"I Do Love an Evil, Bisexual Monster": Young, Queer New Zealanders' Engagement with Contemporary Lesbian Horror Media

BY

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Abstract

Recent trends in contemporary horror TV present monstrous queer women as Western media's latest anti-hero, and in doing so highlight the role gender has in shaping our understanding of violence. This thesis examines this trend, looking at how representations of violent lesbians are interpreted and used by viewers to aid in shaping and understanding their own identities. I use close textual analysis of three queer horror shows- *Ratched* (2020-); *Killing Eve* (2017-2022); and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020)- alongside discussions with fans via focus groups and in-depth interviews to understand how women and non-binary individuals collectively create meaning from queer woman's TV representations and apply this to their own lives. I examine how these shows represent queerness and femininity in relation to violent monstrosity, to explore how viewers perceive their own identities in relation to TV representations, and in turn how their identities shape their interpretations of these shows. I argue that while these shows present viewers with alternative, interrogated images of femininity, they also contribute to the reinforcement of certain gender norms, thus supporting intersecting dominant power structures that present a restrained image of queer women's deviancy, that is not available to all bodies. Viewers critically engage with this material, utilising these shows to expand their own understandings and expressions of identity, while also challenging some of the shows' limitations.

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Chapter One: Introduction

"I'm not sure how I'm even meant to do this," Mildred Ratched (played by Sarah Paulson) confesses when faced with a plate of fresh oysters. Her lunch partner, Gwendolyn Briggs (Cynthia Nixon) offers to demonstrate, walking Mildred through the process: "First, a few drops of lemon, then you take this little fork, and loosen the oyster from his shell...and then, you just let it slide into your mouth. It's like making love to the ocean." With that Gwendolyn tips an oyster into her mouth, closing her eyes for a moment and lets out a contented sigh. When Mildred still resists after the demonstration, Gwendolyn takes charge. "Here, let me help you," Gwendolyn says taking the oyster from Mildred's hand. Gwendolyn glances around, as though checking if anyone is watching the pair, before she lifts the oyster towards Mildred's mouth, telling her to "just, open your lips." Mildred slowly leans forward, placing her lips on the edge of the oyster shell, staring up at Gwendolyn. Gwendolyn tips the shell up, allowing Mildred to take the oyster into her mouth before pulling back her hand. Closely watching, Gwendolyn instructs Mildred to "now swallow." Mildred maintains Gwendolyn's gaze as she does so, swallowing down the oyster.

I was taken by this scene the first time I saw it. I sat at my desk, 30 minutes into the second episode of *Ratched* (2020-) feeling a slow grin spreading across my face in a mixture of excitement and disbelief, tinged with a healthy dose of fear. It was thrilling, the clear sexual chemistry and the slow building sensuality of the scene. I was overtaken by the possibility that this horror story was about to become very gay, a prospect which was equally exciting and concerning. One concern, that this was 'queer bait,' where lesbian attraction is only hinted at and never leaves the subtextual level of oysters, was alleviated a scene later, when Gwendolyn takes Mildred to a 'woman's bar,' confirming the queerness of the show. The other fear was one built on history, and the show's unofficial tagline that "true monsters are made, not born." (Netflix N.D.). It was a fear I sat with, when, at the end of the episode, I watched as Mildred Ratched drugged a young priest. As she tied him down to a hotel bed, she explained how she would do anything to protect her family, before placing an ice pick above his eye and hammering it into his brain to lobotomise him. This felt a familiar yet dangerous path to be walking, in which violent monstrosity goes hand in hand with queerness.

Ratched stuck out to me not only as part of a historic trend of queer monstrosity, but as part of a growing contemporary trend of queer women's representations in horror. In the last few years, lesbians have become more visible than ever before in horror media,

populating both the big and small screen. But where lesbian films, such as *Fear Street* (2021), provide a queer twist on the heroine, lesbian TV horror focuses instead on remaking the queer monster. Horror media has often used monstrosity to represent queerness and queer desire as a destructive form of deviancy, and while new monstrous queer women's desires remain in part a destructive force, queer desire is now also represented as a possible means for salvation. Interconnected with this, the monstrous queer woman stands out because of the representation of her gender. Gender is a central concept within contemporary lesbian horror shows and the wider media space around them. Promotional interviews for *Ratched* regularly market it as a women driven story, highlighting the large cast of woman actors (see Villarreal 2020). The monster in this and similar shows is notable for her overt femininity, which is entwined with her violence. Her need for violence is depicted as created by her gender identity, and her methods for enacting violence rely on the use of gendered norms and heteronormativity. TV's monstrous queer women are murderers who use their gender to trick and kill a plethora of (mostly male) victims.

In noticing this TV trend, I found myself interested in the way media representations of violent queer women position 'womanhood' as a central element of their 'monstrous' identities, and what this means in relation to understandings of queer identity. I wanted to explore what influence these globally reaching shows might have on young New Zealand viewers, and how viewers, particularly queer viewers utilise shows like these in the construction of their personal identities. This led me to the central research question of: **How do contemporary horror representations of queer women relate to how young, queer New Zealanders understand their own identities?** To tackle this question, I divided it into two sub questions: How does modern TV use monstrosity to represent queerness? And how do young queer New Zealanders engage with representations of monstrous queer women in TV media?

To answer these, I examined three shows that exemplify the trend- *Ratched* (2020-); *Killing Eve* (2017-2022); and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020)- interrogating how these shows interconnect gender, sexuality, and violence. This included looking at promotional materials, to see how these shows are being positioned and promoted to the public. From there I considered viewers relationship to the material, beginning with a consideration of my own relationship to this material as a queer, AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary individual. I also conducted two focus groups and six interviews with fans of the shows, to explore how viewers respond to these shows and relate them to their own identities.

Based on this material, I argue that while these shows use monstrosity to make visible subversive representations of femininity, and in doing so work to demonstrate how gender is socially constructed. However, this subversive femininity is highly limited in the ways it can be enacted and to whom it is made available. As such, the shows also function to reinforce certain gender norms, maintaining many elements of the dominant power structures they may initially appear to challenge.

Focus group and interview participants celebrated the visibility these shows offer of queer feminine identities that challenge current societal norms, embracing representations of disruptive, monstrous queer women. However, participants were also highly critical of the show's restrictions surrounding representations of queerness and the continued connections between queerness and uncontrollable violence. Participants carefully regulated their connections to these shows, drawing on certain elements to help them develop and explore their own understandings and expression of identity, such as through physical appearance, while also actively rejecting other elements. Participants called for the subversion and disruptive parts of these representations to be pushed further, and challenge the presented limitations, while also actively maintaining and reinstating their own, non-violent identities in relation to the shows' material.

A note on language*:*

I use the word 'queer' throughout this paper as an action, a way of being, and a label given to the shows, characters, myself, and my interviewees. 'Queer' is a complex term, being at once a critique, a call to action, and a blanket label for that which sits beyond hegemonic norms (Adams and Bolen 2017:104). The term has political significance, in particular being tied to gay activist movements from the late 1980s. Queer is also an identity, and one I willingly claim for myself. Queer is a title I have given these shows and characters, due to the disruptive representations of desire and gender they present. To be queer is to exist in conflict with cis-het normativity. These are women located beyond societal expectations, repurposing and challenging norms to create routes of resistance for themselves. As such I feel comfortable labelling them as queer, although it is not a label claimed by any of the main characters. None of the main characters in these shows label their own sexualities. Regarding my research participants, I did not search for queer participants to interview, but that was mostly what I found. Some readily claimed the title, others did not give it to themselves but did not reject the title when it was raised. As such, despite inhabiting an array of individual

identities, I feel comfortable placing most of them within the communal term of 'queer.' It should however be noted, one of my participants did actively exclude themselves from the label, identifying as cis-het, and as such their contributions will be contextualised and regarded with this in mind.

Interdisciplinary Research

While this thesis is centred on an anthropological study of media, it is an interdisciplinary examination that draws on sources beyond the bounds of cultural anthropology. I found in undertaking an in-depth examination of my media texts and their place in my participants lives, it was necessary to draw on concepts and understandings from both media studies and queer studies.

There is an inherent overlap between media anthropology and media studies, with their shared focus on media. However, where the anthropology of media centres on people and their interactions with media, media studies centres on an examination of media texts themselves. As such, media studies can provide anthropologists with valuable methods of approaching and examining objects of media (Peterson 2008:17). It offers an understanding that is helpful in examining the role media plays in everyday life, and the understandings viewers draw from texts (Peterson 2008:17). According to anthropologist Mark Allan Peterson (2008), interdisciplinary work between anthropology and media studies "is what will allow for broader, deeper, and more comprehensive understandings of the place(s) of mass communication in contemporary lives." (18). As such, I utilise media studies language and concepts such as the 'audience gaze' to assist me in my ethnographic work of exploring viewers relationships with these texts.

My research also draws on queer studies. Queer studies as a field emerged in the early 1990s out of several areas of thought including feminist studies, lesbian and gay studies, and identity politics (Holman Jones and Adams 2010:197). Academics who are not strictly queer studies scholars have long contributed to the field of queer studies, including anthropologists (Boellstorff 2007:18). In broad terms, queer studies explores challenges to heteronormativity- and- in doing so, critiques essentialist understandings of sex and gender (Holman Jones and Adams 2010:197). When queer studies is utilised within cultural studies, focus is often placed not only on the objects of examination, but the reader as well, asking what role the gender and sexuality of the spectator plays in creating meaning from a text to explore how resistant 'queer' readings of text can be produced (Somerville 2020:4).

One of the scholars fundamental to the formation of queer studies, Judith Butler, put forward the theory of gender performativity in their book *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler (2002) argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed identities, and that gender is culturally inscribed onto a body to produce a gendered and sexed body (12). Butler argues this construction is not static, but a repeated and continued action, a 'doing.' "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (43-44). Butler argues that this process creates the appearance that gender, and gender differences are natural (44). This appearance of a natural gender binary is necessary to maintain male and heterosexual frameworks of power (44). Butler suggests that making visible the ways in which gender is socially constructed, through methods such as gender parody, can function to challenge these categories and the oppressive frameworks they uphold (175). I selected this conceptual framework for understanding gender as the shows I examine emphasize the ways in which the gender binary is socially constructed, working both to attempt to disrupt it, while at times also reinforcing certain gendered norms.

Queer is a wide-reaching umbrella term, and while its broadness can be a strength, it can also be a weakness. Queer studies has faced criticism from scholars for its resistance to set boundaries, with suggestions that in its inclusivity it can be overly simplistic, overlooking the lived realities of people's lives (Adams and Bolen 2017:103). For example, political scientist Cathy Cohen has argued that queer studies wide focus of looking at normality as a binary of straight and queer overlooks how elements such as race intersect with social understandings of normality, stressing the importance of intersectional examinations of heteronormativity and power (Cohen 1997; Somerville 2020:5). Combining queer theory with anthropological research helps combat criticisms of the field's broadness by ethnographically grounding queer theory; locating it within the 'real world' and onto real bodies, exploring how people live and enact with queerness beyond the label (Adams and Bolen 2017:107). At the same time, sexuality and gender have long been areas of anthropological examination, and the interdisciplinary incorporation of queer studies into anthropology offers potentially valuable frameworks for understanding how people conceptualise sex and gender, addressing matters such as sexual categorizations and the relationship between sexuality and gender (Boellstorff 2007:18, 27).

TV and Power

Central to my analysis is the notion of TV as an object of power. In media studies, it is widely accepted that the representations presented in TV shows are socially powerful. TV

reflects the norms of the cultures that created it, but also has a hand in shaping, and reinforcing norms (Gerbner 1998:180; Scharrer 2012:159). What is represented and what is not can influence understandings of acceptable ways of being in the world (Peterson 2008:119). In particular TV has been found to play a role in the formation of sexual identity, offering a space of sexual awakening, and helping shape peoples understanding of their own sexual identities (Wheatley 2015:897; Meyer and Wood 2013:434).

Currently, access to the potentially influential power of TV is more readily available than ever before. With almost endless channel options and streaming sites saturating the market, TV provides viewers with an abundance of choice (Lüders, Sundet and Colbjørnsen 2021:35). TV shows no longer restrict viewing to a set time, or device, as highlighted by the range of devices used by participants, including laptops, iPads, and phones. This ease of access has contributed to TV becoming a highly popular mode of entertainment around the world, with analytics company Nielsen finding that the average American adult spent over 4 hours a day watching some form of TV in 2021 (Nielsen 2022:4).

Media anthropology also acknowledges the potential power of TV, regarding it as a form of mass communication and a form of storytelling. A range of concepts have been used in media anthropology to try and conceptualise the role mass media plays in peoples' lives, including examining media as myth (Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005:6; Peterson 2008:106). Looking at TV media as mythic enables us to focus on how TV shows can be part of the symbolic system of the societies they interact with (Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005:7). This involves looking at the central narratives and figures in these stories to find the patterns present and examine the discourses these patterns intersect with (Coman and Rothenbuhler 2005:7; Peterson 2008:106). Examining TV in this way allows us to regard TV "as a conceptual tool that allows people to make sense of the world by mobilizing symbols for the construction of identities, boundaries, and cosmologies" (Peterson 2008:106).

Peterson (2008) stresses that in examining TV as myth it is important to look not only at one understanding of the symbolic messages conveyed by the texts, but also consider the role of the spectator, and the different interpretations that can occur (115). TV and myth are not fixed to single interpretations, but open to a range of readings. This fact contributes to the way TV can function as a space of play. TV allows the viewer to momentarily shift between identities and play out both possible and impossible scenarios; "Media offers us a virtuality in which we can meditate on experiences that are not our own," (Peterson 2008:119). As such,

to look at media as a myth is to regard it as a space where cultural boundaries are tested, challenged, and reaffirmed (Peterson 2008:119). In this area of exploration, TV presents a space for viewers to test the possibilities of being and expressions of identity.

The awareness and acknowledgment of the power of TV ran through practically every one of my research discussions. Participants evoked a shared understanding that the TV we watch helps shape understandings of identity. TV was seen as a powerful tool, but the nature of that power was regarded as volatile. On one side, TV can be a site for identity navigation and the production of a sense of belonging (Hatef 2021). Bringing up queerness and television with my participants prompted discussions of self-discovery forged through a relationship to queer horror media, with several recounting how media helped them discover their sexuality. This is an experience I have shared in; TV has long functioned as a space for me to see different forms of queerness. At thirteen, and with overly relaxed regulations on viewing material, I first saw queer relationships presented as a serious possibility in *Torchwood* (2006-2011). The shows central relationship, between the leading man and his male partner, was transfixing. I found myself taken by a fascination I did not understand at the time, at the representation of a long-term, homosexual relationship, treated as seriously as the heterosexual ones surrounding it. They were two men who were allowed to love one another, have sex, and exist as complex people, whose identities surpassed their sexuality. I was mesmerized by the very idea, and by the possibilities it suggested.

However, while TV can be a space for self-discovery, it can also be a space of restriction. TV representations, particularly of already marginalized groups, can function to create boundaries around acceptable forms and expressions of identity (Lovelock 2019:3). In showing only certain forms of an identity, TV can function to communicate to viewers that there are set ways to be that identity which are acceptable. This functionality is particularly important to my examination and the use of monstrosity to make queerness visible, as in Western media monster stories often function to regulate borders and boundaries, including gender boundaries. By giving form to what is not deemed acceptable, monster stories work to help reinforce ideas of what is deemed socially acceptable (Cohen 1996:13). As such, they can play a role in maintaining and reinstating the regulatory frameworks which naturalise socially constructed sexed and gendered categories.

Methodology

Material Analysis

Being faced with the initial question of how to study TV as an anthropologist was somewhat daunting due to its rarity. Thankfully I found a rough roadmap following anthropologist Mark Allen Peterson (2008), who recommends the anthropological examination of media begins with an examination of the object of media itself, through focused interpretation (61). I began with a close textual analysis, watching and rewatching three selected shows over several months. I viewed the entirety of each show a minimum of four times, in addition to repeatedly watching select episodes and scenes for closer examination. This totalled to over 250 viewing hours. To analyse this material, I considered the shows through several of Peterson's (2008) recommended dimensions of textual understanding, which involve looking at the text based on differing relations that "give the text its coherence," (62). I contextualise the materials looking at by genre and situating it within the history of queer horror, as represented through the medium of TV. To deepen my examination, I also utilised one of Peterson's recommended methods of analysis, discourse analysis, alongside representation analysis, which I drew from media studies, specifically from the recommendations of Mary Beltran (2018:101). To do this, I began with a stylistic analysis, focusing on the images presented, and what can be learnt from visuals alone, such as set and costume, making note of what was made visible, and what was not. This was followed by the prementioned discourse and representational analysis, examining the shows representations of gender and sexuality and mapping out the overlapping power structures made central within the texts. Doing so allowed me to later position these texts within wider cultural structures and power systems (Peterson 2008:96).

As my interest is not just with the context of the text, but also how it is presented to audiences, I also expanded my textual examination outward to explore materials produced alongside these shows. To do so I again drew from media studies, examining a collection of paratexts, related materials which contextualise the main text. I included marketing material, critical reviews, and interviews from cast and creators. These paratexts assisted my textual analysis as they begin the work of decoding the text, offering a stripped away example of how this media is presented and how the audience is positioned to receive it (Gray 2018:214). Promotional material in particular can prime audiences to receive the text in certain ways, making it useful in understanding audience relation to the material (Gray 2018:213). The importance of the paratexts in this was demonstrated when in discussions participants

referenced show trailers, showing they used these materials to approach and understand the texts.

Autoethnography

This work is, in part, autoethnographic, drawing on my own stories and experiences as a queer viewer. At its simplest, autoethnography is a combination of ethnography and autobiography. Autoethnography is the creation of "accessible, vivid, and vulnerable representations— ""thick descriptions"": —of the ways in which personal experience intersects and/or is informed by cultural norms, values, and practices." (Adams and Bolen 2017:104). Autoethnography involves the researcher locating themselves within the social and cultural context they are examining, drawing attention to the ways the researcher's identity influences the research (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2014:19). This can be particularly important regarding gender and sexuality research, as anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay (2020) notes that in gender studies "the social and gendered positioning of the researcher is viewed as vital to ethnographic knowledge and its production" (11).

 Within my own research, my identity as a queer researcher directed the way I approached the material of the texts, having had a pre-existing experience with each of these shows built not on analysis but my enjoyment of these shows. It is this connection I used to centre my initial analysis, using my own relationship with the material as a queer person to direct my examination. My queerness also affected the interactions I had with research participants, my position as a part of queer communities allowed for a different level of openness in discussions of sexuality that I may not have otherwise received.

The points of similarity between myself and my participants also function to mitigate researcher superiority. Autoethnography challenges the position of the researcher as an 'outside observer,' disrupting the boundary between researcher and subjects of research, and in doing so can address concerns of researchers "speaking for 'others.'" (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2014:18). As such, autoethnography can be used to give a voice to groups which had previously been silenced, allowing them to show and explore how they view themselves (Adams, Jones and Ellis 2014:18).

It has been argued by academics such as by communication scholar Tony E. Adams, that autoethnography is a valuable method for queer research (Adams and Bolen 2017). Queer studies and autoethnography sit well aligned in their undoing of boundaries and embrace of fluidity, working to challenge and destabilise established norms (Holman Jones and Adams

2010:191). Their differences, Adams argues, balance each other, with the critiques that autoethnography is too atheoretical and narcissistic offset by the theoretical depth queer theory enables. Autoethnography in turn, grounds queer theory in the everyday (Adams and Bolen 2017:107). As such Adams' claims the merging of the two offers a unique way to show "how personal experience is pierced with cultural norms" (Adams and Bolen 2017:107). In its embrace of fluidity and challenging of a fixed self, queer autoethnography can create a merging of the 'us,' of the researcher, subject, and reader (Holman Jones and Adams 2010:191).

While celebrated by scholars such as Adams, Autoethnography has also faced criticisms. One critique is that Autoethnography can continue to privilege the voice of the researcher (Jackson and Mazzei 2008:302). Autoethnography often focuses on one main area of commonality, and in doing so can imply a unity of experience which results in the discussed identities coming "across as 'singular, fixed, or normal'" (Holman Jones and Adams 2010: 201). In response it is important for autoethnographic works to acknowledge that experiences are not unifying and universal (Jackson and Mazzei 2008:302). This can be done, in part, by drawing attention to points of difference, such as age and ethnicity, and how these may intersect with experiences and disrupt this perceived unity of identity. As such, autoethnographies offer only a partial account of identities that are neither fixed nor singular (Holman Jones and Adams 2010: 202).

Participants

Participants	Shows viewed	Gender identity
Jane	*Bly Manor,* some *Ratched.*	Cis woman
Sam	*Bly Manor,* some *Ratched.*	Non-Binary/Genderfluid
Charlie	All three	Non-Binary
Sophie	*Ratched*	Cis woman
Taylor	*Killing Eve*	Cis woman
Milo	*Killing Eve, Ratched*	Non-Binary
Rose	*Bly Manor, Ratched*	Cis woman
Lexi	*Bly Manor*	Cis woman
Hana	*Bly Manor*	Cis woman
April	*Bly Manor*	Cis woman

Naavya	*Killing Eve*	Cis woman

I was met with a fair amount of excitement in the process of conducting my research and was surprised by the enthusiasm people had to discuss these shows. I came wanting to expand my view from the text alone and understand not just how these shows could be read, but how they are being read. What purpose do these stories play in the lives of those who watch them? The viewers I encountered where more than willing to answer these questions.

However, in gathering answers, I ran into the issue of defining the shows' audiences. My selected shows were wildly popular, airing across the globe. *Ratched,* brought in 48 million viewers in its first 28 days (Netflix 2020a). As such, it would be unrealistic to assume this widespread collection of individuals, can be analysed as a singular, mass audience on the grounds of encountering the same text (Peterson 2008:127). So instead, my work examines the relationship between material and a select collection of viewers, addressing 'an audience' rather than 'the audience.' Ultimately, my audience consisted of 11 participants, who variously took part in two focus groups, as well as six individual interviews.

To enable these participant's views to reflect 'an audience' I placed certain parameters around those to whom I spoke. First, I defined a viewer as someone who had seen a complete season of one of the shows, as this would give them sufficient knowledge of the material for conversation, and suggests a basic level of interest, as they maintained viewership over at least eight episodes. As I wanted my focus groups and interviews to support my personal analysis as an audience member, I also chose viewers with whom I had some level of similarity. This was done in part by sourcing participants through existing connections, using social media posts on my own and friends' Facebook pages. This led to some naturally formed limitations, such as an age range of 22 to 26.

