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# Rape, revenge, reclamation: An analysis of female agency in American rape-revenge films

Marissa Connell

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Rape, Revenge, Reclamation: An Analysis of Female Agency in American Rape-

Revenge Films

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Women's and Gender Studies

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## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mom, Theresa, for never letting me quit my academic journey, no matter how many times I wanted to throw in the towel. Every time I cried, screamed, and slammed my laptop closed, she was there, pushing me to keep going. Thank you for always being my rock and my best friend. I truly would not be here without you. You have created and molded a strong, independent, take-no-shit feminist and I hope I make you proud.

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Thank you to my cat, Ginger, the love of my life. If science ever develops technology where she can read and understand this, I hope she knows how indebted I am to her for her constant companionship, cuddles, and meows that helped me endlessly while writing this thesis. Thank you for reminding me to be selfless and also forcing me to stop writing every now and then to spend time with you. Those are my most treasured moments.

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I will analyze five films that have a rape-revenge narrative: *Ms. 45* (1981), *M.F.A.* (2017), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). I will argue that the violent actions taken by the female protagonist during her revenge against her rapist(s) serve to allow her to reclaim her agency that was stolen from her during the rape(s). I will show that the rape-revenge narrative is more diverse than it might seem, as the five films I analyze deal with rape, and responses to rape, in very different ways. I will analyze female protagonists who act as social avengers and reclaim their agency by taking on society as a whole, female protagonists that confront the phenomenon of gang rape, and female protagonists who challenge the institutionalized system of male power.

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## I. Introduction

In this thesis, I will analyze rape-revenge films to argue that the violent actions taken by the female protagonist in the revenge portion of these films are justifiable (within the context of the film) and serve to allow the female victim to reclaim her agency after the rape(s)/attack(s) she endured in the first half of the film.

A film that has a rape-revenge narrative is one whose central narrative maneuver uses an act of sexual assault or rape (either on-screen or off) to motivate an act of vengeance.<sup>1</sup> Typically, these films will follow a three-act plot structure—Act I involves the female protagonist being raped/gang raped/sexually assaulted, Act II involves her surviving the attack and rehabilitating herself, and Act III involves the female protagonist taking revenge on and/or killing her attacker(s). Claire Henry states, “rape-revenge stories are primarily about the *lex talionis*, the notion that once rape takes place, the world is out of kilter until vengeance is carried out by the victim.”<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, this vengeance takes the form of eye-for-an-eye justice, where the victim-avenger enacts her revenge on her attacker(s) by doing similar types of torture to them as was done to her. Henry argues that eye-for-an-eye vengeance helps to restore order and rebalance the scales of justice.<sup>3</sup>

The rape-revenge narrative is a widespread phenomenon that occurs across several film genres. Henry argues that rape-revenge is a genre in itself because the classification of rape-revenge as a genre is a political move to validate rape-revenge’s

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<sup>1</sup> Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

<sup>2</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

significance and worthiness to be studied alongside the traditional genres.<sup>4</sup> She also argues that studying these films as a genre will contribute to broader genre studies.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Jacinda Read argues that the rape-revenge film should be understood as a narrative structure rather than a genre in itself.<sup>6</sup> As Read outlines in her book *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, rape-revenge plotlines can be found across a wide range of genres, from the detective genre, to the neo-noir, to the science fiction, and even the Western.<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Heller-Nicholas also argues that the rape-revenge narrative structure is a universal phenomenon not bound to any time period or specific to any genre.<sup>8</sup> In this thesis, I will follow Read's and Heller-Nicholas's approach because it best captures the rape-revenge film's ongoing yet diverse approach to rape and responses to it.

Rape-revenge narratives are of a particular interest to feminist film theorists and film critics alike. Rape-revenge films showcase pro-female scenarios that support female sexual agency at the individual level and sympathize with rape victims.<sup>9</sup> These sympathies often culminate in a progressive political impact despite the fact that these films contain seemingly regressive or excessively voyeuristic elements like nudity,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Andrews, "The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

violence, or vigilantism.<sup>10</sup> Feminist theorists are interested in analyzing why some rape-revenge narratives have struck spectators as thematically and politically progressive while others have come across as more exploitative.<sup>11</sup>

The retaliation that the victim takes is seen by some theorists as irrational. Tamler Sommers believes that “retributive behavior is in a certain sense irrational,” for it cannot “undo the harm committed by the offense and it often comes with a significant cost.”<sup>12</sup> Critics of the rape-revenge motif have also contended that these films are made by, and for, rape fetishists. Theorist Peter Lehman argues that rape-revenge involves “spectacularized, eroticized, violent punishment against the male body, designed for the enjoyment of the masochistic male spectator.”<sup>13</sup> Lehman also claims that these films “do not even masquerade as seriously concerned with women and rape.”<sup>14</sup>

However, many feminist theorists agree that the behavior is rational in the sense that without the threat of retaliation to keep offenders in check, there is nothing to stop people from exploiting one another. Although the cost of retaliating is often high, the cost of not retaliating could be higher.<sup>15</sup> David Andrews explains that the trauma that one experiences following a rape may help that person to avoid future rapes, just as the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Sommers, “The Two Faces of Revenge: Moral Responsibility and the Culture of Honor” quoted in Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

<sup>13</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

cognitive capacity for pain helps people to avoid injuries.<sup>16</sup> The Darwinian framework that Andrews adopts helps to locate the female victim's actions as not only rational but also a means for survival.

Andrews argues that heterosexual (male-on-female) rape within these films operates as a special crime on par with murder. His argument helps to inform my motivation behind writing this thesis because I am arguing that the actions taken by the female protagonist are justifiable and forgivable as retribution. This justification is important when considering that several of the female protagonists murder their assailants. When their rape is considered on par with murder, the scales of justice are more easily balanced if the crime committed is avenged with a similar crime. For example, if rape were seen as murder, then murder would be seen as a proper vengeance. Andrews argues that the enormous pain of rape predisposes victims to view rape in a "special" type of way.<sup>17</sup> Andrews alleges that the specialty of these crimes is what sparks the motivation for (and ultimately justifies) the reciprocally violent actions that the victim takes.<sup>18</sup> By making rape a "special crime," these films allow for punishing this crime in a "special" way, a punishment that often requires vigilantism. The official legal system is often not sought after by rape victims because the system is viewed as macho and patriarchal, and has failed victims repeatedly in their quest for justice.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Rape in these films functions as a special crime because it is presented particularly brutally, both physically and mentally. The victim is raped vaginally or anally; sodomized with various objects; taunted, jeered at or shouted at; and beaten, kicked or punched. The victim will frequently suffer mental deterioration after the attack, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), flashbacks, nightmares, and loss of energy. Indeed, rape is viewed as a more serious crime than even murder; not uncommonly, a character in the film will assert that nothing can atone for rape.<sup>20</sup> For example, when one of the rapists in *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven Monroe 2010) makes a heartfelt apology to his victim, she replies that the remorse “just isn’t good enough.”<sup>21</sup> This idea of no apology being “good enough” to forgive the act of rape makes the act so exceptional in nature as to allow the revenge to be exceptional as well.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus specifically on films in which a female protagonist is raped/assaulted by one or more male attackers. I am not including films in which male characters are raped/assaulted, nor am I including films in which a third-party enacts revenge as a proxy for the assaulted female protagonist. The focus of this thesis is solely on the female protagonist’s own experiences with the assault(s) and their reclamation of agency rather than focusing on the experiences of other characters and to maintain a feminist solidarity throughout. Following Carol Clover, Andrews argues that the rape-revenge narrative structure has a “nervous relationship” with the third-party dispute settlement because more often than not, these third parties (police and court

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

systems) have failed rape victims and haven't brought justice.<sup>22</sup> Thus, human instinct has settled for a more hands-on and direct approach for revenge. Andrews argues that films in which the female protagonist secures revenge for her sexual assault should be considered progressive because they promote female agency and defend female consent.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Andrews contends, when a third party (such as a parent, boyfriend, or friend) becomes the avenger, the film shifts from progressive to conservative; the female protagonist is no longer an empowered, much less an active avenger for the crimes committed against her.<sup>24</sup> Sarah Projansky concurs and notes that when a third party gets revenge, the female victim is relegated to a minor "prop" in the narrative; when she enacts her own revenge, the film takes on a feminist narrative in which women who face rape recognize that the law will neither protect them, nor avenge them, and are left to take the law into their own hands.<sup>25</sup>

I will also be focusing solely on American films because these films have been seen by a wider audience and are more prominent globally. This emphasis builds a basis for examining the current status of rape culture in the United States. Rape culture is pertinent to this thesis because all of the films that I am analyzing are made in the United States, where rape is prevalent and justice systems are either nonresponsive or failing to serve justice. Because films are often a product of the culture in which they were created,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, 60.

the actions taken (or not taken) by the female protagonists speak to the status of rape culture in the U.S. when the film was being made.

This thesis will also briefly examine feminist film theorists and their theories relevant to this project that laid the groundwork for the field of rape-revenge studies and helped to shape my analyses of these films. I will also be covering a brief history of rape, including the shifting legal definitions of and punishments for rape. This history is vital to understanding the experiences of the female protagonists and also understanding the violent actions that they took for revenge. I will also discuss the history of the rape-revenge narrative itself to provide historical context to the topic as well as to trace the shifting concepts of justice.

I will be analyzing the following five films for this thesis: *Ms. 45* (Abel Ferrara 1981), *M.F.A.* (Natalia Leite 2017), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi 1978), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven Monroe 2010), and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher 2011). *Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.* will be analyzed alongside each other, as will as *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010). I have chosen to group *Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.* together because, as my analysis will show, the female protagonists, Thana and Noelle, act in very similar manners throughout their respective films. While I recognize that no two experiences with rape are the same, I will analyze how Thana and Noelle go through similar processes of mental anguish directly after their attacks and how they choose to enact their revenge in similar ways—both kill their rapists and then go on killing sprees of men they deem a threat to women. I chose to analyze the original and the remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* together because changes in how the story was told in 1978 versus 2010 are very telling of how rape and the ensuing revenge are thought about and how

they are accepted (or not accepted) by general society. I will also be using the differences between the films to argue that the female protagonist, Jennifer, is a multifaceted character that is able to reclaim her agency in multiple different ways depending on the era of the film. I will analyze *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* separately because, as I will argue, this film handles the rape-revenge narrative differently than the other four: the men in this film aren't framed as inherently bad or potential rapists simply because they are men. This film highlights one of the many diverse trajectories that the rape-revenge narrative can take.

## II. Feminist Film Theory

Feminist film theory began to develop in the early 1970s, during the second wave of feminism. Influenced by Marxism, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, the feminist study of film has shifted from focusing on the content and meaning of films to paying more attention to the sensory and affective experience of watching them.<sup>26</sup> Many of the key concepts developed within feminist film studies have been influential in the broader field of film studies.

Jacinda Read argues that the rape-revenge film can be seen as both enabled by and a response to the feminist discourse that emerged during the same decade (the 1970s).<sup>27</sup> She further states that the transformations that occur in the representations of gender when the rape-revenge narrative is mapped over existing film genres can be read as an attempt to make sense of popular understandings of feminist discourses.<sup>28</sup> Read's arguments regarding the rape-revenge narrative stem from the way these films dramatize and articulate the gaps and contradictions between the "feminine" (victim) and the "feminist" (avenger).<sup>29</sup> Her main argument is that one of the ways in which the rape-revenge narrative attempts to make sense of feminism is through the dramatization of the transformation from the feminine victim "who is forced to give up" to the feminist

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<sup>26</sup> Smelik, "Lara Croft, Kill Bill, and The Battle for Theory in Feminist Film Studies," 179–80.

