeit in ways that are not focused on the rhetoric. LaToya Ferguson compiled a wide body of

statistical and summative information in her *Encyclopedia of Women's Wrestling*, which highlighted 100 of the industry's most influential performers from its earliest days to the modern era. The database-like nature of this work provides a wealth of non-kayfabe information from which to pull for statistical purposes or reference for watching landmark matches in the performers' careers. Of note are the entries on Becky Lynch, Charlotte Flair, and many of Lynch's other major opponents (plus other pioneering wrestlers). With the present research, Ferguson's information will be used as the foundation to build historical context for its analysis of Lynch and women's wrestling overall.

Ferguson provides one of two major historical sources for women's wrestling. The other comes from Pat Laprade's *Sisterhood of the Squared Circle*, which examines the path women's wrestling took on its way to its current state in the modern era. Each major section of the book is split into two parts similar to that seen in Shoemaker's *The Squared Circle*. First, Laprade describes of the historical phase of wrestling or the historical context of the focal point of the unit. He begins from the start of women's wrestling, featuring some of the pioneers and their achievements, both praiseworthy (given the number of firsts in the era) and dubious (given the political nature of the sports entertainment business). He continues to write throughout the evolution of the business into the Rock 'n' Wrestling Era of the 1980s, which featured WWE's first foray into mainstream media through a connection to Cyndi Lauper; the Attitude Era of the late 1990s, a time that focused more on sex appeal than athletic performance; and the modern era, with storylines literally and figuratively being written as we speak. Afterward, he provides biographies for some of the major performers in that era, from pioneers like Mae Young to Attitude Era staples like Sable and modern women making waves such as Lynch and, behind the scenes, Stephanie McMahon. He also adds historical asides that examine major milestones,

personalities, and subtopics within the era, such as the fight for legalizing the sport in New York to the creation of Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling (GLOW), now the subject of a major Netflix series.

This work is, by all accounts, one of the most comprehensive and most recent sources focusing on women's professional wrestling. As such, it provides historical context at a slightly deeper level than the *Encyclopedia of Women's Wrestling*, since it gives more than just a wrestler-by-wrestler look at the eras. Furthermore, it provides events and stories recounted from the performers themselves that are missing from the encyclopedia—happenings that warrant further rhetorical analysis. It also shows where the future may be going with the sport under the guidance of Stephanie McMahon and the new group of talent such as Lynch. However, this work, like Ferguson's, lacks a strong rhetorical basis for analysis, relying on history and not analyzing, in depth, the impacts and the symbolic meaning behind some of the trailblazers of women's wrestlers historical and contemporary. The present research serves as the continuation toward this vital viewpoint, focusing on Lynch in a way that hybridizes Laprade's sociohistorical approach and Shoemaker's rhetorical analysis. In combining these approaches, the research will allow for a focus not only on the wrestlers and talent in the industry now but also on the rhetorical implications involved with Lynch's moniker, actions, and booking within the company.

There has been some rhetorical work in wrestling, mostly pertaining to the physical act of wrestling and embodied politics. Broderick Chow, embedded within a wrestling school, examines how the physical actions in the sport represent a paradox: holds meant to look painful are, in fact, done in a way that ensures the safety of the performer locked in it. He uses this principle as the frame through which he explains the nuances of wrestling such as the work. The

piece, then, serves as a corporeal ethnography (to summarize the author), with his body's process of learning the sport as his primary data. He then explains the process of his learning, going through his days at the school and the process of learning bumps and holds that, while painful at times, are meant to minimize injury among all competitors. He talks of working in a certain way that appears contradictory to the idea of wrestling, wherein "being loose" mentally and physically and working with the opponent are the primary objectives. Chow then examines the political side of the wrestling business, speaking of his lessons in how to get over (gain favor with fans, bookers, and colleagues; see Shoemaker 16) through working safely and in cooperation with his fellow trainees—all as he examines the precarious working environments that wrestlers face wherein wrestler's primary form of capital is their bodies. He concludes the piece with an examination of where to take future studies, particularly pointing out the role of women within wrestling schools.

This work provides elaboration on some of the terminology within wrestling and examines the political aspects of wrestling, particularly regarding how it can apply to women. Going back to the idea of the body as capital, women wrestlers' bodies provide the audience with a different kind of capital than do their male coworkers, considering the sexualization of the female body and the heavily male viewing audience of wrestling. Chow's examination provides a contextual lens through which to analyze women's wrestling while also providing insight into the industry from the corporeal point of view. Focusing on aspects related to physical capital, the present research provides analysis of not only the wrestling product on the screen but also the changes in women's wrestlers' physical capital in the current era of wrestling. Furthermore, it addresses the social aspects of inclusivity that Chow mentions are needed within the field.

Through Becky Lynch as the exemplar, the paper will show women's wrestlers' social progress in the sports entertainment industry.

The foundation for the rhetorical aspects of the present research lies not only in theory and history but also in analyses of women within wrestling and similar sports. Given the dearth of academic study on women's wrestling, at least from a non-historic view, the observation of women's sports, especially combat sports, becomes a vital aspect of the research. However, these examinations often occur through highly gendered lenses. Vikki Krane examines gender hegemony within the context of sport, attributing certain sports as masculine or feminine within the heteronormative framework. For example, sports that feature power, assertiveness, and competition are considered more masculine, with those involved more with finesse and cooperation considered more feminine. Any athlete, particularly women, who attempts to transcend these bounds are considered deviant and receives derision, leading to discrimination not only for breaking the typical gender norm but also for their supposed homosexuality (based in the assumption that those who act counter to their sex/gender are, by nature, gay). As such, many women athletes, whether tacitly or consciously, otherwise perform their gender as described using Butlerian terms. In a way, then, the women in sports live within their own form of double consciousness, where they have to balance the expectations of performing femininity with the expectations of being "masculine enough" to participate within a sport—usually to no avail, since many fans will either sexualize the athletes for performing femininity too well or chastise them for not performing either of the two binary genders well enough. Krane concludes by stating that there are efforts at change, such as feminist sport and redefinition of femininity. Only time could tell how these challenges will fair in the long run.

Other research has shed light on the idea of hegemonic femininity with sports. Piroška Béki and Andrea Gál interviewed athletes in sports oft-considered in direct opposition of each other when it comes to perceived femininity and masculinity: rhythmic gymnastics and boxing, respectively. The researchers hypothesized that, based on gendered factors, women participating in rhythmic gymnastics chose their sport based on different childhood circumstances than those who participate in boxing, mainly that rhythmic gymnasts applied more heavily to gender roles than do boxers. However, they found no significant qualitative evidence toward this hypothesis, finding that both sets of athletes view gender roles similarly, particularly regarding the descriptive nature of a woman's role in the household (noticing that women do more housework, women are expected to focus on family, etc.). The major differentiating factor in their sporting decisions, then, was age, with rhythmic gymnasts being placed in the sport at a younger age by mothers while boxers chose the sport at a later age. The other major difference between the groups involved their perceptions of the other athletes: while women's boxers viewed rhythmic gymnastics with no extreme opinions, gymnasts viewed boxing more negatively and stereotypically, referring to it as less feminine.

These articles are important because of their analysis of the perception of women's athletes within an understood Butlerian structure of feminism used to analyze the present product with Becky Lynch while also providing insight into the unique double consciousness many women in sports face while performing their jobs. However, a major gap remains: how these perceptions translate to professional wrestling—specifically involving Lynch and her rise to popularity. Wrestling's relationship with women's competitors, as history has shown, has been sordid but improving. Within the 15 years since the publication of Krane's research, WWE has shifted its own depiction of women in its product, going from an edginess rife with titillation that

permeated the Attitude Era to a heightened focus on in-ring ability in the modern product. Furthermore, professional wrestling contains nuance that goes unaddressed when speaking of more mainstream sports, especially when it comes to the scripted nature of the competition and its surrounding hype (wrestler promos, advertisements, etc.). In Lynch's case, the adoption of a masculine moniker has coincided with this meteoric rise.

Examined within this research, then, is the process of how all these factors interact discursively to convolute Lynch's moniker "The Man." This analysis comes in two forms. First is the idea of gendered appropriation of the name itself. In taking the typically masculine moniker, Lynch breaks through gender barriers to signal a new definition of "The Man" and, with it, a new paradigm of women's wrestling. In contrast, though, is the idea of the title from the perspective of power. Here, the idea is more complicated, since Lynch has power based on her popularity and ability to draw crowds yet still falls under the direction of a creative team that may not always perceive her as the most powerful entity on the roster (taking bookings lower down the match card, wrestling matches not befitting of the top draw, etc.) or even within her own division (particularly in relation to Charlotte Flair, who owes as much to her family lineage as she does to her in-ring ability). The idea of hegemonic femininity interacts with both these analyses in a way that could shed light on how Lynch's performance of femininity and, in turn, performance of power contribute to her place in the WWE hierarchy and the fittingness of her title of "The Man."

After all, this title comes in a sport where masculinity is not just the default—it's the expectation. Danielle Soulliere examined the messages about masculinity that WWE events portray in its programming and speculated on the effects these messages could have on the viewing public. Given the organization's position as both pseudo-sport and mainstream

entertainment, its pop cultural relevance is wide-reaching and, thus, can serve as important cultural indicator pertaining to perceptions of masculinity. Indeed, wrestling serves as an exemplar of hypermasculinity and, in relation, anti-femininity. As such, Soulliere examined 118 episodes of WWE programming, particularly flagship shows *Raw* and *SmackDown* as well as monthly pay-per-view events. Throughout this sample, Soulliere found six primary messages about masculinity: real men are aggressive, men settle things physically, men confront adversaries and problems, real men take responsibility for their actions, men do not whine, and men win. Furthermore, common effective attacks toward adversaries involve questioning the manhood of or emasculating competition through promos and actions, thus promoting and further socializing hegemonic masculinity.

These findings help provide the present research with an understanding of the hypermasculine structures within the WWE during this timeframe. The messages that the author mentions are in line with the product that was on-screen throughout much of the organization's heyday in the late 1990s and early 2000s, thus providing the lens through which WWE viewed not only its men's talent but also its women's talent. It entrenches the federation in a vastly anti-feminine culture, since many of the traits considered bad or weak are traits commonly ascribed to women. Using this lens, then, readers can see how men viewed women in the wrestling industry: as objects of submission who whine and require a man to settle things physically. However, given the timeframe during which the research was published, things have changed in the WWE women's division. Within the present research, the masculine lens Soulliere mentions will be modernized through an examination of Lynch, given her position as a women's wrestler using a masculine moniker, thus leaving her open for judgment under both hegemonically masculine and hegemonically feminine constructs.

Judgment of women athletes transcends the sporting arena, though, going so far as into advertisements and photographic coverage. Emma Sherry and colleagues performed a summative analysis of images of women within sports, examining how they are depicted in comparison to their male counterparts. The researchers found that, across the studies, women gained more visual exposure if they participated in gender-appropriate sports, though this exposure typically fell in line with gendered expectations: poses were typically more passive, usually with accompanying text that emphasized the athlete's femininity and/or sex appeal. Many of their depictions were sexualized as well, shifting focus away from their ability and accolades and more toward a female ideal under a male gaze. These depictions, then, influenced how individuals perceived not only the athletes but also women's sports in general, putting more value in aesthetics over athletics, leading many advertisers to lean heavily into a mindset of sex selling the sport.

This paradigm, though, has been shifting, even during the time in which Sherry and colleagues published this research. Fink and colleagues analyzed how advertisement for women's sports could predict ticket sales to an event. Specifically, the authors looked at athlete attractiveness, athlete skill, and athlete fit to sport affected a viewer's interest and intent to buy a ticket to the event. While they hypothesized that all three factors would positively affect ticket sales, they proposed that athlete skill and fit to sport would have a greater effect on fan intent to purchase tickets. To test this, they generated a fictional advertisement featuring a fictional NCAA softball player advertising the sport's championship tournament. The researchers used two different photos of a conventionally attractive and a conventionally less attractive athlete sharing the same name. They used each photo in two advertisements—one with the fictional player's accolades, one without. They found that, with fans, attractiveness held little significant

weight in ad viewers' intent, especially when compared to the other two factors, thus validating their hypotheses. Of note, however, was the non-fan response, wherein attractiveness provided a major draw to the events. Since these individuals were unaware of the expertise or the fitness of the person in the advertisement, their primary instinct was to trust based on aesthetic alone.