I also selected for gender identity. While any actual information on audience demographics was hard to come by, these shows are characterised as being centred on women, both as creators and viewers (Ellman 2018; Villarreal 2020). This assumption fit with the viewers I encountered. Apart from one man, I found it was primarily women and non-binary people who told me they had watched these shows. Ultimately, all my participants were AFAB. The majority, eight out of eleven, were cis women, while the remaining three were non-binary. I was open to speaking to binary trans participants as well as AMAB non-binary participants, however I was likely my own limitation to accessing such participants, as my social circle is

primarily made up of AFAB individuals. Additionally, my focus group participants make up a wide range of sexualities. As mentioned before, I did not limit my search to queer identifying individuals, but most of the people who approached me identified as queer, with ten out of eleven participants identifying themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ and/or queer community.

I limited my scope geographically, speaking to a New Zealand audience. I had initially planned to limit it to Wellington, however the shift of one of my focus groups to Zoom removed the need for this geographic barrier and allowed me to expand out to include participants from across New Zealand. I had participants Zoom in from Christchurch, Palmerston North, and Auckland. My method of sourcing people through existing connections via social media left me with a range of familiarity with participants. Some, I consider close friends, others I had met once or twice before, and some I had never met before. Below I give a description of the tenor of some of my research interactions.

Focus groups

It's early February 2022, Covid restrictions have just been lightened, but high case numbers mean many people are still cautious about going out. Considering this, I offered my participants the option to meet online. Some took me up on that offer, but several were still happy to meet face to face. So, midday on a Saturday, I find myself in a classroom on Kelburn campus. The space was chosen because the university is familiar to most of my participants, and the room allows us to chat in private- necessary given our conversation will include topics such as sexual assault. The room is large, selected in part for its ventilation and allowance for social distancing. We are sat in a rough circle. April, Rose and I make up one half of it, sitting as spread out as possible while still being able to converse, on the other side, flatmates Milo, Lexi, and Hana sit closer together, their proximity allowed as they cohabitate, lounging back against a table that was pushed to the side to give us more space. A microphone sits on the table, one of the three recording devices I've scattered around the room in the hopes of picking up everything said, a task made harder by the added muffling from everyone's face masks.

Despite the hanging threat of Covid, and our heavy topics of conversation, the mood is light. There is an air of excitement, conversation flowing loud and quick as participants jump in on others' thoughts, rushing to be the next person to comment. More than once I have to ask we at least attempt to speak one at a time, as excited voices overlap each other. People seem to

enjoy the conversation. At one point Rose, a friend from my honours year, pipes up and asserts that "We need to start organising like, bi-weekly, queer TV show discussion groups." Hana, an acquaintance I'd met once or twice before, gasps at this, adding "Oh my God, new university club just dropped." While at the same time Lexi, Hana's flatmate chimed in with, "Oh my God, queer TV club."

I acknowledge that participant observation is usually encouraged for anthropological research, however my interest lay less in what people did while viewing the shows, and more in how people were affected by and responded to the shows post viewing. As such, I chose to conduct my research using methods which facilitated conversation and self-reflection. To this end, I conducted two focus groups, each lasting roughly three hours. One took place in person at Victoria University of Wellington, and one was held on Zoom from my apartment. My Zoom participants similarly Zoomed in from home locations, most appearing in their bedroom or living room. The inclusion of a Zoom focus group allowed not only participants outside of Wellington to contribute, but also Wellington participants such as Sophie, who is immunocompromised, to participate in a way that did not put them at risk. While meeting via Zoom did result in the occasional interruption, such as a participant's partner stepping in to bring them tea, for the most part it ran smoothly, with participants seeming comfortable and familiar with the Zoom format, likely thanks to the past two years of Covid.

These focus groups were run in the form of group discussions. I made my role into primarily prompting and facilitating conversation, using broad opening questions about the show to direct conversation. I focused on three themes- violence, gender and queer romance, but from there tried to let my voice take a backseat, giving participants space to discuss and argue points between themselves. This allowed for a flow of conversation, and the sharing and building on of ideas within the groups (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013:32). Additionally, not all participants having seen the same shows lead participants to question each other about certain materials, leading to the asking of valuable questions I had not considered myself.

I selected focus group discussions in part because the TV shows function as a social object. Most, if not all participants' relationship to the material also involved relationships with other viewers- whether they viewed the material together, recommended it to others, or regularly discussed it. Conducting focus groups allowed me to better understand this, as I was able to observe how interpretations of the text are constructed through group interaction, rather than just getting separate individual opinions (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013:11). Additionally,

it allowed me to observe how participants position themselves socially in relation to the shows and the social context surrounding the shows, as focus groups are an effective method for examining how the self is constructed socially (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2013:6). These points offer valuable angles to my examination of how viewers use these shows to construct and understand their own identities.

Interviews

In addition to focus groups, I also conducted a total of six personal interviews, each roughly an hour in length. The in-person interviews took place on campus, either in a private room or my office. These spaces where selected again for the balance of familiarity and privacy they afforded participants. For Zoom, I either Zoomed in from my apartment or office, with participants again Zooming in from their own homes, often their bedroom. I attempted to maintain a conversational feel in the interviews, sharing more of my own ideas and thoughts then I had in focus groups to keep discussion flowing. The one-on-one format allowed me to be more direct and detailed in my questions, asking about specific details such as viewing habits and elements of relatability. I found the personal interviews allowed for a slower, calmer conversation, giving participants time to think before answering, unlike the rapid-fire discussions of the focus groups.

I undertook in-depth qualitative interviewing, asking initial questions based around findings from the focus groups, before asking more probing questions based on the participants initial answers to encourage participants to think deeply about their own answers and experiences (Gerson and Damaske 2020:1). Whereas the focus groups involved undertaking analysis of the shows, in interviews I focused more on participants' experiences with the shows, and the relationship they saw themselves as having with them. This allowed me more of an idea of how they make sense of the shows than observing them watch them may have (Gerson and Damaske 2020:9).

Conducting private interviews also gave participants a space to discuss sensitive topics such as personal experiences with homophobia and their sexual interests, with several participants opening up on a more personal level and sharing stories about their life and identities. These are aspects they may not have been comfortable discussing in a group (Gerson and Damaske 2020:4). As such, interviews offered valuable insight into the ways participants viewed their own identities, and how this had shaped and been shaped in relation to TV shows.

Thesis Structure

Chapter two explores how TV media uses monstrosity to represent queerness. I discuss the history of horror and queer TV and offer a brief overview of the three TV shows examined in this study, to show how the shows represent queer identity and desire in relation to destruction and violence.

Chapter three examines the relationship between gender and appearance, focusing on the performance of femininity. I explore the role clothing and fashion plays in communicating and creating gender identity within the shows, and how feminine items and the connotations connected to them can be subverted and repurposed to empower the wearer. This is intertwined with a discussion of how these onscreen gendered codes are related to, recreated and remade by viewers in the construction of their own gender identities.

Chapter four addresses the tension between enjoyment and rejection created in shows that ask viewers to enjoy viewing acts of violence. Within the shows this is carefully balanced by framing certain acts of violence as 'acceptable.' I argue the formation of this acceptability is reliant on gender, with male violence often used to justify women's violence, functioning to reinforce certain gendered norms. This framing assists viewers to take pleasure in watching on-screen acts of violence while also maintaining their own identities as 'non-violent.'

Chapter five interrogates the way heteronormative frameworks remain embedded in these texts, and the influence these frameworks continue to have on queer viewers. In discussions, my participants produced alternative readings of the texts, considering them through a dominant heteronormative gaze alongside their own reading, to allow them to conceptualise the ways these texts that they celebrate could also be harmful to queer identities.

This thesis examines the relationships viewers have with representations of queer women on TV. These shows attempt to challenge feminine norms, showing how gender and femininity are socially constructed. However, their restrained representations of deviancy also reinforce certain gender norms. Viewers use these shows to understand and affirm aspects of their own identities, while also actively interrogating the presented limitations around deviancy.

Chapter Two: Queer Horror Media

Before discussing the shows, it is worth looking at the historical context of queer representations within horror and TV on a wider scale in the West. This history shaped my own and other participants' interactions with the material, many approaching the shows with an underlying distrust towards queer horror. One participant, Sam (any pronouns) a self-proclaimed horror fan, commented in the focus group on their expectations on watching queer horror:

> *"It's like you put together, not just you're getting representation, but you're also in a horror (show), so you're like well, 'we gonna die,'… and you could also expect it's going to be some sort of commentary on deviancy."*

This concern is rooted in a history of queer identities and desire being represented through destructive monstrosity in horror media (Halberstam 1995:7).

A monster story, at its centre, is an examination of the categories of 'us' and 'other.' In Western horror cinema, the monster is the abject horror, contrasted against the traditionally cis-het white hero of 'us' (Benchoff 1997:1-2). In marking the monster as other, physical signs are often used make visible inner morality, and these signs often function to code the monster as part of an existing minority identity. For example, signifiers of race and physical disability have both been used as forms of othering; racial minority groups have been signified as the monstrous other based on the colour of their skin, and physical deformities are regularly utilised in horror to evoke a sense of disgust and fear from viewers. In doing so, physical disability becomes a sign of inner immorality (Means 2011:6; Sutton 2014:76.) Through this othering, horror has historically functioned to uphold cis-het white identities while putting down other minority identities, including queer identities (Halberstam 1995:22). Queer identities have historically been regarded as 'abnormal,' as they challenge heteronormativity, thus breaking or blurring the boundaries between established social categories. In horror, this is often represented through the physical disruption of gender categories, such as using crossdressing or the placement of one gender's body parts onto differently gendered bodies, as in *The Silence of the Lambs*[1] (1991) (Halberstam 1995:1, 6-7). By conflating queer disruption to monstrosity, early representations primarily displayed homosexual desire as destructive and dangerous, something which needs to be removed for

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[1] Queer coded villain Buffalo Bill skins women to make a 'woman suit' for himself.

the good of society, and in doing so functioned to reinforce heteronormativity (Benchoff 1997:37).

Notably, early media representations of the 70s and 80s often relied on queer coding to imply a monstrous character's queer identity, without confirming the character's queer identity. Queerness was only hinted at enough to show what a threat it could be to wider society (Benshoff 1997:17). Because of this queerness was often communicated through appearance, including clothing. This could be subtle coding, such as the alternative styling of *The Lost Boys* (1987), or more explicit, such as crossdressing in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Crucially, the horror of such characters came, in part, from this breaking of gendered clothing rules, and the fear not just of being murdered, but being murdered by a man in a dress. Yet despite, or perhaps in part due to, early creators' efforts to mark queer monsters as irredeemable, dangerous villains, individuals who themselves did not fit the mould of the white heteronormative heroes came to recognise and celebrate the representation of parts of themselves within the monsters, showing the potential of such narratives to function as a place of reclamation and resistance[2] (Benshoff 1997; Halberstam 1995:23-27).

2000-Present

Media usage of monstrosity has shifted since the 80s and 90s in several key ways. In the late 2000s monster stories gained popularity within the young romance genre, introducing the sympathetic, and often sexy monster. Sparked in part by the film *Twilight* (2008), this trend also gained traction on TV, with shows like *Teen Wolf* (2011-2017) and *True Blood* (2008–2014). The heroes of these stories had their danger muted or controlled, such as *True Blood's* vampires who survive on synthetic blood, removing the threat they pose to humans. This made them sympathetic others, shunned by society for an unremovable but controllable difference. This shift allowed for monsters to act as more than just warnings; they became an avenue to exploring and challenging social boundaries. For example, *True Blood* uses vampirism as an allegory for race to examine race relations in the Southern US (Boyer 2011:27).

Parallel to this development, Western horror media has also seen the rise of the serial killer anti-hero, a morally grey killer who is placed in the 'hero' role within the story. Building off the 80s slasher craze, this trend also started in film, with movies like *American Psycho*

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[2] For example, see Halberstam's 1995 rereading of Frankenstein.

(2000), before moving to TV, with popular shows like *Dexter* (2006-2013) and *Bates Motel* (2013-2017). Unlike the monster of the teen romance genre, these monsters maintain their danger, their monstrosity coming from their willingness to, and often enjoyment of, murder. They often have an inherent desire or need to kill, which they navigate through their own moral codes. These codes and the narrative offset the killers' violence, balancing them against a 'greater' evil, functioning to help maintain audiences' sympathy for such monsters (Ní Fhlainn 2016:200). The popularity of anti-hero serial killers persists today, with the success of shows like Netflix's *You* (2018 – present), and the return of classics, with *Dexter: New Blood* (2021- present). Notably, most fictional killers are men, although we are slowly starting to see more women killers represented on TV, such as Love in the later seasons of *You,* however woman killers rarely receive the same level of sympathy as their male counterparts.

At the same time, there has been a gradual shift in queer representation on TV, with a general trend of outwardly LGBTQ+ characters in television increasing in number each year. As of the 2021-2022 season, 11.9% of series regular characters in scripted shows were LGBTQ+ identifying (GLAAD 2022:8) Additionally, research from GLAAD and Netflix in 2021 found a majority (87%) of LGBTQ+ people polled think LGBTQ+ representation on TV more accurately represents the community than it did two years prior, suggesting improvements in quality of representation along with quantity (GLAAD 2021:4). However, while queer representation has improved in recent years, certain potentially harmful trends remain. For example, there is a continued persistence of the 'bury your gays' and related 'dead lesbian syndrome,' tropes, referring to the tendency for stories to kill off their queer characters, particularly queer women characters. Additionally, we have seen the development of new, questionable tropes such as the untrustworthy bisexual (Smith 2020:166). These are patterns my participants were aware of, making references to tropes such as 'bury your gays,' and 'the evil bisexual.'

The cumulation of these shifts in queer and horror media trends created a strong environment for explicit queerness to be explored within monster stories. As such, in the early to mid-2010s, we began to see 'positive' representations of queer monsters, where the audience is asked to align with an explicitly queer monster. This is either in the form of the sympathetic monster, like the medicated zombies of *In the Flesh* (2013-2014), or the morally grey killer, such as in *Hannibal* (2013-2015). The fact that these shows, and the history reflected here

primarily exemplifies queer men is not an oversight, but a reflection of the reality of the history of homosexuality on TV. Early horror representations of homosexuality were primarily populated by men, and when the shift to more positive queer representations in horror occurred, this initially primarily included representations of queer men, often created by queer male creators (see Elliot-Smith 2016). Historically, gay men have been the most represented group of LGBTQ+ community, with 2022 being the first year GLAAD found gay men were not the majority of LGBTQ+ characters on broadcast television, although they are still hold the majority representation on streaming sites (GLAAD 2022:10, 16). Participant awareness of this disparity was present in focus groups, as was the knowledge that on the occasions queer women do appear in horror, they bring with them additional harmful stereotypes. Queer women's horror often utilises tropes such as the psychopathic lesbian or the vampiric seductress[3] (Benshoff 1997:8; Smith 2020:20, 23-24). As such, positive queer woman's representation in horror media remains a rarity, as one participant Charlie summarized on the topic, "*we're starved.*"

Monstrous Women

This lack of queer woman's representation touches on one of the key intersections for understanding why my participants in particular distrusted TV's representations of women and femininity. I have chosen not to detail the history of (heterosexual) women in horror, as the shows examined build more on the history of queer horror than women in horror. But as brief summary, horror traditionally has been a space where women and women's bodies have been objectified, primarily functioning as victims to be torn apart for audience enjoyment. However modern horror, particularly in TV, has begun to shift to make horror a space for women to reclaim subjectivity, and act as the heroine, rather than the victim (Gerrard 2019:5).

Murderous women tend to be absent in horror media, although there are two key archetypes of women from overlapping genres that are important to situating women's violence; that of the 'femme fatale' and the 'sadistic nurse'. A staple of thriller and crime fiction, the femme fatale is characterised by her over sexualisation. She uses her body and sexuality to seduce victims. The femme fatale is seen as a delinquent form of femininity, in which sexuality is turned against men and used for harm, and thus must be reformed or destroyed (Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021:1-2). The 'sadistic nurse' is a version of the 'angel of

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[3] The vampiric seductress traditionally preys on heterosexual women, leading them to their death.

mercy/death,' referring to nurses and caregivers who kill patients under their care. The sadistic nurse most often appears in thriller media, such as Annie Wilkens from Stephen King's *Misery* (1987). She is a controlling, dominating woman who tortures her (usually male) patients (Kaloh Vid 2019:121-122). Often characterised as sexless or masculine in appearance, the sadistic nurse has lost her femininity to gain power. She too, must be usurped from her position to return the power to the men (Kaloh Vid 2019:125). In short, where the femme fatale shows the corruption of femininity by using sexuality as a source of power, the sadistic nurse has abandoned her sexuality to enter a male space of power.

These archetypes and history offer an important context for understanding both what the shows themselves are built on, and how they are understood by viewers. The shows play with this history, reimagining stereotypes and understandings of queer monstrosity. Additionally, my participants demonstrated a knowledge of the history of queer and women's representations in television, which influenced their interactions with the media. In particular, ranging from 22 to 26, many of my participants remember the early 2010s era of queer TV, drawing on this as a comparison to the shows of today. References were made by participants to shows like *Glee* (2009-2015), previously hailed as a positive source of LGBTQ+ representation, but now noted by participants for its casual homophobia and reinforcement of harmful stereotypes (see Dickason 2011). *Glee* held particular importance for the discussion as the creator, Ryan Murphy, also produced *Ratched.* In short, while media representations have expanded in recent years, participants where keenly aware of what it took to get this representation, and the patterns of harm embedded in that history. Below, I offer a brief overview of the shows, and how they continue to represent queerness alongside violent monstrosity.

Ratched (2020-)

I watched *Ratched,* Netflix's most streamed show debut of 2020, for the reason I imagine many other viewers watched *Ratched,* Ryan Murphy (Netflix 2020a). Murphy, often labelled "the most powerful man" in television, gained that status in part for his representation of marginalised communities. Murphy is known for telling LGBTQ+ stories, as well as representing people of colour and people with disabilities, both on-screen and behind the camera (Nussbaum 2018). However, Murphy's representations can be complicated, often riding the line between empowerment and harm. As such, Murphy has received a fair amount of criticism from both media critics and fans, with claims he focuses his work on cis white

males, offering at times derogatory representations of people of colour and women (Mackenzie 2020).

I went into *Ratched* certain that even if it was not good, it, like everything Murphy does, would at least be entertaining. *Ratched* is a horror thriller series, created by Evan Romansky and developed by Ryan Murphy, serving as a prequel to the 1975 psychological drama, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest,* directed by Miloš Forman. The movie focuses on an imprisoned mental patient, Randel McMurphy, and his confrontations with the one-dimensional authoritarian head nurse Ratched. This battle of wills ultimately leads to Ratched indirectly causing another patient's suicide, for which McMurphy strangles her. Although Ratched is not killed by this, she loses her power after the attack, becoming reserved and docile. The TV series explores Mildred Ratched's background, detailing her growing cruelty and abuse of her position as a nurse. However, aside from this titular character, the TV series is almost unrecognisable from its source material, with a completely different set, tone and genre, seemingly drawing more off Hitchcock and Brian De Palma for inspiration[4]. Abandoning the movie's drab, hyper-realism, the show, set in Northern California is an overly stylised, gory and altogether heightened experience, soaked in Murphy's signature brand of camp horror.

The first, and so far only, season of *Ratched* is set in 1947, sixteen years before the movie. Mildred manipulates her way into a nursing position at Lucia State Hospital, managing to impress the head of the hospital, Dr Hannover. Unbeknownst to him, Mildred is there to save her adopted brother, Edmund Tolleson who is being held at the hospital to determine if he is criminally insane after murdering four priests. Mildred's path to saving her brother is littered with her own bodies. From lobotomizing the only witness to the crime to coercing a patient to commit suicide, Mildred quickly proves she is willing to do whatever it takes to keep Edmund safe. This Mildred stands in firm contrast to the original source material. In the film, Ratched is a representation of the dehumanization of medical systems and authoritarian control. In contrast, in the show Mildred is not a product of the medical system, but an outsider, an orphan who lied to get a nursing position and acts to disrupt the very order the original nurse Ratched represented.

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[4] As seen in *Ratched's* cinematography, musical score, and colouring, the use of red and green as emotional expressions being particularly reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo.* Additionally, we see De Palma's influence in the stylised use of split screen.

While at Lucia, Mildred meets Gwendolyn Briggs. Gwendolyn is the press secretary to Governor Wilburn, who she convinces to make the hospital the centrepiece of his re-election campaign. Gwendolyn, already comfortable in her sexuality, takes an instant interest in Mildred, who initially rebuffs her, along with the idea she may be interested in women. However, throughout the show, Mildred gradually accepts her feelings towards Gwendolyn and returns her affections. Their relationship allows Mildred to shift her priorities from saving her adopted brother to caring for her girlfriend, their shared love presenting an alternative path to violence. The season ends with the two moving to Mexico together. It was this relationship that kept me watching. Witnessing the slow unfolding of trust between characters, and the comfortable, genuine chemistry between actors held my interest through the shows otherwise convoluted storylines and plot twists. It is worth noting that both Paulson and Nixon are openly wlw (women who love woman), Nixon identifies as queer, and Paulson describes her sexuality as fluid, having dated both women and men in the past. As such, they brought their experiences of living as queer women to the show, reportedly helping shape the representation of the onscreen relationship (Hall 2020).

Killing Eve (2018-2022)

Killing Eve was first described to me as "*Hannibal* but with lesbians," rooting it within queer TV history. This was a comparison echoed by participants in discussions due to the shows' shared focus on queer psychotic serial killers. *Killing Eve* is a spy thriller series, based on Luke Jennings's *Villanelle* novels, produced by Sid Gentle Films for BBC America and BBC iPlayer. The show was originally created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, a British creator and actor known for representing complex and deviant women. Waller-Bridge wrote the first season and stayed on as a producer for the later seasons, each featuring a different woman head writer. There are four seasons of the show in total, however as the fourth season was airing as this thesis was written, only the first three seasons will be examined.

The series, set in the modern day, focuses on the relationship between Eve Polastri (Sandra Oh), a bored British intelligence investigator with a fascination for female killers, and Villanelle (Jodie Comer), a psychopathic Russian assassin, working for a mysterious organisation known as The Twelve. After being fired from her MI5 job for failing to protect a witness, Eve is hired by Caroline, the head of MI6's Russian division, and tasked with catching Villanelle. The two women quickly develop a mutual obsession with one another, complicating the boundaries of who is chasing who, and what they want to do when they

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catch each other. *Killing Eve* exists in a world of heightened realism, contrasting the dull grey tones of Eve's realistic daily life in London against the overly bright and carefully stylised world of globe-trotting Villanelle.