<sup>27</sup> Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

avenger “who refuses to.”<sup>30</sup> Read explains that this transformation is even reflected in the term “rape-revenge” itself, where the hyphen between the two words can be read as a bridge from “victim” to “avenger,” or “feminine” to “feminist.”<sup>31</sup> She also articulates how rape-revenge films make sense of feminism by addressing popular culture’s repression of women’s stories, and thus she emphasizes putting femininity back into play.<sup>32</sup> Read points out that because the definitions of feminism and femininity are dynamic, competing, and often contradictory, the attempt to make sense of feminism through these films is complex, changeable, problematic, and ongoing.<sup>33</sup>

One of the main purposes of feminist film theory, as argued by Laura Mulvey, is to “question the relation between image and referent, and to demonstrate that the commodified images of women [in films] bore little relation to ‘reality.’”<sup>34</sup> Thus, a major goal of feminist media educators became to present positive role models and empowered images of women within films.<sup>35</sup> This argument is especially relevant to my project because it supports my claim that the women in the films become empowered to take revenge on their attacker(s) in order to reclaim their agency. These images of empowered

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup> Mulvey, “Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s,” 1291.

<sup>35</sup> Artel and Wengraf, “Positive Images,” 30.

women are important for spectators (of all genders) to see, especially within films that are alleged to be often made for male spectators.

Mulvey asserts that the phallogentric nature of Western cinema is rooted in male castration anxiety; men, disturbed by sexual difference and seeing women's "lack" of a penis as a threat to their sense of self, have developed narrative and cinematographic structures that position female characters as erotic objects for the characters and spectators alike.<sup>36</sup> Since the female character is reduced to an erotic object to be looked at, the male character is in control of the narrative and is responsible for forwarding the story.<sup>37</sup> Mulvey uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to analyze how shot-reverse shot patterns and point-of-view shots serve to help the male spectator identify with the male protagonist—his "screen surrogate."<sup>38</sup> For this thesis, I am looking at female protagonists that take control of the narrative, and I am focusing on their stories. While their (often nude) bodies are displayed on the screen for long periods of time, these bodies are not eroticized for the spectator. Their bodies are shown being raped, punched, kicked, and spit on. Although a nude female body might be automatically tagged as an erotic object, I will show that the rape-revenge narrative flips this cultural script and uses these scenes to make the spectator identify with the female protagonist rather than the male character(s). The nude female protagonist is no longer just an object "to be looked at;" she is a fully formed character with whom/which the spectator can identify and, more importantly,

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<sup>36</sup> Mulvey, "Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s," 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

empathize. This affiliation with the female spectator helps to make the narrative hers, allowing the spectator to stand in her corner and root for her as she endures, recovers from, and eventually avenges severe emotional and physical trauma.

Psychoanalytic theory can illuminate castration anxiety. According to Mulvey, male spectators unconsciously see the female body on screen as not complete (lacking a penis) and therefore are reminded of the threat of castration.<sup>39</sup> Mulvey argues that this can be averted in two ways: through sadism or through fetishism.<sup>40</sup> Through sadism, the woman's body is controlled through violence, usually in the form of rape or murder.<sup>41</sup> In the case of fetishism, male fear is averted through the turning of the female body into an idealized, flawless beauty.<sup>42</sup> The male characters in the films that I am analyzing combat castration anxiety through sadistic means, mainly by raping women and controlling them with violence.

The castration complex is directly tied to voyeurism, which is also conceptualized by Mulvey. Voyeurism, or *scopophilia* (the urge to look),<sup>43</sup> is divided into two different categories within feminist film studies. The first instance of voyeurism can be seen within films in which the male character looks at a woman and the camera films what the man

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<sup>39</sup> Smelik, "Lara Croft, Kill Bill, and The Battle for Theory in Feminist Film Studies," 181.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 180.

sees from his point of view.<sup>44</sup> This type of voyeurism is referred to as the “male gaze,” an exercise of power, where the man, specifically, is infused with the power to look, whereas the woman functions as the object “to be looked at.”<sup>45</sup> The “male gaze” also involves images of the woman’s body being fragmented and “cut up” on screen, where only parts of her body are framed for the spectator, as opposed to her entire body.<sup>46</sup> This objectification of women plays into rape culture manifested in such behaviors as cat-calling and street harassment. Seeing a woman only as sexualized body parts allows her personhood to be stripped away and “gazers” to take control over her. This concept is most germane when analyzing *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven Monroe 2010). In this film, one of the male characters voyeuristically films the female protagonist with a video camera while she is in her underwear in her house, and he also films each assault and rape that his group of friends enact on her.

Anneke Smelik argues that the voyeuristic gaze has since shifted to a more egalitarian representation of gender, where the “looking” and the “looked at” are shared relatively equally among men and women.<sup>47</sup> She also problematizes, following Mulvey, how the identification with the narcissistic gaze of the attractive hero on the screen inflates the ego of the spectator by arguing that it leaves the female spectator with no

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Columpar, “The Gaze As Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory,” 27.

<sup>46</sup> Smelik, “Lara Croft, Kill Bill, and The Battle for Theory in Feminist Film Studies,” 180.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 183.

positive female characters with which to identify besides the male hero.<sup>48</sup> The few female characters that do appear are objectified or marginalized and, therefore, do not elicit identification in the female spectator.<sup>49</sup> With the inclusion of strong, empowered female characters, the female audience has characters with whom to identify and sympathize. One of my main goals in this thesis is to showcase the empowered, strong female protagonists in each of the five films. Because some of these films have been hailed as being made for men, by men, or “made for rape fetishists,” I want to show that the rape-revenge narrative can produce strong female characters with whom female (and male) spectators can identify.

Jane Gaines analyzes a racial aspect of the “male gaze.” Gaines observes that the male gaze is negotiated via whiteness, whereby the black man’s sexual gaze is socially prohibited.<sup>50</sup> Gaines’ argument stems from racial hierarchies constructing black men as rapists of white women. She contends that film theory fails to account for the ways that some social and racial groups were allowed to “look,” while others can only “look” illicitly.<sup>51</sup> Although none of the films that I am analyzing include characters of color, this aspect of the “male gaze” is still very relevant because of the racial hierarchies that persist in 2018.

Theorist Linda Williams argues that even though the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been tailed to masculine spectators, as many film critics have alleged rape-

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Smelik, “Feminist Film Theory,” 499.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

revenge films to be, the female body also offers sensations through such bodily excesses as orgasm, terror, and weeping.<sup>52</sup> Although the male rapist presents sexual pleasure, the female victim displays only terror. In each of the films I am analyzing, the female protagonist certainly experiences terror during and directly after their rape(s), and some cry during it as well. These bodily excesses help to connect the spectator to the female protagonist and encourage them to empathize with her rather than her attacker(s).

Molly Haskell discusses how the film industry reinforces the fallacy of female inferiority. She argues that even though women make up “the majority of the human race, half of its brains, half of its procreative power, most of its nurturing power,” they are still displayed only as “servants and romantic slaves” in Hollywood films.<sup>53</sup> She also argues that films reflect society’s roles in microcosm: men are most themselves when achieving, creating, or conquering and least themselves when reflecting or loving; conversely, women are most themselves when caught up in their emotions and least themselves when pursuing knowledge or success.<sup>54</sup> Haskell argues that these representations become self-fulfilling prophecies, and that female characters who defy these expectations become “unfeminine,” “undesirable,” or even “monstrous.”<sup>55</sup> I will discuss the notion of the “monstrous feminine” at greater length in a later section on castration anxiety.

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<sup>52</sup> Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

Constance Penley contends that a strong current within feminist film criticism rejects several theoretical approaches, such as those of Freud and Lacan,<sup>56</sup> rooted in an implicit masculine bias and, therefore, believes that feminist film theorists should adopt alternative theories, or even get rid of theory altogether, and rely on experience as a way to focus on a specifically feminine understanding of the world.<sup>57</sup> Penley goes on to argue that because film is both a medium of mass entertainment and an avant-guard art form, feminist theorists have been able to examine audience reception in all of its complex forms.<sup>58</sup> She argues that the productivity of this convergence allowed feminist film theory to make a significant contribution to feminist theory in general.<sup>59</sup>

Carol Clover claims that although a vast majority of rape-revenge films are directed, written, and produced by men, they explicitly articulate feminist politics.<sup>60</sup> She also holds the position that if female writers, producers, and directors made these films, they would be viewed as “male-bashing” rather than feminist.<sup>61</sup> She explains that the feminist redefinition of rape was very significant to the rape-revenge narrative. This redefinition changed rape from “a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust” to “a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation, and possession on the part of a would-be

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<sup>56</sup> Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory*, 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 151.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear.”<sup>62</sup> She argues that this reframing of rape as an offense on par with murder changed its perception in the real world as a crime deserving of a severe level of punishment.<sup>63</sup> This reframing is critical to my argument not only in redefining rape and feminism but also in illuminating the justice of the revenge taken by the female protagonists.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 152–53.

### III. History of Rape/Rape Culture

A brief history of rape and feminist theories of rape culture will illuminate how they have informed my reading of these films. A historical examination of how rape was treated legally provides a social and cultural explanation for the female protagonists' choice not to seek legal help after being assaulted. I will also be providing a brief history of rape culture in this chapter to help explain how the legal system generally doesn't believe victims which can help explain their reasoning to not seek legal help and to instead take matters into their own hands. It is important to examine rape culture and the legalities of rape because the films that I am analyzing reflect their historical context while at the same time showing continuity in men possessing women, women being treated like objects, and male property rights. These themes emerge in all of the films that I will analyze and, most importantly, have hardly changed or gone away in the nearly forty-year span that these films cover. The objectification, commodification, and brutality that the women in these films experience explain the violent revenge that they later take on the men who subject them to it. Only through these acts of violent revenge can the female protagonist reclaim her agency after being raped.

Susan Brownmiller, a journalist, analyst, and historian, examines the history of rape in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. Brownmiller, writing in the early 1970s, discusses only heterosexual rape and assumes cisgender male as the aggressor and cisgender female as victim. While I recognize that this work is dated for 2018, Brownmiller's book is significant to include here for two reasons: 1) it was published as a piece of feminist discourse during the same time period that rape-revenge films began flourishing, so it reflects contemporaneous beliefs about rape, especially

within feminist circles, and 2) it was so groundbreaking as to be still referenced by feminist theorists today, so much so that not including it would do my own work a disservice. Although several feminists of color such as Angela Davis and bell hooks have critiqued Brownmiller's discussion of race in relation to sexual assault, many other feminists saw *Against Our Will* as a turning point into a new era of anti-rape activism. According to Tanya Horeck, a feminist theorist, Brownmiller's book "mark[s] the point when rape began to be thought of as a 'major social force' that must be understood in terms of gender relations and sexual politics."<sup>64</sup>

Brownmiller argues that because we cannot work around the fact that human anatomy allows for the possibility of forcible intercourse, this may have led to the creation of a male ideology of rape.<sup>65</sup> Once men discovered that rape was possible, they proceeded to do it. Man's discovery of his genitalia as "weapon" led to rape becoming not only every man's right, but also his basic weapon of control over women.<sup>66</sup>

His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood.<sup>67</sup>

This "manhood" was also reinforced through male bonding, about which Brownmiller argues gang rape was probably an early form.<sup>68</sup> This weaponization of rape leads

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<sup>64</sup> Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 14.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

Brownmiller to state that rape is “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.”<sup>69</sup>

Another feminist historian who has studied rape in early modern England is Garthine Walker. She explains that male sexual misbehavior was described as ordinary heterosexual activity, and rape was depicted as an extreme expression of men’s “lustful desires” and “pleasures.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, Walker explains, men often claimed that sex, not rape, had occurred, and that they knew the woman had consented based on her verbal invitation, showing little physical resistance, or supposedly “lewd” disposition.<sup>71</sup>

When it came to marriage, Brownmiller explains that there could be no rape by a husband<sup>72</sup> since a wife’s “consent” was a permanent part of the vows of marriage.<sup>73</sup> Brownmiller further explains that since marriage was seen as consummated in one manner only, by defloration of virginity, the act of rape was restricted to the illegal

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>70</sup> Walker, “Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England,” 5.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>72</sup> “Audiotapes of Michael Cohen Threatening Journalist Released,” CNN Politics, May 31, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/31/politics/michael-cohen-tapes/index.html>. The “impossibility” of marital rape has been evoked recently. Although marital rape was made illegal in the state of New York in 1984, Ivana Trump claimed to be involved in an incident of marital rape in 1989 with then husband, Donald Trump. Donald Trump’s divorce attorney, Michael Cohen, stated, “You’re talking about the frontrunner for the GOP, presidential candidate, as well as a private individual who never raped anybody. And, of course, understand that by the very definition, you can’t rape your spouse...it is true. You cannot rape your spouse. And there’s very clear case law.”