These two studies contribute two opposing ideas to the present research, one that reinforces gendered perceptions of women in sports, and another that shows how performance is the leading factor that drives ticket sales. Both coexist within the WWE and have been prevalent since the dawn of the Attitude Era. While the modern group of women's wrestlers such as Lynch earn praise for their in-ring abilities, they still fall under a male gaze—even if it is one that has lessened since the time of these articles' publications. As with other research in this discipline, then, there needs to be modern application and, consequently, a conversation about the nuance involved with professional wrestling that other sporting events such as softball and tennis do not have because of wrestling's scripted nature. Since, in theory, a wrestler's push comes from a discourse between fans and Creative (with contributions from the wrestler's in-ring prowess), decisions on how wrestlers are depicted come partially from outside sources but mostly from within the company itself. As such, the Creative team follows societal trends. In the '90s and 2000s, this meant a product heavy on titillation. However, for individuals like Lynch, it means a depiction of women that falls more in line with their male counterparts.

Research has shown that this trend has pervaded other sports. Toni Bruce outlined a set of “rules” that encompass how sportswomen have been portrayed in media in history and in contemporary discourse, especially when viewed from a third-wave-feminist perspective. The author laid out 13 rules involving depiction of sportswomen, five of which pertained to how women's sports were portrayed (including comparisons to men's sports, infantilization of

sportswomen, and focusing on gendered aspects of existence—even if not pertinent to sports) and four that still persist from the past (particularly things that adhere to hegemonic heterosexual femininity, sexualization, and the non-importance of sportswomen). The remaining rules pertain to the present and future state of representation. These ideas serve as converses to paradigms seen in Sherry and colleagues' research, mainly as pertains to portraying women's athletic prowess. There are other current rules, such as appearing as a model citizen—especially in contrast to outgroup (typically foreign) athletes—but the future needs to embrace women's voices and the act of being both pretty and powerful.

This research works as a lens through which to view both the present research and research from T. Christopher Greenwell and colleagues that examined opinions of mixed martial arts (MMA) advertisements based on the gender of the depicted fighter. They surveyed a 245-person sample representative of gendered demographic breakdowns within MMA fandom (i.e. the survey skewed male, albeit proportionately to prior demographic studies), showing participants ads with fighters of both binary sexes depicted across three levels of violence and asking them to rate their attitudes about the ads. Researchers found that fighter sex had a significant effect on attitude toward advertisement, with a preferential bias shown toward ads with male fighters. However, this effect was most demonstrative within the male subsection of participants, as female respondents evaluated the ads equally regardless of sex depicted. Both sexes also exhibited lowered attitudinal responses to more violent advertisements depicting women, falling in line with gendered expectations, though more violent ads were disliked more across the board.

Both this research from Greenwell and the research from Bruce provide a more contemporary view on women's representation in media, particularly for Greenwell's research

into combat sports. As such, they prove an invaluable resource to the present research, which will expand these tendencies and rules into an analysis of women's wrestling—a field, as has been seen, that is oft-overlooked in research. More progress in the sport means more events akin to male counterparts, particularly matches that involve weapon usage and that are fought in dangerous environments such as steel cages. As such, examining the effects of representation and, more importantly, their rhetorical significance within a hegemonically masculine sport is an important resource given within the present research. As pertains to Lynch, extending the research to examine her proclivity toward violence can show how the moniker of “The Man” proves fitting for her while also blurring the line between femininity and power, a typically masculine trait. As such, using these pieces of research as frames of reference, the present research can shed light on how Lynch is adding power to the paradigm, something fans and Creative are beginning to realize and accept.

## Introduction

Like most other narrative-driven media, professional wrestling thrives on a near-formulaic process to generate an effective dramatic story wherein an underdog battles adversity on their way to stardom and prosperity. In sports entertainment—specifically WWE—it starts with discovery of a talent and crafting their character and in-ring acumen to the point where they feature in the main event of WrestleMania, usually leaving victorious. Many major stars like The Rock and John Cena have been a product of this development process. While Becky Lynch has been one of the most recent and most successful WWE grooming projects, she serves as a synecdoche for women's wrestling within the company. Though Lynch's rise happened within the span of just over a year, her crowning victory served as a culmination of decades of work and adversity for the WWE women's division.

When discussing the progression of women within WWE, it is important to examine the progression of women within non-wrestling—and, as will be explained, non-scripted—sports. Throughout the history of modern athletics, different events carry with them gendered expectations. For example, sports such as rhythmic gymnastics carry with them feminine coding, while sports like boxing feature highly masculine coding. As such, for many sports, the transgression of gendered expectations is often met with significant pushback from traditionalists, creating a segregation of sports based on hegemonically gendered coding. However, since this widespread genderization, women athletes have fought for equality both socially and competitively, reflected in the endeavors of such athletes as Billie Jean King and Margaret Court, who both tallied victories in 1973 Battle of the Sexes tennis matches (both against Bobby Riggs). Similar events have happened in the decades since, but the overarching theme has been a fight for equality in recognition and, in many cases, pay between men's and

women's athletes, especially within the same sport. This push remains ongoing, whether in the form of the US Women's National Soccer team's plight for equal pay to their male counterparts or in the form of WNBA players receiving recognition at the same level as their NBA colleagues. This fight for equity has been especially difficult in more masculinized sports, particularly combat sports like boxing and mixed martial arts (MMA). Both genres of sport bring with them a violence and bravado typically associated with hegemonic masculinity. As such, women's progress was met not only with patronizing pushback but also gender essentialism at a level much greater than that seen in other, less physically demanding sports. While MMA stars like Ronda Rousey and boxers like Layla Ali have made strides in shifting the paradigm, the air of masculinity still persists, creating a continued need for change in the name of equity.

However, in professional wrestling, there are added nuances that make this plight more complex. To fully ascertain these idiosyncrasies, it is necessary to define and describe the industry's foundational terminology and concepts that set it apart from mainstream sports, the most important of which is kayfabe. Apart from unexpected injuries and some general physicality, almost every facet of professional wrestling works within the dogmatic construct of kayfabe, or what David Shoemaker refers to as "the wrestlers' adherence to the big lie, the insistence that the unreal is real – the rule that you have to play your character all the time, even outside the ring, to make sure you don't ruin it for anyone" (15). Kayfabe is a holdover of professional wrestling's origins in carnival athletic shows (at shows), where strongmen competed against local challengers who would earn money for winning or surviving a bout (usually running about fifteen minutes). Eventually, promoters decided to preplan the bouts to create a more captivating product and, thus, generate more interest and profit. A performer planted in the audience would accept the challenge and eventually defeat the champion, creating an illusion of

unpredictability. Many promoters did not want to give up this ruse and risk losing money, so they created a jargon based in Pig Latin to share information with those in the know without fear of pulling the curtain back. This idea of secrecy, embodied in kayfabe, has become the basis for what viewers see in modern sports entertainment.

Throughout wrestling's evolution from carnival attraction to national sensation, kayfabe remained a constant as performers maintained the work ("the act of the wrestling world," according to Shoemaker (16)) with no exception. In the mid-1990s, however, the lines between reality and the grand illusion blurred to the point where many critics feel kayfabe died, particularly after 1997's Montreal Screwjob. That year's Survivor Series pay-per-view in Montreal, Quebec, featured a main-event WWF Title match between challenger Shawn Michaels and champion Bret "Hitman" Hart, who was set to leave for rival World Championship Wrestling (WCW). As the match neared its final stages, Michaels put Hart into a sharpshooter, the Hitman's finishing submission maneuver. Immediately afterward, McMahon approached the ring and urged referee Earl Hebner to ring the bell (despite no indication that Hart was giving up), ending the match and awarding Michaels the title. This sudden jerk of the proverbial curtain coincided with a smartening-up of wrestling's fanbase through internet discourse and high public interest. With the Screwjob, the fanbase now knew that the major players were no longer just those viewed on-screen. The people behind the curtain, the ones orchestrating wrestling's every move, became just as important in the narrative as the performers in the ring.

Since Montreal, the face of wrestling—and of kayfabe—changed dramatically. Wrestlers no longer protect kayfabe at all costs. Instead, as Corey Erdman writes, the industry forces fans to question what is real and what is illusion—all while profiting from the transparency. The internet now provides fans with unprecedented access behind the curtain of wrestling, and the state of

kayfabe has changed because of it. For many fans, that illusion is virtually dissolved, the big lie revealed. However, for many fans, this disillusionment only ruins the concept of kayfabe—but not the enjoyment of wrestling itself. In some cases, the muddying of kayfabe has added nuance to the modern WWE seen today. The combination of work and shoot (“an act of reality in wrestling,” Shoemaker 16) has ushered in the modern paradigm of kayfabe in the WWE, especially with expansion into the world of social media, where storyline feuds can spill over onto performers’ real-life accounts on platforms such as Twitter. As such, fans see an even blurrier face of kayfabe wherein the real and the scripted exist within the same entity simultaneously.

The other foundational concept to address for proper understanding of the subject at hand is the idea of *being over*. The definition of this term benefits from a discussion of conflict, particularly in relation to rivalries between heroic or otherwise good *faces* and the villainous *heel*. The WWE Creative team crafts storylines for performers based on good versus evil dynamics, and the fans, ideally, cheer and boo accordingly. According to Shoemaker, many fans are considered *marks*, or individuals not clued in on the nuances of kayfabe. On the other end of the spectrum, there are *smarts*, or people with (typically firsthand) backstage knowledge of the business. Shoemaker continues, “The middle ground occupied by a hearty portion of modern wrestling fans is the smart mark, or *smark*—someone who’s in on the fact that wrestling isn’t on the level, but who doesn’t speak about wrestling from intimate knowledge or experience” (“Grantland Dictionary”). Thus, many viewers know that most everything they see on-screen, in-ring, and even on social media is part of Creative’s depiction of the grand illusion. As such, their reactions may not always be in line with what the story is supposed to embody—booing faces

and cheering bad guys based not on how the story is supposed to go but on how much fans like the performer.

The imprecise balance of creative team booking and fan reaction is the foundation of being over, a term usually associated with how fans react. However, overness consists of two discursive elements—one from a fan perspective, one from Creative’s perspective. As Shoemaker writes, “*Getting over* is the act of becoming popular or making fans care ... [and] *putting over* usually refers to a wrestler making his opponent look good in the ring or a company deciding to make someone a star” (“Grantland Dictionary”). This dualism suggests that there is more to a wrestler’s popularity than their fan reaction and more to a championship push than booking from the creative team. Being over in general is an amalgamation of both elements. Thus, the determination of a superstar’s overness results from an understood discourse between fans and the booking team starting from the performer’s initial booking. Smarks react to the wrestler and their booking based on performance in the ring and on the microphone. Creative examines these reactions and (ideally) adjusts booking accordingly. This understood discourse perpetuates the kayfabe that viewers see when they watch wrestling.

These concepts help with the understanding of women’s wrestling and its history, particularly as it applies to the fight for equity. Women featured in wrestling as early as the formation of regional territories, typically as a sideshow attraction that featured women’s aesthetics about as much as their athletic ability. As the women’s division grew in prominence, so, too, did the backstage politicking from such stars as Fabulous Moolah, who worked her way into the main women’s match spots at the expense of other talent. Moolah’s influence extended into the territories and even the early WWF, with her star power and training expertise extending her in-ring legacy well into the heyday of McMahon’s promotion in the 1980s. However, her

influence also involved the exploitation of her trainees, often exchanging their sexual services for furthering their roles in the company, reinforcing the toxically masculine environment within the business that permeated the rise of the WWE from the early 1980s until the present day.

Throughout most of that time period, the paradigm of women within wrestling shifted, focusing less on the in-ring ability of the performers and more on their appearances. The female talent were now managers, accompanying major stars to the ring, their attires matching the gimmicks, whether formal and “classy” to risqué and unrefined. Women’s matches were glorified catfights focused on titillation, often with match stipulations that involved objectification and nudity to draw the attention of a heavily male audience and, in turn, to please the Creative powers that be with higher viewership. With few exceptions, this pattern persisted until the mid-2010s, when wrestlers such as Paige and AJ Lee started to advocate for more focus on women’s in-ring talent, a movement that most fans, more aware of the problematic nature of objectifying women, got behind to the point where Creative had to listen. Though problems still exist in smaller pockets, the women’s product now holds a more respected place on the match cards and in the fans’ collective mindset, especially as reflected in the rise and continued dominance of Becky Lynch.