Openly queer Villanelle lives without regard for others, focused on her job and the rich lifestyle it allows her. Overly materialistic, Villanelle often wears her money, regularly spending copious amounts on clothing and perfumes. Villanelle is initially thrilled to hear someone is tasked with catching her, playing along, staging kills and sending Eve gifts. However, Villanelle's interest in Eve along with her careless and carefree attitude causes issues at work, with Villanelle becoming disconnected from her job. The connection between the two women contributes to Villanelle rethinking her priorities. Ultimately, by the third season Villanelle begins to question why she kills and is looking for a way out of assassination.

Eve, in contrast, starts the show unsatisfied with her life, constrained by her job and husband. As such, Eve is drawn to Villanelle's apparent freedom. Eve's obsession with understanding Villanelle quickly takes over her life, leading to her losing multiple jobs, and the gradual breakdown of her marriage. Her husband, Niko, finally leaves her after he is pitchforked in the neck by another assassin, Dasha Duzran. While Eve initially denies any attraction to women, by the end of the first season Villanelle and Eve's relationship develops an explicitly romantic and sexual undertone, with Villanelle bluntly stating she masturbates while thinking about Eve, and the two are regularly referred to as 'girlfriends' after this point. In later seasons both women engage in forms of proxy sex, in which they sleep with other people while thinking of each other. Most notably, in season 2 Eve has sex with a male agent while listening to Villanelle through an earpiece.

My own relationship with this show is complicated. *Killing Eve* was a show I watched that others love, while I never quite felt the same way. This relationship only got more complicated when I started researching its creation. I do not recall why I first researched the sexuality of the creators of *Killing Eve*, but I remember being surprised by the lack of information. I had always assumed the creator, Waller-Bridge, was a queer woman. I knew the show was made by a woman, heavily promoted as 'a story about women, made by women.' I had assumed as it is about queer women, it was made by one. Information not forthcoming, I skimmed my way through several interviews, and was left with the conclusion the creator was likely not queer. This felt like a betrayal; reading as Waller-Bridge discussed

her love of "transgressive" women, before walking us through her own, (notably hetero) sexual history, I felt uncomfortable. What had previously felt like an inside chat now had the air of a straight woman poking around the edges of queer sexuality for the thrill of it. On reflection I dislike the reaction I had. It feels unfair to rewrite my own experiences due to an assumption. It is also, I acknowledge, unfair to Waller-Bridge, who never stated she is not queer. This was an assumption I made based on her open attraction to men and the lack of mentioning of desire for women. Waller-Bridge may well be a queer woman. Regardless, I have to deal with the fact that the discovery of that lack of explicit, openly embraced queerness, felt like a breaking of trust.

The Haunting of Bly Manor (2020)

As with *Ratched* I watched *The Haunting of Bly Manor,* because of the creator. But where I approach Murphy's works out of interest rather than real enjoyment, I approach Mike Flanagan as a fan. Flanagan's first entry into *The Haunting* series, the predecessor to *Bly Manor,* remains one of my favourite TV shows to date. I also went into *Bly* expecting wlw representation, as while not queer himself, Flanagan's wife, Kate Siegal is bisexual, and Flanagan has a history of lesbian representation in his work. *Bly Manor* draws from several works by author Henry James, primarily adapting his novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). With a non-linear narrative, *Bly Manor* is bookended by a wedding set in 2007, while the bulk of the story occurs in a retelling of events from 1987. This flashback focused narrative results in several complex intertwining stories. Of this, there are two that are particularly central to this research.

First is Viola, or the 'lady of the lake'. Living at Bly Manor the 1670s, Viola struggled after her father's death as, to quote the show, she "…*had nothing, no present, no future, without a tie to a man.*" So, Viola orchestrated a marriage to a distant cousin to keep control of the manor and begin collecting expensive clothes and jewellery to maintain her own access to wealth. When Viola became ill with an undisclosed sickness, she locked these items in a chest for her daughter, in attempt to pass on her financial power. After resisting death for several years, Viola is finally suffocated by her sister, Perdita, who is tired of facing verbal and physical abuse from Viola. However, after death, Viola refuses to leave, remaining as a ghost. Fuelled by anger and love for her daughter, Viola creates a 'gravity well' which affects anyone who dies on the grounds, trapping them as ghosts as well. In the flashback setting of

1987, Viola appeared as a faceless woman clad in a worn nightgown, who occasionally rose from the lake at night to walk through the manor and killed anyone who crossed her path.

The second story is Danelle 'Dani' Clayton's (Victoria Pedretti). Dani, a young American au pair, takes a job in Britain, caring for two young children, Miles and Flora. The children are under legal guardianship of their absent uncle, Henry Wingrave, as their parents died a few years before. Dani takes the job as she is running from her past, haunted by her ex-fiancé, Edmund. The two had been childhood sweethearts, engaged at a young age. Shortly before the wedding Dani ended the relationship, a decision that is implied to be related to her sexuality. This inadvertently causes Edmund's death when he is hit by a truck trying to get away from her. The circumstances of his death tie Edmund's spirit to Dani's struggle with her queer identity, with Edmund appearing whenever Dani attempts to express her sexuality. Working at Bly, Dani meets the manor's gardener, Jamie, and the two develop a romantic relationship, with Jamie helping Dani overcome her guilt surrounding Edmund's death. Their relationship gets complicated when Dani lets Viola possess her to save Flora. Jamie supports Dani with the possession for as long as she can, but ultimately Dani kills herself to avoid hurting anyone. After Dani dies Jamie is unable to move on from her death, constructing elaborate rituals in the hopes Dani will return and isolating herself from the family she found at Bly. The ending scene suggests Dani's spirit does indeed remain with Jamie, haunting her from beyond the grave.

Narratively, *Bly Manor* is set apart from *Ratched* and *Killing Eve*. The other shows focus on a queer woman who starts off positioned as the monster, and who begins to change upon meeting their romantic lead. In *Bly*, our monstrous woman is, for most of the story, not our queer protagonist. It is only at the end that our protagonist takes on the monstrosity of another woman, one that ultimately consumes her.

I will now further explore the central role gender plays in these shows, and how it shapes the ways participants perceive and respond to these representations of monstrous queer women.

Chapter Three: Appearance

I own an old red plaid sweater. It is well worn, a few of the buttons have been replaced and the fabric is wearing thin at the elbows. I don't wear it often nowadays, but there was a time I wore it almost daily. I bought this sweater with a purpose. I bought it because I loved Audrey. Audrey, with her messy butch haircut, tight jeans and cropped shirts that showed off her arms. She was beautiful. Her existence once and for all fully confirmed to me my attraction to women. There was no doubt I wanted to be with her, but a part of me also wanted to be her. I wanted Audrey's 'fuck the world' attitude, her strength, her wit; I wanted her style. Audrey looked beautiful in a way that was inarguably gay, and I wanted that for myself. So, when an episode aired in which Audrey, a character in MTV's Scream (2015- 2019), wore a plaid red shirt, unbuttoned as a sweater. I went out and bought an as close to identical sweater as I could find.

On this day, the sweater sat in my backpack, as a 'just in case the weather turns' extra layer. Not that I ended up wearing it, as the less then optimal ventilation in my office left me uncomfortably hot. Before me, my laptop sat propped on a pile of books for the height. I'd been told that makes you look better on Zoom, although I'm not sure it helped. More than once I caught myself staring at my own image in the computer screen, the picture proving I looked as dishevelled as I felt. My shirt was rumpled and damp with sweat, my face flushed, my hair sat askew. Nearby, a stick of eyeliner sat on top of a pile of notes, just out of frame. I had planned to take 10 minutes to freshen up in the bathroom between interviews, but a forgotten laptop charger had ruined that idea. On the other side of the screen, my interviewee Naavya, seemed much less dishevelled. Naavya, (she/her) a straight cis woman, was dressed in a dark blue, lowcut dress, seated in what appeared to be her bedroom.

We are talking about Killing Eve, a conversation that, in less than 5 minutes and unprompted from my side, had already turned to the topic of fashion. When asked what she liked about the show Naavya recalled her love for a particular outfit, lamenting her inability to purchase it, before admitting to having once recreated a different dress from the show for a party.

"I went to a birthday party, and it was like a dress up birthday party and I made like the iconic pink dress… you want me to show it to you? I have it with me."

Naavya ducks out of frame for a moment, before returning with handfuls of pink tulle. As she held them up, the fabric unfolded, taking on a familiar shape. It is a recreation of one of

Villanelle's dresses from episode two of the first season. As Naavya showed it off as much as the small camera on her computer will allow, she expanded on why she made it.

"...I wore that to a party, and I styled it in a very, like, specific way. Pretty much, like, I copied the exact kind of style... of what Villanelle (was) wearing... I feel like wearing this gave me a lot of confidence, because... I knew that my outfit look(ed) so good, so I wasn't really super concerned with how people, like, saw me. I mean I was... I was concerned (in the) sense that-I feel like people might have thought of me in a certain way, because I was wearing like, such a, like, you know, elaborate dress. But it was all quite like, positive, and I felt very, very confident. I think more than I usually would, and I think that's what fashion really does for me."

Naavya was not the only person to take an interest in the show's fashion or even that dress. Designed by Molly Goddard, the dress sold out after the episode aired and subsequently topped several 'Villanelle's top outfits' compilations (You Magazine 2020). Watching the episode, it is easy to see why it was so memorable. Made up of layers of tulle that puff outward, and hang down past Villanelle's knees, the dress is a big bright, bubble-gum pink statement piece.

The love for the fashion permeated most discussions about the shows, with participants regularly referencing characters' clothes, and often, their desire to replicate them.

> *Lexi (on what she liked about Bly Manor)*: *"(Dani's) fashion was incredible, I wish I could dress like that... I'm going to be her for Halloween."*

My participants' interest in the shows' fashion often focused on representations of gender, mostly femininity. It is no wonder why, given the shows themselves focus heavily on an interrogation of the feminine and the assumptions femininity brings with it. Markers of femininity are interconnected with violent power, subverting and repurposing them to suit their wearers needs.

Within these shows, femininity is regularly used as a disguise, to hide a woman's potential violent power. The use of femininity as a disguise for women's monstrosity was notably discussed by Barbara Creed (1993), in *The Monstrous Feminine.* Creed argues that female monsters are defined by their sexuality, and that their gender is central to their production of monstrosity and horror (1993:3). Creed explores the idea that femininity can be conceptualised as a disguise; representations and signifiers of 'acceptable' femininity are

used to complicate and hide a monstrous women's monstrosity, making them unidentifiable (Creed 1993:136). A similar use of femininity by monstrous women is evident in the shows examined here.

However, femininity crucially not only plays a role in disguising power but remains significant to the characters even when their violence is revealed. These characters not only use femininity as a tool, but also take enjoyment in their own expressions of femininity. What's more, markers of femininity are integrated into acts of violence, transforming feminine signifiers into markers of power in their own right. The result of this integration are representations of femininity where the importance is placed on the wearer's aim in presenting themselves femininely. The shows suggest femininity can be a source of power, depending on the wearer's purposeful choices of presentation, and success in that presentation. However, this success is constrained by their ability to understand and use how gendered markers are read by society. Additionally, it must be remembered that this is power rooted in violence.

Identity

Taylor (on what she liked about Killing Eve): **"Yeah, I like the clothing. I'm** *superficial."*

Appearances matter. Fashion can carry with it markers of class, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and more. Sociologist Calefato (2021) describes fashion as "the language of the signs of the body," (10). It is a 'sense-making system', which allows for the production of individual and social representations of identity. We can build an image of the self through the clothes we choose to wear. However, fashion also presents us with a space for play. It allows one to shift between identities, to try on different signifiers or put forth false identities in the form of a disguise (Geczy and Karaminas 2020:10). It has been theorised that the copying of TV characters' styles and clothing speaks to a want to replicate the characters' qualities and often sense of strength (Mascio 2021:443). In our cases, this presented as the replicating of a strength closely connected to gender identity. This act of replication can be understood through the lens of Judith Butler's (2002) theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender, as well as sex, are culturally constructed categories which are formed and maintained through repeated performances of gender (178). As Butler argues, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results," (2002:33). In replicating characters'

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styles, viewers are remaking the characters' performances of gender, to form their own expressions of gender identity by borrowing select gender markers. The knowledge of how these performances would be read socially was a key element within their replication. The confidence Naavya drew from Villanelle's dress cannot be separated from the femininity of the outfit, any more than the comfort my sweater gave me can be severed from the androgyny it offered.

To tie clothing to gender is hardly revolutionary. The two are often interconnected from birth, when dressing a new-born in pink or blue signifies the shape of their genitals. Ideas of what produces a masculine or feminine person remain entangled in the clothes they wear, and the breaking, mixing and reorganising of gendered clothing boundaries has long served to communicate queer identity, both within the real world, and on-screen (Calefato 2021:47; Benshoff 1997:164). This was what I drew from Audrey, copying the markers of her androgenous butch identity, to actualise my own queerness. The monster presents the opportunity to take this breakage to the extreme, to push against the limits of the feminine and masculine and merge them together on one body (Halberstam 1995). Yet the blurring of gendered markers is not the extreme the shows focus on, nor it is the one that sits at the centre of the women character's violence.

The shows do explore the blurring of gender categories at times. *Bly Manor* includes a male spirit possessing and 'living' within a woman's body, and *Killing Eve's* Villanelle dresses in male drag on several occasions. In season one Villanelle bursts boisterously into her apartment, a fake beard and bushy eyebrows glued over her features. This is a breaking of gendered boundaries, but not one done in seriousness. This outfit is a mockery, Villanelle is dressed as her assassin handler to poke fun at him. It is not meant as a marker of her own identity, but a momentary borrowing of his. It is a game, and one kept separate from Villanelle's violence- she never kills while wearing a beard, but often does so wearing a dress. Perhaps this is why the image of a bearded Villanelle is not the one that remained in people's minds. Instead, the image people maintained was of Villanelle in "the iconic pink dress." What sat at the forefront of discussions about *Killing Eve* and the other shows representations of both clothing and violence, were their expressions of femininity.

To discuss femininity raises the question of what we mean by 'femininity,' and what it means to be 'feminine.' Understandings of femininity are culturally specific and can change both between and within a culture. In the west, femininity as a term can often be considered as the

'norm' for women, at times being used synonymously with 'womanly' and prescribed to all women. In this way it can colloquially be regarded as some inherent, 'natural' element of being a woman. Alternatively, some feminists such as Germaine Greer conceptualise femininity as a term which encapsulates the normative gender expressions placed on female designated bodies (McCann 2017:4). It is formed under, and positions a person within, a heteronormative power structure. This makes femininity key in exploring how the gendered body is shaped by society, and how norms function as a surface for the body (Ahmed 2010:145).

However, femininity and masculinity as attributes can also be separated from these designated bodies, as shown by work such as Halberstam's (1998) examination of masculine women. While femininity may be the gendered expectation for women, not all women are feminine. In this discussion I primarily focus on the appearance of femininity, and the expectations tied to feminine appearance. As such, I have chosen to follow the work of gender theorist McCann (2017) in defining femininity. McCann argues femininity can be seen as a "style of the body", which is a normative descriptor for, but also separable from, female designated bodies, conceptualising it as "an aesthetic that also goes beyond the surface of the skin." (2017:5). McCann claims thinking of femininity in this way "takes into consideration not only how the body is shaped socially but also the way it is enacted and felt as a gendered mode." (2017:5). This understanding of femininity is beneficial to my examination of how women in these shows both conform to and subvert gendered expectations through the performance of a feminine aesthetic. Importantly for our conversation of confirmation to gender norms, femininity is an achievable aesthetic. Nonetheless western ideals of femininity are also in part an impossibility, involving unachievable and conflicting expectations that can never fully be met. As such, femininity is both real and to an extent, artificial in its existence (McCann 2017:4).

To look at femininity as an aesthetic means examining how the performance of visual markers of femininity work to help produce a feminine identity (McCann 2017:5). Femininity as an identity takes a collection of markers to produce, as one feminine signifier in isolation will not label a body as feminine. My love for earrings and eyeliner is not enough to produce a recognised feminine identity. With respect to participants' readings of the shows, what makes a feminine woman seems to come down to three main elements: her clothes, hair, and makeup. These were the elements participants picked out to signify femininity, the correct performance of them playing a key role in producing what was recognised as a feminine

identity. For example, of the three shows *Bly Manor* presented arguably the most varied image of femininity, featuring a range of feminine characters with differing styles, yet participants still identified them as feminine, partially on the basis that their presentations of these elements matched the social the norms for a female designated body.

> *Rose (discussing femininity in* Bly Manor*): "(Dani's) still sort of undeniably feminine."*
>
> *Revena: "What makes her undeniably feminine?"*
>
> *Rose: "...in terms of like how she acts and presents… it's still very um, like made up and sort of like, feminine. Like her hair looks nice."*
>
> *Hana: "Pretty make up, fuzzy little sweaters… lots of like, pinkish kinda soft colours."*

Here, Rose (she/her) and Hana (she/her) offer some specific markers of femininity, styled hair, pink clothes, pretty makeup. These in isolation do not identify one as a feminine woman, but in combination produce a feminine identity. It is hard to locate the precise images of femininity the shows draw from as femininity is contextual, learnt, and ever changing, and the exact details of a successful portrayal of femininity differ slightly between each show. The portrayal of femininity is influenced by the set and narrative. Ratched's representation of femininity in 1940's California is not identical to the femininity of Villanelle in modern day Paris. What we do see in all three shows is femininity as drawn from stereotypes of 'traditional' Western femininity. It is a femininity that explores the interplay between the image of femininity as naivety, and the image of femininity as sexual. A femininity that is aware of the heteronormative assumption that a successful woman is attracted to men and works to make herself attractive to them in turn (Pollitt et al 2021:522).

If we accept for a moment these characters are successfully performing a feminine aesthetic in such a way that creates a feminine styled body and signifies a Westernised feminine identity, this leads to the question of what it means to have, or to be read as having a 'feminine identity.' To answer this, we must look how fashion can play a key role in signifying compliance to gender norms beyond clothing. Feminine styling brings with it assumptions about the wearer's traits and behaviours, assumptions which can be repurposed to achieve the wearer's goals.

Makeup

Ratched's lipstick is almost always fire engine red. Bright, bold, eye-catching. We watch Mildred apply it in the pilot episode. Positioned over Mildred's shoulder, the viewers watch as Mildred primps in front of the bathroom mirror, adjusting her clothing before pulling out the tube of lipstick. Mildred puckers her lips, reapplying the lipstick, before taking a moment to study her own reflection and say, "Looking good today, Mildred." The line is a mimicry of the complement she just heard the nightguard pay Dolly, a trainee nurse. The lipstick too is a mimicry- moments earlier we watched as Dolly applied lipstick, the shot an intense close up, focused on the mirror in Dolly's compact as the lipstick slowly glided across her lips. Now we are with Mildred, in the bathroom of Lucia State hospital, a building that by the end of the series Mildred will have all but run, having removed the current hospital director. But Mildred does not have that yet; all she has before her now is a fake job interview of her own creation. Needing to impress head of the hospital, Dr. Hannover, she has dressed for the occasion. In this moment, Mildred offers the picture of 1940's femininity. Hair done up neatly, pearl earrings dangle from Mildred's ears. Her vibrant, yellow dress provides her with the ideal 1940's silhouette. The padded shoulders and a cinched waist working, to quote Sarah Paulson, to "make a woman look like a real woman" (SAG-AFTRA Foundation 2021). The entire look is a crafted costume, everything accounted for, down to the exact tilt of her hat, copied from a fashion magazine.

The signifiers of femininity are complex and varied, and so too are their connotations. A lot can be read from Mildred's presentation in this scene. The style offers an image of class, education, someone with attention to details, good hygiene, sensible yet sensual. The lipstick alone offers an array of connotations. Coming off the war effort, lipstick served as a symbol of feminine strength and resistance against the challenges of World War Two (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019:227). It offers the image of a confident woman able to work. The red colour in conjunction with Ratched's adjustments to her neckline also speak to her giving an image of sensuality. Red lip was encouraged in part, as a moral boost for men, so they could see ostensibly attractive women. This connotation between lipstick and sex has further developed since the 1940's, making it a connection modern audiences are likely to be familiar with (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019:227). For current audiences, connotations of makeup sit at a similar crossroads, between a possible sign of strength, as well as a sign of oppression (Gurrieri and Drenten 2019). At its simplest, this moment exemplifies for Ratched a conformance to gender norms. It adds to the image of Ratched as the ideal, 1940s picture of a

feminine woman, conveying the message that she is safe. Ratched is not a threat, she's just a woman.

If there is one overarching message given by all three the shows and expressed by in focus groups, it is that the overt performance of femininity is read by society as a symbol of weakness. This idea of feminine weakness can be connected back to biologically essentialist Western ideas of sex and gender, by which women are perceived as the weaker sex, being less capable than men in terms of both physical strength and mental rationality (Grosz 1994:14). Challenging this idea, the shows' collective central message is not that to be a woman is to be weak, but that to be a woman, and read as a woman, particularly a feminine one, is to be underestimated. This image of feminine presenting women being underestimated was one participants linked to their own lived experiences of presenting as feminine. One participant, Rose (she/her), a feminine presenting cis woman discussed how her femininity affects peoples' view of her intelligence:

> *"I've had a lot of people dismiss traditionally feminine interests… going into makeup (school) this year I've had people either say I'm 'too smart for that' or have a very obvious shift in their view of my intelligence based on it. Also, I notice the more femme I'm presenting the less seriously people take me, like there's a peak amount of femininity you can present before you're vapid. So, you can wear makeup and a skirt, but God forbid it's pink or you take any joy in it."*

We see here, a connection drawn between femininity and assumptions of intelligence. This is an assumption we see proof of within the wider world. For example, one US study found feminine presenting women are less likely to be assumed to be able to be a scientist (Banchefsky et al. 2016). This connection between femininity and intelligence is, in part tied to the way Western ideals of femininity are connected to youth. Young women are seen as the ones most capable of replicating and producing feminine norms, as such successful productions of femininity bring with it assumptions of naivety and innocence (McCann 2017:47). The shows play off this idea, that to be seen as a successful woman is to be seen as lesser, and by extension, nonthreatening. This link again holds true in the wider world, where women who are perceived as feminine are more likely to avoid sentencing or receive a lighter sentence when charged with murder than women who are seen as failing to perform femininity (Morrissey 2003:170). Feminine women are seen as safe through their adherence to feminine norms. Ratched's image of the ideal 1940's woman gives Dr. Hannover the

image of a sweet, caring, kind-hearted woman, the kind you want as a nurse in your hospital. She appears the kind of women who would follow his authority, as the head of the hospital and as a man. However, to return to Rose's observation, Rose picks out another interesting element to understanding markers of femininity, namely the idea of "*a peak amount of femininity*", implying that there is a limit to the level to which you can present femininely, before the presentation goes beyond simply confirming to norms and is read as something new.