<sup>73</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 29.

destruction of virginity outside of a marriage contract.<sup>74</sup> This definition was later broadened to cover the destruction of the wife's chastity too, in order to include adulterous non-virgins.<sup>75</sup> These definitions, created by men, demonstrate that rape was considered a violation of *male* rights to possession (of their wives) and were based on *male* requirements of women's virginity and chastity, not women's consent to sexuality within the marriage contract.<sup>76</sup> Jill Hasday, who likewise, examines the history of marital rape in her article "Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape," explains that there was not the slightest suggestion in nineteenth-century case law and treatises that a husband could be prosecuted for raping his wife.<sup>77</sup> She also explains that Sir Matthew Hale, a former Chief Justice of the Court of King's Bench in England declared, "But the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract."<sup>78</sup>

No real changes were made in regards to rape until later in the thirteenth century when Edward I of England declared "if a raped woman or her kin failed to institute a private suit within forty days, the right to prosecute automatically passed to the Crown."<sup>79</sup> This giant step for law and for women meant that rape was no longer just a family

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Hasday, "Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape," 1392.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 1397.

<sup>79</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 29.

misfortune and a threat to land and property, but it was now taken seriously as an issue of public safety and concern.<sup>80</sup> This newfound seriousness prompted the First Statute of Westminster, enacted in 1275, to set the Crown's penalty for rape at two years imprisonment plus a fine at the king's pleasure.<sup>81</sup> Suddenly, there was a severe enough punishment for rape that not only showed that it was being taken seriously as a crime, but also acted as a deterrent for perpetrators. Within a decade, the Second Statute of Westminster was enacted; it stated that "any man who ravished a married woman, dame, or damsel without her consent" was guilty of a full-blown felony under the law of the Crown, and the penalty was death.<sup>82</sup> This Second Statute cemented the concept of rape as a public wrong. Under modern English law, the maximum penalty for rape is life imprisonment.<sup>83</sup>

Shani D'Cruze, a feminist historian, explains that women's credibility during rape trials in nineteenth-century English courts was questioned from both sides, and if the woman was thought to be sexually voracious, it was deemed that rape was unlikely to have happened.<sup>84</sup> D'Cruze describes that the overall feeling of the time was that female sexuality needed to be awakened by male insistence, where "no" meant "yes" and,

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> D'Cruze, "Approaching the History of Rape and Sexual Violence: Notes Towards Research," 388.

therefore, rape wasn't possible.<sup>85</sup> She goes on to explain that in order to be seen as credible in a rape trial, a woman should have been of previous "good fame," should have disclosed the assault to a third party immediately, and demonstrated that she received physical injury while resisting the assault.<sup>86</sup> Walker also maintains that the legal requirements of non-consent required active physical resistance.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, the women who did the "best" in rape trials were often young, affluent, perceived as "innocent," were raped by strangers or had visible physical injuries. For other women, the difficulty of proving rape in the court of law was nearly insurmountable, and the perpetrator rarely received any punishment.<sup>88</sup>

During this time, not only were female rape victims seen as untrustworthy in the court of law, but the accused rapist was seen as respectable, and his respectability was upheld unless he was given severe punishment (which was rare).<sup>89</sup> If the accused rapist was middle or upper class, the courts sought to preserve his status by ensuring that court appearances would not compromise his respectability; in contrast, any woman forfeited her

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>87</sup> Walker, "Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England," 8.

<sup>88</sup> D'Cruze, "Approaching the History of Rape and Sexual Violence: Notes Towards Research," 389.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

respectability merely by reporting rape.<sup>90</sup> D’Cruze explains that the courts were unable to accept that “any man above the level of an animal” could be guilty of rape.<sup>91</sup>

These historical themes continue to influence how rape is treated in modern times. The fact that women have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt to the court that they were raped, but their perpetrators are automatically seen as innocent is a main reason that women do not seek legal recourse after being assaulted. Women who attempt to prove their assault to the court of law often experience mental anguish similar to how they felt during the initial rape; the process of questioning, re-questioning, and producing evidence can feel like another rape to the victim. The requirement that women produce evidence of resisting the assault in the form of physical injuries also presents an issue, as the woman’s word is not seen as evidence enough that they did not consent. Therefore, if a woman does not exhibit physical injuries, she may see no reason to report the crime or seek legal help because she knows she will not be believed without “proof.” Respectability politics also plays into the reasoning that women do not report their rape to legal authorities because if the court does not view the woman as an upstanding person in society, she will not be believed.

When female rape victims choose personal vengeance rather than seek legal action, it can be seen as a product of these historical precedents set with the scales of justice unfairly balanced to favor the perpetrator instead of the victim. In the rare instance where a perpetrator is tried and convicted for his crime, the legal system oftentimes fails and releases rapists back into society, where they are free to rape (or murder) again. In

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

these cases, the victim is left to “kill or be killed” because they cannot trust the legal system and the rapists know this.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, many rape victims avoid the legal system altogether.

In the United States, severe punishments for rape can be traced back to the slave period, when black male slaves who were accused of raping white free women were lynched. Capital punishment was a possible verdict for rapists up through the 1970s. Brownmiller explains that rape entered the law “through a back door,” and the legal definition maintained that rape was a property crime of man against man, with the women being viewed as property, not independent beings.<sup>93</sup> The legal definition of rape in the United States has changed several times over the years. According to the United States Department of Justice, rape is defined as the “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”<sup>94</sup> This definition not only makes room for any gender of victim and perpetrator but also includes a clause about consent. Currently, punishment for rape in the United States can range anywhere from two years to a lifetime in prison and mandatory registration as a sexual offender.

Brownmiller also discusses police rape, or the rape of a civilian by a law enforcement officer, which she notes is an “on-the-job abuse of power within the protective cover of ‘duty’ by men invested with the sanctioned authority of a badge and a

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<sup>92</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 149.

<sup>93</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 18.

<sup>94</sup> “An Updated Definition of Rape,” The United States Department of Justice Archives, last modified April 7, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/blog/updated-definition-rape>.

gun and the power to make an arrest.”<sup>95</sup> She goes on to explain that police rape is unique because the abuse of power is committed by someone whose job is to control such abuses of power.<sup>96</sup> In addition, women who are raped by the police seldom have an avenue for justice—whom are they to turn to when the very law enforcement system that is supposed to protect them is the one that assaulted them?

An important point to examine here is the prevalence of rape culture in America today. “Rape culture” is a term coined in the 1970s by feminist activists, but has re-emerged within popular feminist discourse over recent years.<sup>97</sup> Broadly defined, rape culture is “a socio-cultural context in which an aggressive male sexuality is eroticized and seen as a ‘healthy,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘desired’ part of sexual relations.”<sup>98</sup> According to feminist theorists Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, and Jessica Ringrose,

A rape culture is one in which sexual assault is not only seen as *inevitable* in some contexts, but *desirable* and *excusable* as well. This is because women are constructed as *enjoying* being aggressively pursued, and in some cases, *overpowered* by men. Women are also seen as *deserving* or *provoking* rape by failing to perform a chaste femininity, or for sending out signals to men that they are ‘up for it’, regardless of how much they protest.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>97</sup> Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose, “Speaking ‘Unspeakable Things’: Documenting Digital Feminist Responses to Rape Culture,” 23.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Many of the historical themes that I have outlined above fall into the category of rape culture. The proclivity for courts of law to not believe rape victims unless they were upstanding members of society who could prove they resisted by showing physical injuries, marital rape, and rape being seen as a property crime against men are all aspects of rape culture. Along with these legal aspects, rape culture also involves things such as objectifying and over-sexualizing women's bodies, "slut shaming" women who are sexually active, and victim-blaming women who are raped or sexually assaulted.

The legal history of rape and rape culture help to inform my analysis of how rape-revenge films confront women's experiences as rape victims and their efforts to reclaim their senses of agency in a system that has legally and culturally denied them such agency. The women in the films that I am examining do not seek legal action against their attacker(s), but instead personal vengeance through their own means. Through this revenge, they are able to reclaim the agency stolen from them during the rape(s). The films discussed in this thesis contain brutal rape scenes, while at the same time help to understand and problematize concepts that are a part of rape culture. Scenarios such as the rape victim being blamed for her own rape, of being told that she "wanted it" or "welcomed it" by virtue of what she was wearing, are all components of rape culture that these films foreground. I argue that although many rape-culture concepts pervade the films, the female protagonist helps the film resist and respond to rape culture by taking the narrative into her own hands and avenging her rape(s).

#### IV. History of Rape-Revenge Films

Rape-revenge films began to flourish in the United States after the elimination of the Motion Picture Production Code in 1968.<sup>100</sup> This code, also known as the Hays Code, was a set of moral guidelines applied to motion pictures released in the United States between 1930 and 1968. Prior to the 1930s, explicit references to rape and onscreen depictions of attempted rape were common in filmmaking.<sup>101</sup> During the mid-1930s, these depictions became less common, but allusions to rape and sexual violence continued to appear in films.<sup>102</sup> When filmmaking entered the 1960s, explicit representations of rape once again became commonplace.<sup>103</sup> Sarah Projansky, a feminist film theorist, understands these shifts in rape representation through the decades as products of the formation (and the later demise) of the Production Code as well as the development of self-regulation in Hollywood.<sup>104</sup> Projansky argues that rape is a key force throughout the history of U.S. cinema and that one cannot fully understand cinema itself without addressing sexual violence.<sup>105</sup>

In 1968, the Production Code was replaced by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating system, which is still in use today. This change in rating systems was heavily motivated by a 1952 U.S. Supreme Court decision that stated that

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<sup>100</sup> Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

<sup>101</sup> Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

films were to be considered under rules of free speech, which included allowing depictions of rape.<sup>106</sup> This new rating system allowed filmmakers more leeway with regard to what could be included in their films. Things such as nudity, strong language, sex, and violence, could now be permitted, albeit with films depicting such things falling under stronger ratings, such as R, X, PG-13 (added in 1984), and NC-17 (which replaced X in 1990).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, rape-revenge entered the mainstream, and suddenly, rape became a problem that women had to solve for themselves.<sup>107</sup> In her widely acclaimed book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, released in 1992, Carol Clover argues that the female rape-victim/avenger character that emerged in these films was a vital contribution to popular culture during the women's movement.<sup>108</sup>

In the 1970s, rape-revenge films were categorized as exploitation cinema or, in the United Kingdom, "video nasties."<sup>109</sup> In post 9/11 American culture, rape-revenge films and remakes have been used as a format for working through ideological issues surrounding revenge, retribution, family values, and a general "us versus them" mentality.<sup>110</sup> Twenty-first century remakes of the original 1970s rape-revenge films have been strongly tied to the torture-porn genre, to which I will return later.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>107</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 138.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 162.

<sup>109</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 30.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

In rape-revenge films, revenge comprises (typically) the second half of the film. As Carol Clover argues,

The center of gravity of these films lies more in the reaction (the revenge) than the act (the rape), but to the extent that the revenge fantasy derives its force from some degree of imaginary participation in the act itself, in the victim position, these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal, sort.<sup>111</sup>

Andrews argues that the reciprocal cruelty enacted by the female protagonist allows her to teach the rapist(s) what it feels like to be tortured and/or raped.<sup>112</sup> Clover posits that rape occurs due to the power dynamics between men and women and these power dynamics are what make the rape avengable.<sup>113</sup> She argues that rape, especially gang rape, has first and foremost to do with male sport and pecking order rather than sexual or sadistic motivation.<sup>114</sup> When it comes to the revenge, Clover asserts, “If maleness caused the crime, then maleness will suffer the punishment.”<sup>115</sup>

The rape-revenge narrative holds the potential for allowing both on-screen characters as well as the spectators to understand the experience and psychology of rape,

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<sup>111</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 154.