With the fundamental concepts of wrestling addressed and applied to women’s wrestling, a theoretical foundation can help further explain the idiosyncrasies involved with Lynch’s run as “The Man.” The analytical approach for the present research comes from three sources: Burkean theory, Foucauldian rhetorical theory, and intersectional feminist analysis. Burkean theory is based heavily in a dramatistic (performative) system that unifies rhetoric and poetic language into one framework. Motives, Kenneth Burke posits, can be examined in relation to five dramatic elements common in human discourse: Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose. Translated into

other terms, these concepts relate to the ideas of what the action is, where and when it occurs, who is performing it, how they perform it, and why they perform it (respectively). While these terms are used less to define tangible experience, they provide a guide to examine how individuals conceptualize and talk about their realities. For Burke, language and experience are interdependent. However, the terms within this dramatic pentad are heavily interrelated with each other. For example, there are proper ratios and proper fits between scene and act as well as between scene and ratio, wherein better fits create more easily understood communication about reality.

While the pentad creates a uniform language through which individuals can express their views on the nature of the world, there still lie differences in how people can perceive the world they wish to express. Here, then, is where another Burkean concept comes into play: the terministic screen, or the lens through which individuals view the world, composed of language and concepts that lead them to perceive and interpret stimuli in specific ways. Words, he asserts, convey meaning that people interpret different ways based on the metaphorical screen through which they view the world. As such, certain terms and concepts may grab one person's attention, while others may appeal to disparate individuals. Therefore, word choice defines not only the reality in which someone lives but also their perception of the reality in which all people share. Within this framework, then, there are two types of screens: scientific, which determines the denotative limits of a term, or dramatic, which pertains to actions that one performs or does not perform surrounding a term.

The present research, then, is based in analysis through the dramatic pentad. More specifically, the pentad provides a way to analyze Lynch's rise to prominence in conjunction with her adoption of "The Man" in the context of Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose—

which, as stated, are heavily interdependent to the point where there is conceptual overlap within these legs of the pentad. For example, there are three potential Acts that exist in reference to Lynch's rise: (1) the (creation of a) new paradigm of women's wrestling in WWE, (2) the creation of "The Man" as a character, and (3) the redefinition of gender within WWE. Each Act, though, can fit as other aspects of the pentad: Act 1 can be a conceptual scene in that Lynch is performing in a time period that serves as a new paradigm of women's wrestling, while Act 2 can be a type of Agency, especially in reference to Act 3, which can serve as its own Purpose. There are multiple instances of different pentadic aspects serving in different dramatic roles, but there is no overlap among the three disparate Agents involved: Lynch, the WWE Creative team, and the fans. Here is where terministic screens come into play, with each Agent's specific screen determining which aspects of Lynch's rise fit into which Act, Scene, Agency, and Purpose.

While the pentad serves as a logical way of describing the nuance of the present research, there remains a gap: the discursive generation of meaning associated with it. For this, Foucauldian theory serves as an apt way to achieve this task. Within his work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the major argument Michel Foucault posits is that discourses emerge and evolve based on discursive and institutional relationships that are defined by breaks and cohesive themes within knowledge. Discourse, to him, involves the ways in which individuals speak, thus establishing his method as one that examines tangible utterances in said emergences and transformations with no focus on collective meaning. This, then, creates for Foucault a theory in which discourse is meaning within the specific exchange of utterances, the most basic unit of which is the statement, or the rules that generate discursive meaning to an expression. For an

utterance's signification to be meaningful, then, there must exist a statement that provides it with that meaningfulness within the discourse.

For Foucault, the statement serves as an additional set of rules that provide meaning to signifying phrases on top of the structuralist paradigm of syntax and semantics. As such, meanings depend on the conditions in which they emerge—their surfaces of emergence, including statements that precede it and the ones that come after it. As such, these statements are also events because they emerge and disappear over time, depending on the conditions. A relevant example of a surface of emergence is women's wrestling. The prevailing statement for much of the late 1990s and early 2000s was that women in the WWE were, at most, titillating afterthoughts. The WWE creative team promoted them as such, and the fans of the era voiced their approval with their reactions, thus creating the conditions to foster the paradigm. However, the condition surrounding WWE began to change in the mid-2010s with wrestlers such as Becky Lynch performing well in-ring without relying on sex appeal. What started as niche booking from Creative led to positive fan reactions which, in turn, encouraged WWE to change the statement and created conditions in which women's wrestlers were athletes, not objects. As pertains specifically to Lynch, though, the evolving conditions have led to her own input: the character of "The Man." As such, a new statement arose, one that not only treated women as equal performers to men but also redefined gendered nomenclature—and gender itself—within the WWE.

Foucault also provides explanation regarding the topic of gender and sexuality in his aptly named book *The History of Sexuality*. In this work, Foucault challenges the idea of sexual repression that started with the modern belief of sexuality and its discourse as repressed throughout from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>—all of which is a byproduct of capitalism

and the bourgeois. This perception of repression, then, provides modern theorists with a sense of liberation through rejection of moral systems in the past. While this rejection of moral systems does lead to liberation, it is not the full story. The Western scientific study of sex, then, sought to find the truth behind sex and sexuality. The *scientia sexualis* had its political purposes, too, according to Foucault, since institutions in power would vilify perversion in the name of public health and religious sanctity. But Foucault questions the reasoning behind the Western need for truth behind sexuality, positing that an analytic of power is required for proper understanding of sex. For him, power controls sex through the rules of society, with obedience to those rules serving as a requisite for that power to be maintained. However, ruling classes mask their intentions of domination as benefit for those in subjugated classes, especially in the form of law. Foucault, then, asserts that power and law have been intrinsically linked. To break from law and, by proxy, power is to fully ascertain sex.

Foucauldian theory, then, relates to the present research in its conception of power as omnipresent, its expressions contingent on the conditions in which an individual and, by proxy, the power they assert operate, especially as it pertains to the sustenance of life. For him, power emanates from the body and its actions within the systems they participate in. In relation to the idea of surfaces of emergence, then, the conditions generate the statements of power expressed through the body and its actions—as relates to the present research, the act of wrestling. Its preceding (creative team book) and following (fan reaction) conditions further define the statement, with a triadic power exchange occurring to generate discursive meaning. Creative asserts its power by booking a superstar in a specific way, while the wrestler (for the purposes of this research, Lynch) takes that decision and uses her power as the performer to change that meaning. The fans, in turn, assert their power in the reactions, adding a positive, negative,

ambivalent, or apathetic meaning to the performance. The discursive cycle then restarts, only now within a newly conceived set of conditions. Through this discourse, then, over the two decades between the peak of Attitude-Era sexual objectification and now, the statement had changed alongside the discursive exchanges of power that continue to create meaning of gender and sexuality within wrestling.

These ideas work in conjunction with the third theoretical basis of the present research: intersectional feminism. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this term addresses the ways in which a person's distinct identities (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) combine to create an idiosyncratic form of discrimination (see Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection"). This approach differs from many early forms of social justice focused solely on one mode of discrimination, particularly early forms of feminism (see hooks). As such, Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality contributes much to the theoretical approach for the present research. However, from a theoretical perspective, other analytical lenses provide greater benefit to the current project, building upon Crenshaw's foundation to provide the necessary nuance to address the topic in question.

Two main sources provide the basis for the present interpretation of intersectional feminism. The first of which is bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, which is the author's seminal text covering feminist theory. In it, hooks critiques previous feminist authors such as Betty Friedan for their limited perspectives regarding the realities in which women live. While important to the dialectic surrounding women's rights, these works tended to focus on white, typically educated, middle- and upper-class women. This perspective, then, excludes a large portion of the feminine population, specifically women of color, women in poverty, and women who do not have (access to) education, among others. As such, much of feminist

thinking—and, by extension, culture itself—is steeped in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Her definition of feminism—and the definition of feminism used for the present research—is based in the idea of ending sexist oppression. Simple as this definition may be, its simplicity leaves room for interpretation and addition, especially as “sexist oppression” becomes operationalized within the context of the permeating white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. By shifting the focus away from the overly-simplistic “women’s liberation” definition and into this more inclusive conceptualization based on intersectionality, researchers can account for what hooks calls an implicit dismissal of different factors that determine the extent to which marginalized individuals experience oppression.

Like Foucault, hooks also examines structures of power inherent within discursive societal relationships that define the patriarchy in which individuals live. For hooks, all men support and benefit from patriarchal power in some way. However, men are not the enemy within her framework, since men from marginalized groups experience oppression from white men and women of privilege in a way akin to (though not identical with) women of color. In hooks’ feminism, men can be compatriots to women in the fight against sexist oppression. The main antagonist, then, is the patriarchal power that pervades society. However, contrary to the beliefs of feminist thinkers before her, hooks asserts that women are not powerless so long as the definition of power is shifted away from a focus on domination and exploitation, instead toward a focus on disrupting the exploitation of the patriarchy. By looking at power this way, hooks enables marginalized individuals to empower themselves in the fight against oppression.

The present research is grounded in feminism not as an ideology but as a theoretical lens. Where Foucault examines meaning creation through dialectic and power exchange, feminist theory will observe specific power dynamics involving marginalized individuals. Specifically,

when looking at Lynch and her rise to prominence, feminism will examine the power discourse involved with generating Lynch's push and image as "The Man." Furthermore, feminist theory will be one way of examining the rhetorical implications of the moniker. The moniker itself is based in the gendered idea of a top draw being (exclusively) male, especially since being the top draw means dominating the rest of the competition. However, this concept is turned on its head, given Lynch's gender identity and her adoption of the name. Feminist theory, then, could view this development in one of two ways: Lynch adopting the name, language, and status of the patriarchy while still being oppressed by it; or Lynch redefining power and, in the process, the face of women's wrestling while figuratively wearing the title as a direct attack against patriarchal forces that have oppressed her and other women's wrestlers. Both viewpoints hold equal weight within a feminist framework, thus leaving room for other theoretical approaches to fully ascertain the rhetorical implications of Lynch's use of "The Man."

However, further elaboration of feminist theory can also provide insight into the nuances of Lynch's push. For the present research, this understanding comes in the form of Butlerian theory on gender, specifically referenced in her work *Gender Trouble*. Like hooks, Judith Butler critiques earlier feminist thought, focusing on the idea that the title of *woman/women* is not all-encompassing, considering how class, ethnicity, and sexuality complicate the idea of womanhood. Furthermore, also like hooks, she argues that patriarchal oppression does not affect individuals in a uniform manner because of the sociocultural influences at play in identity formation. As such, she proposes a coalitional feminism that eschews the idea that sex and gender are split among biological/sociocultural (respectively) lines, since sexed bodies are not signified without the influence of gender.

In this way, then, gender is a performative function of dialectic. Focusing on *women/woman*, the idea of femininity and, thus, the conceptualization of being a woman is not created within a vacuum. Rather, it is created within a cultural discourse that creates (rather than expresses) gender, wherein definitions of gender—much like definitions of oppression—are neither universal nor inherent. Using this constant reinterpretation of fluid gender identity, then, individuals can participate in subversive action against patriarchal oppression, which relies on the taboo of incest and, by proxy, pervasively instituted heterosexuality to solidify straightness and binary gender performance. Through this lens, Butler also criticizes the idea of poetic language as repressed maternity surfacing in writing, claiming that maternity is not a defining characteristic of women but instead a product of gendered discourse. In much the same way, then, sex (the act) is conceptualized as female, thus putting the burden of sex on women to the point of the body (male or female) becoming a tool for establishing hegemony through ideas of taboos and purity, typically associated with transcending the lines of gender and sexuality.