Ratched is not just producing *an* image of 1940's femininity, offering enough markers to show conformity; she is pushing an image of the ideal, of an extreme of femininity. This is something depicted in all three shows. The presentations of femininity go beyond everyday norms. These characters are not just seen as feminine, but overly feminine; the word often used by participants to describe this performance is 'hyper-feminine.' In academic usage, 'hyper-femininity' is primarily connected to heterosexuality, seen as a visual expression of sexualized heterosexuality through overexaggerated adherence to binary feminine gender roles (Blaikie 2018:215). This performance of femininity is seen as an act done by women for men, one that communicates the performers desire towards men. Importantly, hyper-femininity can at times also be read as failure of 'correct' femininity, its excess pushing it beyond gendered norms (McCann 2017:144). What's more, McCann found the aesthetics of hyper-femininity can be utilised by femme identifying women[5] to try and purposefully 'fail' at performing femininity (2017:144). Similarly, the performances of hyper-femininity in the show are being performed by queer women. But the aim is still often to communicate desire towards men, and as such it must be a performance which is readable as successful by men. However due to their sexuality, this display is often that of a false desire. As such, the image of a hyper-feminine woman here functions as a disguise both for the characters' danger, and the characters' queerness.

Ratched's outfit speaks to her character, her attention to detail that we see carried through the season, her neatness, and her seemingly genuine enjoyment in certain markers of femininity. But the outfit is also a cover. The presentation of class and education offered by the dress are a lie, as Ratched was a poor, uneducated orphan. The suggestion of heterosexual sensuality distracts from the reality of Ratched's lesbianism. The image of a caregiver covers over the lives Ratched has taken. Ratched is not dressed overly femininely simply as an expression of

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[5] 'Femme' is an identity label and subculture ascribed to primarily lesbian women who present femininely.

her femininity, but because she knows how femininity is read, and how to use these readings for her own gain.

> *Rose (discussing Ratched's feminine presentation during her interview): "Ratched's like… 'if I present in the way that (men), feel comfortable with first, it's easier for me to get what I want, even if I then have to divert from what they expect.'"*

A Pink Dress

> *Milo (on femininity and perceived safety): "It's like if you're hyper-feminine then you can't possibly be dangerous, no sir. Not in the slightest."*

I want to return, for a moment, to a different, but equally iconic pink dress than the one picked out by Naavya, a dirndl in hot pink, worn by Villanelle in the fourth episode of season two:

We find ourselves in Amsterdam's red-light district. A middle-aged man walks the street, looking for company, until Villanelle passes before him. Interested, the man follows her into a nearby curtained room. Villanelle's look is striking, dressed in the hot pink dirndl, her face hidden behind a stylised pig mask with cartoonishly large eyes and long lashes, giving the mask an overly feminine feel. The outfit is complete with a soft pink hood, pig ears included, and two pom-poms for Villanelle to coyly play with while the man, her mark, undresses. Finally, when the man is lain on his back, shirtless, hands cuffed, feet bound together, Villanelle opens the curtains to reveal floor to ceiling windows opening onto the street outside. A collection of tourists gather to watch as the mark is lifted into the air by his feet, as Villanelle parades before the crowd. Villanelle takes her time in producing a knife and showing it to the viewers, miming slicing into the man and laughing as though acting out a pantomime. Then, at the direction of the cheering crowd, Villanelle guts the hanging man like a pig being slaughtered, before turning back to the window to curtsy politely by the hanging body.

In this instance we see Villanelle, a woman with a female designated body, putting on a literal, purposeful performance of what it is to be feminine. It is a tailored disguise, donned for a purpose, namely, luring in the mark. The outfit emphasises the sexualization of femininity. The dress is short, the shirt is low cut, sitting off the shoulders, and the bodice frames her breasts. Villanelle's body is on display. The outfit codes Villanelle as a sex

worker, allowing Villanelle to play into assumptions that the female body is available for male enjoyment, and that a woman's role is that of a carer, there to serve other's needs. At the same time, the outfit also draws on the childhood connotations of femininity. The poofy tutu-like element of the dress and pom-poms Villanelle tugs on are suggestive of a picture of childhood innocence, adding to the perception of Villanelle as a naive, weak woman. In this instance. this is also in part a subversion of the femininity visible to the mark. The man believes Villanelle is a sex worker, he is aware her coy, childlike innocence is false, and being performed for him. However, he is not aware the extent to which it is an act, believing it is being done for his sexual pleasure.

This outfit is a costume. This, for Villanelle, is not a serious performance of personal femininity, but a part of her job, as well as a form of play. The episode's director, Lisa Brühlmann, said in regard to Villanelle's outfit "(the dirndl) was always a bit sexist, because it's so much about the woman's body…if (Villanelle) is wearing it, she's making fun out of it." (Bradley 2019). Villanelle is, in a form, offering a parody of Western, specifically traditional European, femininity. I want to return here to Butler, who, in their discussion of gender performativity, also discussed the theatrical performance of gender. Butler argued the theatrical performance of gender can be subversive as it reveals that gender is a construction, undermining assumptions about naturalness of gender and the body (Butler 2002:175). Butler also argued activities such as drag and cross-dressing can disrupt the reality of gender, as a male body performing femininity, or female body preforming masculinity works to destabilize the means through which the body is read in regard to gender categories. Additionally, drag can highlight the way gender is created through the repetition and imitation of gender markers (Butler 2002:174-5).

Most of the work on this topic has focused on men preforming as drag queens, although in recent years some attention has been given to the drag king, but by far the least attention has been given to the 'hyper queen', that is, a female identifying person who puts on a performance of femininity as a drag queen (Shapiro 2007:255).

I have chosen to use the label 'hyper queen' here, but the label 'bio queen' is more common within academic writing. I have done so as I feel the title bio queen risks a return to notions of biologically true gender, whereas hyper queen avoids this issue and better highlights the elements of artificiality and performance involved. The hyper queen initially appears to present a problem to the subversive nature of drag, in that she lacks the disruption between

body and performance, and thus cannot disrupt reality in the way of the drag queen or king. However, it has been argued the hyper queen may still stand to demonstrate gender's constructed nature, without relying on a disparity between gender presentation and biology (Devitt 2006:33). Hyper queens often produce what aesthetically appears to be a hyper-feminine performance of gender, the level of extremity proving a clear attempt to push this performance into the area of failed femininity. What's more, the purpose of the performance is not about communicating the performers' genuine confirmation to gender roles and attraction to men. Instead, in pushing expressions of femininity to the extreme, hyper queens put on purposeful performances of femininity which poke fun at and parody traditional gender roles. In doing so successfully, in a way that draws attention to the socially constructed nature of femininity; a female body putting on a performance of heightened femininity can function to reveal the fact that there is no natural link between the biology of the body and the construction of the feminine (Devitt 2006:33). This notion of hyper queening, I argue, is similar to the work being done by the characters in these shows.

As detailed above, Villanelle in particular produces a parody of femininity. In Amsterdam, Villanelle has a literal audience to perform to, but even when not on a stage, her hyper-feminine outfits are still costumes, functioning as a performance. These characters perform for themselves, and they perform for the audience. We the viewers are in on the joke, able to share in Villanelle's game because we know that it is a game. The artificiality of this performance, as with drag, reveals itself in its extremity. In this instance it is a literal artificiality, the cartoon, doe-eyed femininity of Villanelle's pig mask is impossible to replicate by human bodies. The artificiality of the performance is strengthened when the messages being read from the dress are brought into a sharp contrast with the reality of the figure wearing it. The moment Villanelle slices through the man's neck, the dual feminine images of naive innocence and sex object are undone and replaced with the reality of a world-renowned assassin.

A similar framing of these productions of femininity as a parody can be read in *Ratched*. As mentioned above, Ratched too creates a purposeful performance of femininity. In Ratched's case, it is the success of her performance that gives away the artificiality of femininity to the audience. *Ratched* (the show) plays on the way the feminine is tied to roles of caregiving, a fact Ratched (the character) chaptalizes on. She can put on a costume of femininity, separate from her own identity, offering another example of a feminine body putting on a performance of femininity. In doing so Ratched successfully convinces others of her 'caring, feminine'

nature. However, when another character comments *"(Ratched's) a true caregiver"*, the audience knows the truth, knowing of the pile of bodies created by Ratched's actions. This breaks that link, between femininity and nature, and in this way, Ratched's performance of hyper-femininity again functions to reveal the way gender and femininity are constructed.

Feminine Violence.

> *Rose (discussing characters' depictions of femininity in the shows to get close to men): "I think it is that sort (of) the thing of like oh when one cares that much about appearance, you can't have other shit going on in a brain that's not how it works."*
> *Hana: "There's only so much room in there, can't be, you know, thinking of other things."*
> *Rose: "Just thoughts about lipstick colours…"*

In Creed's (1993) exploration of the 'monstrous-feminine', she suggested the ways in which female monsters utilise acceptable images of femininity to cover up their monstrosity functions to destabilise their gender identities (Creed 1993:23-4, 135). The use of signifiers of 'acceptable femininity' can be conceived either as the acceptance by the monstrous woman of the need to follow patriarchal pressures to survive, or as a disguise, hiding their true danger (Chare et al. 2020:26). This disguise is revealed, most often, in the moment of violence. For the serial killer, the moment of exposure is murder (Weinstock 2020:364). When Dexter or Hannibal slice through a victim's neck, they reveal their true selves; the violent, masculine monsters who live hidden under an effeminate, nice guy façade. When Villanelle or Ratched kills, they too, are revealed through their violence. In killing, a woman is thought to take on masculine attributes; a violent woman is deviant not only because she kills, but in doing so, she goes against what it is to be a woman, revealing herself to be 'bad' at being a woman (Miller, Atherton and Hetherington 2021:2). However, while these shows present in the moment of violence a subversion of the feminine, it is crucially not a *removal* of the feminine. In slitting a man's throat Villanelle does not expose herself as a secretly masculine figure, instead her femininity remains entangled in the killing itself. Rather than casting aside the mask of the feminine, Villanelle carries the markers of femininity into the act of violence.

To understand the relation of violence and femininity that these shows present, it is important to establish that murder for these women is an act not only made available to them through gendered performance, but one they are forced into due to gender. Throughout each show, the characters' gender identities are portrayed as something which limits the options available to them. These women's status as women restrains their opportunities for growth, and restricts

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their power, in such a way that they are left with only the options of suffering or enacting violence. As such, gender identity in a way facilitates the need for these women to be violent, entangling the action of enacting violence with their position as women, a point that will be explored further in the next chapter. Additionally, expressions of characters gender identities and femininity also take place within acts of violence themselves, as violence becomes an extension of femininity and a way of expressing gender.

Material Murder

In all three shows character identity is tied closely to clothing. Villanelle is Villanelle because of what she wears. However, *Bly Manor* takes this a step further, in that the material of women's clothes becomes a direct extension of personhood. Participants such as Rose (she/her) picked up on this, commenting on the important role clothing held in *Bly Manor* when asked about the show's representation of femininity.

> *Rose (discussing* Bly's *costuming):* "*Who (the women of Bly) are, is linked with their, like a collection of their clothing."*

We see this connection between clothing, feminine identity, and the act of violence most clearly within Viola's story.

Viola "had an inordinate love of dress." Throughout her life she collected many fine dresses and jewellery, building up a vast and expensive collection. When faced with the possibility of her death, this collection was packed away in a chest as an inheritance for her daughter. When Viola died, she, in some sense, also went into the chest, her spirit remaining amongst her dresses as she waited for her daughter to come of age and find her. However, some years after Viola's death, it was not her daughter, but her sister, the woman who killed her, who crept to the attic where the chest lay. Using a key stolen from her husband's desk Perdita unlocked the chest, revealing the riches that lay inside. Perdita stroked over the soft fabric, moving aside the silk covering to reveal the first of the dresses. She lifted the dress up, admiring the richly detailed piece. As Perdita gazed at it, the dress suddenly appeared to come to life, arms moving, hands appearing out the ends of the sleeves to wrap around her throat and squeeze the life out of her.

Bly Manor places heavy emphasis on the ways feminine women are underestimated. Each of the main characters face their own struggles in this regard, Viola's being the most obvious, given she is unable to survive without a husband. Clothing is presented as one of the tools

women have available to them to utilise this underestimation and create their own forms of power. Viola first utilises fashion to win over a man, in a move the show's narration describes as "*true, but… also theatre*". Viola's presentation and dress is an orchestrated appearance, but it is also a genuine expression of who she is. Her dresses serve both as a method of self-expression and a valuable tool in the creation of power. After getting married, Viola's clothes on their own function as a form of power, in that they allow her the collection of wealth in a time when women weren't allowed to hold their own money. They are a way for Viola to maintain some level of control, separate from her husband.

The dresses also become a literal extension of Viola's personhood. When she dies, her spirit remains not with her body, but with her clothes. Viola's being is forever tied to her feminine clothing. When Perdita opens the chest, she disturbs Viola by disrupting the clothing, and she also threatens the livelihood of Viola's daughter, as the clothing was intended as the daughter's inheritance, a means of passing down wealth and power between women. In what can be regarded as an attempt at protection, this challenge to her daughter's survival is countered by the material of the dress itself. The dress almost seems to come to life and strangle Perdita, sleeves reaching forward of their own accord. The item of clothing needed for Viola and her daughter's survival as women is the thing that ends her sister's life.

> Rose (on Perdita's death): "Visually, it's the dress that – it's the dress that strangles her."

As such, in *Bly Manor,* the embracer of markers of a feminine aesthetic such as clothing functions both as an extension of a woman's personhood and as an alternative means of power. *Bly* recontextualises the material of women's clothing into a marker of power. But, as with the other shows, this is a form of power that is eventually expressed through violence.

Killing Eve, *season one, episode one, Villanelle has broken into the house of mob boss Caesar Greco, her latest mark. Villanelle steps into the garden, alive with people celebrating Greco's anniversary. She fits easily into the crowd. Her dress is a light, summery blue. The fabric is sheer in parts, and a slit in the front combined with the fact she appears to be braless draws attention to Villanelle's chest. Her blond hair is pinned up with an ornate hairpin. Done taking in the party, Villanelle retreats inside. Upon finding Greco's grandson, she convinces the young boy to call for Greco, bringing the man inside as well. They meet in Greco's bedroom. Villanelle sitting at the end of the bed, stroking a hand over silk sheets when Greco enters. Greco, who has a range of bodyguards patrolling his house, shows no*

concern at finding an unknown woman in his bedroom, assuming she is a sex worker sent to
him as an anniversary gift. Villanelle plays into the idea, confirming she was, in a way, sent
to him. However, Villanelle shows no interest in actually engaging in a sexual role. When
Greco attempts to touch her, she brushes him away, chiding that "you should always ask
before touching". Laughing the interruption off, Greco admires her dress, noting its
familiarity as it is in actuality his wife's dress. At this point Villanelle pulls the hairpin free
from her hair and thrusts it into one of Greco's eyeballs. She presses a valve that releases the
poison in the hairpin, slowly killing Greco as Villanelle cradles his face in her hands,
watching him die.

Killing Eve is rich with moments that overlap material markers of femininity and the act of powerful violence. The hairpin is far from the only feminine item Villanelle repurposes- she regularly draws on tools and symbols of traditional femininity, turning them into weapons. A knitting needle is stabbed into a man's throat, perfume poisons a French businesswoman, a knife is buried within a tube of lipstick. These items are being subverted from their original purposes, in which they can be read as tools of oppression and symbols of women's naivety and weakness, to become the tools with which Villanelle kills. In Villanelle's hands, lipstick not only offers a false sense of security, hiding the face of an assassin under its pretty hue, but the lipstick itself is now a weapon as well. As such, we see again markers of femininity coming to hold a form of power within themselves. They function not just as a disguise that hides the danger but hold an inherent danger themselves. Crucially, these are also items Villanelle delights in, in their original forms. Villanelle adores clothing, spending much of her money on extravagant outfits. Villanelle similarly shows a genuine love for makeup and perfume. Villanelle's apartment bathroom is cluttered with perfume bottles; in the first season she gifts a perfume, *La Villanelle,* to Eve, along with expensive clothing. Beyond the disguise and out of costume, Villanelle remains a feminine woman.

Ratched similarly blurs the line between weapons and tools of femininity, most starkly in its marketing, Netflix posters juxtaposing symbols of femininity with horror. In one poster, Ratched holds up an ice pick, an iconic tool used for lobotomies, and one Ratched herself uses in the show. However, the poster's positioning of the pick, hovering above Ratched's eye, does not fit with a lobotomy. Instead, Ratched imitates the pose held when applying mascara. Here again, we see the mixing of markers of femininity and violence, as well as the centring of these markers as more than a disguise. The ice pick/mascara stands as a symbol of

Ratched's identity, as a meeting point between violence and femininity in which neither masks the other, but both work in conjunction together.

In the past, a number of feminist scholars argued for the need to reject expectations of feminine appearance, as the failure to do so functions to uphold the oppressive gender system. If society produces women as feminine beings, using this to position them within a suppressive power structure, then femininity must be interrogated and rejected (McCain 2017:1). However, this view has also been critiqued, in part for its complete rejection of the possibilities of feminine presentation and of enjoyment and pleasure some people find in presenting femininely. As a counter argument, it has been suggested that while femininity can be constraining when forced upon bodies, agency can be found in the enacting of a chosen, interrogated femininity (McCain 2017:103).

Killing Eve's support of this notion, which is echoed by the other shows, is clearest when Villanelle's performance of femininity is placed against an uninterrogated expression of femininity, that of Gemma. Gemma is a friend of Eve's husband Niko, who develops romantic feelings for him. Gemma offers an image of uninterrogated, traditional middle class British femininity. A schoolteacher, she speaks in a sickly-sweet voice, her bedroom is decorated with fairy lights, and she likes the missionary position. Gemma is the show's example of unexamined femininity, adopting a feminine style shaped by society and never questioned by its wearer. There are no thought-out layers to Gemma's presentation; the pink bows on her bras speak to her genuine naivety and childlike nature. It is a femininity that Villanelle, with her crafted, purposeful performance, is easily able to run circles around, manipulating Gemma and directing her on how to get close to Niko before Villanelle finally kills Gemma when she stops being useful to her. The element of purposeful choice puts them apart. Villanelle knows what it means to dress in pink, she knows how it will be read and responded to, and does so with purpose, even when that purpose is a self-expression of her feminine identity, whereas Gemma must be directed by Villanelle on how to use her femininity, because she fails to interrogate her own actions. This personal integration and purpose, according to the show, overcomes the potentially oppressive nature of femininity.

Variance

> *April: "(Bly) just did a really good job at portraying just like- a variety of different ways of being feminine and showing the strength in that."*

To return to *Bly Manor* for a moment, if *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* offer an image of powerful femininity born from pushing feminine aesthetics to the extreme, *Bly's* image of powerful femininity is one focused on the choice of the extent to which one performs femininity. The use of markers of femininity in *Bly* are highly influenced by character purpose. What the women need to achieve dictates their outfits, even when, as with Viola and her husband, the goal is a performance intended to attract a man. In this way, some viewers, such as Sam (any pronouns), a non-binary/gender-fluid participant, saw *Bly* as detaching gender from the body, as it removed the idea of there being a 'correct' form of feminine presentation, allowing anyone to take and remake feminine markers as wanted, separate from society's image of correct gender presentation.

> *Sam: "...that costuming, it helped transcend that idea of binary gender. It was like you've got these three women who all dress completely different, and because how they dress isn't related to, what they're born with or like their sexuality is more of a representation of one what they need to get done... It's like, their gender doesn't matter, and I think that's really powerful."*

This was a presentation of femininity several participants found particularly appealing, in its seeming allowance for the mixing of gender markers and the ability to perform certain feminine gender markers and still be feminine, without feeling required to perform a full range of feminine gender markers. Sam in particular spoke of how seeing the more diverse mixture of feminine and masculine traits articulated on-screen, helped her in finding their own style.

> *"The gardener's character in Bly actually really did help me figure out how I could be comfortable in my existing as both a feminine and masculine person... I decided I wanted to feel more comfortable like not wearing makeup but, having my hair done and stuff like that, I mean I was already gone through a lot of my... figuring out more about myself, so I think she encouraged me to look into different eras that I could still present gender neutral...*
>
> *...Like I know when I was watching it was like, I love this character, I love what she's wearing. But I think, it's not till I look back on it- oh yeah, my wardrobe has shifted or expanded."*

Sam's comments return us to the ways participants actively engage with these shows. Like Naayya, Sam utilised the show to further develop their outward expression and performance

of their gender. Sam recreated and remade certain feminine markers that were presented on the show to represent a cis, feminine woman, to present their own, more fluid expression of gender. In this way, Sam both replicated but also transformed the show's signifiers of gender, expanding the possibilities behind what they represent.

Conclusion

> *Taylor (commenting on the message of* Killing Eve*): "…as a woman, (Villanelle) kills people, but she is attractive and she has nice clothes… it does say 'hey you can wear nice clothes and be very confident in yourself and still be a bad ass,'"*

The shows present subversive images of femininity, challenging assumptions of femininity as weakness or disguise for masculine strength. They repurpose material markers of femininity into powerful tools, making them a potential source of strength, rather than something that needs to be set aside to gain power. The shows place focus on the wearer's intent and use of fashion as gendered performance, highlighting presentations of femininity built around control. The power this offers is however notably reliant on the performers' abilities to successfully conform to gendered norms, and in this way is restricted in who can utilise it. The wearer must be able to produce a recognised and accepted performance of femininity, one that remains interconnected with heteronormativity.

The shows address this in part by exploring the ways heteronormativity can be used to a woman's advantage. They also address the reality of receiving male attention when presenting femininity, while separating the performance of femininity from inherently being an expression of heterosexual desire. Additionally, this leaves open the option of performing with the purpose of gaining male attention, something which I mention not only in regard to my one cis-het participant, but the many pan and bisexual participants, including some, such as Sam, who are currently in relationships with men.

While these shows present subversive representations of femininity, the power offered through this subversion remained tied to the ability to successfully perform traditional expectations of femininity. Despite this limitation, participants were receptive to these images of subversive femininity. Gender markers were copied and recreated by viewers to create their own expression of self-identity. Crucially, this process did not involve replicating markers exactly as presented within the shows but changing and transforming them to suit the wearers own needs. In doing so these performances were further subverted, such as through Sam's decoupling of the performance from binary womanhood. Viewers found feelings of

comfort and power in doing this. It is worth noting however, the power connected to these representations of femininity within the shows are an explicitly violent forms of power. This leaves us with the question of how the violence of these characters is understood and reconciled by both the shows and viewers alike, which I explore in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Violent Delights

Sophie (On watching Ratched kill): "To see a female do it, you know as a female myself… you just love it, because I'm not gonna go out and shoot however many people and kill people, but the fact that (Ratched) can do it is great."