<sup>112</sup> Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

<sup>113</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 144.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

the emotional and physical responses to rape, including violent rage and catharsis.<sup>116</sup> This narrative allows spectators to explore how rape affects a victim's orientation toward the world.<sup>117</sup> The figure of the female protagonist as victim-avenger is typically the one that is most accessible for spectator identification.<sup>118</sup> Henry argues that this identification is two-fold, involving both *alignment*—the viewer's access to the narrative world through a character's actions, thoughts, and feelings—as well as *allegiance*—a sympathetic involvement prompted by the film's moral structure.<sup>119</sup> Henry goes on to explain that the spectator is positioned not to judge the victim-avenger's violence, as she is to become the spectator's ethical guide through the narrative.<sup>120</sup> This means that the spectator does not question the moral dilemmas brought about by the victim-avenger's actions, but rather roots for her and emotionally supports her quest for justice. The spectators trust that what the victim-avenger is doing is justified and right because they are positioned to know that what the rapist(s) did was wrong. Henry further explains the notion of “perverse allegiance,” in which the spectators identify the resistance to social and moral constraints and feel a desire for the victim-avenger's transgressive characteristics.<sup>121</sup> Desiring the victim-avenger's transgressive characteristics does not mean that they identify with the need to perform these acts themselves. Rather, the desire comes from the tension being

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<sup>116</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 14.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

built throughout the film and the need for a cathartic release by revenge being served and wrongs being righted. I agree with Henry's argument because I believe that these films allow spectators to vicariously exact revenge and, therefore, experience the cathartic release through the on-screen revenge.

Rape-revenge films can be viewed as distinct from other films for a variety of reasons. Barbara Creed and Julianne Pidduck discuss the difference between erotic thrillers and rape-revenge films, and they conclude that erotic thrillers are missing a motive (like rape) and, therefore, present the character(s) as psychotic rather than justified in their deadliness.<sup>122</sup> Read argues that the pleasures found in the fatal femme (women who kill) cycle are rooted in the rape-revenge narrative.<sup>123</sup> She explains that this pleasure comes from the way in which the narrative has a “consistent turning of the tables” which allows for female spectators to explore the shift from being represented as the object of violence (victimization) to being its subject (aggression).<sup>124</sup> Carol Clover uses *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi 1978) to demonstrate the specificity of rape-revenge films. She states that this film is an “oddly external film,” in that the female protagonist transforms into a silent, almost catatonic character, traits which distance her from the audience.<sup>125</sup> She also illustrates that the “perverse simplicity” of the film is most disturbing; this film is “simple” in that the male characters are normal, the rapes are not traced to any dysfunctional upbringing, and the revenge is not rooted in any deep-seated

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<sup>122</sup> Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape-Revenge Cycle*, 43.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 119.

psychological issues.<sup>126</sup> Clover argues that it would take a “very tone-deaf viewer to imagine that Jennifer’s [the female protagonist’s] motives are anything other than situational.”<sup>127</sup> She also posits that this film shocks because it is too familiar and easy for spectators to identify with, not because it is alien.<sup>128</sup> She argues that it is easy for spectators to identify with the character’s emotions and to recognize the extreme polarities between the rapist(s) and the victim.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

## V. Castration and Its Anxieties

One of the most iconic and resonant ways in which the revenge takes place is through the act of castration. This particular type of retaliation helps distinguish rape-revenge from other film narratives. Castrating a rapist avenges a gender-specific trauma through another gender-specific trauma. The use of castration and male torture in rape-revenge films shows the horrors of rape to male spectators and conveys the feminist idea that rape is about power, not sex.<sup>130</sup>

Casey Kelly analyzes the “monstrous feminine” and the “femme-castratrice” through the film *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein 2007). Kelly defines the femme-castratrice as “a sadistic figure that makes the male body, not the female body...bear the burden of castration.”<sup>131</sup> He conceives male monstrosity as “sadism, phallocentrism, patriarchy, [which] summons a female heroine to reestablish a moral order,” and female monstrosity as “a source of physical power that enables women to combat a culture of gender violence.”<sup>132</sup> The femme-castratrice film is a hybrid of vigilante films, sexploitation, and low-budget horror, blended with female consciousness.<sup>133</sup> This subgenre invites spectators to identify with the female protagonist’s experience of violence and thirst for revenge. In early femme-castratrice films, the female victim was agentless, but later, the

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<sup>130</sup> Andrews, “The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications.”

<sup>131</sup> Kelly, “Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous Feminine in *Teeth* (2007),” 87.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

avenging female protagonist reclaims power over her own body through sexual violence—including castration.<sup>134</sup>

Kelly argues that horror cinema’s trope of “woman as monster” arises from her eviscerating power rather than her “lack,” as many feminist theories suggest.<sup>135</sup> Further, Kelly argues that femme-castratrice films utilize the “woman as monster” trope as a way to threaten the phallogocentric institutions attempting to control women’s sexual agency.<sup>136</sup> He explains that recent feminist appropriations of the femme-castratrice trope illustrate the potential of feminist horror films, which comes at a particularly crucial moment in society when women’s sexual and reproductive freedoms are “constructed in monstrous terms.”<sup>137</sup> Because these films feature women who violently refuse victimhood, they often echo second-wave feminism’s emphasis on sexual agency and its politicization of violence against women.<sup>138</sup>

Rape-revenge films that feature a femme-castratrice challenge traditional film theorists because the female-castratrice figure challenges their presumption of a sadistic male gaze and invite spectators to disavow the perspective of the male victim and identify across genders with the avenging woman.<sup>139</sup> In his analysis of *Teeth* (Mitchell Lichtenstein 2007) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi 1978), Kelly explains how the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 87–88.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 87.

films intervene in the gendered politics of spectatorship by developing identification with a violent heroine who refuses to abide by the binary between masculine (violence) and feminine (victimhood).<sup>140</sup> In *I Spit*, the female protagonist, Jennifer, traverses masculine and feminine subject positions throughout the film—she enacts phallic violence on some of her attackers, but she seduces and castrates others.<sup>141</sup> Kelly posits that in the female avenger rape-revenge film, the male victim is portrayed as the “real” monster and is forced to occupy the female role of a traditional slasher film.<sup>142</sup> He also argues that the female avenger narrative interrupts the cinematic ritual of masculine “regeneration through violence” by “redirecting retributive energies toward conspicuous signs of cultural misogyny.”<sup>143</sup>

Another feminist film theorist that has analyzed the monstrous feminine and castration is Barbara Creed. In her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Creed argues that male castration anxiety has given rise to two representations of the monstrous-feminine in horror films: woman as castrator and woman as castrated.<sup>144</sup> She explains that woman is represented as castrated in two ways—literally or symbolically.<sup>145</sup> Literal castration is depicted in films where the woman is a victim and her body is repeatedly stabbed until it resembles a bleeding

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 122.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

wound, and symbolic castration is when the woman feels she has been robbed unjustly of her rightful destiny and, thus, is transformed into a “psychotic monster.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

## VI. Torture Porn

It is important for me to include torture-porn in this discussion because there is some overlap between torture-porn and rape-revenge, and many recent remakes of rape-revenge films have been identified as torture-porn. However, not all rape-revenge films are torture-porn, and not all torture-porn films follow a rape-revenge narrative. Henry explains that rape is a form of torture, and the eye-for-an-eye vengeance often seen in rape-revenge films involves spectacles of bodily horror and gory violence, which can be overlaid with torture-porn.<sup>147</sup> For example, as Heller-Nicholas argues, the 2010 remake of *I Spit on Your Grave* encroaches on the torture-porn genre during the revenge scene as it is much more explicit and gory than in the original film.<sup>148</sup>

Jason Middleton defines “torture-porn” as “a film that constructs scenes of torture as elaborate set pieces, or ‘numbers,’ intended to serve as focal points for the viewer’s visual pleasure, and (in some critics’ view) for which the narrative is merely a flimsy pretext.”<sup>149</sup> Adam Lowenstein defines it as “the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical allegory.”<sup>150</sup> This genre came into prominence in the early twenty-first century, significantly after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (“9/11”). In his book, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation*,

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<sup>147</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 30.

<sup>148</sup> Heller-Nicholas, *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, 178.

<sup>149</sup> Middleton, “The Subject of Torture: Regarding the Pain of Americans in *Hostel*,” 2.

<sup>150</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 30.

Aaron Kerner argues that the terrorist attacks spread a sense of anxiety throughout the United States,<sup>151</sup> a fear only heightened by the media and government officials. He explains that after bearing witness to such an extreme act of terrorism, the American public realized that ordinary people have the potential of doing terrible harm.<sup>152</sup> No longer was their fear of the “boogeyman” most prominent; now it was that of their next-door neighbor. Thus, a key feature of torture-porn films is their realistic, rather than supernatural, setting and their plots revolving around “characters in a mundane world where horrific things happen, perpetrated by flesh-and-blood mortals.”<sup>153</sup> This also relates to rape-revenge films because the plots in these films are set in the real world with ordinary people doing horrific things; the rapists in rape-revenge films are not supernatural monsters, they are classmates at a party, caretakers, and supposedly friendly men you meet at a gas station.

Steven Jones, another expert on torture-porn, explains that it is “remarkably difficult to pinpoint precisely what the characteristics of Torture-Porn films are.”<sup>154</sup> One important characteristic is the trope of retribution, which is related to the rape-revenge narrative.<sup>155</sup> While the retribution in torture-porn is not always for rape, it does follow a

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<sup>151</sup> Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation (War Culture)*, 23.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Jones, “The Lexicon of Offense: The Meanings of Torture, Porn, and ‘Torture Porn,’” 187. quoted in Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation (War Culture)*, 22.

<sup>155</sup> Kerner, *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11: Horror, Exploitation, and the Cinema of Sensation (War Culture)*, 26.

lot of the same patterns as revenge in a rape-revenge film. A main point of difference between rape-revenge and torture-porn is that the presence of the “monstrous feminine” (according to Creed) in rape-revenge films, whereas abject fathers, not mothers, spark dread in torture-porn.<sup>156</sup> Another notable difference is the torture-porn film’s tendency to lack satisfactory resolution,<sup>157</sup> unlike the rape-revenge film where the female victim-avenger’s completion of revenge marks a clear conclusion.

A point of comparison between rape-revenge and torture-porn is the fact that they both elicit sensations from the spectator.<sup>158</sup> Linda Williams states, “the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen.”<sup>159</sup> However, the notable difference in these experiences is that with torture-porn films, the spectator identifies and feels sympathy for the victim being tortured. With rape-revenge films, the spectator identifies with the female victim-avenger as she takes her revenge on and tortures her attacker(s). In rape-revenge films, the spectator tends to feel the emotions and experience the bodily sensations of the victim-avenger during the rape scenes yet feel the strength and empowerment of her character during the revenge scenes.

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>159</sup> Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” 4.

## VII. Film Analyses

As mentioned previously, I will be analyzing the following films alongside each other: *Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.*, and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010). I will analyze *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* alone because, as I will argue, this film handles the rape-revenge narrative differently than the other four films. The synopses for these films are available in the appendices.

### ***Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.***

*Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.* work well together for a side-by-side analysis because they both reveal harsh realities of rape. In both films, the female protagonists, Thana and Noelle, respectively, respond to rape in similar ways; both women are social avengers who reclaim their agency by taking on the rape culture that construes women as actually desiring and enjoying the sexualized attention foisted upon them. Neither woman reports the crime to law enforcement, and both end up killing their rapist in a fit of rage. After killing their rapist, each woman is sparked with a sense of vengeance and begins a killing spree of men. Each film shows that the female protagonist cannot trust the criminal justice system and, thus, must take matters into her own hands. Thana and Noelle have several characteristics in common besides enduring traumatic events and extreme mental anguish after being raped: they are both thin, timid women with dark hair who dress relatively plainly. While Thana is mute and Noelle quiet and reserved, both are independent and self-sufficient. Each is seen as an introverted outcast with very few close friends who encourage them to break out of their shells, and each is a hard worker—Thana as a seamstress and Noelle as an art student.

Both Thana and Noelle experience toxic masculinity in different ways in their daily lives. When Thana walks home from work with her coworkers, construction workers on the street harass them by yelling crude remarks. Thana is unable to respond to the men because she is mute. She also receives patronizing treatment from her boss, Albert, who treats her like a child. Another negative male presence in Thana's life takes the form of Phil, her landlord's dog. During art class, Noelle receives harsh critiques that her work is lacking in emotion. Her professor humiliates her in front of her peers, yelling at her to "Get messy! Fail! Fail miserably! Make something ugly. Who cares? Fuck it. That's why you're here, right?" He then tells her, "Let's jump in the deep end this year." Both women received negative feedback from the males in their lives and are thus positioned to have a negative view of men in general.