The major contribution Butler provides for the present research, then, is the idea of feminism that acknowledges not only the intersectional approach that Crenshaw defines and that hooks proposes but also the idea of gender as a performative action. Her conceptualization of feminism allows marginalized individuals (women, in her case) to become a subjective part of the discourse (as opposed to a discourse object), thus generating their own identity through their own resignification of self. In doing so, individuals not only subvert normative patriarchal standards while also critiquing their establishment, but also create a more positive and congruent conceptualization of identity in the process. As applies to women's wrestling—specifically Lynch—this means a redefinition of the role of a woman in the wrestling ring. Observing the trajectory of change from the Attitude Era until now, women have gone from objects of titillation

to subjects within their own story along a slow growth that eventually boomed within the last decade. In particular, Lynch went from a bit player in the women's division to figurehead of change to physical embodiment of being *over* in WWE. Along this time, she redefined herself through both her in-ring acumen and her self-promotional work on screen and on social media. This process includes her adoption of the nickname "The Man," which itself acts as a form of subversion when observed through a Butlerian feminist lens. Thus, the addition of Butler's theories of dialectical gender performativity add the needed nuance to round out the depiction of Lynch that began with analysis through hooks' feminist lens. This intersectional approach combines with Burkean and Foucauldian theories to create the theoretical underpinning of the present research and provide much-needed contextualization to analyze this topic.

## Methodology

The current project will examine the gendered implications of Becky Lynch's "The Man" character both within the mythos of WWE and in the larger scheme of popular culture. The theoretical analysis is based in four theories. Burkean and Foucauldian theories address provide the basis for discourse and meaning-generation, and intersectional feminist theory from hooks and Butler provides the comprehensive theoretical lens that serves as the foundation for the present research—and all three work as an intertwined entity. Burkean theory serves as the communicative basis for describing Lynch, her push, and her adoption of "The Man" as a moniker and a character. Foucauldian theory, then, will provide the analytical lens for the pentadic description of the present research, establishing the Agents as a discursive community that, through exchanges of power, create the conditions and statements that determine not only meaning within the wrestling world but also signification of the Acts, Scenes, Agencies, and Purposes that can describe it. Lastly, intersectional feminist theory will further analyze these dimensions using the specific lenses of marginalization (hooks) and gender performativity (Butler) to help generate meaning and interpretation of wrestling, especially in relation to the understood Foucauldian power discourse.

## Organization

With the key topics surrounding women's wrestling and gender equity laid out and the theoretical foundations addressed the present research will consist of three related but separate rhetorical analyses. First will be an examination of Becky Lynch's "The Man" character and the fittingness of the nickname within the structure of professional wrestling and, subsequently, masculine paradigms. Following this section will be a deconstruction of how Lynch and her actions have subverted the hypermasculinity inherent in the title of "The Man" while deconstructing gender paradigms in the company. The third aspect addressed in the research provides a different perspective on the nickname itself, one that shows how Lynch does not completely (or solely) fulfil the role of "The Man". The project will end with a discussion of future directions for research as well as implications of the research in analyzing not only professional wrestling but also other areas in which issues of gender performativity and equity are seldom addressed.

## Chapter 1

### Becoming “The Man”: Lynch’s Rise to Prominence—and to the Moniker

Becky Lynch’s on-screen WWE career began in 2014, when she debuted as an Irish step dancing character and defeated Summer Rae in a match on developmental brand NXT. In the time since then, she developed into a driving force behind the so-called Women’s Evolution in WWE, starting with the matches she had in NXT with the rest of the Four Horsewomen and continuing to the top tier shows Raw and SmackDown. Leading up to Summerslam 2018, she had become the first ever SmackDown Women’s Champion and developed a reputation as a solid worker in the women’s division. In fact, she earned that opportunity because of a hot streak that spanned a large part of the year leading up to the August pay-per-view event.

However, the biggest break of Lynch’s career (and the primary case study for the present project) came with her adoption of the character of “The Man.” Having earned a match against SmackDown Women’s Champion Carmella, Lynch was set to have a one-on-one match for the title at Summerslam. Then, as the storyline unfolded, Charlotte Flair had been inserted into the mix, winning the title seemingly out of nowhere. After Charlotte won the Summerslam triple threat match to win the title, Lynch slapped her in retaliatory anger and began a feud that was supposed to make Becky the heel and Charlotte the face. However, despite WWE’s booking trajectory, Lynch’s fan reactions grew with each week and each act of defiance, interpreted less as villainy and more as anti-establishment anti-heroics. Reappropriating the gendered sobriquet “The Man,” Becky proved to be the top draw of the company, leading to a WrestleMania 35 match against Flair and Ronda Rousey for the Raw and SmackDown Women’s Championships, winning after pinning Rousey to claim both belts. It is this rise to the top, then, culminating with her WrestleMania 35 win, that will be the primary timeframe of analysis—even though Lynch is,

as of writing, still the Raw Women's Champion and still wrestling using the nickname and character gimmick of "The Man."

To preface the analysis, it is important to examine Lynch's rise to the top using Burke's pentad. As previously mentioned, the dramatic pentad provides a framework for identifying the Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, and Purpose of a rhetorical situation—the what, when/where, who, how, and why associated with the object of analysis. For this chapter, Becky represents, fittingly, the Agent—the individual who furthers the Act. In this case, the Act is threefold: (1) the (creation of a) new paradigm of women's wrestling in WWE, (2) the creation of "The Man" as a character, and (3) the redefinition of gender within WWE. Depending on the Act in question, the alternative Acts serve other roles. Act 1 could be the scene in which the other two Acts could occur. Act 2 could serve as an Agency for the other two Acts, while Act 3 could be a Purpose that provides reasoning behind the other two acts. This fluidity is made possible in Burkean theory because any one term—and, in this case, any one concept—can serve various roles within the dramatic pentad. He writes, "The margins of overlap [among the concepts] provide opportunities whereby a thinker can go without a leap from any one of the terms to any other of its fellows" (Burke 1302). While talking generally about the arms of the pentad, this could also apply to specific entities classified using them—in this case, Lynch's three Acts as an Agent. Based on the fittingness of the situation, then, these Acts could fulfill Agencies and Purposes because of the fluidity involved with the dramatic pentad and its circular possibilities (see Burke 1311).

Examination of Lynch's rise from Summerslam 2018 to WrestleMania 34 becomes easier with a Burkean framework serving as a buttress for further analysis. Starting from the genesis of "The Man," Becky served as an Agent for her own push, despite what Creative had in mind for

her at the time. When she turned on Charlotte, Lynch was supposed to be the clear-cut villain of their storyline. However, leading up to that point, Lynch connected with the crowd and worked in a way that gained their respect and adoration. The way she did so was through the display of typically masculine traits that, according to Dave Schilling of *Mel Magazine*, only further endeared her to the fans. He writes: “The crowd, however, roared in approval. Those audience reactions continued week after week, until WWE had no choice but to embrace Lynch’s folk-hero status. Her feelings of resentment, frustration and determination resonated with WWE’s predominantly male audience” (Schilling, “Becky Lynch”). Lynch’s anti-establishment attitude reflected the WWE Universe’s need for a renaissance of such authority-defying characters as “Stone Cold” Steve Austin, CM Punk, and Daniel Bryan. The mention of these names evoke in many wrestling fans fond memories of major heroes of the past. As Shoemaker writes, Becky’s “The Man” character is worthy of these comparisons. He continues, “Lynch’s position atop the women’s division is indisputable. ... No wrestler has captured the imaginations of fans as dramatically as she has since Daniel Bryan five years ago ... we might have to start dusting off the “Stone Cold” comparisons. Hell, let’s go ahead” (Shoemaker, “The ‘Royal Rumble’”). By equating Lynch to two of the most popular babyface everymen in WWE history, Shoemaker legitimizes the anti-heroics of “The Man” as Lynch’s magnum opus, one that establishes her as a top draw along the lines of two of the most impactful in recent memory.

The comparisons to major faces of the company puts Lynch in a rarified air which, through Burkean analysis, can shed light on not only the state of Becky within the company but also the general state of women performers within the company. Burke writes, “The fact that an activity is capable of reduction to intrinsic, autonomous principles does not argue that it is free from identification with other orders of motivation extrinsic to it” (Burke 1329). Using this logic,

then, Lynch may be acting separately from other women in WWE in ways that fall outside the paradigm of their shared gender and shared division within the company. However, there is still no separating her from the plight of women's wrestlers in the modern era of sports entertainment, a plight that leaves her striving for equity and non-objectification. As Chow states, the representation of women's wrestlers within his embedded study was problematized because of the WWE's highly gendered portrayal of women at the time. In a profession where "the visible marks that reveal the commodity status of the laboring body ... include bruises, broken bones, dislocations, and excessive muscle gain," sustaining injury and physical marks of exertion runs counter to the paradigmatic approach WWE depicted women until the mid-2010s (Chow 81). Lynch, then, served as both anomaly and paragon, taking bumps and injuries atypical of her gender but near-expected of her title as "The Man." Such a paradox is accounted for in Burkean theory. He writes, "Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (Burke 1341). This idea helps analyze "The Man" as acted-out discourse and, thus, terminology. The gimmick is a selection Lynch's reality as the top draw in the company. The selection and deflection, though, are contingent on the gendered reality in question. Focusing terministically on the implications of "The Man," the gimmick reflects the attitudes not only of stereotypical men but also of the anti-heroics of men like Austin and Bryan while deflecting the idea that this reality must feature a male exemplar. Shifting focus to Lynch as a woman, "The Man," then, reflects the current state of the women's division in WWE while deflecting the paradigm set up through decades of objectification and sexism.

In her attempt to distance her character from typical definitions of femininity, especially as established within the WWE, Lynch eventually adopted typically masculine traits to fit her

character of “The Man”—specifically, a confrontational defiance with a penchant for violence and an adherence to tropes steeped in misogyny and the othering of women. Such traits are highlighted in both Krane and Soulliere’s work. Krane’s work emphasizes the differences in gendered performance of sport, emphasizing that power and assertiveness are hallmarks of men’s sports. Women, she says, “know the consequences of not appearing feminine or participating in sports not perceived as feminine” (Krane 118), including negative treatment, harassment, and lack of (positive) media attention. However, Lynch performs in WWE, a sport (of sorts) that encourages adherence to masculine tropes. In her content analysis of WWE television from the Attitude Era, Soulliere found six prevailing messages about manhood, stating in summary that “these messages support the dominant culturally ideal hegemonic form of masculinity by emphasizing aggression and violence ... [and] achievement as desirable masculine traits” (8). Though this data is nearly two decades old, and while ideas of gender are more fluid than they were in that time, the hegemonic structures that run WWE (particularly on the Creative team) are still in place. So, while Lynch’s work as “The Man” exhibits gender fluidity, the ideas of masculinity inherent in the moniker are still omnipresent.

Examination of Lynch’s actions and words in the leadup to WrestleMania 35 shows her adherence to those roles. This pattern can be seen in her early “heel” promos against Charlotte. As the two debated during a split-screen, on-video faceoff, Flair tapped into their former friendship, emphasizing that she would give Lynch a title opportunity if she just asked (rather than physically assaulting Flair). Becky responded flippantly, stating “Do I look like a charity case to you? Did I look like one last week when I was standing above you holding a title above my head? ... I’m done playing. From now on, I’m taking. And I don’t care how that affects you, Charlotte, or your royal little bubble” (“Charlotte Flair and Becky Lynch”). Here, Lynch played

into the idea of defiantly standing up to authority, referencing not only Flair's nickname of "The Queen" but also her status as the daughter of Ric Flair, a legend in the wrestling world for his longevity and acumen in the ring and on the microphone. Evoking this idea created in fans a feeling of anti-establishment fervor, playing on a typically male entitlement for what is "rightfully" theirs. To confront this wronging, Lynch leans on the implicitly violent idea of taking without regard, another trait associated with masculinity, particularly when it comes to colonization and other similar concepts.

The fans supported this characterization, though. As Simon Miller of *WhatCulture Wrestling* says, the fans believed Lynch was rightfully angry, considering Charlotte's unfair assertion into the title picture. Even after claiming the title, the fans continued to shower love onto Lynch because of her attitude and violent tendencies. This idea was culminated in the buildup to Survivor Series, where Lynch lead the SmackDown roster on an invasion of Raw. In the fracas, Lynch suffered a concussion and bloodied nose, which she paid no regard to as she posed defiantly by the crowd. As Miller elaborated, "At that very point, she wasn't playing pro wrestler. She was just a fighter, she was just a warrior, and she was someone you wanted to get behind" ("Why Becky Lynch"). His use of the words "fighter" and "warrior" were fitting with Lynch's appropriation of stereotypically male traits, given the strength and headstrongness the terms evoke. Given that description, it is no wonder fans got behind her—she was fulfilling the masculine ideal that the typically male audience of WWE strive to see in programming.