I watch a lot of violent media. My love for horror includes a particular fondness for the slasher genre. Watching highschoolers get stabbed in *Scream* (1996) qualifies as a weekend de-stressor. The violence of such movies has never worried me, nor have I ever felt the need to justify my enjoyment of the films by first disavowing its display of violence. Perhaps this is why my participants need to regularly assert their own separation from violence stood out to me. The pattern of taking enjoyment from witnessing violence, while also reaffirming one's separation from the action of it, played out repeatedly in our discussions. Participants would talk of their love for the shows, their love for the characters, even their love for the characters' violence. But this was always caveated with a reminder of the viewers separation from the character. The assurance that "*I'm not gonna go out"* and be violent. Participants felt the need to repeatedly reinstate that they themselves were not violent and did not advocate for violence in 'the real world', despite endorsing and enjoying it in the shows.

This tension between enjoyment and rejection was carefully balanced both in participant discussions and in the shows themselves. The shows do not shy away from showing the consequences of these women's violence. We see the pain Villanelle causes, snapping children's necks. We are shown the results of Ratched's actions, faced with a lobotomised, brain-dead priest, left drooling in a wheelchair. We see the harm Viola causes and the harm Dani could cause, almost strangling Jamie, her partner. Yet, the shows must also ask the audience to root for these very characters who they label 'monsters.' To do this, most acts of women's violence across the shows can be categorised as either acts of mercy, in which the perpetrator believes the act will help the victim or protect someone else, or acts of revenge. Violence perpetrated by men is repeatedly used to as justification for women killing. Crucially, this is framed as an issue arising from wider social structures, rather than the actions of specific individuals. The systematic suffering the women face functions to humanise them and justify the need for violent action. Violence is presented at times as the only way for women to reclaim agency within their own lives. This framing also functions to present male violence as widespread and expected. This depiction alongside the entwining of

women's care with acts of women's violence ultimately function to reinforce the idea that violence is a 'natural' act for men, but not women.

The balancing of the enjoyment and rejection of violence done here is nothing new to horror media. Representations of the monstrous in Western media have long been connected to both disgust and desire. The monster gives a body to forbidden or taboo wants, offering a physical representation to societal fears and desires. In doing so the monster reveals not only the underlying anxieties, but also fantasies of those who create and circulate it; for the monster, in its horror is also a being which is unbound and unconstrained by the social and cultural rules the rest of us must follow (Cohen 1996:17). Importantly, in watching a horror movie the audience is allowed a momentary indulgence into such taboos, when they align alongside the monster. This alignment can be assisted through film techniques such as point of view (POV) shots, in which the audiences gaze and the gaze of the monster becomes one (Benshoff 1997:13). Cohen argued that the audience's ability to enjoy this alignment is reliant, in part, on temporality. When watching a film, you the viewer do not have to worry about this connection threatening your own identity as it is a momentary and limited identification, one with a set resolution (Cohen 1996:17).

Traditionally, this resolution comes with the monster's destruction at the end of the text. In its destruction, order is reaffirmed, and the audience is returned to aligning alongside the hero. This removal cements the horrific nature of the monster and re-establishes the boundaries it had threatened (Benshoff 1997:37). The anti-hero killer TV show disrupts this process, for it presents us with a killer who, for the show to succeed, must to some extent be positioned alongside the audience for an extended period of time (Hernandez-Santaolalla and Hermida 2020:226). TV anti-hero shows demand an ongoing identification with the monster, one which must be renewable, and sustained over several episodes, if not seasons. As such, the horror TV show must employ new methods to navigate this tension, working to create a level of sympathy and solidarity between the monster and viewers, to allow the feeling of delight to remain within the terror (Hernandez-Santaolalla and Hermida 2020:226).

To understand how this is done within these shows, and the ways in which women's violence is being portrayed as part of this, requires us to look at the cultures these shows arose from. Monsters are markers of the culture in which they were created. According to Cohen monsters are "…an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place… The monstrous body is pure culture" (1996:4). The monster is a signifier, it "exists

only to be read" (4). This holds true to the humanised, 'anti-hero' monster as well. The anti-hero monster, in positioning audiences with the outsider 'other' can reveal fears surfacing around current dominant cultural forces, as well as the break down or merging of cultural boundaries (Weinstock 2020:360,364-365). Crucially, in revealing these fantasies and anxieties monsters also operate to help us navigate and understand them. J. Halberstam described monsters as "meaning machines," or tools people use to make sense of their world (1995).

Context

The #MeToo movement, in which sexual assault survivors are encouraged to share their stories online, is a movement focused on opposing sexual assault and harassment, and showing survivors they are not alone. The movement became a globally recognised campaign when the #MeToo hashtag went viral on Twitter in 2017. From this was born the #TimesUp movement in 2018, a campaign put together by more than 300 women in Hollywood, focused on creating safe and equal work environments for women (Langone 2018). The #MeToo movement can be seen as having its roots in the second wave feminism movement of the 1970s, particularly the anti-rape movement, which placed topics such as rape and sexual assault at the centre of feminist activism (Loney-Howes 2019:23). Actions taken by second wave feminists such as 'Take Back the Night' marchers, first held in the US in 1978, functioned to demonstrate the wide reaching, structural nature of rape culture, starting to move it from a private issue to a political one (Loney-Howes 2019:24). Around this time, the idea of feminist solidarity was also consolidated. For example, prominent social activist bell hooks put forth an understanding of women's solidarity in 1986, calling for women to build political solidarity together. To do so, hooks argued women needed to actively acknowledge the differences between them, and unify together, showing sustained, ongoing commitment to shared beliefs and goals (1986:138). Current movements build on this work.

The collective sharing of individual experiences enacted as part of #MeToo and #TimesUp also function to politicise the personal, working to highlight the structural nature of sexual violence (Loney-Howes 2019:29). Additionally, the movements themselves and actions taken in conjunction with #MeToo such as the Women's march, which also began in the US as a response to Donald Trump's election win, before spreading outside of the US, forefront feminist solidarity as key to the response to structural violence (Littler and Rottenberg 2021:865). Scholars Vachhani and Pullen argued contemporary feminist movements centre on affective solidarity (2019: 23). Affective solidarity is drawing on a term proposed by

feminist scholar Clare Hemmings, who suggested that solidarity comes from recognising an affective difference between the perception of self and social expectations of the self (2012:156). This, Hemming argued, emerges out of experiences caused in relation to dominant social norms, and will ideally function to cause a desire for social change (2012:158).

This political climate has provided a key backdrop for these shows. Its relevance can be seen in how publicity for the shows attempted to align them with wider socio-political movements towards woman's support. Publicity for *Killing Eve,* which began airing in 2018, as the #TimesUp movement began, included discussions of the movement in interviews, with lead actor Sandra Oh commenting, "it was amazing to be making a show and doing exactly what TimesUp is trying to do and trying to bring" (Ramos 2019:2). *Ratched* and *Bly Manor's* publicity did not make direct reference to these social movements but positioned themselves within a more general political space of supporting women. *Ratched's* publicity presented the show as a women driven story that assists in disrupting male dominated spaces. Promotion for the show included articles with titles such as "*'I worked with men all my life': ' Ratched's' women open up about their time in Hollywood"* and depicted the women in the cast reading a 1940s guide to hiring women, using it to discuss ongoing prejudice against women in the workplace today (Villarreal 2020; Netflix 2020b). *Bly's* promotional material often discussed the importance of presenting specifically queer women and working towards equality in terms of sexuality as well as gender (see Hale 2020). In these ways, the shows publicity teams and creators attempted to position as allied to a contemporary political movement that challenges dominant gender hierarchies and advocates for gender equality.

Within the shows themselves, the structural nature of oppression and violence against women is highlighted and utilised to justify women's violence. The shows present the women's gender as a limiting factor, reducing these women's options. This is seen clearly in *Bly Manor,* which depicts how being a woman can constrict one's progress through the world, through the intertwining stories of Rebecca, Dani and Viola. Each woman struggles with the path her gender lays out for them in their own way; Dani deals with the pressures of compulsory heterosexuality, almost marrying her childhood sweetheart; Rebecca struggles with her goal to become a barrister due to sexual harassment, and Viola is forced to marry a man to protect her sister and their home. Each of these women's paths also ultimately leads to someone's death, Dani's fiancé dying in part due to her actions, Viola taking the lives of several others after her death, and Rebecca losing her own life to her lover, Peter Quint.

Of the three women, the challenges Viola faces due to her gender are the starkest, as she needs a husband to be able to keep her home. Viola is also the one who turns to murder, killing out of pain and anger but also love, as her first kill is an extension of care towards her daughter. After Viola kills her sister, her next murders are both of men who represent the systems that constrained her in life. First, she kills a plague doctor, who resembles the doctor who attended to Viola when she was alive. Our introduction to Viola's doctor was a tight closeup of Viola's view, staring down his plague mask. The long bird like beak and circular eyeholes gave the appearance of an inhuman face, as he poked and prodded at Viola's neck. Later, we saw his attempts to cure her, leaches attached to her leg, we watch as Viola writhes in pain as the doctor slices into her arm to perform bloodletting. The doctor constrained Viola in life, ordering her to remain in bed, away from her family and child.

After strangling the new plague doctor, Viola kills a vicar. As with the plague doctor, the vicar resembles a vicar Viola dealt with when alive. We see Viola deal with the previous vicar twice; first, when he legally bound her to her husband, and reminded her to obey him when she omitted it from the vows. Next, the vicar pushed Viola's last rites on her when she was not ready to die. The second vicar is there to perform an exorcism to remove Viola from the manor, before Viola strangles him, dragging him down the manor stairs. By killing these men, Viola continues to resist efforts to restrain her, finally removing these figures of power from her home for good.

The symbolism of these deaths was not missed by participants, such as Sam (any pronouns), who is non-binary/gender-fluid and sympathized with Viola in their shared anger over being constrained because of one's perceived gender.

> *Sam (on Viola's violence): "…we're not used to seeing women being violent so having this **woman's rage**… for me it's like the rage (against) the patriarchy is through her and so maybe like when I see that I'm just sort of like yay! I mean no, but yes."*

The other shows similarly highlight the constraints of gender hierarchy, particularly when intersected as class. Both Ratched and Villanelle start their lives as poor, uneducated orphans, thrust into their respective foster systems- and depicted as needing to utilise violence to survive. Years later their gender continues to constrain them, limiting how high they can climb. Ratched is able to lie and overcome her class status, gaining work as a nurse, but she is limited by her gender. From the opening of the show, we are introduced to a world that

follows a firm 1940's gender hierarchy, that privileges men. Utilising her femininity, Ratched is ultimately able to get the head of the hospital, Dr. Hannover under her control, effectively running the hospital for a time. However, this extension of power only pertains within the hospital itself, as highlighted when Ratched goes up against the governor, an external male figure and representation of the state's power, who in a telling exchange, refuses to speak with her, only addressing Hannover:

> *Governor Wilburn: "Was I speaking to you?"*
>
> *Ratched: "You were not, but as head nurse-"*
>
> *Governor Wilburn: "-Then shut the fuck up!"*

It does not matter that Ratched runs the place as in the structures beyond the walls of the hospital she is still just a woman, and only allowed to rise so far before she must be stopped.

Restrictions due to gender may not be enough to fully excuse murder, but crucially, the women killers in these shows are often subject to violent and/or sexual harm. *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* both explicitly address the topic of sexual violence against women. In the third episode of *Ratched,* we watch Ratched have sex with a man. While the sex begins consensually, Ratched's discomfort throughout shifts this interaction into the area of sexual assault.

Charles was a hitman, staying in the same motel as Ratched. Charles flirts with Ratched, leading her to invite him back to her room. Despite Charles clear intentions, they do not have sex, with Charles leaving after Ratched stalls for too long. However, in their second meeting, which Charles initiates, they have sex. Ratched initially takes the lead. Pushing Charles back onto her bed, she begins to ride him, imagining a moment from her past to distract herself. Ratched narrates a memory of amputating a soldier's leg (a man we later find out was the first soldier she killed). Describing the admiration and desire the soldier felt for her, Ratched imagines herself kissing the soldier, but as she does so, he becomes Gwendolyn Briggs. As the two characters separate in her mind, Ratched realises the change, breaking her from her fantasy. At this point Ratched brings up being fucked from behind, leading to Charles aggressively flipping her over, removing her from the position of power, and roughly fucking her. Ratched initially cries out in pain at his action, before resigning herself to her fate. We watch Ratched, her head turned to face the camera as she clings to the pillow, narrating her

pain and attempting to justify it as the 'right' way to do things, "…your hands are not soft and comforting… you are rough, you fill her up with your manhood…"

The discomfort of this scene cannot be understated. It was brought up by participants in both focus groups when discussing the shows' representations of desire, with multiple viewers mentioning their discomfort at watching a queer woman force herself to have sex with a man. Rose (she/her) described it as "*a fucked scene*" and Jane (she/her) labelled it *"just (the) most uncomfortable thing you'll ever see in your life.*" I cannot speak to it being the most uncomfortable thing I have ever watched, but with regard to the three shows examined here it was by far the scene that I found the hardest to view. The violence depicted in the shows was easier to stomach then this act of sexual assault. It is an act of violation that we are not given the option to hide from, as we are forced to focus in on Ratched's suffering as she forces herself to let the act happen.

The violence Ratched enacts in response to this act is also particularly brutal. Most of Ratched's murders are framed as acts of mercy, being injured solders or patients who are driven ultimately take their own life. When discovered by another nurse Ratched explains her actions saying, "*all I was guilty of, was showing these men mercy, when no one else would.*" Notably, most of these deaths occur off-screen, or partially hidden, separating us as viewers from these acts. The exception to this pattern is the death of Charles Wainwright, whose death is not hidden, but highlighted and celebrated in its horror.

Halfway through the season Charles is locked in a hydrotherapy bath. A large steel lid covers the tub, only his bandaged head is visible. He had broken into the hospital with Ratched's help, looking to kill Dr. Hannover, but Hannover surprised Charles, knocking him out with a paperweight. Then, working together, Ratched and Hannover locked Charles in the tub. Ratched turns the water on, setting the bath to heat to 150 degrees Fahrenheit (65°C), before leaving Charles there, presumably to die. The audience watches as Charles slowly starts to boil, screaming in pain. Blood from his head wound begins dripping down his face as he tries to break free. His attempt proves surprisingly successful, Charles eventually breaking through the locks, but not before he is badly burnt. Charles pulls himself out of the tub and with his remaining energy, drags himself out of the room. He staggers down a corridor, towards a young patient who happens to be out of bed. The framing of a disoriented, groaning Charles stumbling down a hallway, skin peeling off his body, music swelling with each step he takes, places Charles in the position of the monster. Reaching out towards the

boy we get a last look at Charles face, the look of desperation suddenly disrupting the image of him as a monster, before a panicked nightguard shoots him dead.

This death is not an extension of care, nor is it an act we, the viewers, are shielded from watching. Instead, we are encouraged to enjoy it. Notably, as Charles boils, Ratched extends care elsewhere, the scenes of Charles suffering are intercut with Ratched helping two lesbian patients escape the hospital. Crucially, the bath in which Charles is boiled had been installed to 'cure' these lesbian patients of their "sapphic urges." In an earlier episode one of the lesbians undertook this cure, suffering in the near boiling water. Ratched, also a lesbian, repurposes this object of violent oppression into a tool for her own release, using it to burn her sexual abuser and highlighting Charles as the truly sexually deviant one. This is the turning point in Ratched's story, in which we see her extend non-violent care towards the lesbian patients, and in doing so, beginning to accept her own sexuality. By killing Charles, Ratched is symbolically taking control of her own sexuality and literally destroying her heterosexual life. The violence Ratched faced from Charles justifies this act, making it into a triumphant moment of vengeance, one we are asked to share in.

The reality of the threat of male violence against women permeates *Ratched*. From Dr. Hannover threatening to hit nurses to the governor sexually harassing his press secretary, male violence is presented as commonplace. It is a threat that permeates the worlds of other shows as well, as my participants picked up on. Both groups commented on the frequency with which TV media depicts violence against women and pointing out its regularity in the studied shows as well. For example, when Milo (they/them) recapped the start of the second season of *Killing Eve,* Lexi (she/her) pointed out it repeated the pattern of depicting men enacting violence against women as commonplace.

> *Milo (describing the start of* Killing Eve *season two): "(Villanelle) gets kidnapped by this random man... The man's obsessed with her… she's trapped and at the mercy of this guy who's like very, very weird and then she kills him but like-"*
>
> *Lexi: "-Something something violence against women again."*
>
> *Milo: "Yeah. something something violence against women, yeah yeah yeah."*

In the shows, experiencing male violence was portrayed as enough to justify a woman taking violent, and often deadly, action in return. Additionally, the frequency and commonality of on-screen male violence led to the expectation that any male character had the potential to

become violent, even if we had not previously directly seen them enacting violence. This then was deemed as justifying women's acts of violence against men *in general*.

To further understand how this image of male violence as a widespread societal issue worked to justify women's violence, while also at times reinforcing the idea of all men as potentially inherently violent, we must take a closer look at how male violence is treated in the shows.

Violent Men

> *Hana (on men enacting violence on-screen and in real life): "Toxic masculinity always coming through violence, I don't want to see that."*

At the end of season 2, Villanelle hurries up the steps of a hotel in Rome, looking for Eve. Villanelle has just killed tech CEO Aaron Peele, in a move orchestrated by MI6 and her own employers. Now she and Eve plan to run away together. But instead of Eve, Villanelle finds Raymond waiting for her at the top of the stairs. Raymond works for the Twelve, same as Villanelle, except he is employed to kill assassins who step out of line. Raymond stands at the end of the hallway, half in shadows, a large axe resting on his shoulder. He smiles at Villanelle, slowly walking down the hallway and taunting her, "I've been thinking about doing this for a long time, on the train, at night with my wife, taking my kids to school in the morning..." Villanelle, not one to take things lying down, attempts to taunt him in return, calling his kids ugly, and labelling Raymond "a nobody." Raymond brushes the first insult aside, although the second one causes him to pause, and set the axe aside. Tugging up his sleeves, he tells Villanelle, "...Some might say, I'm a real somebody." Raymond steps threateningly towards Villanelle before suddenly stopping, a look of fake concern on his face- "Wait- where's Eve?" Raymond looks around playfully, "She's probably in one of these rooms, isn't she?" Villanelle looks around as well, concern showing in her expression. "Let's play a game, if you can guess which room she's in, you can keep her, but if you get is wrong-" Cutting himself off, Raymond makes an overexaggerated sad face, brows drawn in, mouth small and downturned. He even offers a quiet, whimpering noise of fake concern, mocking Villanelle's fear.

For a serial killer show to successfully side you- the viewer- with their anti-hero killer, while also maintaining the tension needed to create a compelling story, the creators must supply an opponent to the anit-hero- often in the form of a 'true villain'. The true villain is someone worse than our killer, who is there to be defeated by the anti-hero (Hernandez-Santaolalla and

Hermida 2020:227). Within these shows, the 'true villain' is always a role played by a man. In this way, violence is represented as a man's domain.

Violence is deeply rooted in Western social and cultural constructions of masculinity, to the extent that sociologist Michael S. Kimmel states, "Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" (2006:278). In fact, killing is most often carried out by men, both on-screen, and in the real world. Most murders in both the US and Britain are carried out by men. Women are, moreover, estimated to make up just over 11% of all serial killers (Aamodt 2016; Statista Research Department 2022).

As such, violence is not only sometimes seen as acceptable behaviour for men, but the act of killing itself can function to reaffirm and form a male killer's masculine gender identity (Boyle and Reburn 2015:194). We see this in the excerpt from *Killing Eve,* when Raymond's sense of self is challenged as he is called "*a nobody.*" It is only after this taunt that Raymond puts aside the axe- a quicker, easier option- and instead opts for hand-to-hand combat. In this fight Raymond proves himself to be physically superior, throwing Villanelle around and strangling her. Villanelle only survives when Eve intervenes, hitting Raymond from behind with the axe he had abandoned. Through his violence Raymond momentarily reinstates his status as "*a somebody,*" physically exerting his power over Villanelle. Importantly, the expectation and sometimes acceptance of male violence means that a man can kill and still be regarded as a successful, humanised person (Morrissey 2003:17). Violence is seen as an acceptable expression of male emotions and power, a fact that contributes to the romanticisation of killer men. This is seen throughout Western culture, as well as in the medias 'heroization' of both real serial killers and fictional ones, such as in *Dexter,* a show about a male American serial killer (Boyle and Reburn 2015:194).

In the shows I examined the male killer serves as narrative foil to women killers, limiting the extent to which the audience is allowed or able to identify with him. Aiding in this, violent male characters often have little to no explanation for their violence, further separating them from us, the audience. The message thus cast is that violence and killing is normalised for men but operates differently for women.

Traditionally, male serial killer narratives often obscure the social and cultural components of male violence, choosing instead to individualize the killer and isolate the reasons for killing, often relating it to mental illness (Boyle and Reburn 2015:194). Serial killer shows diagnose individual causes for violence, thus humanising these killers and enabling sympathy towards

them, but also setting us apart from them.[6] In the three shows, we are occasionally given hints of such individualized rationales, the most explicit example being the case of *Ratched's* Edmund; whose violence stems from the physical and sexual abuse he and Ratched faced in the foster system, with Edmund's violence surfacing before Ratched's when he kills their foster parents with a pair of scissors. Across the shows, Edmund's violence is offered the most sympathy, possibly due to his close relationship with Ratched. Ultimately however, Edmund is deemed unsavable, never able to give up his violent ways, whereas it is suggested Ratched may be able to stop killing. *Ratched* also offers a range of other men who are given no explanation or sympathy for their violence. Even Dr. Hannover, a man portrayed as a caring doctor who genuinely wants to help his patients, ultimately resorts to threats of violence when head nurse Betsy Bucket attempts to pressure him into a relationship. It is a threat tied directly to him feeling challenged in his masculinity, saying in his refusal of Betsy, "*I am sick and tired of women telling me what to do and I'm not going to take it anymore.*"

The other shows offer even less rational for men's violence. While Villanelle kills with a purpose, for money, for safety, or out of necessity, many of the men around her kill simply for the sake of killing. According to Villanelle's handler Konstantin, Raymond kills because he enjoys the act of murder, more than money.

> *Konstantin (warning Villanelle that Raymond will try to kill her): "You know how Raymond get paid? … they don't pay him any money, they let him be the person who terminate the contracts, you know like racehorses when they can't race anymore, and Raymond is the guy with the gun."*

We are offered no explanation beyond this for Raymond's violence, the implication being he simply is violent. Indeed, in all three shows, men are allowed to be violent without any justification beyond the fact they are men. As such, the male killer in these shows is not a personalised, sympathetic killer, but your everyday, average man. Raymond is a middle aged, slightly overweight, balding white man. He has a wife and kids, he commutes on the train, and in his spare time enjoys hacking women to death with an axe. The shows' violent men thus lack the humanisation and individualisation usually granted to male serial killers, making their crimes represent the violence of all men.