Thana is raped by a masked man while walking home from work one day, and upon returning home, she is raped again by an intruder. She is threatened with a gun during both assaults, and the rapist sticks the gun in her mouth, which is symbolic of fellatio. Not only does the rapist threaten Thana's mouth with the representation of a sexual act, but he also makes a very real threat about shooting the gun in her mouth—both of these acts targeting her weakest point. When Thana discovers that the intruder has broken into her apartment and rifled through her belongings, metaphorically raping her personal space, she is raped once again. During both assaults, Thana's silence is taken as cooperation, which ultimately keeps the rapists from shooting and killing her. Upon climax, the second rapist drops his gun, creating another parallel between the gun and the phallus. Thana strikes him with a paperweight and then grabs her iron and kills him. I argue, alongside Heller-Nicholas that this iron becomes a weapon against both her rapist

and the patriarchy as a whole.<sup>160</sup> Thana regains some of her agency here as she uses her iron, a feminine tool from her workplace, to kill the man that raped her. Since she receives harassment at her work from her boss, using the iron as a weapon against her attacker also signifies that she is using it against all attackers in her life. She has reclaimed her iron, and it no longer simply represents feminine domesticity. After killing her second rapist, Thana dismembers him in her bathtub and wraps the body parts in garbage bags and stores them in her refrigerator.

Noelle attends a party after being encouraged by her friend Skye to flirt and attempt to hook up with Luke, Noelle's crush. At the party, Noelle and Luke talk about art and eventually end up in his bedroom where he sexually assaults her. As she fights back and continually says "No," Luke forces her down and tells her, "Be good. Be a good girl. Stay. Stay. Be good." These words echo those of Noelle's art professor by making demands of her and treating her like a child. Luke gains physical control over her and anally rapes her. A few days later, when Noelle goes to Luke's house and asks him for an apology for what happened the other night in his room, he exclaims, "You want me to apologize for fucking you?" Noelle says, "That's not what happened. ... You. Raped. Me." Luke says, "Excuse me? [laughs] Oh that's fucking rich. Stop being so fucking sensitive. You were into it, you liked it." She slaps him, and he tells her to leave as he goes upstairs. After Noelle chases him upstairs, he slams her against the wall and tells her to "stop acting crazy." She yells at him, "I'm not acting crazy!" As she pushes him off of herself, he falls backwards over the banister, landing on the first floor, dead.

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<sup>160</sup> Heller-Nicholas, *Ms. 45 (Cultographies)*, 52.

Whereas Thana did not have any close friends to support her after she was raped, Noelle does talk to her friend Skye, who discourages her from reporting the crime to the school. Skye tells her that she knows of another woman who reported a rape and was made to feel like a slut and like it was her fault. Unlike Thana, who is physically mute, Noelle is metaphorically muted by Skye's advice, so both women withdraw from others and take matters into their own hands.

After killing their rapists and processing what happened, Thana and Noelle each begin to methodically plan their next moves. Thana starts to drop her rapist's body parts throughout the city. After leaving a bag on the street, a man grabs it and chases her down, thinking that she left it by mistake. When the man runs toward her, she shoots him with the .45 caliber gun that the rapist left in her apartment. After killing him, she returns home and immediately goes to the bathroom and dry-heaves over the toilet. Her landlord and her dog, Phil, come to the door and demand to know what is wrong with Thana. Her landlord acts like an overbearing mother figure to Thana and threatens to call a doctor. Meanwhile, Phil has snuck into Thana's apartment and is caught sniffing around the refrigerator, where Thana is storing the bags of body parts, threatening to expose her secret.

Noelle, after being questioned by the police, reads articles about Luke's death online. She comes across an article about three fraternity members who gang raped a woman, filmed it, yet were not charged with any crime. Noelle watches the video and, for the first time, changes her expression significantly since the assault. She now looks inquisitive and almost inspired; she knows that justice doesn't work and revenge is her only option. Noelle finds the woman in the video, Lindsey, and tries to convince her to be

apart of her thesis project. She also attends an on-campus group meeting called “V-Day” and hears stories from a group of women whom know women who have been raped and how the perpetrators had gotten slaps on the wrist as punishment. One woman speaks about a special nail polish that changes color if swirled around in a drink that has date-rape drugs in it. When Noelle protests, “guys could just stop drugging and raping girls so we don’t need color-changing nail polish,” the leader of the group responds with “That would be nice, but until that day comes, I think we need to be prepared.” Noelle responds:

What if we’re not prepared? What if we have a drink? What if we wear high heels and we didn’t learn Taekwondo? What if we forgot our rape whistle at home and we didn’t paint our nails with color-changing nail polish that tells you if your drink is drugged? Then what? We just get raped? How about instead of that really useful fashion advice, the administration starts teaching guys that they can’t stick their dicks wherever they want?

After not being taken seriously by the other women at the meeting who think that their methods are best, Noelle gives up and decides to take matters into her own hands; a vigilante is born.

At this point in each film, Thana and Noelle begin their transformations from plain, timid women to women with a thirst for vengeance—black widows. During a meeting with Albert, Thana wears a black beret with her hair tucked under it and a bright red cardigan, the first time in the film that she wears anything other than black, white, gray, or brown. Albert begins to massage her shoulders and invites her to a Halloween party, explaining that she has a “handicap” and thus needs to work twice as hard. He also

tells her that she needs to “act like the other girls.” These sentiments have a double meaning if the traumatic effects of the assaults that Thana is experiencing are seen as a “handicap” as well as her muteness. The act of Albert rubbing Thana’s shoulders also ties into rape culture in symptomizing the misconception that women should submit to men touching them. As Thana leaves Albert’s office, she appears to be wearing black leather high-heeled boots rather than her flat black lace-up shoes. Not only has Thana’s fashion sense changed, so too have her facial expressions. At the beginning of the film, her expressions were shy and timid, but now they have a sense of focus and anger, her eyes cold and unflinching. It is as if she is seeing the world (and men) through new eyes, and she does not like what she sees. Thana also wears black eyeliner and applies bright red lipstick – a noticeable part of her transformation from victim to avenger. Film critic Sean Axmaker notes, “The passive victim becomes vengeful vigilante, hunting for potential predators using herself as bait.”<sup>161</sup> When Noelle prepares for a fraternity party, she similarly puts on fishnet tights, a hot pink wig, a butterfly masquerade mask, and much more makeup than she normally wears. Like Thana, Noelle dresses far more provocatively than usual to prey on her victims. She never dressed so flashy before, typically blending in and going unnoticed. Now, she is determined to stand out (while also being in disguise) in order to grab the attention of her targets.

Thana and Noelle both embark on killing sprees, although Noelle’s is more calculated and targeted than Thana’s, which takes the form of a serial killing each night. First, Thana shoots a pimp whom she sees beating up a sex worker. Next, she shoots a group of men who surround her in Central Park. When offered a ride by a limousine

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 64.

driver, a wealthy Middle Eastern man in the back offers her a cigarette, which Thana accepts. Smoking symbolizes another significant change in Thana: a cigarette represents her cynicism and calculated quest for revenge. The man offers Thana money, implicitly for an implied sexual transaction, to which she responds by putting the money in her purse and then shooting the man and the limo driver. All the while her killing spree has a clear focus—she is looking to kill men who either sexually or financially oppress women. All three of her murders are sparked by these oppressions: the pimp was beating up the sex worker because she owed him money, the gang of men surrounding her in Central Park showed unspoken threats of rape *and* theft, and the man in the limo wanting to exchange money for sex.

Noelle seduces one of the men that gang-raped Lindsey at a fraternity party, demonstrating another profound change in her character: she has a newfound sexual confidence and takes control of the situation, whereas before she was shy and inexperienced. She slips a drug into his cocktail and urges him to drink before they continue kissing. During this scene, one interspersed with flashbacks to the gang-rape video that she watched, Noelle repeats expressions that were said to Lindsey by the rapist. He vomits and begins to choke, but Noelle sits on his chest, holding him down. He eventually asphyxiates and dies. Noelle strips his pants off so that he is fully nude, and she leaves. She then kills the other two fraternity members from the gang-rape video, eventually finds a report of Skye's sexual assault, and hunts down Skye's rapist and attempts to kill him, only to be interrupted by the police. Skye, who puts the pieces together and confronts Noelle, is upset by what Noelle did and tells Noelle that it was not Noelle's responsibility to take care of her own rapist. Noelle asks, "Whose responsibility

is it then? The cops? The school? They're not protecting us, Skye! But I will!" Noelle sees how the police and the school have failed both rape victims, and she sees herself in charge of gaining justice and dishing out retaliation.

Both women experience opportunities where they question the violence they commit. Thana takes her landlord's dog, Phil, for a walk through the city streets and eventually ties him up in a deserted waterfront area, cocks her gun, and points it at him. The scene quickly cuts to a handwritten note from Thana to her landlord stating that Phil ran off and she can't find him. In the other film, Noelle shares a pizza with one of her male classmates with whom she initiates a consensual sexual encounter but stops when he puts his hand between her legs, at which point she pushes him off and yells for him to leave. This touch triggers a flashback for Noelle and makes her recoil back to how she felt when assaulted; she curls up on the floor, her breathing is very shallow, and her expression is blank. It is nonetheless clear here that Noelle has made some progress. She demonstrated her agency by both initiating sexual contact by kissing him and verbally consenting when he asked if she wanted to proceed with the sexual encounter.

Thana, feeling liberated after taking care of another threatening male presence in her life, Phil, transforms into the most iconic and recognizable figure from this film—a gun-toting sexy nun, complete with thigh-high stockings and high-heeled leather boots. As she loads her gun, she ritualistically kisses each bullet before putting it in the magazine and then heads to the Halloween party. At the party, Albert is dressed as a vampire, which is fitting for his lascivious ways of “sucking the blood” of the innocent. Back at the apartment, Thana's landlord, who has been snooping around her apartment, finds the final bag of body parts that Thana has yet to dispose of. When the landlord

opens the bag, she sees that it contains the rapist's head and calls the police. Meanwhile, Albert leads Thana to a secluded room away from the dance floor and begins seducing her. When he lifts her skirt, he sees her gun strapped to her leg. Thana grabs it and shoots Albert off-screen. Upon hearing the gunshot, the partygoers begin to climb the stairs to where Thana and Albert were. Thana appears at the top and begins shooting each male whom she sees, making judgments of gender based on Halloween costume choice. This process causes her pause when she encounters a man wearing a wedding dress. After shooting him, Thana is stabbed in the back with a large knife. Thana turns around to see who stabbed her, gun at the ready, and takes aim to shoot, letting out a blood-curdling scream for the first time; however, when she sees that it was one of her female coworkers, she lowers her gun and her expression changes to one of sorrow. Looking at her coworker, Thana whispers the word "sister" before falling to the ground, the only word that Thana has spoken throughout the entire film. In the final scene, Phil comes running back to the landlord's door; Thana had not killed him after all.

Eventually, Noelle dives back into her artwork with a quiet fury, painting for the first time since the assault. Feeling reinvigorated and re-inspired, she dips her hands into the paint and smears them across the canvas. The next day, Noelle swims in the outdoor pool again, but this time, she is floating on the surface, smiling and looking up at the sun coming through the trees. During another critique in her art class, Noelle's piece receives praise from all of her classmates and her teacher. Her teacher even asks, "Who are you and what have you done with Noelle?" This clear change in how her art is being perceived shows yet another transformation in Noelle. Through the assault and the killings, she has found her footing and marked her place among her peers, whereas

before, she blended into the background and wasn't taken seriously as an artist. By creating work that others deem worthy, she furthers her pursuit of her degree, which, in turn, helps her to regain her autonomy. At graduation, Noelle speaks to her fellow graduates and urges them to use their art to expose the truth, for "the world will be a better place because of it." As she leaves the ceremony, she is taken into custody by the police, after being identified by Skye's rapist who survived the attack. The film ends on Noelle smiling in the back of the police car.