In other words, Becky Lynch was performing masculinity "correctly" according to the fanbase, allowing them to cosign onto Lynch's identity as "The Man" despite her gender. This discursive exchange is possible because, as Butler explains, gender is a fabricated and, more importantly, a performative act. She explains, "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of

gender requires a performance that is *repeated*. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation” (Butler 191). The ideas of assertiveness and violent confrontation have been repeated within the cultural climate surrounding masculinity to the point that it is, indeed, mundane—almost expected. By repeatedly performing those rituals, Lynch, too, adopted the role of “The Man” not just in character but in action. She was, for all intents and purposes, male to the WWE audience, seeing as she acted like one in her actions and her words. These actions led to the comparisons to Punk, Austin, and Bryan, especially when considering that, according to hooks, hegemonic ideologies place value in women through their relations to men. She writes, “When bourgeois white women . . . sought role models who possess strength, confidence, assertiveness, and decision-making ability, they choose ruling groups of white males” (hooks 88). Lynch, a native of Ireland who, at the time of her “heel turn,” was in a comfortable position within the company, adopted masculine traits and a masculine moniker. She performed in a way that gained comparisons to other masculine icons within the wrestling business. As such, she was doing just as hooks describes: looking to the dominant group of WWE (white men) to get over and earn a push above the rest of the women’s division and, in many ways, above the rest of the roster.

In doing so, though, Lynch reinforced hegemonic—patriarchal—power structures within the business. According to Foucault, this practice is in line with how such constructs pervade society. Whereas the law may ensure some levels of power from dominant groups, “new methods of power whose operation is not ensured by right but by technique, not by law but by normalization, not by punishment but by control, methods that are employed on all levels and in forms that go beyond the state and its apparatus” (Foucault 89). In this case, power is ensured

through Lynch's adoption of the assertiveness, the confrontational nature of interaction inherent with the WWE paradigm of dominant performers. Her adoption of "The Man" as a nickname further cements this idea: even women want to be men—have to be men—to achieve a prominent place in the company and on the match card. They, along with individuals outside the main event spotlight, have to be more assertive, more confrontational, and more violent to achieve the success of their more accomplished (and, by proxy, better booked) colleagues. The circular reinforcement of gender roles and domination, thus, is continued.

Another, more problematic, way in which Lynch adopted "The Man" persona and perpetuated the power dynamics of hegemony was through her adherence to tropes steeped in patriarchal misogyny. Since losing the title and veering into supposed heel territory, Lynch's social media presence balanced a cocksureness with insults at other women in the WWE ranks. She attacked Charlotte's credibility as champion, citing the nearly two decades Lynch spent honing her craft while Flair was "playing volleyball and getting a tan" (Lynch). After winning the title, Lynch participated in a Twitter exchange with NXT wrestler Rhea Ripley, calling her "a girl playing a woman while [Lynch is] a woman being the man" (Lynch). In December, after Charlotte called her out for missing a week with a concussion and bloodied nose, Lynch responded with a picture that, in part, featured a photo of Flair framed specifically at her cleavage, accompanied with this text: "[Charlotte] missed ONE MONTH of Smackdown for something. I can't remember" (Lynch), alluding to Flair's absence to tend to ruptured breast implants. Even after her win at WrestleMania, Lynch established her place as "The Man" against new rival Lacey Evans, nicknamed the "Sassy Southern Belle" and portrayed as a former US Marine who still acted like a proper lady. On multiple occasions, Lynch played on Evans' characterization, asking the Southern Belle to make her a sandwich, also tweeting "Do what The

Man tells you” (Lynch) and “Here’s your apron, Plank, now where’s the man’s sammich [sic]?” (Lynch). While all arguably skillful uses of wordplay, there is no doubting that many of Lynch’s statements are rife with misogynistic comments aimed at her fellow women’s competitors.

Her most notable examples of misogyny come from the build to WrestleMania 35, particularly when it comes to her insults aimed at Ronda Rousey, since those were tinged not only with patriarchal sexism but also misogynistic ableism in reference to Rousey’s MMA career. As Lynch said in an interview with ESPN, “I’m excited to chase her out ... We all know what happens when Ronda Rousey loses: she can’t hack it, she gets her jacket, she goes and curls up in a blankie” (“Becky Lynch puts Ronda Rousey”). Rousey was undefeated in her UFC career until two knockout losses—both in under one minute—sent her into a deep depression before she emerged in WWE. Knowing this, Lynch pokes fun at Ronda, infantilizing her while simultaneously diminishing the effects of her mental illness. This was not the first instance of Becky making such a statement, though. As a response to Rousey’s disingenuous comments about Lynch missing their match at Survivor Series, Becky responded, “When I got my face broke I got up, owned you, THEN showed up the next day ... When you got your face broke you hid for a year under your blankie. Your mind is as weak as your jaw” (Lynch). The next week, Lynch linked a video of Ronda giving a promo as fans cheered “Becky” repeatedly, adding, “Hey Ronnie, does this give you me-ness envy,” playing on the Freudian concept of penis envy, colloquially used as a way of signifying women’s jealousy toward men (Lynch). In these public statements, Lynch fully adopted the socially gendered aspects of “The Man” to devalue her competition on the microphone, but these acts just as easily reflect traditionally anti-feminine attitudes using tropes frowned-upon in modern anti-sexist discourse.

One argument for Lynch's adherence to these tropes comes from the idea of gender performativity. From a Butlerian perspective, her sustained overness and position on the card is contingent on one primary thing. As Butler explains, "Because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term *strategy* better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences" (190). This idea applies to Lynch's character as well: the survival of "The Man" and its performer are contingent on the correct performance of gender, even a gimmicked one. While she performs gender well through her aggressiveness, Becky adds this sexist dimension to her character as a way of "more correctly" performing her gender based on the standards of the hegemony in which she is steeped—particularly the hegemony surrounding Vince McMahon. This microcosm of patriarchy, then, reflects what Foucault refers to as an "omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point ... Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (93). WWE's hegemony is societal, inherent in McMahon's decisions, inherent in Lynch's actions, inherent in fans' approval of the product, inherent in many aspects of the world outside the company. As such, Creative does not need to assert control over what Lynch says or does to adopt the persona of "The Man," seeing as she already has the tools capable to perform and reproduce the patriarchal constructs the character and the company both adhere to.

This collection of misogynist tactics comes not from Lynch's active accumulation of them but from her passive participation in a society that, as Foucault says, actively promotes and generates such conceptions of gender and, thus, of power. According to hooks, this brand of

power has been conditioned wholesale into Western society's definition of the concept. She writes, "Women, though assigned different roles to play in society based on sex, are not taught a different value system ... Although women do not have the power ruling groups of men often exert, they do not conceptualize power differently" (hooks 87). Therefore, women value power the same way as men, albeit from a marginalized perspective when it comes to attaining it. Lynch, and the rest of the women's division by proxy, see this power as a road to equity within their business, much like society has conditioned many women to view power as a way of obtaining social equity. To get there, Lynch adopts a moniker and gimmick to, in a way, infiltrate masculinity on the way to the success that patriarchy defines and values. In doing so, though, she participates in the machinations of the hegemony with her sexist acts toward the rest of the women's division. As hooks states, this sort of in-gender fighting is an expression of male supremacy. She continues, "It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause. While sexism teaches women to be sex objects for men, it is also manifest when women who have repudiated this role feel contemptuous and superior in relation to those women who have not" (hooks 48). By adopting "The Man" as a character, Lynch separates herself from the rest of the division in a way that tacitly reflects the contempt and superiority hooks mentions. She reinforces this rift through attacks on typically feminine traits and activities in which her colleagues participate. Lynch, truly, adopted the moniker of "The Man," not only as a demarcation of her status within the company but also as a symbol of hegemony in action.

## Chapter 2

### Subverting “The Man”: A Deconstruction of the Masculine Ideal

In adopting the moniker of “The Man,” Becky Lynch gave herself just as much opportunity to redefine gender paradigms as she did to establish them. Examining Lynch’s ascension to the top of the card and her representation of the moniker since adopting it, there is an apparent dissonance outside of the phenotypical differences between Becky and those who have adopted the sobriquet previously. As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are ways she fulfilled many of the gender expectations inherent in the title of “The Man.” However, throughout her time wielding the nickname and its associated gimmick, she reconstructed how WWE, its fans, and some of its superstars define masculinity while embracing femininity and taking a progressive stance for inclusion within sports entertainment—one previously unseen or unheard of in the hypermasculine environment of professional wrestling.

The present chapter will delve deeper into Becky’s role as Agent for two heavily connected Acts previously addressed: Act 1 (the creation of a new paradigm of women’s wrestling) and Act 3 (the redefinition of gender within WWE). Given the fluidity of the pentad, then, Act 2 (the creation of “The Man” as a gimmick) serves as the Agency through which Lynch carries out the two Acts. In other words, throughout her run as “The Man,” Lynch used the platform she created alongside her character to change the paradigm of women’s wrestling and, thus, redefine the gender limits within WWE. The pentad can explain this appropriation of Act as Agency through the inherent “circular possibility in the terms,” working in conjunction with the ability for concepts to jump across the pentad to fulfill different roles in the name of conformity to the context at hand (Burke 1311). This context, usually, comes from the Agent performing the act. Burke writes, “The act-agent ratio more strongly suggests a temporal or sequential

relationship than a purely positional or geometric one. The agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from him ... Acts can make him or remake him in accordance with their nature. They would be his product and/or he would be theirs” (Burke 1309). The Act does not exist without the Agent giving it shape or performing it. In this case, Lynch, performs all three of the mentioned Acts, giving them definition as they manifest. Each Act materializes differently, and sometimes as other parts of the pentad. Burke continues, “However ‘pure’ one’s motives may be actually, the impurities of identification lurking about the edges of such situations introduce a typical Rhetorical wrangle of the sort that can never be settled” (Burke 1328). In relation to Lynch and the three Acts, her development of the character of “The Man” started primarily as an Act. However, given the ripple effects of her enactment of the gimmick, this Act becomes less concrete and serves as the Agency for the other two, tacitly (almost incidentally) generated Acts. In this process, then, Act 2 takes a supporting role for the others, particularly from an analytical standpoint.

These other concepts—the creation and redefinition—receive an ironic sort of support from Lynch adopting the role of “The Man.” By taking on this nickname, she draws attention to the paradigms of both men’s and women’s wrestling while traversing between the two gendered classifications, entrenching herself in whatever role she is performing at the time. From a Burkean perspective, the nickname allows for this brand of vacillation. He writes, “There are two kinds of terms: terms that put things together, and terms that take things apart. Otherwise put, *A* can feel himself identified with *B*, or he can think of himself as disassociated from *B*” (Burke 1344). In Lynch’s case, “The Man” as both a nickname and a gimmick performs both terministic roles in two different ways. On the one hand, in identifying as “The Man,” Lynch identifies herself in terms of masculinity and disassociates herself from femininity. As mentioned in the

previous chapter, this practice included adhering to hypermasculine and misogynistic traits to emphasize her adherence to the gendered meaning behind “The Man.” On the other hand, as will be addressed later in this chapter, taking on the moniker serves almost as a parody of the name, thus leading to Lynch’s identification as a woman while distancing herself from an identity as the prototypical stereotypical man.