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[6] For example, Dexter's violence stems from his individual experience of watching his mother be murdered as a child, leaving him with a 'need' to kill.

By placing this wide selection of violent men who are given little to no justification for murder, alongside women who must be made violent, and kill as extensions of care, the male characters highlight the extent to which male violence is normalised. Participants such as April (she/her), a bisexual cis woman, commented on how in our discussions of the shows her attention was drawn to the lack of justification given to onscreen male violence.

> April: "*I feel like a lot of the time in media, when men commit violence it's kind of taken for granted, it's like, oh, of course he's committing violence…like when you think that action shows and stuff and they just like eeeh, like okay your wife's dead so you're shooting people, like congrats, I don't really care… in a lot of media when women do (commit violence), they try to give them like more motivation.*"

Furthering this, the shows depict male violence as a selfish act, done for individual gain, rather than out of care for others, or out of the need for survival. Because of this, several participants perceived acts of male violence in these shows as being 'worse' or 'more violent' than women's violence, such as Rose (she/her), who found watching male enacted violence, particularly in *Bly Manor* to be more 'visceral' than watching the violence enacted by women.

> Rose (discussing violence in Bly Manor*): "the things that feel the most violent (were) perpetrated by men… part of that is like the- they get a lack of reason- or like the reasoning feels more selfish rather than like a reaction to direct thing*."

This sense of male violence 'feeling' more violent is aided by the shows tendencies to focus on the victims in portrayals of male violence. When Rebecca dies in *Bly*, the focus is on her suffering. We watch her try to scream as she drowns. Peter, the man who killed her, is notably absent from the actual moment of her death. Similarly, when Ratched suffers sexual abuse, it is her face resting against the pillow that we linger on, with all that is seen of Charles being his hands gripping her hip. As such, in these moments of violence it is the victims whose emotions we are asked to focus on and share in, not the attackers.

This positioning of men and women's violence within the stories is reliant on wider gender hierarchies. Gender is so integral to these stories and the shows' representations of violence that many participants expressed the notion that if the main characters genders were swapped and all else remained the same, they would not get the same enjoyment out of watching the shows, or that enjoying them would not even be possible.

> *Nayvaa: "I don't - I wondered to what extent I would- I could connect to (Killing Eve) if it was you know about (men)… I actually don't know if- If they would, if there could be a male equivalent."*

I have enjoyed plenty of shows and films about violent men, and yet I have to agree. I find it hard to believe I would find Villanelle as fun, or Viola, Dani and Ratched as sympathetic if they were men. Gender is too firmly embedded in these characters stories and the shows' creation of connection and sympathy to them for any of them to be gender swapped without requiring major rewrites. As it is, their stories rely on the reality of male dominated power structures, - *which enable the enjoyment that comes from watching women enact violence.*

Participants drew parallels between the regularity of men enacting violence on-screen and their awareness of the real-life danger of men enacting violence, expressing the sense that men enacting physical and sexual violence towards women in real life is commonplace, as highlighted by movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp. This clearly effected how participants viewed on-screen violence. For example, one participant, Lexi (she/her) a bisexual cis woman, discussed how watching male violence on-screen makes her think of real violent acts committed by men.

> *Lexi: "…I just want to say something with, what you said about like escapism. Like women committing horrific acts of violence kind of hits a little bit different because it seems like, more common that men do that, so it's not- it's not fun to find out, to see, like a male character doing that- I have a very brief anecdote I did- when I worked in retail I had an interaction with a customer who told me he had just come out of prison and I ended up looking him up to find out he had committed some very horrific acts of violence on a woman, and I was like if I saw that kind of thing depicted in the film, I would just be like scared and disgusted whereas like-*
>
> *What- the kind of stuff he'd done could have come from a mov- like a show like this if it was about men, instead, so I think there's definitely a- I dunno, there's something there."*

This sense of male violence as commonplace both on-screen and in real life also affected how participants viewed women enacting violence on-screen. The realities of male violence were used as justification for celebrating women enacting violence on-screen. For example, Hana (she/her), a bisexual cis woman, mentioned in a conversation about action movies how the reality of widespread male violence affects her response to on-screen violence.

Hana: "If I see a man doing all that stuff in media or just even in real life, you know I'd be like, oh no- that's a bad guy I hate that guy you know no support whatsoever don't ever want to be him. I see women doing that, maybe like- five perc-"

Lexi: "-Maybe she has a point."

Hana: "Yeah, I'm always just like let's hear her out… because no doubt when the men want to give the reason, it's always the same shit and that's like we've been here for like-thousands of years, it's never changed."

In Hana's comments, we see men enacting violence being understood as part of an ongoing, historical issue, and how this historical context influences the ways on-screen violence is viewed through a gendered lens.[7] Male on-screen violence is contextualised alongside a history of real violence, but women's on-screen violence is not. Instead, when it came to relating women characters to reality, participants' conversations focused on support. Participants drew connections between their enjoyment of the characters and the formation of real-life supportive relationships between women.

Solidarity

The concept of solidarity has played a key role in feminist activism and women's rights movements, such as the ongoing movements which influenced the creation of these shows. Women's solidarity is a form of organisation which draws on extensions of support and care and unites women in a shared effort to resist ongoing gendered inequalities (Wickström et al 2021:857). Contemporary women's movements demonstrate a push back on the idea of individualised women's empowerment, instead centring of ideas of solidarity and allyship, focusing on the narrative that women need to stand together, regardless of difference, to support and protect one another, to be able to enact change (Littler and Rottenberg 2021:865). This importance placed on women's solidarity was present throughout my focus groups. While the category of 'women,' is a vast group, and not one all my participants prescribed to, many spoke to having experienced building real-life connections based around experiences caused by their externally perceived gender. Sam (any pronouns), talked about the experience of bonding with women over shared experiences and working to protect each other from perceived harm.

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[7] This raises the question of how male viewers perceive such representations, a question that unfortunately falls outside of the scope of this research.

> Sam: "I know I've gone into a party, and I bonded with women by the fact of being treated like shit sometimes… or you go to a bathroom in groups, or you like, find a girl to cling on to because you know it will be safe."

This importance placed on woman's solidarity, across difference, as a form of resistance and a way of forming new routes for success is centred within the shows studied here. Participants recognised and celebrated this representation and the focus placed on women's communal support. Many participants, such as Hana (she/her), pointed to *Bly Manor* in particular as presenting alternative routes of women's survival through shared support.

> Hana: "(Love) kind of helps Dani like save, save everyone… like Dani's love for Jamie you know, that she sacrificed herself to make sure that her lover stays okay. The fact that she was going to do that for Flora… like there's so much strength in their softness, in their love for everyone and each other and it's shown as a like strength."

In *Bly* it is Dani's extension of care for the children which allows her to take on Viola's pain and rage, and the care between Dani and her partner Jamie which allows Dani to manage this pain without turning to violent action as Viola had. Even when Dani begins to lose herself, leading to her taking her own life in a final action of care, her love means she does not become a violent spirit after death, ending Viola's cycle of violence. This offers the image of a form of power not centred on violence, but on the connections between women.

We see the possible power of women's solidarity as an alternative route to survival depicted in the other shows as well. It is the emotional bonds built between women which function to humanise them and hold them back from tipping too far into becoming unredeemable monsters.

Ratched and Betsy Bucket, Lucia's head nurse, begin the season in conflict over a man, both fighting for the attention of Dr. Hannover. Betsy desires him romantically, Ratched wants his co-operation in saving her brother. This comes to a head when, at a hospital ball, Dr. Hannover publicly and aggressively rejects Betsy, threatening violence against her. Betsy, distraught, runs to the nurse's staffroom, followed by Ratched and her partner, Gwendolyn. The pair find Betsy sobbing over the sink, her hair a mess, makeup smeared across her face. Ratched, rather than continuing in her expected antagonistic way, sets to work comforting Betsy and helping her tidy herself up. Following Betsy to where she collapsed into a chair, Ratched uses a wet rag to carefully wipe away the smeared makeup, telling her, "Betsy, listen

to me, Dr. Hannover… doesn't deserve someone like you, someone strong, and caring, and opinionated, who knows what she wants." Ratched pauses her efforts to pointedly say, "That's what you are, Betsy, a real woman." Ratched continues as she combs out Betsy's fringe while Gwendolyn tides the rest of Betsy's hair, "that's the only thing you are guilty of… you wake up every morning and without even trying, you are tenacious, clever, and wise…" Hair done, Gwendolyn bends down to the others eye levels, and adds, "you're stunning."

These two women spent the first half of the season attempting to get rid of each other, and yet when faced with the threat of violence from a man, they place this fight behind them, moving instead to support one another. Given the importance the shows place on appearance and gender, it seems like no oversight that this first moment of connection between the three characters occurs in the context of repairing one's appearance and that to repair Betsy emotionally and finally create a bond between them, Ratched must first repair Betsy's physical appearance as a woman. After this scene all three characters are bonded together, becoming close friends, and are seen together in Mexico in the final episode. This end sequence, in which Ratched and Gwendolyn have run away from their previous lives to live together in Mexico and Ratched has stopped killing, offers an exchange that gets to the heart of *Ratched's* representation of gender.

> *Betsy: "It is so nice to be rid of them."*
>
> *Gwendolyn: "Who?"*
>
> *Betsy: "Men."*

At this time, the three are momentarily at least, free from the destructive, disruptive power of men. They exist in an ideal women's space, one, to quote Betsy, where there is "*not a fella to be seen, enjoying the lives that (they) made for (themselves), three strong independent women.*" It is worth noting while this is framed as a removal of men, it is actually a removal of the men who exercise power over these women. There are still men in this 'women's space,' in the form of the nameless Mexican servers who exist to bring Ratched her morning paper or top up the women's drinks. As such, while this space presents the image of a shift in gender hierarchy, it maintains a firm racial hierarchy, with three white women at the top. This new environment is presented as a space in which violence is no longer a necessity. In leaving behind the hierarchical structures that governed her life, and redirecting her energy

from focusing on men to focusing on supporting the women in her life, Ratched is able to create an alternative option for survival, one where harm is not a requirement.

Crucially, as with *Bly,* to end the violence and create a new path forward requires acceptance of the violence that has already been performed. After the hospital dance, Betsy discovers Ratched's actions, learning of the lobotomy and killings, but instead of rejecting Ratched, she offers sympathy, drawing a connection between them, on the actions they had taken for the men they loved.

> *Betsy: "We've all done stupid things in the service of stupid men, me with Dr. Hannover, you with your brother."*

We see here solidarity built around experiences that were created by dominant norms, in Ratched and Betsy bonding over their prescribed role of serving men. This solidarity leads to action, as the women work together to remove Dr. Hannover from the hospital, usurping male control. But before this can happen, Betsy shows an understanding of why Ratched felt violence was necessary for her survival. There is an acknowledgement of the suffering she faced, and how this suffering contributed to her need for violent action. Similarly in *Killing Eve,* we see the possibility that connections between women can present an alternative route to violence. In *Killing Eve,* the connection between Eve and Villanelle leads to a breakdown of Villanelle's sense of identity, resulting in her attempting to stop being an assassin, a process that includes Eve acknowledging and accepting Villanelle's violence.

> *Villanelle: "I've killed so many people Eve."*
>
> *Eve: "I know."*

Here we can see how the shows present support and care between women as an alternative option to violence that enables resistance and survival. Participants recognised this pattern, and, drawing on their own real-life experiences of supporting other women, extended a form of support towards the fictional characters as well.

Participants shared the experience of feeling the disconnect between one's perception of their own capabilities and the social opportunities made available to them due to their gender. This recognition fuelled an extension of emotional support towards these characters, as the participants felt they understood why these characters felt the need to resort to violent action as a form of resistance. Sam (any pronouns) talked about finding sympathy for Viola out of their understanding of the struggles Viola faced as a woman.

> *"...and I think (Viola's anger is) really relatable to how women feel, whether it be because of micro aggressions or whatever like it is as soon as you start seeing how patriarchy has affected you, you start seeing it everywhere and you do not stop- stop seeing it."*

Approaching on-screen woman's violence through a framing of woman's solidarity allowed for the viewer's acceptance of the need for violence, letting the viewer take pleasure in watching the momentary reversal of power such actions bring, while also maintaining an understanding that this is not the only, nor arguably best, route for survival. In approaching these characters from a position of support, participants were able to share in the enjoyment of the characters' violence, while still maintaining a level of separation between themselves and violent action.

Separation

> *Hana: "But I never really want to be (a violent woman). It's more of like ah- I support them... Again, living through them by watch them do that, but mostly just like clapping from the side-lines, you know, like thank you, gaslight, gatekeep girlboss."*

A key element of enjoyment of this material was the maintained separation between viewers and acts of women's violence. If male violence in these shows was compared to reality, women's violence was conceptualised as fiction. Women's violence was the "power fantasy" you enjoy watching but would not enact. We are allowed to celebrate with Ratched as she boils Charles alive, or delight in the creative ways Villanelle slaughters men. However, this enjoyment must be carefully mitigated to protect participants' own perceived identities as non-violent. Any momentary identification with murderous characters was always carefully navigated in conversation, with participants quick to assert that they themselves have no interest in taking violent action. We see this in part through how participants positioned themselves alongside and not directly in relation to the characters, as well as the work done to maintain thinking of women's violence as a fantasy. Indeed women's violence was often classed by participants as something so separate from reality that it could be enjoyable without causing a risk to one's own identity.

> *April (on enjoying women's violence in media): "There is also an element that I kind of think about when I watch these sort of shows, I think it is kind of viewed as being okay or funny because **women like aren't capable** of doing that in real life or that sort of thing…"*

> *Hana: "...I think more of like, women can do this shit. We can fuck up so many people, but **we don't** you know, so be happy about it, because if we did, we would get away with it."*

This separation of women's violence from reality is aided by the overly stylised worlds of the shows; the characters, for the most part, do not exist within 'our' reality. Rose (she/her), noted this as one of the elements that made watching women's acts of violence more enjoyable:

> *"...Ratched's very stylish – Bly Manor also being a supernatural show, it'd be different if they were like- Here's just like a- period drama and then we're going to have like a women punch man that would feel very different, I think, to, the more sort of heightened aspect of it."*

The female characters who kill are also further separated from humanity, through their monstrosity. In particular, each murderous woman is separated from us due to her emotions. Viola is inhuman in a literal sense, as she is a ghost, but in this state, she also has begun to fade, until all that is left of her are her strongest emotions, those of anger and love. The rest of what makes her a person- her memories, thoughts, and experiences- have vanished. Ratched and Villanelle maintain these things, but both struggle with their feelings as well. Ratched feels too much, her experiences leading to feelings of pain that overwhelm her and drive her to end others' pain, following the mantra that there are "some things that are worse to feel then simply feeling nothing." However, Villanelle's problem is exactly that, feeling nothing. Villanelle, who exists in the world the closest to ours, is throughout the show labelled a 'psychopath,' a label that the show makes clear sets her apart from the rest of humanity:

> *Martin, (the show's psychiatrist and serial killer expert talking to Eve): "When you think of a psychopath, you tend to think of a regular person, then you add certain negative traits… don't add. Take away, everything that makes us human, take it all away… you might as well try to understand a wasp, or a stapler."*

Villanelle is unlike the rest of us because she does not feel as other humans do. Undercover at an AA meeting in season two, Villanelle confesses that *"most of the time, most days, I feel nothing… No matter what I do I don't feel anything."* Later she admits to Eve that the exception is she can feel things when with Eve, again building in the idea that the connections between women can offer a possible reprieve from monstrosity.

As such, while these shows work to make us root for these characters, and want to watch them succeed, justifying their need for violence, the shows also maintain these women's positions as monstrous others. There is a separation upheld between the human viewer and the murderous women, who is prevented in the moment of violent action from being fully human. As touched on above, this separation often took the form of participants, such as Rose (she/her), positioning themselves alongside characters, in a supporting position, while vehemently stressing they did not want to be or act like the characters themselves.

> *Rose (in a wider discussion about enjoying watching violent women): "With women who are characters that will kill people, it is less about I want to be them and more of a fucken, good on ya."*

This position, of the viewer as beside the killer rather than one with them, particularly in moments of violent action, is encouraged by the cinematography of the shows. The shows rarely if ever, offer us the killer's direct point of view. We do not see Viola or Villanelle's victims with their eyes; instead we, the viewers remain separate, at most hovering over Villanelle's shoulder as she stalks a target but never fully taking on her position. Ratched's killings are even more hidden, the camera pulling away as Ratched places a pillow over a soldier's face, or the screen cutting to black before the ice pick hits the priest's brain.

Conclusion

> *Milo (on enjoying* Killing Eve*): "Men murdering people is just like so- such a common trope ...this is refreshing, a female assassin. I want to have fun escapism. Yeah, rather than reality."*

Gender shapes violence in real life and within these shows. On-screen these women are made violent by external, restrictive forces which confine their options and normalise the physical and sexual violence they face. As such, an aggressive response becomes one of the only options for survival. The violent actions they undertake are mostly either extensions of care or acts of revenge. Male violence in contrast is presented as expected, and often undertaken for personal reasons rather than on behalf of others. Situated within the post #metoo era, this functions to highlight how male violence is a widespread, normalised action for men. But in doing so, the shows also reinforce ideas about men being 'inherently' or uncontrollably violent, presenting violence as an unchallenged norm for men.

Additionally, women's violence is enacted using assumptions and norms created by the restrictive systems that cause it, relying on assumptions about femininity and weakness to access this power. As such women's violence does not present a viable option for fully challenging such systems. Women's violence also remains self-destructive, threatening to destroy the women who enact it. What's more, Women's violence, unlike men's, is presented as an act which is escapable through connection and solidarity. This reinforces the idea that violence is an unnatural act for women.

Participants also emphasised gendered difference in violent power. Male violence was interpreted in relation to real life and regarded as expected. Comparatively, women's acts of violence were interpreted as separate from reality, allowing them to be viewed as a form of fantasy fulfilment. Participants drew on the emphasis the shows placed on woman's solidarity to explain their own relation to women characters on the show. In line with contemporary global feminist movements, participants placed emphasis on community building and extensions of care between women as a means of creating alternative forms of survival. In doing so, women and non-binary viewers used their connection to the shows to reinstate and reinforce their own positions as non-violent, connecting this position in part to their own gender identity, as they actively rejected violence as a male expression of power. This demonstrates how even while presenting representations of deviant, violent femininity, the shows still reinforce gendered roles of women as non-violent caregivers, and men as 'inherently' violent.

Chapter Five: The Queer of It

Hana: "When I saw like, the little gaze they had in the kitchen I was like, oh my God, are they going in this direction?"

April: "I was like, where's this going?"

Lexi: "I text my friend and I was like 'I think there's gay people in (Bly Manor),' and then by the end I was like, 'there is gay people in this.'"

The Kitchen in Bly manor is a large, homely room, with a large dining room table taking up the space. On Dani's first day as au pair, she and the children collect at the table for lunch. The kids dig into their food as Hannah, the housekeeper, pours everyone lemonade and Owen, the cook, hurries around the kitchen setting down the last of the plates. This is when Jamie, the gardener, appears for the first time. She strolls in casually, dressed in worn blue overalls, with a smudge of dirt on her face from the garden. Jamie glances at Dani before heading to the sink to wash her hands. Dani looks up after she has passed, staring at Jamie's back, her chewing slows as the narrator tells us, "The gardener did not even introduce herself to the new au pair… simply treated her as if she'd always been there. The others in the room just assumed they'd already met, which, if she were honest, was how the au pair felt, when she first saw the young woman." As the narration ends and Jamie turns off the water, Dani gives an almost flustered slight shake of her head, before returning to her meal.

This first moment in the kitchen lasts for little more than 20 seconds, and not much occurs within that time. Jamie washes her hands as Dani watches, and then Jamie turns to tease the children, Dani chats with the others, and the story moves on. Yet those 20 seconds were enough to make several viewers including myself pause, and realise the possibilities suggested by that stare. Gaze is an important idea in film and TV media; there is the gaze of the characters, the gaze of the camera, and the gaze of the audience. Initial conceptualisations of the gaze in film media such as feminist Laura Mulvey's theory of 'the male gaze,' first proposed in 1975, referred primarily to the way media addresses viewers and positions them as an audience (Sturken 2008:1). Regarding 'the male gaze' Mulvey drew on psychoanalysis to argue that film (though the theory has since been applied to other media) depicts women from a male, heterosexual perspective, which objectifies women by placing them in the position to be looked at, while men are positioned as the 'lookers' (1989). The 'gaze' of the camera is that of the heterosexual man, and thus this is the gaze the audience is presented

with and invited to view the world of the show through. This theory plays a fundamental role in discussing how media positions audience members in regard to select, often dominant points of view, most often that of cis-het white men. The theory of the male gaze and ideas of 'the spectators gaze' have since been challenged and reworked, including by Mulvey herself, to give more weight to the role audiences take in interacting with and interpreting pieces of media, but is still useful in terms of considering the ways through which media offers a particular view to the audience (Sturken 2008:2).

The widening of the discussion of the gaze facilitated conversations around how different viewers position themselves in relation to media, contributing to examinations of scholarly theorising about the positioning of the 'homosexual spectator' and/or the 'lesbian spectator.' This acknowledgment that the spectator has agency over their gaze and can produce different and resistant readings of a material played a crucial role in queer theorists' (such as Harry Benshoff's) early examinations of queer monstrosity, including examinations of how monstrosity can be read from a queer perspective (Benshoff 1997:13-14). What is queer and what is monstrous depends both on the positioning of the media itself, and on the understanding of the 'gazer.' It is not coincidental that those of us who picked out the queer potential of the shared gaze between Dani and Jamie were ourselves queer.

The texts examined do not require a queer reading to pull out their homosexual subtexts. Instead in each, women's romantic and sexual attraction to one another is made explicit. This explicit homosexual representation affected viewer interaction from the start, with some participants citing it as the reason they initially engaged with the shows. Jane (she/her), a bisexual cis woman, mentioned queer representation when asked what first interested her about the shows.