Noelle's experience of violent rape and her ensuing revenge against other rapists eluding justice give her agency, increase her creativity, and develop her sexual identity. Throughout the revenge portion of this film, Noelle blossoms and sheds her timid, outcast shell. She begins dressing differently, acting more sexually, and putting more emotion into her artwork. She becomes not only a vigilante for herself, Lindsey, and Skye but also an advocate fighting against rape culture and victim blaming in general.

As a result of her experiences, Thana is led to connect violence and its consequences to men and masculinity.<sup>162</sup> After being assaulted twice, Thana undergoes intense trauma that manifests in the changes to her appearance and her behavior. Following the attacks, Thana slowly morphs from a nervous, child-like woman to a "vampy femme fatale."<sup>163</sup> We see this persona most prominently in the way Thana changes her style of clothing—from neutral-colored long skirts and flat black shoes to red and black outfits with leather high-heeled boots. Heller-Nicholas observes that Thana's behavior "goes from genuinely terrified to genuinely demented with remarkable

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 3.

emotional agility,”<sup>164</sup> as is primarily observed in Thana’s facial expressions since she cannot speak. During the attacks, Thana’s eyes are wide and her expression can be read as scared. After the attacks, and during the scenes in which Thana is taking her revenge, she is calm and focused on her task. Heller-Nicholas describes this emotion as “demented” since Thana’s task at hand is a nightly ritual of killing men.

Thana’s muteness is a significant part of this film and essential to analyze as part of her character. Film critic Stephanie Zacharek says, “Thana may not be able to speak, but she sure knows how to make herself heard...her vocabulary just finds its best outlet through the barrel of a gun.”<sup>165</sup> My interpretation of Thana’s muteness is that it epitomizes her reclamation of her agency after being raped. Because she is mute for most of the film, unable to scream or cry out during the attacks, Thana is largely lacking in agency. Thana’s muteness is most poignant at the beginning of the film when she cannot respond to the jeers of men on the street, unlike her coworkers. Thana’s muteness, especially during the rape scenes, resonates with women’s experiences of being silenced throughout history but particularly in the context of rape culture. Many rape victims are asked if they screamed loud enough, or tried to reason with their attacker, and are often blamed for the assault if they didn’t do these things. Thana’s case provides an example of a rape victim who is *unable* to scream, cry out, or talk to her attacker, thereby ensuring her silence and the attacker’s protection against prosecution. Thana’s situation literalizes the voicelessness that many women feel while experiencing and reporting rape. Thana’s inability to verbally identify or prosecute her attackers leads to her mass killing spree of

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 45.

masculine threats. Although Thana is able to speak at the end of the film, I argue that her spree of vengeance allows her to find and use an ability that she did not know she had. Therefore, before, during, and directly after being raped, Thana was unable to scream out, to talk either to her attackers or to the authorities. Only after reclaiming her agency through acts of revenge is Thana able to also reclaim her voice, literally and figuratively.

Thana identifies with her coworkers, the closest friends that she has, so her utterance of the word “sister” at the end of the film is important not only because it’s the first and only word that she speaks, but because it signifies female bonding and kinship, such as Noelle has Skye, who saw her as a sister and wanted to avenge her rape for her. Thana is also dressed as a nun—another kind of sister—during the final scene, which is also tied to female bonding and kinship, although with religious overtones. The culmination of her reclamation of agency, of her change in dress and attitude, is this moment of speech. Thana is finally able to do something she has longed to do: use her voice. Heller-Nicholas argues that Thana speaks the word “sister” only because that word was taught to her by a man (the photographer whom she met at the restaurant, who referred to Thana’s coworker as her “sister”).<sup>166</sup> However, Thana is able to communicate with others throughout the film, so Thana would have certainly have heard the word “sister” before this photographer said it to her. I contend that she has reclaimed the feminine word to affiliate with her coworker—a feminist act of solidarity. Moreover, that the last word spoken in the film is spoken by a once mute woman herself symbolizes the ultimate reclamation of agency. This act proves Thana to be the film’s protagonist, even

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 81.

though others tried to take the narrative from her. She reclaims the narrative as well as her agency at the end by speaking.

Thana's decision not to kill Phil reinforces her developing sense of agency. The audience was led to believe that Thana killed him, only to find out in the final scene that he is still alive. I posit that this decision is another sign of Thana's empowerment; she has been able to make decisions for herself regarding what is right or wrong. This moral compass ultimately leads her to let Phil live even though he represents a masculine threat and is in part responsible for exposing Thana's secret. She recognizes that the dog, although male, is not the one oppressing women like the male humans whom she encounters on the street.

Although *Ms. 45* and *M.F.A.* end very differently—*M.F.A.* concludes with Noelle's arrest, making it impossible to predict what future lies ahead for her, whereas *Ms. 45* concludes with Thana's death, so it can be safely assumed that her story has closed—the fates of the female protagonists are similar. Both women reclaimed their agency and developed new, bolder identities through their confrontations with rape culture—yet both also pay a price. A major point of contrast between the two films is how each woman goes about reclaiming their agency. In *Ms. 45*, Thana kills people who do not immediately pose a threat to her, but whom she sees as a potential threat to herself and all other women because they are male. In *M.F.A.*, Noelle reclaims her agency by avenging other rape victims at her school and re-enacting the rapes that they have experienced with the perpetrators. Noelle kills men whom she *knows* are guilty of rape and who have eluded the criminal justice system; Thana kills men that she *thinks* have the

potential to rape. Although both women go about reclaiming their agency differently, in the end, both women are successful in doing so.

### ***I Spit on Your Grave (1978) and I Spit on Your Grave (2010)***

For this section, I will be analyzing the differences between the original and the remake *I Spit on Your Grave*. In the thirty-two-year gap between these films, the horror genre changed drastically, as did the spectator's expectations of it. However, I argue that despite these shifts, both films allow the female protagonist, Jennifer, to reclaim her agency through acts of violent revenge after being raped. Jennifer stands out from other female protagonists in rape-revenge narratives because of her strength, both mental and physical: she survives a gang rape by four men (five in the remake) and is empowered to exact revenge on each of them. Henry argues that the 1978 *I Spit on Your Grave* is the origin point of the rape-avenger figure coming into her own,<sup>167</sup> setting a precedent for her turning the rapists' terroristic tools against them.<sup>168</sup> She notes that this film is canonical in that it "reduces the genre to its essence."<sup>169</sup> This film, and the character of Jennifer, also stands out from the other films that I am analyzing because of the gang rape, a phenomenon that does not appear frequently in rape-revenge narratives and creates multiple targets for the protagonist to exact revenge upon. The first noteworthy difference between the original and the remake is the addition of the Sheriff Storch character in the 2010 version, who was added to show how little rape victims can trust law enforcement<sup>170</sup> or expect to obtain justice. Henry explains that ineffectual and corrupt police officers are common figures in the rape-revenge narrative, as they help to justify

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<sup>167</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 45.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

the vigilantism taken by the female protagonist.<sup>171</sup> Sheriff Storch's pregnant wife and young daughter were also introduced as characters, whom Jennifer uses to exact her revenge on the Sheriff.

The other characters in the 2010 film remain relatively similar to their 1978 counterparts. Andy, Stanley, and Johnny are all portrayed as backwoods countrymen who dislike people from the city. The Matthew character is portrayed as developmentally delayed in both films and therefore is viewed as a "younger brother" of sorts to the other three men. Matthew, a reluctant participant in the gang rapes, has to be encouraged a great deal by the other men before joining in. After their continuous pestering to lose his virginity by raping Jennifer, and after consuming alcohol, Matthew eventually partakes in the gang rape.

Whereas the 1978 original contains the longest rape scene in film history, clocking in at roughly 25 minutes of screen-time,<sup>172</sup> the 2010 remake focuses more on the revenge scenes, which are much gorier and torturous than in the original. This increase in the gore-factor is perhaps due to a rising demand from spectators for filmmakers in the torture-porn genre to keep pushing the limit with each film released. During the scenes of gang rape, Jennifer's body becomes a "physical field" for violence, marked by blood and bruises.<sup>173</sup> The revenge half of the 2010 remake reaches an apex in terms of graphic images of pain inflicted to sensitive body parts, such as eyes, genitals, teeth, the face, and the anus. During Jennifer's revenge, the bodies of the rapists become "physical fields" for

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Andrews, "The Rape-Revenge Film: Biocultural Implications."

<sup>173</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 53.

her violence, allowing her to inflict pain on the same or similar body parts that they did on her body.<sup>174</sup> Julian Hanich explains that these injuries can be unbearable to watch because of “somatic empathy,” which is a particular carnal response that makes us feel ourselves feeling and thus strengthens our awareness of ourselves as an embodied viewer.<sup>175</sup>

Regardless of the reason, what is important is the very strategic, eye-for-an-eye way in which the revenge scenes are played out by Jennifer and how she is able to make her rapists feel the emotions and physical pain that they made her feel. By speaking some of the same phrases that they said to her, Jennifer uses the rapists’ words against them during her revenge. When Matthew rapes Jennifer, he puts his hands around her throat, choking her; her revenge involves her choking him with a noose. Andy’s revenge involves him drowning in a bathtub of lye because he held Jennifer’s head underwater while Sheriff Storch raped her. Since Sheriff Storch anally raped Jennifer, whispering to her “I’m an ass man,” Jennifer’s revenge involves him being anally raped by his rifle as she asks him, “I thought you were an ass man?” When Johnny tortures Jennifer by making her fellate his gun, he calls her a “show horse” and demands for her to “show her teeth,” reducing her to an animalized object to be looked at or sold. For his revenge, Jennifer puts a horse bit in his mouth and pulls out his teeth with pliers. She also castrates him after asking him if he knows what happens to horses that can’t be tamed. Stanley’s punishment, having his eyes peeled open for crows to peck out, is fitting for his crime of videotaping (and thus “seeing”) everything that went on. I agree with Henry that these

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 53–54.

scenes make both the on-screen rapists as well as the spectators understand: “this is what you’ve done to me, this is what you forced me to experience and endure.”<sup>176</sup> Jennifer accomplishes her eye-for-an-eye revenge in an intelligent and practical way. Rather than simply killing her rapists one by one, she crafts specific tortures for each rapist that would force them to experience the exact physical, mental, and emotional anguish that they subjected her to.

The addition of Stanley’s video camera in the remake is noteworthy because the film uses point-of-view (P-O-V) shots from his camera to bring the spectator closer to the scenes. The P-O-V shots provide an amateur documentary feel and allow the spectator to experience the scenes from the perspective of the rapists.<sup>177</sup> The original film instead employs close-up shots of the rapists’ faces, putting the spectator into the P-O-V of Jennifer.<sup>178</sup>

Another notable difference between the 1978 original and the 2010 remake is that in the latter Jennifer does not use her sexuality to seduce the men during her revenge. In the original film, Jennifer seduces both Matthew and Johnny to their ultimate demise and uses their sexual advances against them. The men insist that they raped her because she was “asking for it” by the way she was dressed, while, in the remake, Jennifer truly becomes the *monstrous feminine*, without depending on sexuality to reclaim her agency. The 2010 remake takes away any hesitancy in her character that the 1978 original had, going straight in for the shock and awe. The original Jennifer’s revenge allowed her to

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>178</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 139–40.

utilize a part of herself (her sexuality) that was violently attacked in order to manipulate and ultimately control her attackers. By letting them believe that they had the upper hand and by appearing sexually submissive to them, she enacted her revenge in a way that they never saw coming and were helpless to prevent.