Terministically, then, Lynch sits in an inbetweenity befitting of not only her place on the card but also her character—a far cry from WWE’s depictions of women in the last quarter century. During the mid-to-late 1990s, WWE experienced a renaissance in popularity, deemed the Attitude Era for its congruence to the zeitgeist of edginess in the face of established norms. Women in WWE during this time were collectively termed *Divas* and depicted as objects of titillation, thus devaluing any legitimacy they had as in-ring performers. Instead of wrestling legitimized matches, female talent competed in contests that focused on showing skin and performing in provocative manners—a pattern that continued until the company took a turn toward more PG content. Even still, women’s competitors still received less spotlight than their male counterparts. Matches were still designed to be breaks in the action, and competitors were still made “to smile, to preen, and to be appealing to the male audience” (Schilling, “Becky Lynch”). This paradigm was best exemplified in the leadup to the #GiveDivasAChance Movement, started during a 2015 rivalry between then-Divas Champion Nikki Bella and upstart anti-Diva Paige. As Adam Clery of *WhatCulture Wrestling* describes, this storyline did its best to showcase the women’s talent, albeit in ways unsuccessful. He explains, “Back in 2015, Paige and her whole ‘anti-Diva’ gimmick was about as close as WWE got to any form of female empowerment. But when you look back at [one] particular segment—where she gets her clothes nicked and she has to dress up [in a childish outfit]—it’s actually really grim” (Clery, “How

WWE Changed”). The commentary team focused not on the storyline, but on Paige’s appearance. Given the scripted nature of wrestling—even going as deep as commentator’s lines—as Clery explains, “That’s old dudes talking to other old dudes with another old dude in their ear, and all any of them are saying is that the 22-year-old is actually pretty hot when you dress her up as a child” (“How WWE Changed”). Even though the product was nowhere near as explicit, the mistreatment was still rampant, a sentiment echoed after the beginning of the #GiveDivasAChance hashtag, a campaign arising from an episode of *Raw* wherein the only women’s content on a three-hour show amounted to under two minutes of time. Compared to what other companies were doing at the time, in Clery’s words, “WWE’s post-Attitude Era treatment of women [looked] somehow more archaic than the days of stick-on handprint bikinis and women barking like dogs” (“How WWE Changed”).

This treatment of women reflects Foucault’s ideas of a repressive hypothesis, wherein the powerful seemingly relegate sexuality to a shadow existence while they exploit it as a foundational secret of society. As he writes, “On the face of it at least, our civilization ... [is] the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex which are geared to form a knowledge-power” (Foucault 58). As applies to how WWE treated women during the Attitude Era, the company took advantage of this manufactured scarcity of sexuality and used sex as a tool for attention and, by proxy, financial gain through the exploitation of (female) physical capital. Given the human tendency toward obtaining knowledge, as Foucault says, two processes emerge and interact with one another: “we demand that sex speak the truth ... and we demand that it tells us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness” (Foucault 59). Bringing it back to Attitude-Era WWE,

fans watching the product sought a truth about sex based on a hypermasculine paradigm of the era and of the product. WWE, in turn, appealed to this perceived truth by leaning heavily into the era's edginess and the professions hypermasculinity, creating, in turn, the misogynistic atmosphere surrounding women's performers.

This tactic worked because of the prevalence of sex and sexuality in power discourse. As Foucault writes, "Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies" (Foucault 103). The WWE, then, used this versatility to create a product that not only appealed to a wider audience but also established a narrower view of women to this larger following. In doing so, the company also exhibited a form of control of the narrative surrounding their female talent and, by proxy, women in general. Foucault continues, "The deployment of sexuality has its reason for being, not in reproducing itself, but in proliferating, innovating, annexing, creating, and penetrating bodies in an increasingly detailed way, and in controlling populations in an increasingly comprehensive way" (107). In WWE's case, the idea permeated not only the performers who embodied the power discourse at hand but also the viewing audience who, in accepting this representation of women and their sexuality, found a way to control the population and the product that acts as their shared discourse. WWE controlled these discursive interactions even during the Women's Revolution that grew from the #GiveDivasAChance movement, leading to what Clery refers to as "a commercially guided public relations exercise designed to boost business" ("How WWE Changed"). While a less misogynistic depiction of women changed the persistent narrative, WWE made concerted efforts to control the changing paradigms, taking responsibility for the Revolution as it was happening.

Lynch, in her ascension to the top of the card, reclaimed control of this narrative from WWE through her organic connection to the fans. With her adoption of “The Man” in 2018, Becky—not the WWE—led company’s charge into the future, reshaping the paradigms of the WWE to include and to emphasize women as top draws of equal caliber to the men. As she said in an interview with *Yahoo! Sports*, ““The top dog in the company has always been the man. Now I’m the top dog. It’s been a progression of believing it and owning it”” (Sulla-Heffinger, “Becoming ‘The Man’”). Lynch, in this statement, accepts her role at the top of the company while recognizing the paradigm she continues to shift in the process. As she told *Pink News*, her status and her name are less about gender and more about doing her job better than anybody else. She continues, ““I’m the most victorious of all Superstars, both on Raw and SmackDown [and] won the most matches. Therefore, I am the man of not just the women’s locker room, but also the men’s locker room”” (Ahmed, “WWE’s Becky Lynch”). This statement creates a theme for Lynch’s approach to being at the top: redefining masculinity and femininity within the company.

To achieve this goal, she has appropriated “The Man” as a nickname and refashioned it as a mark of honor, not as a mark of gender. This idea has basis in Soulliere’s idea of defining masculinity through winning, which creates another dissonance considering Lynch’s identity as a woman. In a manner that simultaneously attacks superstars’ individual masculinities and the idea of masculinity itself, Lynch takes to social media and to her matches to create a more feminine form of masculinity. Take, for example, her interaction with then-top babyface Seth Rollins when a fan mentioned that he was the man (in the colloquial sense). Her response: “You might be a man, but I am undeniably the man” (Lynch). This approach creates much criticism within many circles when brought up in relation to women’s progress in the company. In response to one Instagram comment about the adoption of the nickname, Lynch tweeted that “The Man” is

her own statement. She added, “After decades of (awesome) men being The Man, what’s more empowering than saying to both female & male locker rooms, ‘I am The Man now, what are you going to do about it?’” (Lynch). While respecting the (male) lineage of the nickname, she was able to appropriate “The Man” to describe her own climb to the top, gender notwithstanding. Furthermore, as she says in a discussion session she had at the 2020 Consumer Electronics Show, the paradigm of the sport is that the top draw is “The Man” by nature. She adds, “I can’t change the English language to mean that the top person is The Woman, so I said ... ‘I’m going to start calling myself The Man.’ And for me, that wasn’t a way to negate female empowerment, that was a way to say, ‘No, sorry guys, I’m the top dog, The Man, I’m taking your name and your spot.’” (The Female Quotient, live video). In continuing this paradigm, she changes the paradigm. While continuing the trend of referring to a top draw as “The Man,” her existence as a woman redefines who a top draw can be.

Lynch, in a way, has simultaneously repurposed both her gendered role as a woman and the definition of “The Man” in a way best analyzed through Foucauldian systems. He lays out a three-step roadmap for understanding how discourse objects come into existence, starting with the idea of surfaces of emergence. These surfaces, as he writes, “show where these individual differences ... may emerge, and then be designated and analyzed. These surfaces of emergence are not the same for different societies, at different periods, and in different forms of discourse” (Foucault 1437). These surfaces provide a way to examine situations in which an object is initially situated. In the case of “The Man” as a character, the surface of emergence comes from the paradigm of a male wrestler adopting the gimmick. Foucault then explains how authorities identify and limit the term or, in this case, gimmick. In this instance, the WWE served as the primary Agent of inclusion and exclusion, much like the medical field served as the authority for

identifying madness (see Foucault 1437). However, given Lynch's subject position as an Agent in this case, she provides the authority to redefine how "The Man" is conceptualized based on her authoritative discursive position. Her unique perspective, then, influences the last step of this analysis: the grids of specification. These systems differentiate an object of discourse from others like it, usually when observed through specific authoritative perspectives—in this instance, through Lynch's redefinition of "The Man." While still steeped in masculine paradigms, Becky took the character (the surface of emergence), provided her authoritative discourse as a wrestler over with the audience, and used her actions and words in developing the gimmick as the grid of specification to recontextualize how to perceive "The Man" through Lynch as the Agent.

Lynch's actions, through this analysis, provide ambiguity to a concept, a character, once considered solidified in its identity. However, the idea of "The Man" is still in place as a specific surface of emergence. The idea of being the top draw of the company remains unchanged. What has changed, however, is the discursive formation through which authorities—be they fans, wrestlers, or wrestling promotions—generate the multitudinous definitions of what "The Man" is. As Foucault writes, "A discursive formation is defined ... if one can show that it may give birth simultaneously or successively to mutually exclusive objects without having to modify itself" (Foucault 1439). Again, the idea of "The Man" is not modified. What has changed, though, is the specific identification of the character. What was once a specifically male role has become one free of gender identification. Even though the specific brand of power, the specific discourse involved with defining the characteristics of "The Man," are still intact, the Agent involved with its identification is now free from the requirement of gender congruence.

Lynch's time as champion and as "The Man" has been rife with examples of this newfound incongruence between moniker and performer gender. This dissonance was

highlighted during her rivalry against Evans, especially when this storyline overlapped with the feud between Rollins (who was romantically involved with Lynch) and company heel Baron Corbin. While Lynch continued to refer to herself as “The Man,” commentary focused more intently on her relationship with Rollins, making constant mention to the two’s status as a couple. Even Evans played on feminine roles in a Twitter exchange, stating “I’ve been makin [sic] sandwiches, raisin [sic] babies and feeding my MAN the whole time you’ve been striving to be successful in life” (Evans). By attacking her femininity, Evans drew upon the dissonance between Lynch’s gender and nickname in a manner steeped in gender essentialism. This lean onto hegemonic depictions of femininity is typically found in sports considered more feminine (see Béki and Gál), so it fits Evans’ Sassy Southern Belle persona, considering how much the character leans on the idea of acting like a lady—at least outside of the ring.

However, Lynch used this dissonance to her advantage, countering in a way that eschews typical essentialized gender expectations. She quoted Evans’ tweet, replying, “So you’d agree a woman can be whoever or whatever she likes? Wife, mother, CEO, businesswoman or The Man of this whole damn business” (Lynch). Though she followed up that line with a misogynistic spin, the point remained: this new manifestation of “The Man” was an act of defiance against the idea of essentialism and the gender paradigms of the past. She continued this assertion throughout her run, saying as recently as January 2020 that keeping the “women’s” label on their division is a hindrance to progress. She continued, “[Gender] shouldn’t be an issue at this point. We’re passed all the making history. We’ve made all the history. I mean, sure, there’s always going to be more history to be made, but that’s out of the equation now” (“Becky Lynch on the Women’s Division”). She clarified this statement in a tweet the next day, featuring a screenshot of the following text in a notes app: “The term ‘women’ can limit openings because phrases like

‘there’s already a women’s match on the show’ is still in wrestling’s historical DNA. ... I’d simply love us to get to a place where there’s three ‘women’s matches’ on PPV, or ten... or none if it so happens we’re not serving the audience” (Lynch). Her words serve as an attempt to create a more egalitarian environment for all competitors based on talent. Instead of a juxtaposition of segments based on demographics, she advocates for a redefinition of booking—and, by proxy, of the gendered spectrum within the company—based on merit and audience response.

Regardless of the progressiveness that may or not be extant in Lynch’s comments, her ideas are based in hooks and Butler’s theories surrounding discursive generation of power, especially as gender is involved. As hooks has mentioned, many women conceive of power through the lens of sexist oppression and, thus, are led to believe they are powerless. On the contrary, “One of the most significant forms of power held by the weak is ‘the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful.’ ... [Women] can reject the powerful’s definition of their reality ... the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength” (hooks 92). hooks adds that “recognition of that strength, that power, is a step women together can take towards liberation” (hooks 95). Liberation, then, comes from the deconstruction of hegemonic definitions of identity and the subsequent reconstruction of this identity in the fight toward true equity and equality. This premise serves as an analytical background for how Lynch has approached her character of “The Man.” Instead of making the women’s division in the image of the men’s using the lens of (hyper)masculine power, she makes efforts to challenge and redefine the roles and depictions of women in the company, constructing a new paradigm surrounding gender in the process.

As such, Lynch sits in the middle of the supposed binary between masculine and feminine identity while having the ability to occupy either role depending on the traits she

purports emphasizes at any time. As Butler writes, “One is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formula that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (30). However, as Butler points out, this idea, too, is not as simple as a binary, since gender is neither stable nor uniform, given how the definition of the term “women” is not all-encompassing either in identity or in experience. What occurs, then, is a continuous discourse that “seems to congeal into the most reified of forms,” thus creating a constructed (though still somewhat fluid) idea of gender (Butler 45). However, as Butler writes, this sort of congealed reality is not only fluid but also superficial, contingent of factors that project a supposed reality onto the surface of a body. She explains, “Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 185). In this case, Lynch’s identity is a continued fabrication of gender along all points of the typified masculine/feminine binary, drawing from male (sometimes misogynistic) performativities to establish her status as “The Man” but still adhering to her femininity in the name of progress. In channeling both sets of traits simultaneously, her existence within and between both the masculine and feminine creates an idiosyncratic congealing of identity, redefining not only “The Man” as a name and gimmick but also the gendered paradigms within the WWE, taking a step toward social liberation and professional equity.