> "Bly Manner, *I saw a lot of like gay memes and I was like that sounds like a bit of me if I'm honest. On Facebook and stuff, I was like, yea get in there.*"

This openly homosexual representation was embraced and celebrated by participants, but also approached with a clear awareness that not only their own gaze, but other possible gazes might be applied to or encouraged by the texts. While participants seemed comfortable with their own gaze, they discussed the ways the shows could be read to reinforce negative ideas about queer women's identities. To do so, both groups referred to an imagined 'straight audience.' This straight, and often male, audience was discussed in terms of the 'media gaze,' or how the shows were perceived as directing themselves towards straight viewership. For

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example, Sam (any pronouns) described *Ratched* as "*media about queer people for straight people to consume.*" Participants also speculated about how an actual straight viewer might interpret or mis-interpret the shows, effectively imagining a 'straight spectator gaze'. The distinction between these two elements was not always made clear by participants, with the idea of the "straight audience," seemingly referring to both gazes interchangeably. Moreover, while the media gaze refers to more than the gaze of the creators, it is worth remembering that the creators of these representations were not themselves queer women. *Ratched* and *Bly* were both created by heterosexual men (though *Ratched* was heavy influenced by Murphy, a gay man), and *Killing Eve's* head writers have primarily been heterosexual women.

Additionally, participants also produced imagined alternative homosexual gazes, speculating on how a queer person approaching the shows through the media's straight positioning might interpret the show. This suggests that they did not see their own gaze as adhering to the media's positioning of them. Their imagined homosexual view was often in part based off their past experiences, suggesting a past adherence to media positioning.

Central in participants' discussions of spectator gaze was the discussion of what can and cannot be seen. Participants focused on what is revealed in these shows, and allowed to be gazed upon, and what remains hidden from our gaze. To be unseen was to be unrecognisable. Participants suggested being unseen on-screen contributed to being unseen in real life and placed being seen as key for TV to be able contribute to social and self-acceptance of queer identities.

The Closet/Hiding

> *Charlie: "(*Killing Eve*) definitely, pits the queer relationship against-heteronormativity, with the husband. Like it's like those- that relationship just completely gets rid of the relationship with the husband, and completely corrupts it."*

The question of what can and cannot be gazed upon permeated early examinations of queer monstrosity. Theorists such as Halberstam (1995) and Benshoff (1997) explored the representation of the symbolic queer, showing the ways queer identities were implied in horror but not explicitly shown. These were beings whose monstrosity was made visible, but whose queerness remained hidden. Benshoff (1997), in particular drew a link between monstrosity and the experience of being 'in the closet'[8] claiming that "both movie monsters

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[8] Being 'in the closet,' refers to an LGBTQIA+ person who is hiding their gender or sexual identity.

and homosexuals have existed chiefly in shadowy closets" (1). Both monsters and homosexuals, according to Benshoff, exist in the forgotten margins, and their emergence into the light brings with it fear and panic (1). The queer monsters of the shows examined here ultimately travel much further into the light than those studied by Benshoff, openly confirming their same sex attraction within the shows. But these characters also still spend a significant amount of time hiding in the shadows, concealing their sexuality from a straight gaze, and in these moments are shown to be at their most dangerous.

The danger these characters present while closeted comes in two main forms. The first, and most obvious, is the way Ratched and Villanelle utilise presumed heterosexuality to manipulate others or get close to a victim. This act of deception hinges on a danger related to the characters' sexualities, in that these queer women knowingly deploy the possibility of providing sex to their victims to entrap them. I have already explored how both Villanelle and Ratched utilise the possibility of heterosexual sex to aid them in enacting violence. Ratched does so with Dr. Hannover, whereas Villanelle uses a range of disguises throughout the show that offer the promise of heterosexual sex and/or sexual pleasure to get close to male victims. These include presenting herself as sex worker and a fetish nurse. In these moments both characters are performing a form of hyper-femininity, and in doing so, are playing on heteronormative assumptions that to be a successful, feminine woman is to be attracted to men, and to attract men. As such they are hiding their queer, non-heterosexual identities, and are effectively 'closeted.' This allows them to appear as 'normal' safe women to their victims. Notably, Villanelle never has sex with any of the men she is hired to kill, nor does Ratched have sex with Dr. Hannover, highlighting the performative element of these disguises, as they do not show any true sexual interest in these men. The deceit of these disguises is revealed when the men, expecting sexual pleasure, are instead met with pain.

To take things a step further, the 'closeted' Villanelle not only threatens men's lives, but also in a somewhat Freudian sense, their sexed identities. In *The Monstrous-Feminine,* Creed (1993) presents an image of the monstrous feminine which terrifies viewers because of her ability to castrate. Creed builds this argument around Freud's claim that the phallus is the marker of sexual difference, and the female body terrifies as it is the image of a castrated body (1993:87). These theories rest on specific Western patriarchal views in which sex and gender are conflated, and in which the phallus is placed as central to male power. *Killing Eve* plays into this fear of the female castrater, taking on what Creed refers to as the role of the *femme castratice*, when she literally castrates male victims (1993:127). In the show, the act of

castration is explicitly linked with the idea of de-sexing men. The first man Villanelle castrated was Max, the husband of Anna, a teacher with whom Villanelle had an affair. When Eve asks her why Villanelle would do such a thing, Anna says:

> *"(Villanelle) was quite literal. Days before, she said that the only reason I loved him was because he had a penis. I told her that she might be right, and then that night I came home, and she was in the apartment… she showed me what she had done, and she said it like, it was a good thing."*

In this moment Villanelle removed the sexual difference between herself and Max not only making Max a 'castrated body' as well, but also taking momentary ownership and control of his penis. Furthermore, in being castrated male bodies appear to become 'unseeable,' characters struggling to turn their gaze upon them. Even Eve, shown not to shy away from dead bodies, struggles to look at Frank, her old work colleague's body after Villanelle castrates him. When faced with the corpse, laid out on a bed, castrated and wearing a dress, Eve peers at it round the side of the door, refusing to face the body in full view, before quickly retreating. When asked by her boss Carolyn about what she saw, Eve struggles to answer, stumbling over her words as she tries to explain it.

> *Eve:* "*She- um. She-*
>
> *Carolyn:* "*Just say it.*"
>
> *Eve:* "*She chopped his knob off.*"

Through castration Villanelle does not just take these men's lives, but she makes them unseeable, transforming them into something deemed too horrific to be gazed upon.

Ratched and Dani never take on the literal role of the castrator, but they also prove a dangerous threat to men, particularly any who have the misfortune of finding them sexually attractive. This is the second form of danger closeted queer women appear to present to men. In each of the shows, Villanelle, Ratched and Dani make an attempt at being "normal," and these attempts involve them engaging either romantically or sexually with a man. In all cases, this attempt leads to the man's death.

The best example we get of this form of danger with Villanelle is through Villanelle's brief relationship with her neighbour, Sebastian. In the show's first season, after a difficult assignment, Villanelle's handler, Konstantin, orders Villanelle to take some time off, telling

her to "*do something normal.*" This leads Villanelle to go on a date with Sebastian, ending with the two having sex in his apartment. A few days later, Sebastian dies from inhaling poisonous chemicals Villanelle placed in a perfume bottle for a work assignment. Sebastian grabs the bottle from her bag, believing it is a perfume Villanelle made, as she had told him she was a perfumer. Unlike the men Villanelle is hired to kill, Sebastian's death is accidental. It is his relationship with Villanelle which kills him, rather than Villanelle herself. The death can be seen as the result of Villanelle's attempt at heterosexual normality, with Villanelle having been the one to initiate sex with Sebastian.

In *Bly Manor,* Dani also kills her male partner accidently, in this case while trying to break off her engagement to him:

Seated in a car outside a nice restaurant, we find the pair directly post breakup. Edmund is visibly irritated as Dani attempts to explain why she didn't end things earlier. He fidgets quietly in the driver seat, offering mumbled responses until her admission of, "I love you, so much, even still," seemingly enrages him. He cuts off the end of her sentence, loudly and pointedly saying "Fuck. You. Danelle. How- why are you doing this to me?!" At this point he attempts to get out of the car, while Dani tries to grab hold of him and continue apologising. Edmund shakes her off, shouting, "Let me go, let me go- Jesus have you not- you've done enough!" He steps out of the car, Dani shouting "Eddie!" after him, and turns, to almost instantly be hit by a truck, sending him sprawling onto the street as Dani watches.

Dani's line from earlier in the scene - "*I thought I could just stick (the relationship) out, and eventually I would feel how I was supposed to*" - speaks both to how this relationship can be seen as Dani's attempt at heterosexual 'normality,' and how the breakup functions as a form of 'coming out.' It is a coming out that kills her male fiancé, suggesting a queer woman's sexuality is dangerous not only when hidden from gaze, but in process of its revelation as well.

We see a similar theme in *Killing Eve.* Eve's slow acceptance of her attraction to Villanelle repeatedly places her husband Niko in danger, culminating in him being stabbed through neck with a pitchfork by one of the Twelve's assassins, before Eve finally agrees to leave him alone. The only man who maintains a close relationship with a queer woman within these shows and does not violently suffer for it is Gwendolyn's husband, Trevor. Notably Trevor, a gay man, entered into a marriage of convenience with Gwendolyn to hide both their

sexualities. As such, Gwendolyn's sexuality was never truly hidden from Trevor's gaze, nor was Trevor's gaze that of the straight man.

Participants discussed this connection between queer women's sexuality and danger both in terms of media gaze, and through an imagined straight spectator's gaze. They located these shows within wider patterns of queer visibility on TV, noting how queer desire is infrequently portrayed, and when it is shown is still often portrayed as inherently negative and dangerous. As an example, when asked about how the shows represented queer relationships, Charlie (she/they), who is non-binary and bisexual, and Sam (any pronouns) commented on how queer relationships in the shows, particularly in *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* were framed as something 'forbidden,' that needs to be hidden, but in being hidden were also highly destructive.

> Charlie: *"I've just started thinking about of like-like forbidden desire… how in* Ratched *and* Killing Eve*, is 100% that both are forbidden desires- by like the state and by the institution and then also* Killing Eve*… one of them's a, you know, an assassin. They're working against each other, but it's like very forbidden desire and those are the relationships that are more violent…"*

> Sam: *"You could even argue that there, that (Dani) trying to be in a straight relationship and causes- It doesn't cause. But she feels responsible for the violence of it. For (Edmund's) death."*

> Charlie: *"…I feel like that's- it- that's an interesting link that I didn't really think about so much before – repression."*

This discussion demonstrates an awareness of the general, straight gaze positioning adopted by much of TV, and how, even while focusing on queer women and queer relationships, these shows still contribute to this 'straight gaze' by implying queer desire is destructive and dangerous. Notably, when approaching the show through their own queer gaze, Charlie frames the characters' actions, particularly Dani's, as repression rather than hiding or deceit.

Charlie later expanded on their thoughts about the shows framing of queer desire, and specifically how the relationship in *Killing Eve* could potentially be harmful, combining their discussion of media gaze with an imagined straight spectator. Interestingly before doing so, they separated out their imagined interpretation from what they perceived or hoped the show creators where attempting to do, before saying:

"I'm very aware that there are a lot of people who are still homophobic, or who just might not understand yet, and so even if they want to be supportive the ideas are still there. And if- coz also (Killing Eve) being on TVNZ, there's other queer shows on TVNZ but there's not a lot um, and so, if that was like the main, exposure that you had to like a central queer relationship on TV then, um... The relationship is kind of like the thing that messes everything up for their lives, for both of their lives and so that's, not really a great, I don't think that's a great message to have in isolation… I think that, because- We don't see heaps of queer relationships people forget that and generalize it to the like general population and think this is what they all look like or it just feeds into what they already believe."

Here, Charlie reflects on how she feels the show functions to reinforce the dominant media gaze, in replicating the prevalent message that queer women's desire is destructive. They also touch on an idea we will revisit later, that the solution to this issue is greater breadth and diversity of representation, to destabilize the dominant gaze through a range of differing media gazes.

Additionally, in initially differentiating between this interpretation and what they 'hope' the creators aimed to do and how the show can otherwise be read, Charlie places some of the agency of the gaze on an imagined spectator as well as the shows. Similarly in Sam's comment regarding *Bly Manor,* she said 'you' could argue Dani caused Edmund's death, while also asserting that is not the 'truth,' some of the imperative is placed on an imagined audience's interpretation of the text, not just the text itself. In doing so, responsibility for a 'straight reading' of the show is placed not only on the media gaze, but also the viewer. This action also affirms the idea that even with a dominant straight gaze being reproduced by these shows, it is possible to approach these shows with a queer reading, that does not necessarily lead to the reinforcement of such ideas.

This work of challenging the potential, straight media gaze presented in the shows was further undertaken by participants through their reimagining of parts of the show, in resistance to some of the connotations presented between queer desire and destruction. For example, both Sam (any pronouns) and Charlie (she/they) talked about reimagining the ending of *Bly Manor* recasting a tragic ending, in which Jamie is left isolated after Dani's death, to one that enables queer happiness.

Sam "In my head, (Jamie) like totally like goes and finds another hot older woman, and they like support each other through their trauma, and that's lovely like that.

> *Yeah would be nice to actually see that as opposed to me just writing mind fanfiction about it."*

In doing so, Sam and Charlie produced resistant interpretations of the show material, coming up with alternative narratives which make visible some of the elements of queer representation that they want to see but are not offered by the texts.

Hidden

> *Sam (on representations of queer desire): "I feel we so rapidly switch from that sexualisation or- fetishization of lesbian couples or queer couples to, 'Oh, you can do it, but I just don't want to see it.'"*

In the epilogue of *Monsters in the Closet,* Benshoff (1997) pondered the future of queer horror, pitching his hope that contemporary horror films of the time were working to "provoke discussion on the nature of the monster queer, to nudge him or her out of the closets and tombs," (265) against the concern that "cultural critics and everyday moviegoers often seem all too willing to ignore the homosexual implications of popular culture artifacts" (266). I have already established that today's queer monsters are undeniably out of the closet. These characters homosexuality is now unmissable, but that does not mean their sexuality is fully visible. There are still parts of them that we, the audience, are not allowed to gaze upon, and one of those parts is sex.

Lesbian sex has been and often remains generally unseen on TV. The question of making it visible is, moreover, often complicated by discussions of fetishization (Beirne 2017:42). Using Mulvey's theory of the male gaze in media, it can be argued that portrayals of lesbian sex on TV often cater to the heterosexual male gaze, and that even the potential presence of male viewers functions to "de-lesbianise" lesbian sex (Beirne 2017:42-43). As such, the exclusion of lesbian sex helps counter this concern. Fetishization of lesbians also further complicates representation as non-sexual lesbian representations can often be perceived as inherently sexual, even when portrayed in a more chaste manner than the heterosexual relationships around it. This representation is so powerful that media studies scholar Rebecca Beirne claims that *"if heterosexual women are defined by the body in popular culture, then lesbians are defined by sex as well as the absence of (at least traditional understandings of) sex."* (2017:45).

The shows in question follow in the tradition of keeping lesbian sex primarily hidden, though sex itself is not hidden, including sex involving queer women. However, the sex depicted is often aggressive, violent, and almost all heterosexual. I found the shows depictions of sex and focus on hetero sex off-putting, given their focus on male pleasure, and at times, the explicit discomfort from the woman involved, and I was not alone in this. Several participants noted this disparity as well. Sam (any pronouns), a self-proclaimed horror fan, did not finish watching *Ratched,* in part because of the show's representation of sex.

> *Sam (following a conversation about the sex scene involving Ratched and Charles): "I find Ryan Murphy expresses sex in a very kind of violent, almost gory, horror and horrific way that I don't necessarily appreciate. Again, I think there's a lot of content out there, of straight people having great sex on TV, or like the man enjoying it, and I kind of get tired of seeing this woman (Ratched) having like sex done to her… I think it's demeaning towards women, to be honest and the way that it's done because we do get to see like male- male characters enjoying themselves. I don't feel like we see (women) enough, and when we do it is in the kinda manipulative way. (I'm) kinda over it."*

As Sam discusses above, their concerns are not reserved to the representations (or the lack there of) of lesbian sex, but instead encompass how film and TVs wider dominant male gaze, prioritises male pleasure in sex. Most sex scenes in film and TV media are heterosexual, and most only show penetrative, penis with vagina, sex, giving little to no attention to other forms of sex, including clitoral stimulation (Naftulin 2020). This form of penetrative sex is notably a form of sexual intercourse which prioritises cis-male pleasure, as many cis-women require clitoral stimulation to orgasm, with some studies finding as low as 18% of women report being able to orgasm from penetration alone (Mahar, Mintz and Akers 2020:25). The onscreen disparity is so great, that in 2020, Frances Rayner and Irene Tortajada launched "the clit test," a campaign that involves judging media to see if it "highlight(s) the clitoris as a source of sexual pleasure" (Naftulin 2020). It feels notable the bar for passing 'the clit test,' is simply acknowledging the clitoris exists, including references to a cis woman masturbating (theclittest.com N.D.).

The necessity for this test rests on the fact sexual acts that focus on women's pleasure such as women receiving oral sex remains a taboo area in film and TV media. Such acts are often blocked outright by producers or the production team, such as D.C. stopping the third season

of *Harley* from including a scene of Batman performing oral sex, stating, "heroes don't do that," (Hibberd 2021). Media that does include women receiving oral sex also often receives a higher maturity rating than media which contains penetrative sex scenes. For example, the Motion Picture Association of America has been accused of giving movies which allude to women receiving oral sex a higher rating then movies with other forms of sexual content (Murray 2013). However, Netflix shows, which *Ratched* and *Bly Manor* are, are under no such restrictions, given the platform has aired scenes in which a woman receives oral sex before, see *Bridgeton* (2020-) or *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019). What's more, both shows already have high maturity labels on Netflix, with a rating of 16 due to violence and sexual content, giving their creators less incentive to avoid such scenes out to avoid a high rating. Whether *Killing Eve* was affected by external restrictions is harder to judge, as the show aired simultaneously in multiple countries on multiple platforms and lacks one official rating, receiving ratings as low as 12 in France, up to 18+ in Brazil, with the average restriction being about 15+ (IMDB N.D.).

The inclusion of sex in these shows is unsurprising. Sex often plays a significant part in the horror genre, to the extent gratuitous nudity and sex scenes are an almost expected staple of B-grade horror movies. Horror is known for pushing the boundaries, including those involving sex. As with many things in horror movies, this testing and breaking of boundaries often functions as a form of regulation. The monster in horror can act both as the regulator of sex, 'punishing' those who break sexual norms, such as the slasher villain who kills promiscuous teenagers, while also often being the site of breakage itself, giving a physical form to sexual desires and acts which should not be committed (Cohen 1996:14; Renner 2016:31). It should be noted that in recent years, it has also become common to see examples of 'good' or 'acceptable' expressions of sex alongside punished 'bad' ones in horror media, particularly with serial killer media. Virginity is no longer a requirement for survival; however, promiscuity still results in death (Renner 2016:31).

As such, the shows representations of sex are, in themselves to be expected, situated well within horror's tendency to intertwine violence and sex, and push the boundaries with displaying sexual deviancy. *Bly Manor* is admittedly more reserved with its sexual content overall, limited to a shirtless Peter kissing Rebecca in bed, making its lack of lesbian sex scenes less striking. However *Ratched* and *Killing Eve* do not shy from showing explicit sexual content.

In an admittedly refreshing shift, *Killing Eve* distinguishes itself from horror's tendency to punish women for being sexual, (although as discussed above, men are instead punished for having sex with queer women). Caroline, Villanelle and Eve all regularly engage in sexual activities without facing any form of narrative repercussions. *Killing Eve* represents women who enjoy sex and engage in casual sex for their own pleasure, though there is a disparity in the forms of sex we are shown, with the onscreen sex scenes being notably heterosexual. We can watch Villanelle have sex with Sebastian, see her in a bright red summer dress riding him, his breathy cries of 'Oh my God' and the squeaking of bedsprings punctuating the activity. We even get to watch him orgasm. However Villanelle's sex with women occurs fully offscreen, hidden from our gaze. Queer sex is implied by a nameless woman visible in Villanelle's bed in the background, or the two women who thank Villanelle before slipping out of her apartment one early morning. We, the audience, know Villanelle had sex with these women, but are never permitted to see it. Eve too, is free to have sex with men, both her husband and others such as Hugo, another agent she works with, but never physically explores her sexuality with women. The lack of sexual or even physically intimate contact between Eve and Villanelle did not go unnoticed, and participants repeatedly bemoaned the lack of any physical intimacy shown between the two, (except for a brief, violent kiss in the third season) as well as the way their interactions always became violent or negative. Charlie (she/they), a bisexual non-binary individual, summarised the nature of Villanelle and Eve's relationship saying "*whenever (Villanelle and Eve) get closer it's- it turns to violence,*" Later commenting on how they want to see Villanelle and Eve happy together, "*if there could be like a fantasy, like scene of like, oh, 'This is what our life could look together'… just a glimpse of 'of nice'*"

Ratched also features several different sex scenes, including the previously described scene between Ratched and Charles, a nurse and patient having sex in the hospital bathroom, and another nurse, Dolly, giving Edmund a hand job through his prison bars. In the middle of the season Edmund and Dolly also have a romantic sex scene after Dolly helps Edmund escape the hospital. The scene, taking place in a low-lit barn, is lengthy, and set with heavily romantic and sexual undertones.

Kissing passionately, Edmund and Dolly fall into a makeshift bed together. We watch as they undress one another, soft romantic music swelling along with their movements. Clothes gone, we get a close up of Dolly's face, half in shadows as she sighs, before cutting to a shot of Edmund's bare back and ass. Body glistening in the light of a nearby oil lamp, he thrusts into

Dolly. The two kiss again, Dolly cradling Edmund's face before she changes their positions, flipping them around to ride Edmund. We end with an image of the two in silhouette against the barn wall, the music overlayed with the slap of their bodies coming together, and Dolly's breathy groans and sighs.

It is worth noting that Dolly is effectively punished for this act, dying not long after when she refuses to leave Edmund or surrender to the police who catch them. Dolly was portrayed as overly sexual and attracted to danger, making her within the show a representation of uncontrolled 'deviant' female sexuality, which ultimately costs her, her life. There are several similar representations of such deviant female sexuality in *Ratched*, such as a nurse who cheats on her husband, and fitting with horror media tradition, she and other women who display an unrestrained sexual desire, end up punished for their transgressions.

The scene above is clearly meant to be romantic and sensual, a treatment lesbian sex does not receive within the show. We are granted, quite literally, a blink and you will miss it, shot of lesbian sex in *Ratched*, when, in the second episode, Ratched walks in on Lilly, a patient at the hospital, giving another patient, Ingrid, oral sex. In the shot that lasts a matter of seconds, we see the pair from the side. Ingrid is sat at the end of a bed, fully dressed, headwrap and all. Crouched between her legs is an equally dressed Lilly, who pulls back from Ingrid almost the instant the door opens. The rapid-fire nature and framing of this scene means the sexual act remains more implied than shown. What's more, the scene lacks any of the sexual or romantic undertones of the heterosexual sex scenes. If anything, the inclusion of the sound of Ingrid, an opera singer, singing out a note that alerts Ratched of their presence, and the rapid fire turn and stare the women offer when the door opens makes the scene read more humorous than anything else.