Yet another major change between the two films involves the scenes following the gang rapes. In the original film, there are several scenes of Jennifer recuperating by taking a shower, lying in bed, and tending to her numerous wounds and bruises. She is also seen going into a church and asking for forgiveness. In the remake, Jennifer disappears for roughly a half hour of screen-time after the assaults—one could argue that she has died and her spirit returns to seek revenge. This film focuses on the lives of the men as they continue to search for her body and argue with each other about the evidence left behind, making the story much more about the men than Jennifer, yet also serving to increase the anticipation for her inevitable return. Henry argues that in the 1978 film, the montage of Jennifer's recuperation represents the last moments of her humanity before she coldly executes her revenge, whereas her disappearance from the screen in the 2010 remake stylistically represents as a full death followed by reincarnation as a violent avenger.<sup>179</sup> I disagree with Henry's analysis of this scene in the 1978 film, for Jennifer has not completely rid herself of her humanity before she begins her revenge. Rather, she began to view humanity through new eyes once exposed to the cold hard truth of the violence that humanity can do. It is through these new eyes that she exacts her revenge, seemingly just as cold and cruel as her rapists. This recuperation actually reinforces her humanity as she eliminated the men whom she deemed inhumane—almost as if a

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<sup>179</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 49.

vigilante for humanity. As far as this scene in the 2010 remake, it is indeed thematically stylized to symbolize her death and resurrection because when she first begins to appear on screen in the woods after her disappearance, Matthew thinks she is a ghost. Although she did not die, she surely returns to haunt the men who harmed her.

Jennifer's transformation from victim to avenger is visible in her demeanor, clothing, and actions. Creed states,

Jennifer's revenge is terrible, exact, and executed in perfect style. She is transformed from a friendly, likeable but ordinary woman into a deadly and powerful killer. ... Filled with a terrible but perfectly justifiable wrath, Jennifer becomes the all-powerful, all-destructive, deadly femme castratrice.<sup>180</sup>

After recuperating from the attacks, Jennifer changes from her brightly colored clothing and high heels to jeans, a dark-colored top, and sneakers. Notably, in the 1978 original film, Jennifer dresses entirely in black and enters a church where she kneels and asks for forgiveness for what she is about to do. This scene shows Jennifer already beginning to reclaim her agency by expressing her beliefs and making decisions, but it may also symbolize her death before her rebirth as an avenger. Wearing all black to a church could signify a funeral, and it also echoes the nun habit that Thana wore in *Ms. 45*, tying both the religious element and all black clothing to the notion of a female avenger. This religious element is left out of the 2010 remake. Another scene in the original film that shows Jennifer reclaiming her agency is that in which she pieces back together the ripped pages of her novel—symbolic of piecing her life back together—and continues to write, showing her motivation to continue on with her life and work as an author. Her writing

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<sup>180</sup> Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, 129.

marks both her independence and her personhood, which are both brought under threat when the rapists mock her writing and tear the pages into pieces. In so quickly rebuilding herself, she proves that she is strong and resilient.

Clover argues that these films present rape as an almost sexless act of cruelty that men commit more for each other's edification than for their own physical pleasure.<sup>181</sup> In both films, Jennifer enacts her revenge in an almost impassive fashion, showing no emotion or joy at all. One scene that supports Clover's claim that gang rape is about male pecking order and group dynamics is that in which Jennifer takes revenge on Johnny, who claims his innocence and blames Stanley, a "sex maniac," for organizing the whole thing. Clover argues that under the laws of blood feud, each individual is responsible for the actions of the group and therefore a proper target for retribution, regardless of his or her own degree of participation.<sup>182</sup> These scenes also support Brownmiller's argument that gang rape is a form of male bonding,<sup>183</sup> for after the men take turns raping Jennifer, they form a close bond of secrecy with each other. They dispose of evidence together, they search the riverbeds together daily looking for Jennifer's body, and they refuse to turn any of the others over to the authorities.

Johnny also tells Jennifer that she provoked him to rape her and states that any man would have done the same because of the way that she dressed like "bait." This statement directly ties into how Thana in *Ms. 45* and Noelle in *M.F.A.* use themselves as "bait" to lure their victims to enact their revenge—a common trope in the rape-revenge

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<sup>181</sup> Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, 118.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>183</sup> Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 14.

narrative. Jennifer follows suit by seducing Matthew in order to take revenge on him, yet she turns the “bait” trope on its head by reclaiming its negativity as an advantage, showing dramatic transformation in agency. Rather than being reduced to “bait” as a reason to be raped, she presents herself as bait for her attackers in order to manipulate and reclaim power over them. The scene of castration supports Kelly’s argument about femme-castratrice films pushing back against institutions that attempt to control female sexual agency<sup>184</sup> as a way for her to reclaim her sexual agency, since he attempted to control her sexuality by saying that she invited the rapes because of the clothes she was wearing—a part of rape culture called “slut shaming.”

Both films end abruptly after Jennifer finishes her revenge and all of her rapists are dead, so her own fate is indeterminate. However, through her dramatic transformation from victim to avenger and her violent acts of revenge, it is clear that Jennifer reclaimed her agency that was stolen from her during the gang rapes. Jennifer’s more complex revenge, particularly in the 2010 version, mirrors the complexities of the gang rape scenario—multiple assailants and multiple attacks mean multiple acts of revenge. These films end less ambiguously than *M.F.A* and *Ms. 45*: in neither the 1978 nor the 2010 versions is Jennifer punished, so her revenge is allowed to stand as a fitting conclusion to the narrative.

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<sup>184</sup> Kelly, “Camp Horror and the Gendered Politics of Screen Violence: Subverting the Monstrous Feminine in *Teeth* (2007),” 87–88.

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

As mentioned previously, I have chosen to analyze *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* alone because this film handles the rape-revenge narrative differently. In this film, rape is not the central narrative element, but a significant thematic one. Not only is the female protagonist, Lisbeth Salander, visually different from the previous female protagonists I have analyzed, but she treats other men in the film differently as well. Unlike the victims in the previous films, Lisbeth does not see all men as a threat after being sexually assaulted and raped. She takes revenge only on her attacker and recognizes that the other men in her life pose no threat to her and that she is able to have safe and consensual relationships with them, as well as with women. Lisbeth's experience with rape is not traumatic enough to lead her to foreswear sex entirely; indeed, in reclaiming her agency, she seems to embrace a more polymorphous sexuality. Rather than seeking personal revenge against other men, Lisbeth tackles the institutionalized system of male power that has kept her essentially trapped for her entire life. Through her revenge against her rapist, she is able to break free from this system and reclaim power over herself and her life.

Lisbeth Salander is a visually striking character. Her androgynous look, black clothing, Mohawk hairdo, piercings and tattoos set her apart from other women in the film and the other films analyzed above. Lisbeth, a life-long ward of the state, symbolizes the victimhood of women at the hands of institutionalized misogyny. She has learned to distrust police, not only as a ward of the state but also as a computer hacker. Lisbeth also has a history of violent aggression with previous arrests on her record.

Also unlike the rest of the films that I have analyzed, Lisbeth's rapist, Nils Bjurman, has significant weight in her life. All of the others involve a stranger or strangers as the rapist(s) with the exception of *M.F.A.*, in which Noelle was raped by her fellow classmate, who even then was a relatively recent acquaintance. Bjurman serves as Lisbeth's guardian and has full control over her finances—an extreme power differential that makes his abuse of power easy to exercise and creates a quite confusing *quid pro quo* situation for Lisbeth, especially since her previous guardian entrusted her with respect and independence. She viewed her previous guardian almost like a father figure, which is why Bjurman's violation is so traumatizing—he is a person she is supposed to be able to trust. At their first meeting, Bjurman forces Lisbeth to fellate him for access to her money, telling her that she can control her money once she learns to be sociable and affable, but she quickly learns that he will force her to pleasure him in order to survive financially. After the sexual assault, the camera pans around the top of Lisbeth's body, showing her upside down on the screen—symbolic of her world being turned upside down after this first encounter with Bjurman.

Upon needing more money, and expecting to perform oral sex on Bjurman again, Lisbeth visits his house, where she finds herself overpowered. Bjurman anally rapes Lisbeth, who unbeknownst to him was recording the assault with a hidden camera in her backpack. Unlike Stanley in *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), whose video recording was a tool of sexual violence, here, it is used as a tool for its eradication.<sup>185</sup> Surveillance equipment in both films thematizes objectification, control, scopophilia, voyeurism, and

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<sup>185</sup> Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, 20.

sexual violence.<sup>186</sup> In both films, these video recordings lead to blackmail and introduce a new medium of exploitation, increasing anxiety and raising ethical questions.<sup>187</sup> In *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010), Sheriff Storch believes his wife receives the tape of Jennifer's gang rape in the mail, and in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, Bjurman knows that Lisbeth has a recording of him raping her, and if he does not allow her control of her finances and does not send good reports of her status to the State each month, she will release the video to the public.

After being raped by Bjurman, Lisbeth is shown recuperating by taking pain medication and a hot shower. She contemplates her next moves, knowing that she cannot turn to the police for help and must take matters into her own hands. Lisbeth's transformation from victim to avenger involves her getting a tattoo on her ankle. The tattoo artist tells her that the process will be very painful, but Lisbeth nods and proceeds with the tattoo. The tattoo, while never shown, is important in demonstrating Lisbeth's consensual acceptance of pain and body modification. She could not control what happened in the previous scene with Bjurman, so she does something that she can control—modifying her body. In a sense, getting tattooed allows her to regain her agency because she is consenting to a painful act that will alter her body forever after being put through a similar painful act that was nonconsensual.

Lisbeth feels personally invested in revenge given that Bjurman controls her finances, and thus, her livelihood. She therefore enacts a fairly cruel, but proportional, revenge. After presenting him with the video recording, Lisbeth tells Bjurman that if he

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 50.

doesn't allow her to have full control of her money, she will release the video to the Internet. She then rapes him with a dildo and crudely tattoos "I AM A RAPIST PIG" across his torso, using his body to communicate with other women who may potentially be victims.

Later, Lisbeth engages in consensual sexual encounters, one with a woman she meets in a club and one with Mikael Blomkvist, with whom she is recruited to work on an investigation. In both encounters, Lisbeth initiates the act. Lisbeth's sexuality before the assaults is neither mentioned nor referenced. She is not partnered with anyone and does not display any sort of romantic or sexual feelings toward others. After her revenge, she gains independence together with sexual agency: control over her sexual life, by enacting revenge on Bjurman, and control over her finances, her main goal. Financial freedom allows Lisbeth to have autonomy. Once under the power of someone else, she now holds full control over her life. Lisbeth limited her revenge to Bjurman. Despite her history of violent aggression, she was able to harbor her aggression and make moral choices about who was deserving of revenge.

When Blomkvist first enlists Lisbeth to track down a killer and solve a mysterious 40-year-long disappearance of a woman, he goes to her apartment. Lisbeth is apprehensive but allows him to come in. In this scene, Lisbeth is clearly able to protect herself (she secretly turns on her taser and has it ready just in case), while also knowing that all men are not an immediate threat to her; otherwise, she would not have let Blomkvist into her home, or she would have tased him in the doorway immediately. Lisbeth uses her savvy computer-hacking skills to aid Blomkvist in solving the mystery and even saving Blomkvist when Martin, the killer, takes him hostage. When Martin

escapes, Lisbeth looks to Blomkvist and asks him, “May I kill him?”; Blomkvist nods and Lisbeth chases him on her motorcycle, though his car crashes and explodes before she is able to kill him. The fact that Lisbeth asked Blomkvist for approval shows a degree of respect for him. Lisbeth respected her previous guardian, whom she saw as a father figure, and now Blomkvist takes over for that role, since she cannot trust her new guardian Bjurman. The request for permission also shows that she wants to ensure that her actions are justified, that she does not kill an innocent man, and further that she is no longer the violent aggressive person whom the state says that she is. Her revenge has helped her to harness her aggression, to discern who is deserving of vengeance and who is not. It is significant that Lisbeth endured a rape-revenge scenario earlier in the film, only to help in the discovery of another woman, Harriet, who endured rape repeatedly as a teenager and who had been in hiding for decades after escaping her father, whom she drowned to escape. Although technically still a ward of the State, Lisbeth’s growth in autonomy allows her to be instrumental in saving Blomkvist’s life and finding Harriet. Lisbeth, who became a ward of the State when she tried to kill her abusive father by setting him on fire, reclaims her freedom and agency by blackmailing Bjurman into relinquishing control of her finances, yet her personal vengeance has a larger connection to societal attitudes towards women and sexual violence. After Bjurman rapes her, she seeks revenge against him and, in turn, against the abusive father figure violating her from her past. Lisbeth finishes the revenge that Harriet could not complete, albeit somewhat passively by watching Martin die in a fire—the same kind of revenge that she tried to inflict upon her own father. Because the Vengers (the family that Blomkvist is

investigating) are politically well connected (and explicitly fascist), Lisbeth's actions have more political resonance than those of Thana, Noelle, or Jennifer.