### Chapter 3

#### “The Man,” the Misnomer: Examining the Complications of the Character

Though Lynch exhibits agency to deconstruct and redefine “The Man” and the gender roles associated with professional wrestling, there are still many ways in which she falls short of truly owning the moniker. Given the discursive nature of professional wrestling, from the off-screen machinations to the live or on-screen product, wrestlers do not work in a vacuum. Other voices—in this case, fellow wrestlers, Creative, or even audiences—are necessary for parts of the discourse in terms of gimmick creation and character push. Along those lines, then, those other discursive authorities are, from a Burkean perspective, other Agents who lay claim to “The Man” as a title. As such, the moniker is just as much a term to define as it is a character to own. As Burke writes, “If any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (1341). Consider Lynch’s trifold Act: creating “The Man” as a gimmick while shifting the paradigm of women’s wrestling and redefining gender in WWE. This Act is a selection of the reality of the wrestling world in that it is a microcosm centered around Lynch. As such, it reflects her own reality while deflecting other realities centered around other Agents. Those other Agents, then, have their own realities in which Lynch’s Act is a selection, albeit not one that reflects their perspectives. In other words, while “The Man” is a part of those Agents’ construction of reality, it does not serve the same role as it does in Lynch’s. In fact, for superstars with name recognition like Rousey and Flair, for Vince McMahon (as synecdoche of WWE Creative), and for the WWE’s fanbase, “The Man” as an idea and a nickname is not one for Lynch to own by herself, considering the discursive authority they hold in the creation of their realities.

## Ronda Rousey and Charlotte Flair

Lynch's opponents in the WrestleMania 35 main event brought more than just their titles to the triple threat match. They brought a name value from two disparate perspectives within WWE. On the one hand is Rousey, a trailblazer in UFC with television and movie credits to her name, who came into WWE and made her way directly to the main event scene. As Sarah Kurchak of *Vice* writes, her meteoric push up the card was a result of her draw outside WWE. She adds, "[Rousey] began her WWE career much like she began her UFC one: riding the wave of a massive turning point for women in the promotion, and being awarded a significant portion of the spotlight at a moment that probably should and could have been shared with everyone who worked so hard to make [her debut] possible at all" (Kurchak, "Ronda Rousey Presents"). Looking at Rousey's record of singles matches on major pay-per-view cards, it is easy to see how she could hold the title of "The Man," if only because of the power she held within the company in her short career.

On the other hand, there is Charlotte, the daughter of legendary champion Ric Flair whose pedigree and in-ring ability have gained her a spot always near the top of the card. As Chris Roling of *Bleacher Report* said in the WrestleMania 35 buildup, "There is always the Flair angle here. She was always going to play a part in this storyline whether fans liked it or not" ("WWE Hot Take"). He made this comment in response to Lynch's kayfabe suspension which led to Flair's insertion into the WrestleMania Raw Women's Championship match against Rousey. However, this idea is equally applicable to other aspects of the women's division in WWE, considering her in-ring prowess as reflected in her record-setting women's title runs across SmackDown, Raw, and NXT. As such, Flair's omnipresence leaves her with competing but equally important roles in the company. Sean Reuter writes, "She's a guest speaker for

college courses and a promoter for PPVs she's not even wrestling on just as much as she is an on-screen bad girl" ("Charlotte Flair vs. the Internet"). She generates an imposing figure, partially from her father's legacy, partially from her own merits. This combination, then, generates for her an amount of power associated with a nickname like "The Man," especially when considering how Lynch could only recently claim that kind of draw and control within the WWE and from its audience.

Both performers wanted to stake their own claim as "The Man." As such, performatively, they act in absolutes of masculinity and femininity that Lynch had participated in, albeit in a more tacit manner, focusing on the ability to flaunt both feminine and masculine traits interchangeably—but never simultaneously. Doing so would shake paradigmatic depictions of gender beyond that which is acceptable within the industry and, to an extent, society. In Butlerian terms, it would rupture the idea of universality of gender. She writes, "Universalistic claims are based on a common or shared epistemological standpoint, understood as the articulated consciousness or shared structures of oppression or in the ostensibly transcultural structures of femininity, maternity, sexuality, and/or *écriture féminine*" (Butler 19). The shared discourse that has generated the paradigm of women's wrestling is steeped into these traditional structures, whether through overt adherence to them or through the illusion of breaking them while still following the paradigm. As such, women who do not fit within the universal image of femininity are ostracized—or at least looked down upon. While Flair and Rousey exhibit traits of masculinity, those traits are not simultaneously signified as their feminine ones. In other words, in the ring, they are masculine, but they are feminine outside of match contexts. This intragender power dynamic, as hooks states, is common in feminist circles when observing how white bourgeois women interact with those of lesser privilege. She writes, "They did not distinguish

between the passive role many women assume in relation to male peers and/or male authority figures, and the assertive, even domineering, role they assume in relation to ... individuals, female or male, who have lower social status, whom they see as inferiors” (hooks 93). As powerful women (whether through name value or through adherence to the paradigm), they look down on those like Lynch who convolute the definitions of gender. Simultaneously, though, they claim a position as a revolutionary trying to fight against male oppression in the industry. While their efforts at breaking the proverbial glass ceiling are commendable, their oppression of others within the division reflects the power dynamics of a toxic masculinity inherent in “The Man” as a persona.

Despite Rousey and Flair’s adherence to interchangeable universals of masculinity and femininity, Lynch still solidified herself as “The Man,” making herself the top draw through a loyalty not only to the business but also to the fans. In the build to WrestleMania 35, the two champions leaned heavily into their heel roles in two disparate ways. Rousey took shots at the company and, by proxy, its fans by leaning into her notoriety in a “real” fighting sport. In doing so (and doing so with poor execution), she fell out of favor with the fans. Charlotte also focused on her name recognition, choosing to lean on her legacy and prowess to put herself on a pedestal above both the women below her on the card and the fans. Lynch countered their heel characters with a common babyface tactic: relatability. Given Rousey’s disrespect for the business and Flair’s pomposity, the WrestleMania 35 main event needed a personality that neither of them could bring. As Lynch said in her interview with ESPN, “Ronda’s there with her name. Charlotte’s there with her name. I come in full of soul and heart, and that’s what people can relate to” (“Becky Lynch Puts”). This ability to relate with a superstar was what made people like Austin and Bryan antiheroes for the common wrestling fan. It is a quality Becky possessed

as much as Rousey and Flair lacked. As she said to *Yahoo! Sports*, “[Fans] want somebody that they can look at and emulate ... [who knows] when they’ve been passed over continuously, undermined, underestimated and they say, ‘No, you know what ... I am more than this. I’m going to show the world.’ That’s what I’m doing” (Sulla-Heffinger, “Becoming ‘The Man’”). By becoming an everyman character, Lynch became the IWC’s darling and, thus, their top draw.

In relating to the fans, she became “The Man” in a more colloquial, almost familiar, sense of the term. The subsequent positive response provides for Lynch a sense of power she was able to take into the Mania main event. Foucauldian theory explains how this tacit exchange translates into power. He writes, “Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance” (Foucault 101). By making waves, both Lynch and the fans pointed out many of the gendered flaws in their discursive patterns by being an exaggeration hypermasculinity present in the company. In response, fans cheered, whether in affirmation of these traits or in recognition of this hyperbole. Furthermore, by generating literal noise, the fans empowered Lynch into a top spot in a way that silence would not provide her. This power, in turn, added a new discursive definition of “The Man” as a concept along the specific grid of gender. As Foucault explains, “The object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not preexist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations” (Foucault 1439). This tacit exchange between Lynch and the fans created this complex new object, with Becky providing a convoluted definition of what it means to be “The Man” and the fans validating it, thus

encouraging and empowering her to grow into the gimmick and the autonomic power that comes with it.

### **Vince McMahon**

Neither Rousey nor Flair would have been in the mix at WrestleMania 35 without the green light from WWE Creative, more importantly Vince McMahon, seeing as the chairman must approve all stories and actions. From this standpoint alone, then, McMahon truly is “The Man” in WWE. While a discursive authority on his own, his say is, arguably, the largest. His authority often extends into the storylines, particularly Lynch’s. As Jimmy Traina writes, the anti-authority storyline, while effective for Lynch, still had a sense of tiredness that came along with it. As he writes, “They give her the same old, tired storyline that we’ve seen over and over in the company ... Yes, it was effective with Austin and Bryan, but now it just feels like the ultimate crutch. It’s lazy and uninteresting because of the ‘been there, done that’ feel” (Traina, “Traina Thoughts”). However, an added dimension of forcing Lynch to apologize for her physical actions toward Stephanie McMahon and Triple H added more nuance to the story—nuance that ultimately faded away when Vince kayfabe suspended Lynch and inserted Charlotte into the WrestleMania 35 title match, even after Becky apologized. While this chain of events is emblematic of the power associated with being “The Man,” it also has tinges of the misogyny implicit in the moniker because of Vince’s history with booking women. Outside of Attitude Era sexism, his booking decisions for women’s matches creates a sordid history filled with cut matches, criticism for performing better than the men, and dropped titles for refusing to perform an out-of-character same-sex kiss (for more details, see the Twitter thread from @bvmbshelled starting “Since Paige claims”). Considering this history, and considering the company’s

commodification of Lynch's anti-establishment character, there is no mistaking that Vince stakes a major claim as "The Man."

McMahon's power manifests in his ability to manipulate kayfabe and, in a sense, reality. His ability to use antiestablishment storylines while establishing a misogynistic hegemony that permeates the company, hooks explains that men with that level of power use this duality to their advantage, perpetuating the status quo behind the guise of fighting it. She adds, "Ruling male groups have been able to co-opt feminist reforms and make them serve the interests of the white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy ... [paying] no significant attention to creating alternative value systems that would include new concepts of power" (hooks 90). McMahon, then, is in full control of the counter-discourse that comes his way through characters like Lynch. In order for these performers and the fans to buy into his company, he has to position himself in a heel role to create a cause to rally against. He does this through a manipulation of gender paradigms that has been inherent in the business under McMahon's direction—a status quo of his creation rife with the absolutes exhibited in the characters Rousey and Flair portray. As Butler writes, a system like his "requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender. 'Follow' in this context is a political relation of entailment instituted by the cultural laws that establish and regulate the shape and meaning of sexuality" (Butler 24). Whether in kayfabe or in shoot (an instance of reality in wrestling; see Shoemaker 16), McMahon's paradigm enforces absolutes and does not, in theory, allow for fringe identities. As such, he holds power of Lynch on an existential level. In other words, Lynch, a convolution of masculine and feminine, is under the power of an absolutist paradigm and its leader to thrive. However, as head of Creative, McMahon created the status quo in a way that he could allow individuals like Austin, Bryan, and

(now) Lynch to break it in kayfabe. In doing so, he has claimed a stake in Becky's success as "The Man" because of his own identification with the moniker.

Even with this power over the company, McMahon is still not in complete control, since Lynch's acumen at portraying "The Man" drew her massive fan support not even Creative could account for. While the suspension was kayfabe, Lynch still proved she had the charisma and ability needed to be a top draw—enough so to sway Vince's booking decisions regarding WrestleMania 35. As she said to ESPN, "I think they were heading for that corporate main event of the two golden girls, Ronda Rousey and Charlotte Flair. But I think that's a fight with no substance. They needed some soul in there. Me running my mouth and getting people excited about this match [is the reason] that it's been undeniable" ("Becky Lynch Puts"). Lynch exerted her character power and her sway with the fans to make herself a requirement for the women's title match at WrestleMania. While her in-ring prowess and her ability to overcome adversity lent credit to her push, the sheer magnitude of her support and her star power completed her ascension into the main event scene even after her inclusion into the Mania headliner. While Vince had final say, Lynch and her fans made "The Man" the smart option for views and, thus, for business.