Our main couple is allowed more romantic intimacy than Lilly and Ingrid, although they are even more restricted in terms of sex. The closest we get to a sex scene between Ratched and Gwendolyn is as follows:

We peer in through a half open bedroom door. Early morning sun streams through the window, the camera slowly moving in and revealing two people embracing on the bed. We cut into the room, discovering the pair are Gwendolyn and Ratched. Both women are dressed in pyjamas, the bed sheets wrapping around Ratched's waist as though for added modesty. Ratched lies against the pillows, cupping Gwendolyn's face as the older woman kisses her. Suddenly, Gwendolyn stops with a grimace. She slowly pulls away, Ratched initially tilts up

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as though to follow, her hands brushing against Gwendolyn's face. Gwendolyn, a look of disgust and discomfort on her face, cups her hand cupped over her mouth, and mutters "oh I'm sorry." She repeats the statement as she runs out of the room. We stay with Ratched, now seated up in the bed, staring after her partner. Off screen, we hear the muffled sounds of Gwendolyn, unwell from chemotherapy treatments, vomiting.

This scene is the most explicitly sexual moment we get between Ratched and Gwendolyn, notable for its lack of sex. The extent of this difference in representation is highlighted even further by the fact it was the queer women on the show who pushed for the inclusion of scenes like this one. In an interview with Entertainment Weekly, Cynthia Nixon, who plays Gwendolyn, said "there wasn't even going to be an onscreen kiss. (Sarah Paulson and I) were like, we've got to have some physical component to this," when asked about the portrayal of the relationship (Hall 2020).

Several participants in both focus groups noted this scene and its juxtaposition against heterosexual sex scenes. In particular Sophie (she/her), who is pansexual mentioned the scene as part of a wider discussion about how several participants felt the shows, particularly *Ratched,* were made for a straight audience.

> *"I think it's very much very veered towards straight (audiences). Because… the main character, obviously, she has a lesbian relationship, but like so much of it is- like you see a number of straight sex scenes… but like (the) one chance they had for her to have, you know a queer sex scene, the partner she's with ends up having chemotherapy and kind of stopped because she has to go and throw up… that could have been a really good moment to showcase that relationship a little more, but they kind of flopped it."*

Here we see how discussions around the lack of lesbian sex was often located by participants within conversations about the show's straight media gaze, with emphasis placed on how the media positions its viewers, rather than how a straight spectator might view the material. The concern here is over what is not made available to be gazed upon. Straight sex is repeatedly made visible, whereas lesbian sex remains at best implied, hidden from the gaze. This lack of visibility participants argued, contributed to lesbian sex seeming undesirable or inaccessible. In a follow up interview, Sophie reiterated her feelings about this disparity, mentioning she would not recommend *Ratched* to people who might feel unsure about their queer identity.

> *"You want to see that (sex) right? They're supposed to have this happy relationship, but you never actually see them really do anything apart from the occasional, you know, kiss. You know, so that was something that made me go 'Ah' perhaps it's more for like, you know, (a) straight mainstream kind of audience… if I knew someone who is newly queer or newly gay, I don't think I would start them with (*Ratched*)… I wouldn't want to want to put that on to them and have them potentially take it the wrong way."*

This comment, along with comments from others in the focus groups, notably did not voice any concern about imagined straight spectators viewing this material. Instead, participants focused on how other, particularly younger, or newly out, queer people might view this material. Participants such as Sophie imagined queer spectators approaching the material through the dominant media gaze, drawing attention to the way the exclusion of lesbian sex to avoid fetishism can also be seen as discounting the gaze of queer woman viewers (Beirne 2017:43). The phrase "*take it the wrong way*" places the agency of interpretation on the imagined spectator, while also asserting the idea of a 'correct' way of viewing. This gaze of the imagined gay spectator was often built around participant's own previous experiences, for example Sam (any pronouns) who admittedly stopped watching *Ratched* before the vomit scene, discussed how they believed their younger self may have viewed the scene, based off of Sophie's description.

> *"…for a lot of people watching TV is when they had some sexual awakenings- and you also have to consider what sort of impression that's having on the audience if you're seeing a queer couple having sex, and it ends in throwing up… you kind of have to think if I was a 13 year old sitting there and I saw that, how might I internalize that subconsciously?… It might not be intentional, but I do think we do internalize those messages, or at least I have internalized (them)."*

Sam's concerns about the scene aligned with the worries raised by the clit test movement, in that not seeing a range of sexual acts in media is internalised by women and can lead to women feeling disempowered and ashamed of their sexuality and feeling unable to act on their own sexual desires (theclittest N.D.).

There is a shot, in the lesbian historical *Gentleman Jack* (2019-2022), of the main character Anne performing oral sex on a woman. The shot is brief but striking, we see the nude body of Anne's partner sprawled on a bed, a topless Anne lying between her legs, leaving no question

as to what is happening. We also see the absolute pleasure both characters are taking in the act, the shot ending with Anne pausing to beam up at her companion. The scene is shocking, purposefully so in the cut of the episode, but also in the rarity of seeing such an act on TV. Yet it is also the closest I have yet to come to seeing anything resembling my desired sexual expression on general TV. Even in shows focused on lesbian desire, we rarely get to witness queer women's sexual expression. This lack of visibility of lesbian sex presents the message that while queer women's romantic desires may now be made visible, a queer woman's sexual expression is still unacceptable. This is a space the audience is not allowed to see or share in but must remain hidden.

Sexual enjoyment, however, was not the only element of queerness that participants felt remained unseeable on TV.

Limiting Deviation

> Sam: *"My biggest problem (with* Bly Manor*) is body diversity and that Dani- and the gardener are like the same size. Like all of the characters are pretty straight fitting. (Laughs) But you know, they fit stuff that they'd be able to go into a normal store and get… Body diversity would be nice...* **I would like to see someone who looks like me***."*

In the second episode of Ratched, we are granted a brief look at a lesbian bar that Gwendolyn frequents. It is the space the farthest from the 'norm' that we are offered in the show, populated by butch women with short hair and suits, slow dancing with their femme partners. A space where there is truly, "not a fella in sight." Yet this is not the image of freedom that Ratched and Gwendolyn escape to at the end of the season. Instead, when we find them in Mexico, we are met with a much more feminine Gwendolyn then the one in a suit jacket and pants found at the bar. This Gwendolyn wears a bright, white floral top, long hair let down, her casual breakfast look complete with shiny earrings and red lipstick. She is now in a space where we are told she can be free, separate from the restrictions of powerful men, and yet conforming closer to the norms of femininity than she had before her escape.

As a final question for both focus groups, I asked my participants what they want to see from queer horror shows moving forward, and in both cases was met with an outpouring desire for more; more visibility in terms of representation, and crucially, more diversity within that representation. While participants celebrated what these shows made visible, many felt they still were not able to see themselves represented on-screen. Their own intersectional

queerness deviated too far from the dominant straight media gaze to be deemed acceptable. This created a barrier between participants and the shows, as participants felt unable to fully share in the gaze of the character and were left feeling unseen in their identities. Even when I expanded the question beyond these shows and asked in general what TV characters people related to, I found that many participants struggled to name any characters they felt they could fully relate to.

For many, this issue came down, in part, to visible physical differences between themselves and the characters on-screen. For example, Rose (she/her), a queer woman who self describes as fat/plus sized, brought up representations of weight as one of the things that stops her from relating to queer women on TV.

> Revena: *"Can you think of any examples of media relationships or characters outside of (*Ratched *and* Bly Manor*) that you've found relatable?"*
>
> Rose: *"…none spring to mind… there's not a lot of fat women… presented as like, full characters, and I think that is still- like, it's not all encompassing, one personality and my- who I am, but particularly as far as like how I present that is like a conscious thing, and because that's not super shown in media as like, here's a fully fleshed out character."*

Rose was not alone in this feeling. The overarching critique participants offered of all three shows was the lack of character diversity, and the separation that created between viewers and the media. For shows focused on supposedly diverse, queer women, participants where all too aware the main queer cast fit into a very similar physical mould, being cis, white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive women. *Killing Eve's* Eve, marks the one exception to part of that list, being of Korean descent. As such, these characters were perceived as still fitting very closely to a form of dominant, cishet white ideal image for women. These characters are allowed to deviate slightly in terms of their sexuality but were perceived by participants as limited in how far from the 'norm' they can get, showing the keyways intersectionality affects how deviation is read and accepted.

Participants were quick to connect this lack of diversity to the male gaze, connecting it to the media's tendency to show women as objects for straight men to gaze upon. The characters were regarded as presenting as conventionally attractive, dressed and styled for a male gaze rather than a queer one. As such, they are seen as all still being sexually appealing to straight male viewers, including the queer characters who do not use their sextual attractiveness to

lure men. This representation sits within the context of butch and masculine presenting queer women often being made less visible in media then feminine queer women, in part because they can be seen as challenging the assumed connection between women and feminine beauty (Smith 2020: 50). Rose (she/her) pointed this out as one of the elements she did not like about the representation of queer women in the shows.

> *"The body type thing is like, they're queer women relationships that would potentially be appealing to heterosexual men."*

In creating representations that are not explicitly queer or deviant in physical appearance, participants felt these queer women, and their relationships are still being positioned as passive, to be gazed upon by men. This role is disrupted narratively, in that the shows utilize the women's appearance to make the characters dangerous to male characters, indicating a danger in gazing upon the feminine lesbian. However, as a spectator, the straight male viewer is not at any true risk from these representations, leaving him free to potentially enjoy them both as sexually appealing women and in terms of the excitement that controlled danger in horror can bring to a viewer.

But as with the lack of lesbian sex, participants' concerns focused not on the response of the straight spectator, but of the alternative queer spectator. Again, participants drew on their past experiences to create this imagined queer spectator, speculating on how a queer person approaching the material through the dominant media gaze might be affected by this material. For example, Sophie (she/her), who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair and Sam (any pronouns), who has narcolepsy, discussed how not seeing disabled, and specifically, queer disabled, characters on TV influenced their own feelings and experiences with disability:

> *Sophie (discussing what she would like to see more of): "...for me it would be obviously more queer relationships, but also more... more around sexuality with queer and disabled people, because I think as we've all identified today, you know queer relationships are often side-lined or whatever, but I think more for the disabled community- even more so because- when it comes to us, we get the stereotype of like, disabled people don't have a sexuality, or we aren't interested in sex or relationships, and as a person who's in that community, it's really hard for me to identify and to see. Because spoiler alert, we are sexual. We like having relationships, and so to see that on the screen and to have that, for... people who are disabled and queer... to be able to identify with that would be great."*

> Sam: *"I feel that so hard… like seeing- sex scenes, where they have to maybe make-work around different things, like for me, I have narcolepsy… which means that I fall asleep a lot. I'm very tired all the time, I could fall asleep right now. And I have thought about the fact that if I was diagnosed while single, I would probably really fear what that would mean for my sex life, and so, if I could see any type of disability or whatever be something that does work with, as opposed to around or against (sex)."*

Sophie later expanded on this topic in a follow up interview, discussing how while TV and film media has helped her figure out her sexuality, her experience has been affected by the lack of disability representation.

> Sophie: *"Media very much played a role in helping me find my sexuality, this is a topic that isn't freely talked about within my family, and disability and sexuality are also not freely talked about within society. It's very much the narrative with disability… that we are not sexual in any form, or if we are, it's only a select few or it's a fetish material… I am yet to see a disabled character on-screen that I connect with in terms of this, (but) other able-bodied characters helped me to explore the idea that I might be something other than straight."*

Sophie's comments return us to the discussion of the power of TV and the influence of media representations. While TV is a space for testing and challenging cultural boundaries, it is also a space in which these boundaries are reinforced (Peterson 2008:119). These shows claim to offer images of complex queer woman, showing examples of powerful deviant resistance, but present a world in which access to this deviant power still requires confirming to many elements of the dominant power structure. Within this, expressions of queer desire are also limited, with shows such as *Ratched* punishing any forms of sexual expression which challenge monogamy. As such the message is not a variety of deviances is acceptable, but that only certain forms of queer deviance that otherwise conform to the expected norms are acceptable. In doing so these shows maintain ablest, racial, and sexual hierarchies, reinforcing the boundaries of homosexual normativity.

This influences how queer identities are viewed and expressed, participants speaking about how not being seen limited their own forms of self-expression. To see queer women, but not queer and fat, or queer and disabled, left participants with the message that you can be queer

or fat, but not both, and in being both their own identities still lie beyond acceptability, even as a form of (acceptable) deviance.

Conclusion

> *Charlie: "Just having more examples and- and diversity in the nature of (queer) relationships and the people's, like, the people themselves, would be great. So that you can get into like… the fun evil stuff that is in horror movies, without feeling like this could define someone's understanding of-of queerness."*

The queer deviance made visible in these shows is specific and constrained. It must be made visible, for hidden queerness is presented as a danger, to the queer woman herself, and those around her, particularly men. Her sexual desire however must remain hidden. The queer woman can now express her love for another woman, but sexual expression remains a space of male pleasure. Interconnected with this, in making herself visible, the queer women of the shows also remain appealing to the straight male gaze. Queer characters' physical presentations still conform to accepted expressions of femininity never veering too far from dominant white cis-het ideals.

Queer participants were quick to bring attention to different sides of queerness that remain hidden within these representations, aware of how these shows could function to support dominant oppressive power structures. They primarily perceived their own expressions of queer identity as still being hidden, falling too far from the norms to be made visible, even as a form of resistant deviance. Because of this, and despite queerness now being explicitly visible within the media, queer viewers still engaged in resistant, queer readings of the material, reimagining and critiquing the narratives given, to make visible and challenge the maintained dominant straight gaze presented by the text.

The larger solution for this issue, suggested by almost every participant, is to enable greater queer visibility, and importantly, increased diversity within this visibility. Participants felt this would help disable the straight media gaze, as well as the persistence of homophobic readings of texts, by presenting a range of possibilities for queer expressions of identity, alongside and in addition to representations of destructive queer violence. Participants wanted to see a widening of the forms of queer deviancy presented within the wider TV landscape, to see their own queer identities presented as a viable possibility, making visible the forms of disruption they embody.

Conclusion

About midway through my in-person focus group, the mood is relaxed and casual. People seem to enjoy the drinks and snacks I provided- the limited-edition Batman Oreos proving a hit, although they do apologise for the crunching noises they assume will be picked up by the microphones. Our conversation at this point is focused on violent women, it began with a discussion of the shows' depictions of violence, but has now veered into a more general discussion of watching, and often enjoying women commit violence on-screen.

This discussion is layered with nervous laughter, as people carefully balance confessing their enjoyment of on-screen violence against a clear desire not to be seen as violent. Whereas people had been happy to admit to enjoying the shows themselves, admitting to enjoying watching violent women proves more challenging. April goes first, she sits forward in her seat as she talks, as though leaning in to tell us all a secret. Her admission of "…there is something so satisfying about- especially when you get (stories) where it's like, it's like revenge or something like that and you're like-you're like fucking go for it," gets gradually quieter, before ending in an all but whispered, "love it." There is a pause for a moment afterwards, the group digesting the confession, before Hana jumps in to share her own thoughts. She starts confidently, asserting her enjoyment of onscreen violence "…I think why I kind of enjoy watching like just women just - I don't know like beating the shit out of someone or something like that-" Hana half laughs over her own words, her confidence seeming to falter as she continues, "-is I think I kinda sorta like to live through them just by watching it." Hana's tone turns up at the end, making the sentence sound more like a question than a statement, as though she is uneasy with the claim. Offering an out, Hana's flatmate, Lexi quietly adds, "vicariously- sorta?" Hana grabs onto the addition, once again reassuring us, and possibly herself, of her own nonviolent position, saying, "Yeah, vicariously kind of thing- because it's like obviously I'm not going to do that in real-life and stuff like that." Reassurance done, Hana continues, "But at the same time, it's like sometimes you're just really filled with a lot of rage so it's kind of nice to see like, a bad ass women just like beat up a guy… like- yes, thank you for doing that for all of us." Hana's final words dissolve again into unsure laughter, one echoed by other group members.

There is a tension within these shows, between their celebration of deviant women, and their disavowal of the joy and power disruption can bring. These shows are presented in marketing as offering subversive, deviant and disruptive images of womanhood, and in part, they do so.

They use monstrosity to make visible subversive forms of femininity, that, in being uncoupled from personal feelings of heterosexual desire hold a particularly queer potential. However, access to this subversive femininity is reliant on heteronormativity, and the disruptive power it offers is only made available to able-bodied, cis, and predominantly, white women. The alternative routes for survival presented by the shows, namely through women's solidarity require a disavowal of not only violent, but seemingly disruptive, power, and a confirmation to many gendered norms. Queerness itself is asked to be made explicitly visible, but only in ways which remain appealing to the heterosexual gaze. As such, within representations of queer disruption, we see the reinforcement of existing intersecting dominant power structures.

Participants relationships with these shows involve tension. Viewers showed a genuine love and excitement for these shows, but also a discomfort in this excitement, and concern for the ongoing harm these shows might proliferate. Participants were aware of the wider contexts surrounding the shows, and the potential support they gave to reaffirming harmful ideas about queerness. Additionally, the shows limitations in depicting queerness created barriers between the material and queer viewers, who continue to feel unseen on TV. By undertaking resistant, queer readings of the material, viewers tried to expose and push back against these maintained limits. What's more, participants also used these shows to explore and reinstate elements of their own identities, at times using the shows representations to find and adapt their own forms of self-expression, further transforming the messages of the text. Yet, while participants seemed comfortable in their own subversive relationships to the texts, they remained resistant to ever fully embracing enjoying shows about disruptive, deviant women.

During the latter part of this project, I found myself gravitating back to past queer horror media, considering what I enjoy about such stories and their representations of disruptive queer monstrosity. One show I returned to was *Black Sails* (2014-2017). *Black Sails* set in the 18th century, is about fictional captain James Flint. Flint becomes a pirate after he is dismissed from the navy and his lover, Thomas Hamilton, is sent to a mental asylum, because of their homosexual relationship. There is a line, uttered in the second season of *Black Sails* that has stuck in my mind since I first heard it.

> *Flint (speaking while on trial by the British for piracy): "Everyone is a monster to someone. Since you are so convinced that I am yours, I will be it."*

There is a particular poignancy to this scene, something I have always found oddly beautiful. Flint sits calmly in front of a rowdy crowd calling for his death and proclaims his role as their villain. It is not just an acceptance, but an embracing of his position as a disruptive outsider. Flint lays ownership to the label of monstrous. It is no longer simply how others represent him, but how he represents himself. In doing so he is able to claim the strength and comfort that embracing a position of disruption can bring, setting himself free from attempting to follow the constraining rules of his society.

This is a moment of embracing we never get in the shows examined here. The women of these shows never fully embrace their own monstrous power. Instead, the label of 'monster' is given to these women by others, but never accepted as their own. Ratched is labelled a monster, but never takes on the label for herself. Nor does Dani, or to that end, Viola. In *Killing Eve* when Villanelle is explicitly labelled as monstrous, called a *"beautiful monster"* by her boss, the title unsettles her. It upsets her, prompting her to later ask Eve:

> Villanelle: *"Did I ruin your life? Do you think I'm a monster?"*

> Eve: *"You're so many things."*

> Villanelle: *"Doesn't answer my question."*

At this Eve pauses, studying Villanelle, before she says:

> Eve: *"I think we all have monsters inside of us, it's just that most people have managed to keep theirs hidden."*

This seems to appease Villanelle. It offers a separation from Villanelle being monstrous; she is not the 'beautiful monster,' she simply has monsters within her, as everyone does, and crucially, they can be controlled, or kept hidden for safety. Rather than embracing a position of destructive deviance, Villanelle spends the next season unhappy, fighting for society's acceptance.

It is a fight that she never wins as Villanelle and her monsters are destroyed. Her passing allows Eve's monsters, which Villanelle brought to the surface to be buried once more, showrunner Laura Neal stating the ending is Eve "washing off everything that had happened in the past four seasons and being able to begin again" (Zalben 2022).

When asked about the future of queer women on TV, Rose, a cis queer woman I interviews first expressed her hope for the genre, saying "*we're in a lesbians and horror, um,*

renaissance" before ending this thought with the reminder, "*but you know, they can never be happy.*" Joy is a limited, fleeting thing for queer women on TV. Both *Bly Manor* and *Killing Eve* end in the death of one of the queer leads, their living partners left isolated and alone because of the loss. *Ratched's* end is still unknown, although one of its queer characters has already had to escape the jaws of death, with Gwendolyn originally planned to die halfway through the season (Hall 2020).

Queer disruption within these shows is itself often isolating. Villanelle is alone in her destruction, Gwendolyn, Ratched's lover never even learns of Ratched's true nature, or the actions she undertook for them to be able to escape to Mexico at the end of the season. Shows about queer male monsters often involve the narrative of connection and shared joy being found in being the outsider. NBC's *Hannibal* is about two queer men connecting over being the monster, cumulating in them committing murder together. But the monstrous women on TV are alone in their moments of disruptive power. The building of community appears to allow women within these shows to connect and find alternative, shared methods of existing. But the creation of this community requires removal from the position of the disruptive queer, and confirmation to most existing dominant power structures other than sexuality. Ratched and Gwendolyn only find community through quiet conformance to the norms, they can exist together as lesbians, so long as they follow the rest of society's rules. Those who fail to learn to hide and conform, such as Villanelle, must still be removed to protect everyone else. When I sat in focus groups, listening to the excitement expressed by participants in sharing the shows, a community built on conformance seemed the farthest from what participant's where interested in. Instead, I found people wanting to connect through finding the joy made through communal, shared disruption.

I cannot help but remember here, another line offered by Rose in our conversation about clothing and women expressing their identities through fashion. Talking about femininity, Rose said "*you can wear makeup and a skirt, but God forbid… you take any joy in it.*" Participants praised these shows. They celebrated seeing deviant women, positioned as powerful, destructive others, as monsters. They took joy in watching women claim disruptive power and challenge the norms. But there was a discomfort, and at times almost shame held in this joy, and a desire amongst participants to justify any enjoyment they did take from watching women enact destructive forms of power. Openly embracing expressions of joy felt almost like a deviant act for a queer woman to undertake.

Is it any wonder it is an uncomfortable joy to claim, when not even within stories about queer monstrosity are queer women allowed to find the comfort and joy of embracing a position of deviant disruption that is allowed to their male counterparts? When asked what they wanted to see in the future of queer women's TV, several participants, including Hana and Lexi said they wanted NBC's *Hannibal*, but with queer women. I too, want *Hannibal,* but with queer women. I want to be able to see women delight in the power of being a disruptive force. To be able to embrace it, and enjoy it, find themselves and others and belonging there. I want them to be able to share it with each other and find joy in being the monster.

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