## VIII. Concluding Remarks

My analysis of these five films has shown that the female protagonists are able to reclaim their agency through acts of violent revenge against their rapist(s). These films demonstrate that the rape-revenge narrative is more diverse than it might seem, and its female protagonists represent a range of social responses to rape. Thana and Noelle are social avengers who reclaim their agency by taking on rape culture. Thana, a mute seamstress, finds her ability to speak after her rape, murder of her attacker, and then murder of all men whom she deems a threat to women. Noelle, an Master of Fine Arts student, finds her creative voice after being raped by a classmate at a party, accidentally killing him, and then killing men whom she knows have raped other women. In both versions of *I Spit on Your Grave*, Jennifer confronts the phenomenon of gang rape. She endures rape by multiple men and gains her revenge by torturing and killing each of them in ways that mimic the male bonding her rapists enjoyed. Finally, Lisbeth challenges an institutionalized system of male power by taking revenge against her financial guardian after he rapes her and then helping gain justice for a woman who had likewise been raped repeatedly by her politically and economically well-connected father and grandfather.

The insights I have offered in this thesis can apply to other rape-revenge films because the social aspect of the rape-revenge film—that the reclamation of agency can bring with it a certain amount of social justice—is an important element of this genre/cycle. These insights also illuminate narratives about rape in the real world: rape can occur from many different avenues that range from strangers to classmates, and even caretakers. The different responses that the female protagonists in the films took show that there is no correct way for a victim to feel after being raped. The fact that none of the

female protagonists went to the police after being raped echoes the lived reality of many rape victims off-screen; the fact that they cannot trust the police leads them to never report the crime. I have also shown that there are many kinds of female protagonists within rape-revenge narratives. Rape-revenge narratives encompass many diverse elements and are spread across many genres, which make rape-revenge a universal phenomenon that is worthy of analysis due to the persistence of rape culture and the historical changes to societal and legal punishments for rape.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Synopsis of *Ms. 45*

Thana is a mute seamstress who lives and works in New York City. Thana is thin, has short brown hair, and dresses plainly in neutral colors. She is friendly with her female coworkers but her boss, Albert, treats her like a child. While walking home from work, Thana and her coworkers must pass by men working in the street who hurl obscene remarks at the group of women. Thana's coworkers respond, but since she is mute, Thana is unable to stand up for herself.

One day while walking home alone, Thana is raped in an alley by a masked man. When she returns home, she finds an intruder in her apartment who rapes her again. Thana kills the intruder-rapist with a blow to the head with an iron, then dismembers the body in the bathtub, placing the pieces in garbage bags. The next day, she begins to dispose of the bags throughout the city. A man sees Thana leave a bag on the ground and, when he follows her into an alley to return it to her, she kills him with the gun she took from the intruder-rapist.

Thana's landlord and nosy dog, Phil, become suspicious with Thana's recent comings and goings. Phil begins to smell around Thana's refrigerator, where the rapist's body parts are being kept. In order to subdue Phil from exposing her secret, Thana feeds him some ground up pieces of her rapist.

While out to eat with her coworkers, Thana encounters a leering photographer who coaxes her to go back to his apartment with him. He touches her face and hand and follows her after she walks away. Thana eventually goes up to his apartment and shoots and kills him.

Each night, Thana dresses like a black widow and scours the city for men to kill—a pimp beating up a sex worker, a gang of men surrounding her in Central Park, and a wealthy Middle Eastern man who offers her money for sex.

Thana takes Phil for a walk, worried that his constant barking and sniffing around will lead the landlord to the rapist's body parts. She ties Phil to a post and draws her gun at him.

Thana attends her work's Halloween costume party dressed as a sexy nun. At the party, Albert tries to seduce her and finds her gun. She shoots him, and then begins to shoot all of the men at the party. Her female coworker stabs Thana in the back, ending the spree and killing her. Thana screams, and before dying, utters one word—"Sister." Phil appears at his owner's door; Thana had not killed him after all.

## Appendix B: Synopsis of *M.F.A.*

Noelle, a thin, timid Master of Fine Arts student, is more focused on working on her art pieces than socializing. She has one close female friend, Skye. Noelle's art professor and classmates are not impressed with her work and give her negative feedback about her pieces.

A male classmate notices Noelle and invites her to a party. At the party, Noelle is anally raped by Luke. The following day, Noelle tells Skye what happened and that she wants to report the incident to the school authorities. Skye discourages her from doing so, telling her that a friend reported a rape and was treated like a slut. Noelle confronts Luke and he denies raping her. In a scuffle, Noelle accidentally kills Luke and is struck with a newfound thirst for vengeance.

Noelle reads about Luke's death online and comes across an article about three fraternity members who gang raped a woman, filmed it, put it online, and were not charged with any crime. She seeks and finds all three men involved in the rape and kills them one by one.

Meanwhile, Noelle dives back into her artwork with a fury, painting for the first time since she was assaulted. Her professor and classmates take note that her work has improved and give her positive feedback.

In a search for more rapists to take revenge on, Noelle accesses the school's Clery Act Report, where she finds that zero rapes were reported. She also finds a file on Skye's assault case, and reads about her rape. Noelle tracks down Skye's rapist and attempts to kill him, but is interrupted by the police. Skye is traumatized by Noelle's actions and commits suicide.

At graduation, Noelle is honored to give a speech to her fellow graduates. She urges them to use their art to expose the truth. As she leaves the ceremony, she is taken into custody by the police, after being identified by Skye's rapist who survived the attack.

## Appendix C: Synopsis of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)

Jennifer is a writer from the city seeking isolation in a secluded lakeside cabin so she can write her latest novel. While relaxing in a canoe on the lake, four men, whom she had encountered earlier at a gas station, circle Jennifer in a speedboat and torment her. After they force her to shore, two of the men, Johnny and Andy, rape her while the others hold her down. They then leave her in the woods.

When Jennifer finds her way back to her cabin, she is horrified to find that the four men are waiting for her. After drinking and being encouraged by the other men, Matthew rapes Jennifer. Stanley mocks Jennifer's writing and rips up pages of her novel, and then forces her to fellate him. After leaving, the men realize that they need to kill Jennifer and send Matthew back into the cabin with a knife. He is unable to bring himself to do so, drags the knife through her blood and returns to the men, saying that he killed her.

In the following days, Jennifer recuperates from the attacks, visits a church and asks for forgiveness for what she plans to do, and then begins to carry out her revenge. She seduces Matthew to have sex with her in the woods, and then she slips a noose around his neck, hanging him. Next, she seduces Johnny by asking him to take a bath with her. While in the bathtub, she masturbates him and then grabs a knife and castrates him, leaving him to bleed out. Stanley and Andy realize that Johnny and Matthew have gone missing, and take their speedboat to Jennifer's cabin. Jennifer swims out to the boat and pushes Stanley overboard. Andy tries to attack her but she grabs his axe and kills him with it. When Stanley tries to climb aboard by grabbing onto the motor, Jennifer starts the motor, disemboweling him, and speeds away.

#### Appendix D: Synopsis of *I Spit on Your Grave* (2010)

Jennifer, an author from New York, travels to Louisiana to write her next book in an isolated cabin. She meets Johnny, Andy, and Stanley at the gas station, and has to deflect Johnny's come-ons. At her cabin, she meets Matthew when he comes to fix a clogged toilet; touched by his shyness and mental disabilities, she gives him a quick kiss to thank him for his work. Stanley secretly records Jennifer in her underwear through her window and shows the other men. The next night, they sneak into her cabin and force Jennifer to perform fellatio on a pistol and a liquor bottle. After being assaulted, Jennifer runs into the woods, where she meets Sheriff Storch. He takes her back to the cabin, but she soon realizes that he is in cahoots with the other men. The men hold Jennifer down and cajole Matthew into raping her. She escapes to the woods again, but the men catch up to her, and Andy holds her head underwater while Sheriff Storch anally rapes her. Meanwhile, Stanley records everything on his camera. After Johnny sexually assaults Jennifer, she escapes and jumps off a bridge, leaving the men to search the river daily for her body.

The men realize Jennifer is alive and she begins her revenge. She lures Matthew into her house, and as he tearfully apologizes for his actions, she slips a noose around his neck and strangles him. Then, she captures Stanley in a bear trap, ties his eyes open with fishhooks, and spreads fish guts on his eyes and face. Eventually, crows arrive and peck out his eyes, and he bleeds to death. She knocks Andy unconscious with a baseball bat and ties him up over a bathtub full of lye. She removes the boards holding him up, and when his strength gives out, he is forced face first into the water. The lye burns his face and throat, and he dies. Jennifer then captures Johnny, and ties him up naked. She uses

pliers to rip out several of his teeth, and then uses hedge clippers to castrate him. She shoves his severed penis in his mouth and he bleeds to death. Jennifer visits Sheriff Storch's family and poses as his daughter's new teacher. She captures him, and he wakes up being raped with his shotgun. She attaches a string from the shotgun's trigger to an unconscious Matthew across from the Sheriff. When Matthew wakes up, his movement triggers the shotgun, and it fires a round through Storch's body and directly into Matthew, killing them both. Jennifer sits outside and smiles hearing the blast.

## Appendix E: Synopsis of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

Lisbeth Salander is an investigator and computer hacker living in Stockholm. Due to a diagnosis of mental incompetency, she is a ward of the state whose finances are controlled by a social worker with whom she has had a good relationship. However, when that social worker has a stroke, she is reassigned to a man who is a sexual sadist. He forces her to have sex with him before he will distribute her money. Unbeknownst to him, Lisbeth records his rapes of her, then exacts revenge by raping him with a dildo and tattooing “I am a rapist pig” on his chest. She also threatens to upload to the Internet the video of his rape of her unless he relinquishes control of her finances. He agrees. Newly freed, Lisbeth picks up a woman at a bar and takes her home to make passionate love.

Mikael Blomkvist is a writer for and co-owner of *Millennium*, an investigative magazine. The magazine loses an important libel case against a wealthy businessman, Hans-Erik Wennerstrom. Embarrassed and angry, Blomkvist agrees to pursue an investigation for another business magnate, Henrik Vanger. In exchange, Vanger will provide Blomkvist with damning information about Wennerstrom—information that was accumulated by Lisbeth. Blomkvist moves to Hedestad to try to discover what happened to Harriet, Vanger’s grandniece who disappeared forty years earlier.

Blomkvist finds a journal with names and dates, but he is unable to decipher it. After his daughter notes that the names are all Biblical, Blomkvist recruits Lisbeth to help his investigation. Her research connects Harriet’s disappearance to other murders of women, all with Jewish names; with the exception of Henrik, all of the Vangers are known anti-Semites and fascist sympathizers. The next day, someone tries to kill Blomkvist. Lisbeth tends to his wounds, and they become lovers.

Acting on a tip from another Vanger brother, Blomkvist and Lisbeth target Martin Vanger and his now-deceased father, Gottfried—the brother and father, respectively, of the missing Harriet. Blomkvist breaks into Martin’s house looking for more evidence, but Martin overpowers him. While torturing Blomkvist, Martin admits to killing the other women, but not Harriet. Just before Martin can kill Blomkvist, Lisbeth arrives. She frees Blomkvist then pursues the fleeing Martin—with permission from Blomkvist to kill him. But during the chase, Martin’s car crashes and he perishes in the ensuing fire. Lisbeth tells Blomkvist that when she was twelve, she tried to burn her abusive father alive, which is what led to her becoming a ward of the state.

Blomkvist and Lisbeth travel to London, where they have deduced that the still-living Harriet resides. Harriet tells them that a cousin helped her escape Martin and Gottfried’s abuse and craft a new identity. Freed from her fear of them, she returns to Sweden and reunites with Henrik. When the information that Henrik had on Wennerstrom proves unhelpful, Lisbeth finds more, damning information that leads to his exile and mysterious death. Lisbeth visits her original social worker and tells him that she has made a new friend and is happy. But when she goes to see Blomkvist and discovers he has reunited with his estranged wife, she throws away a gift she had purchased for him and rides away on her motorcycle.