As mentioned, McMahon and Lynch are intrinsically linked through the gimmick of "The Man" because of their equal adherence to it. As Foucault writes, "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). In this case, Becky could not rally against hegemony without having a relationship to the hegemon. However, in converse, McMahon's control over the company necessarily leads to resistance from some source within the company. This power, then, is inherent neither in Lynch nor in McMahon. Rather, as Foucault explains, the two are discursive

authorities who share “The Man” as a metonym of power, a sign they share and pull from in equal parts. He continues, “They determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to [identify them]. These relations characterize not the language (*langue*) used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice” (Foucault 1440). “The Man,” then, serves as an indication of discursive action. Synonymizing this name—and, in a way, the gimmick—with power creates a dialogic exchange between Lynch and McMahon, wherein they trade authority while both maintaining it. The former holds sway with her status as top draw while the latter provides an environment for the gimmick to (continue to) exist.

### **The WWE Universe**

However, the discourse regarding “The Man” is non-dyadic because of one source: the fans who backed her and, in a way, created the character’s push alongside Lynch. Their involvement in the storyline’s success began as far back as the initial heel turn. As Sulla-Heffinger writes, “Instead of booing the 31-year-old for her dastardly acts, the crowd erupted, creating the most electric moment of the night ... Lynch, despite still not having the SmackDown women’s championship, became the top dog in not only her division, but all of WWE” (“Becoming ‘The Man’”). From that point on, Lynch’s actions may have propelled her character, but the fan reaction propelled her to the status of top draw and, subsequently, face of the company. The company, in theory, is based on fan response (see Shoemaker, “The ‘Royal Rumble’”), the WWE Universe, as they have been deemed, controls a lot of what gets seen on the weekly product through their reactions and their buys. Their responses are what led retired superstar Paige to say, in an interview with *Gulf News*, “It was the fans not taking [women] seriously. They wanted to see more of the male characters many years ago. It was a male

dominated sport” (Rai, “WWE Star Paige”). To an extent, this idea is true: fans saw women’s matches as boring while clamoring to see more of their male favorites compete in the ring, especially considering how much scrutiny the IWC pays to female performers. As Lynch points out, “A million guys have had terrible main event matches. If I have a sub-par main event match, the question comes up should women be main eventing ... we’re all trying to be the absolute best and unfortunately, we always have to be constantly on our game until that’s not a question anymore” (The Female Quotient). Even in a newer era of women’s wrestling that consists of competitive matches, fan reactions are paramount as ever, since poorly received matches between women still hold more weight in booking than do equally bad bouts between men.

This pattern falls in line with those seen in other professional sports. As Emma Sherry and colleagues mention, women’s sports are continuously overlooked in the public sphere. As they write, this pattern has roots is of media devaluation of women’s sports, whether preempting their coverage for men’s events or portraying them in passive poses during gender normative sports (see Sherry et al.). This pattern falls in line with Butlerian definitions of gender—particularly in depiction. She writes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 45). Women in sport, then, suffer from their repeated stylization through sexualization and trivialization. The paradigm, then, is that women are expected to be sexualized in sports that highlight their femininity, sports that oftentimes get overlooked in favor of men’s events. Breaking that paradigm is not solely the task of wrestlers like Lynch, then. It requires a wholesale change in their depictions from a predominantly male media and the acceptance of these depictions from a predominantly male fanbase. As hooks explains “Men have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in

the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers” (hooks 83). In harnessing this power, then, the fans play a major part in “The Man” as a gimmick and as a signifier of control in the discursive generation of Lynch’s character. They have the power to reaffirm Lynch’s actions through dispelling their own misconceptions and reframing other misogynistic thought processes with the other men in the WWE Universe. Furthermore, though Lynch generates the character, the fanbase provides a crucial part of the discursive pattern: affirmation of her actions. In encouraging her breaks with the status quo, they collectively share “The Man” as an embodied power structure, through their collective approval of the gimmick.

As mentioned, “The Man” is a discursive creation of the triadic dialogue among three Agents—Lynch, WWE Creative, and the fans. Outside of the three Acts associated with Lynch’s generation of “The Man,” there is one further Act they share: assuring the best wrestling product possible. Despite this shared Act, the Purposes behind it differ among the Agents. For fans, the Purposes can be multifold, depending on the individual, but they all circle back to the idea of obtaining optimal enjoyment from the product. As such, their power lies in reactions and in their wallets. Lynch demonstrated this power in a tweet acknowledging her failed heel turn with the gimmick. She said, “One year ago today, I said the words, ‘I am The Man’ ... I was trying to turn on you, but you wouldn’t let me. You were all right” (Lynch). The fan’s constant support for Lynch, even amid the supposed villainous turn, changed the narrative of “The Man” in their favor despite what Creative and Lynch had in mind for the character. Through constant negotiation, they showcased their discursive authority while working toward their Purpose.

For Creative, the Purpose involves keeping fans and, subsequently, revenue with the company. One way they do so is through McMahon’s aforementioned manipulation of reality

and, subsequently, retaliation to power. As Ian Williams writes, “WWE commodifies dissent, both from its workers and its fans. If the workers are unhappy, if something terrible happens ... the fix is right there—simply leave it alone until it can be incorporated into the broader story, at which point it is just part of the show, and no realer than the rest of it” (“WWE Is Trying”). This idea is especially applicable to the women’s revolution, since there would be no need for such a movement if there was not “a recent past in which women were very truly treated like dogs,” a past “much easier to deal with and much easier for fans to dismiss” if fashioned into a storyline device (“WWE Is Trying”). Creative makes the environment for “The Man” to thrive in two ways, then: it generates a status quo against which to revolt, and it allows for the revolt to happen by repurposing that paradigm. Through his use of reality control, McMahon sets in motion the string of events that make Lynch’s character—and, subsequently, fan interest in it—possible and, more importantly, profitable.

Lynch uses the generation of good wrestling as an Act to achieve her own dualistic Purpose: validating her actions and cementing her own push. As she says to ESPN, she believes she had done that as early as her number one contender opportunity at Money in the Bank 2018. She adds, “Every time I put my foot on that ladder, the crowd would go crazy. That made people pay attention ... Regardless of what my position had been, I always maintained a good relationship with the crowd. I knew that if I had them on [my] side ... we could do something” (“Becky Lynch Puts”). While not as nefarious as Creative’s tactics, Lynch still had a way of manipulating fan response. By establishing herself through her hard work and her ability to connect with the audience, she demonstrates her discursive authority by creating and shaping the reality that fans see in the ring. Instead of taking a similar route to Flair (whose lineage mixed with her prowess got her respect within the company) or Rousey (who used her mainstream fame

to draw in new fans while making her way up the card), she connected with the fans through a relatability involving hard work and affability without relying on a name to make her way to the top. In connecting with a second discursive authority, then, she asserts her power on the third (Creative) to make her way up the card, showing how much interest and revenue the character could generate. In making these connections simultaneously, Lynch was able to achieve her twofold Purpose.

These three Agents, then, serve as discursive authorities in a constant performative dialogue. After McMahon and talent collaborate to form a character, the wrestler performs the gimmick. As fans and Creative both react, the team determines a push they deem appropriate. When performer and fans observe the trajectory of the gimmick, the fans show their approval or disapproval without regard for heel/face dynamics. So, at any one time, these discursive authorities act as receivers of another's message or as givers of their own. Whether through physical positioning (see Foucault 1443) or "array of identifications ... [in relation to other entities]," differing perspective changes an Agent's place in discourse (Burke 1327). To Foucault, neither positioning nor anything else places any discursive authority in a more dominant position than the others. He writes, "We must not imagine a world of discourse divided between what is accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (Foucault 100). As such, then, "The Man" as a gimmick is more complicated than being a title, a sense of authority, that Lynch holds alone. Both Creative and the WWE Universe have played (and continue to play) their own discursive roles in the character's generation and continuation. The three entities (Agents) all draw something from "The Man," achieving the Purposes they set out to achieve. In this way, then, all three have equal ownership

of the moniker from a power standpoint—and, by proxy, from the perspective of owning the gimmick. While Lynch bears the name, the character is a discursive object in this tacit triadic conversation.

## Conclusion

Discourse, as theorists like Foucault have said, is a creator, a harbinger of meaning. Note that, within that word “discourse,” there is no limiting function relegating it to written or spoken word. Indeed, as the present work and others like it have shown, discourse is verbal, written, performed—conveyed through signs both tangible and ineffable. Furthermore, discourse is not limited to direct or explicit interaction. Rather, discourse occurs outside temporality, outside conversation, outside of intention. What makes it discursive is, purely, interaction. As Foucault says, “[Discursive relations] determine the group of relations that discourse must establish in order to speak of [objects] ... These relations characterize not the language (*langue*) used by discourse, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice” (1440). The language is not the discourse—it is one of many tools of discourse.

There is no better example of these principles than the formulation and ascent of “The Man” as a character in WWE. Using this moniker, Becky Lynch generates a performative discourse that reflects gender paradigms within professional wrestling not only through her words but also through her actions in the name of proving herself as “The Man.” In the process, she reinforces the hypermasculinity inherent in the nickname while simultaneously redefining the concept of gender presentation and performance in the company. However, the success of the gimmick—and, thus, the title of “The Man”—is not solely the result of Lynch’s abilities. Rather, “The Man” is the surface of emergence within a triadic discourse between Becky, WWE Creative, and the WWE Universe, all three wielding their own individual authority in redefining the masculine paradigm associated with being top draw in the industry.

Lynch’s character, and the idea of “The Man,” is still evolving. At the time of writing, Lynch’s feud against former MMA star Shayna Baszler, set to culminate at WrestleMania 36,

features little of the previous year's iteration of the character. "The Man" has been commercialized, and Lynch, save a feud with former rival Asuka, has let complacency mold into hubris. There is no telling whether this change in character is intentional, nor is there a way of examining whether it reflects the performer or of Creative. Reactions from the WWE Universe reflect this nebulosity within the development of the gimmick, with some fans remaining loyal to Becky while others souring on Lynch's cocksure attitude. Indeed, Lynch has added yet another hypermasculine nuance to "The Man," albeit one misaligned with a contingency of the collective discursive authority

The point remains that this gimmick of "The Man" is, as Burke says, "a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality" (1341). While this idea aptly describes Lynch's character in the narrative of contemporary professional wrestling, it also makes a fitting case for sports entertainment as a selection, reflection, and deflection of the society in which it is steeped. In the present research, "The Man" represents a selection of society, one that represents the gender essentialist society in which we live while deflecting alternate realities not present in the current societal paradigm. As Butler says, "Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and established as 'prediscursive,' prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (10). Gender establishes the essentialism of sex, but it does not mean that gender is an essentialism. This research, then, shows how "The Man" as a gimmick and as a case study exhibits this dualism to its fullest extent within the wrestling world—as a reflection of the world outside of the ring.

On that note about gender, it is important to bring up that, as a cis male, I cannot speak or claim to represent the plights of women in any industry, let alone in sports entertainment. The content of the present work is purely rhetorical, coming from a specific perspective and viewed through a specific lens. Future readers, future researchers, even future performers will have different takes on Lynch's interpretation of "The Man." The use of other theoretical lenses could allow for novel examinations of the topics presented herein. Moreover, members of marginalized (gender) communities could bring with them perspectives that I cannot account for from my position of relative privilege and power. As such, I am, as hooks writes, "compelled to assume responsibility for transforming [my] consciousness and the consciousness of society" (83). It is important, then, to use this platform to examine the nuances inherent with a complex character and the implications of its portrayal. I, and others, must use our voices in unison to ensure these analyses of the margins do not exclude or misrepresent the individuals who live within them.

As such, rhetoricians would do well to analyze not only WWE but also other microcosms of popular culture with rhetorical implications that reflect and refract the realities which we live in today. By examining hegemonic representations of certain (marginalized) groups within their verbal and performative discursive habits, scholars could approach larger, often more complex ideas through more familiar lenses. Doing so, as hooks asserts, creates an all-inclusive ideology for change. She adds, "That revolutionary ideology can be created only if the experiences of people on the margin who suffer sexist oppression and other forms of group oppression are understood, addressed, and incorporated. They must participate in feminist movement as makers of theory and as leaders of action" (163). In Lynch's case, she serves, at least through this lens, as one of the leaders of action. As rhetoricians, whether through analysis of sports entertainment, creation of theory, or critical approaches to culture, can also share in this role.

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